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The Endgame: America's Exit from Syria

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by

Gray Montgomery Thompson

Knoxville, Tennessee

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Syria fueled civil war costing nearly half a million lives to date, the US response has been cautious indecision. Syria became a proxy war with Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, the Turks, ISIS, the Kurds, and the local Syrian opposition all competing to support or oust Assad. All but the Kurds and select Syrian resistance groups opposed America. With billions spent on questionable war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, President Obama, the American public, and most of the military establishment were leery of direct US involvement in Syria. Apart from supporting the fight against ISIS and half-hearted demands that Bashar al Assad step aside as leader of Syria, neither President Obama nor President Trump have committed US troops to achieving anything more comprehensive. Optimally, the US should encourage multilateral efforts to negotiate Assad's removal from office with Russia, address Turkish fears of Kurdish independence, or pressure Iran and Hezbollah to withdraw from Syria. Under present circumstances facing US policymakers, such optimizing is illusory. Whatever the limits and possibilities of USFP in the region today, it is clear that America needs a tactical retreat to reconsolidate its power and purpose to fight its Russian and Iranian foes another day when the direct stakes for American interests are higher.

Christ Forevermore

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Introduction

Ever since the spring of 2011, Syria has been embroiled in a civil war that has brought on the attention and action of many in the international community. It was born out of the Arab Spring in 2011. During this time, the Middle East experienced a wave of pro-democracy uprisings. Tunisia and Egypt were the first to experience the Arab Spring. Their governments were overthrown in a few short weeks. Those uprisings motivated similar uprisings, such as in Syria against Assad's regime.

Among the states involved in Syria, America, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have arguably been the most involved. The power struggle created by opposition to the Assad regime also fostered the rise of another key player, ISIS, as well as various if uncoordinated Syrian domestic opposition groups. As the war evolved, these players have changed how they interact, at times alternately opposing and cooperating with one another. With the near demise of ISIS, these players have become more focused on the future of Assad's regime, the Kurds, and their own desires for stability in Syria.

These three major issues have served as the primary dividing lines among those involved in Syria. While each player has its own goals and ambitions regarding Syria, two sides have formed. These sides are certainly not absolute, but the players involved in Syria find themselves aligned to one or the other. America, the Kurds, Syrian rebel groups, and Saudi Arabia are the main players that want to see Assad ousted and Iran's influence diminished in Syria. Pro-regime Syrians, Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia want Assad to remain in power and to decrease America and its allies' influence in Syria. Turkey and Israel also have concerns regarding Syria. Turkey has aligned with Russia and Iran over its concerns about the Kurds while Israel has aligned with Saudi

Arabia and some rebel groups over its concerns regarding Iran and Hezbollah.

In the beginning of America's involvement in Syria, the Obama administration was hesitant to involve America out of fears that it would result in a scenario similar to Afghanistan or Iraq. After ISIS grew stronger and pushed into Iraq, the Obama administration changed its strategy. It sought to confront ISIS in Syria and Iraq while refraining from ousting Assad or making any appearance of doing so. When the Trump administration took over, it essentially kept the same policies in place while hastening its efforts to destroy ISIS.

Now, ISIS lies mostly in ruins. America's main political objective of defeating ISIS has nearly been accomplished. America now faces the decision of what it will or will not do next. America would prefer to see Assad go, but due to Obama's initial policy of non-intervention, America is in a difficult position to make that happen. America needs to decide if it wants to remain involved in Syria and, if so, for what purpose. If America wants to leave, it needs to decide how it will leave and to what extent it will remove itself from involvement in Syria.

Chapter One

Syria Primer

The Situation

While Syria has experienced its fair share of external rule over the millennia, the past half-century can help explain its present crisis. The Ba'ath Party took over Syria via a military coup in 1963, a coup only consolidated in 1970 by the rise of Syria's longest ruling leader and Alawite, Hafez al Assad (ACAPS 2016). Founded in the late 1940s, the Ba'ath Party ascribed to a secular Arab nationalism that would allow Syrian Arabs to bridge religious differences in forging a nation and resisting unwanted European influence. The Ba'ath Party played an important role in Syria as a key factor in the Alawites becoming the ruling minority (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Ba'ath Party"). Syria is still under Ba'athist rule with Hafez al Assad's son Bashar now the president since 2000.

The secular roots of the Ba'ath Party attracted the Alawites in its claim that all Arabs were equal irrespective of their religion or sect. As an offshoot of the Shia minority long persecuted by dominant Sunni authorities who consider them heretics, Alawites viewed Bath ideology and party membership as a path to civic equality. And given the prominence of the military as an institution of upward mobility for many minorities in the post-WWII era of nation building in the Arab world, Alawites too sought and achieved greater representation, rank, and status in the Syrian military. Combined with their integration in the Ba'ath Party, this enabled them to muster enough political and military

power to stage the successful coup in 1963 that placed Hafez al Assad in power (Fildis 2012).

Under Hafez al-Assad's thirty-year rule, the Ba'ath Party has remained in power over a Sunni majority country using roughly the same tactics that have sustained authoritarian rule in the region since WWII—in this case divide and conquer tactics among various sectarian forces in the country, whether Christian, Sunni, Islamist, or Kurdish; support from external patrons like the Soviets and now Russia; intimidation, harassment, imprisonment, or murder of the opposition; firm state control over all media; and finally, maintenance of patronage networks that reward family, extended family, business cronies, and the military and security apparatus. Despite all the regional instability that has occurred in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis and the Arab Spring of 2011, the younger Assad has struggled with the help of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah to maintain this same authoritarian grip on power (Polk 2013).

The civil war that began after the Arab Spring erupted from a culmination of economic despair, drought, sectarian friction, and foreign intervention all stemming from Assad's failure to maintain his authoritarian bargain with the Syrian people. Many Syrians hoped Bashar al-Assad would reform Syria's political landscape when he took office. Instead, he maintained the same authoritarian practices of his father. His sectarian and authoritative government prevented most Syrians from experiencing economic prosperity and ultimately failed to maintain the balance he needed as an authoritarian ruler to keep his dissenters suppressed while simultaneously rewarding those important

and loyal to him. Syria's civil war exposed the failure of the authoritarian bargain and sectarian rule to successfully govern a state.

The Players

The Regime

The interests of those in favor of Assad's regime are straightforward in fighting to maintain his government's survival at all costs. As the ruling sect in Syria, for example, the Alawite minority clings to the Assad regime for fear of Sunni reprisals should they become the majority. Yet even many Sunnis continue to favor the Assad government because they believe, like their Alawite counterparts, that it still provides them a greater prospect of stability than the risk of sectarian war should the regime collapse. Given the history of persecuted minorities in the Middle East generally, such calculated trade-offs in favor of Assad's 'Pax authoritarian' also explain the preferences of Christians, Kurds, and other minorities uncertain about their fate under a possible Sunni-dominated government. Finally, as with all authoritarian support structures, the individuals, institutions, and commercial interests supporting the regime have few alternatives but to circle the wagons around Assad's government and hope for the best.

The Rebels

The rebels are fractured into a plethora of resistance groups and militias all with varying political goals, yet they all still share the common goal of removing Assad and his regime. They are predominantly Sunni Arabs with a small number of secularists and others. Some of the Sunni Arab groups are jihadists set on fighting the West and Shiites. They see Syria as another battleground in their war against these two enemies. Other

Sunni Arab Islamists are only concerned about Syria and disposing of Assad's minority ruled government and replacing it with a Sunni led government.

Despite this schism, the rebels as a whole are supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, all major Sunni states. They view Syria as a means to counter Iran's influence in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia. In this sense, the Syrian rebels have become a conduit for proxy wars amongst these states (Manfreda 2017). None of the nations supporting them are directly involved in Syria, with the exception of Turkey, but they are utilizing these groups in Syria to further their own diplomatic interests.

Kurds

The Syrian civil war has increased the political divisions between Kurdish groups. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey have been the main sources of contention and they are also the two most powerful Kurdish political groups. They view the new Kurdish autonomous region in Syria, known as Rojava, as a vital way to influence their political views on the future of Kurdish politics. Since they do not agree on how a Kurdish government should operate, they are both attempting to shape Rojava to their own liking.

The PKK views Rojava as the model autonomous region for all Kurdish groups to follow while the KDP views the autonomous region as a threat to its desire to establish an independent Kurdish state out of its autonomous region in Iraq. The PKK has the advantage here. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria has been working closely with the PKK and adheres to the same political ideology. The PKK and the PYD also control most of Rojava with their military units (Kaya and Whiting 2017).

The two main fighting forces in Syria are the People's Protection Unit (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The military arms of the PYD and the PKK respectively (Reumert 2016). These Kurdish units did most of the fighting in Eastern Syria against ISIS. The SDF and YPG are still fighting the remnants of ISIS, although with the survival of Assad's regime they are now having to fight the Syrian military supported by Russia and Iran. Additionally, they are under attack by Turkey in northern Syria as Turkey is maneuvering to prevent what it sees as a new threat from the PKK and the establishment of a Kurdish corridor stretching from Syria's coast along its northern border to Iraq.

Turkey

Turkey plays an interesting and dynamic role in Syria. A long time strategic partner of the United States and Europe under the umbrella of NATO membership and the desire for EU membership, Turkey has diverged from both commitments in the last decade, especially under the leadership of its increasingly authoritarian leader President Erdogan. One of the main issues between the two stems over the Kurds. As host to the largest portion of Kurds, 14.7 million out of 30 million, Turkey has a long history in dealing with the Kurds (CFR 2017).

Turkey and the Kurds have been at odds for a long time. The PKK, a recognized terrorist organization, has been at war with Turkey since the 1980s. Turkey's concern with the PKK and other Kurdish political groups has always been the threat of Kurdish demands for a state or even an autonomous region. Turkey does not want to lose any portion of its country to the formation of an independent Kurdish state. The threat of this

has led Turkey at times to take violent and militant measures against its Kurdish population.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Turkey militarized its Kurdish regions in the southeast of Turkey in response to attacks carried out by PKK fighters. This opened the door for several human rights abuses committed by the Turkish government against the Kurds and a massive increase in violence and turmoil between the Turkish government and the Kurds. Approximately 15,000 people were killed from 1982 to 1995, most of whom were Kurds. While the tension between Turkey and the Kurds has fluctuated, this violent past has caused both parties to remain at odds and distrust the other (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “Turkey”).

The war in Syria has further exacerbated the tension between Turkey and the Kurds. The Kurds have gained significant international attention over their successes in pushing back ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Turkey sees this as threatening because it believes the Kurds’ success and international recognition increase the possibility of international support for an independent Kurdish state. Since Turkey hosts the largest population of Kurds, it is concerned it will lose a significant portion of its country to a Kurdish secession

This has prompted Turkey to get involved in Syria. It claims to be fighting ISIS and preventing terrorists from crossing its borders; however, it is taking advantage of the situation in order to disrupt Kurdish efforts to establish an autonomous region in Northern Syria along Turkey’s border stretching from Iraq to the Mediterranean. This has also caused Turkey to align itself with Russia and Iran. America’s support of the Kurds has forced Turkey to shift its alliances to Russia and Iran in Syria. Ultimately, Turkey

will take whatever actions it deems necessary to negate the threat it perceives from Kurdish autonomy, especially from the PKK and its Syrian relative, the PYD (Cook 2018).

Iran

Iran is in Syria to protect its interests as a contender for regional hegemony. With its arc of interest in a “Shia Crescent” extending across parts of Iraq and Syria into Lebanon with its proxy-militia Hezbollah, Iran seeks to project its power in a manner intended to challenge the strategic nexus of competing American, Saudi, and Israeli hegemony in the region. As an ally of Iran, Syria is a strategic link connecting the Shia crescent and Iran’s wider gambit for regional hegemony. Long an important player in Iran’s ability to support groups like Hezbollah with weapons, funds, and military expertise, Syria’s geographic location acts as an operational bridge between Iran and Hezbollah (Fulton et al. 2013, 9).

In return, Iran has assisted Syria in the development of its chemical weapons program. Whether or to what extent Iran needs the Assad regime specifically for its wider purposes, the risks of regime failure in Syria has led Iran to commit serious resources to Assad’s survival. Although Assad is not necessarily the endgame for Iran, Iran simply needs Syria as a bridge of tactical and operational influence for its disruptive activities across the region (Fulton et al. 2013, 26-27).

Russia

Russia’s alliance with Syria goes back to the days of the Cold War. Syria has remained one of Russia’s only partners in the Middle East and a consistent buyer of Russian arms and military hardware. Syria’s port of Tartus is home to Russia’s only

Mediterranean naval base, making it of vital strategic importance to Russia (Saradzhyan 2015). Ultimately, Russia's interests in Syria boil down to support for an ally that has consistently imported its military hardware, provided its navy with a strategic port, cooperated with its wider policy of combating Islamic militancy, and finally, allowed it a territorial foothold in the region in order to compete with the US-Israeli hegemony (Trenin 2014).

Russia's involvement in Syria has been an attempt to challenge America's interests and actions in the Middle East. Its involvement has also been necessary to preserve Syria as a strategic ally in the Middle East (Pakhomov 2015). Russia's support of Assad validated its ability to thwart America's diplomatic and military efforts in the Middle East. Russia did a good job of setting up the situation in Syria, with the absence of American diplomacy under the Obama administration, by giving the world a choice between Assad or ISIS. It created a situation that America refused to get involved in because of the appearance that would have been given by America's opposition to Assad since Russia made such opposition appear as support for ISIS. This validation plays well into Russia's desire to increase its presence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Furthermore, Russia did not want to see the uprising in Syria topple a regime that was a strong ally and replace it with a pro-Western government (Trenin 2014).

Israel

Israel's interests in Syria are countering Iran and Hezbollah. The war in Syria has left Iran and Hezbollah in better shape and stronger than before (Calamur 2017). Furthermore, by Russia and Iran succeeding to keep Assad in power, Israel has also become concerned about Syria itself, not just it being a proxy of Iran (Hanauer 2016, 3).

Although Israel has limited its actions in order to prevent the possibility of open conflict with any party in Syria, these concerns have prompted Israel to conduct tactical strikes against targets in Syria related to Iran, Hezbollah, and even Assad's regime.

Israel is trying to be proactive in its self-defense, but with limited measures. It cannot prohibit Iran or its proxies' freedom of movement in Syria. It also has to coordinate with Russia to carry out its strikes in Syria. Not doing so could result in a diplomatic disaster or Israeli aircrew being downed by Russia's air defenses in Syria. These are significant limitations on Israel's options to influence events in Syria and the parties involved there. Israel is in a difficult spot. A Syria led by either Assad or hardline Sunnis is a dangerous reality for Israel (Hanauer 2016, 16).

Israel's only other option is to encourage Russia to pressure Syria into reducing Iran's presence there. Russia does not need Iran in order to accomplish its objectives in Syria. For Russia to increase its presence and influence in Syria means to diminish Iran's. Russia and Iran are competitors in Syria. If Russia were to push Iran out of Syria to make more room for itself, it would be a welcome change for Israel. Assad remaining in power would not be ideal for Israel, but at this point seeking to remove him is not a viable strategy (Hanauer 2016, 12-17).

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's interests in Syria are countering Iran and promoting stability in Syria. As the most powerful Sunni state in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is competing for regional hegemony against Iran, the Middle East's most powerful Shi'a state. Saudi Arabia has not directly involved itself in Syria; however, it has used its wealth to finance the Sunni rebel groups fighting Assad's regime. Saudi Arabia hopes to dissolve the

alliance between Iran and Syria. Saudi Arabia sees this as a way to rebalance regional hegemony in its favor and stall Iran's advances. Saudi Arabia views stability in Syria as another means to attack Syria and Iran's alliance. Saudi Arabia understands the more stable Syria is the less it will depend on Iran's assistance (Blanga 2017, 56-59).

America

America's interests in Syria are counterterrorism, removing Assad's regime, supporting its allies in the region, and countering Russia and Iran's activities in Syria. America's original interest in Syria was to support the more moderate Syrian rebel groups. America hoped that its support would enable these moderate rebels to overtake Assad's regime before the Sunni Arab extremist groups could. America was concerned that Sunni Arab extremists would topple Assad's regime first and potentially take possession of Syria's advanced weapons, which included chemical weapons (Moyar 2013).

Counterterrorism

As events evolved, America's primary interest in Syria morphed into the fight against ISIS. America's effort to degrade and destroy ISIS began as a limited number of air strikes under the Obama administration. It escalated to embedding military advisors with rebel groups and Kurdish units. This trend continued under the Trump administration with even more American involvement. Now the fight against ISIS is arguably coming to an end; however, Al Qaeda and terrorist groups that have splintered off from ISIS still remain a viable concern to America and its allies. This pattern of terrorists groups rising as others wane has emerged over the last 17 years of America's

Global War on Terror, such as ISIS forming out of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and older and newer groups showing up all over the world once the squeeze it put on them by America.

These diasporas of terrorists and their jihad ideology have led America to be involved in so many nations all over the world in pursuit of terrorists. The pattern has become familiar and predictable. Either an attack against America or its interests occurs, or is thought to be in the works, then America reaches a point of decision where it decides to engage itself against whatever group or state poses the threat. Once that group or state has been suppressed, several more rise up to take its place (Thrall and Goepner 2017, 5-6). Syria has been no exception to this trend and America's continued involvement will not cause it to end.

America's Efforts to Stall Iran

Another important interest for America in Syria is Iran. America is seeking to deny Iran freedom of movement and access to advanced weaponry. Yet Iran has made the situation in Syria more complex for America and has increased America's risk regarding which actions it takes or does not take. Iran is using Syria the same way it used Iraq and Afghanistan to counteract and disrupt America's counterterrorism and nation building efforts across the Middle East.

Iran has trained and supported an increasing number of Shi'a militia groups (SMGs) in Iraq and Syria, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (Vohra 2017). America has supported these same militias in its efforts to defeat ISIS making Iran more effective at making America's partners its own and allowing those partners to benefit from both Iran and America while maintaining their allegiance to Iran. America has failed to stall Iran on this front. It maintains little control over these groups and now that

the fight against ISIS is coming to a close, these SMGs are wild cards predisposed to do Iran's bidding (Watling 2016).

Hezbollah is another group Iran has supported and utilized well as a close ally. It has gained valuable fighting experience in Syria and benefited greatly from Iran's growing presence there. This presents a huge problem for America as it aims to stall Iran's progress in Syria. First, there is very little America can do without significantly increasing its military presence in Syria and its willingness to use military force to limit any of Iran or Hezbollah's actions in Syria. After all, they are welcome in Syria by Assad and America is not. Second, if America were to escalate its efforts to impede them in any overt way, it would likely cause America significant trouble and potentially provoke Russia to get involved as well. At this point, America probably would disrupt Iran and Hezbollah's agendas more effectively by taking a step back and allowing more chaos in Syria rather than trying to dampen it (Fulton et al. 2013, 21-23).

Resisting Russian and Iranian Influence in Syria

America does not have any good options to overtly resist Russia and Iran in Syria. These two states have formed an alliance in their attempts to disrupt America's actions in the Middle East and decrease its influence in the region. They have accomplished this in Syria by maintaining Assad's regime despite America's half-hearted efforts to oust him. America even made it easy on Russia and Iran to keep Assad in power by focusing exclusively on defeating ISIS, one of Assad's main threats. In this way, Russia and Iran have outmaneuvered America as it has helped Russia and Iran accomplish their goal, the preservation of Assad's regime, while America has gotten almost nothing and the one major ally it has on the ground, the Kurds, put America at odds with Turkey. From this

perspective, America is not resisting anything, but rather finding itself in a quagmire orchestrated by Russia and Iran. This being the case, the only effective method left for America to resist Russia and Iran's influence in Syria is through the Kurds and Israel (Karlin 2018).

America and the Kurds

Syria and Iraq benefited greatly from the Kurds ability to repel ISIS. After all of their successes against ISIS, the Kurds are now pushing hard to maintain the autonomy they have fought for and established in Syria. The Kurds in Iraq are even pushing for their own independence as a Kurdish state. This has brought about major backlash from Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. None of them want the Kurds to have their own state (CFR 2017).

This creates a problem for America. It has built up the Kurds as a major ally in the fight against ISIS and Assad's regime, but now that relationship is at a crux. If America continues to support the Kurds, especially if it supports an autonomous region in Syria or an independent Kurdish state in Iraq, it will certainly jeopardize whatever relations it has left with Turkey, embolden Iran's efforts against America, and stress its relationship with Iraq. None of these are desired outcomes and they all likely have worse consequences than abandoning the Kurds would.

America's Greatest Ally in the Middle East: Israel

Israel is high on America's list of concerns regarding intervention in Syria. While Syria has never been a friend to Israel, the concern is Iran and Hezbollah. Iran and Hezbollah being positioned so well in Syria has made them an even greater threat to Israel. There is the terror threat by Hezbollah, but because of Iran's secretive nuclear

program and relationship with North Korea, there is also a growing weapons of mass destruction concern. These threats combined with Iran and Hezbollah's hatred towards Israel and desire for its destruction are truly concerning. Iran and Hezbollah's involvement and positioning in Syria would certainly seem to allude that America needs to stay involved in Syria to prevent Iran from further supporting Hezbollah or from increasing either's ability to project power out of Syria against Israel, but it is not that simple. America does not have the leverage in Syria to alter Iran or Hezbollah's behavior. America must stand by Israel, but remaining involved in Syria is not necessary to do so (Hanauer 2016, 12-17).

America can support Israel regardless of its involvement in Syria. It can still provide Israel with arms, funding, and even direct military support in defense of Israel's sovereignty. This kind of support and more tactical actions aimed at keeping Iran and Hezbollah contained are more realistic for Israel and America to carry out versus strategic military actions. Defending against rocket attacks and other threats on a tactical level are matters America can assist Israel with through intelligence capabilities and weapons systems, but Israel nor America can really afford to make any strategic moves in Syria to diminish the threat posed by Assad, Iran, Hezbollah, or Sunni extremists. Regardless, America can and should support Israel in defending itself and its interest; however, both countries must exercise caution in doing so.

Chapter Two

If America Stays

Political Objectives

America wants ISIS destroyed, Assad gone, and a democratic form of government to take his place (Karlin 2018). These are all understandable political objectives. The first is all but accomplished. The second has not been accomplished and it is extremely unlikely it will be in the near future. The third is just as unlikely as the second barring America and its allies finding a significant leverage point to convince Assad, Russia, and Iran to capitulate into negotiating a new Syrian government.

There are two questions that need to be asked regarding the destruction of ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria. First, why these groups and their ideologies propagate. There is sufficient evidence that America's military and diplomatic involvement in the Middle East has been their primary catalyst. Thrall and Goepner's study, "Step Back Lessons for U.S. Foreign Policy from the Failed War on Terror," does an excellent job demonstrating this. Most terrorists, including Osama Bin Laden, have never stated America's political system, culture, or economy as the basis for their attacks. Instead, they have focused on America's Middle East policies and involvement in the region (Eland, 2-7).

Therefore, America should not continue to use counterterrorism as a validation for its involvement in Syria. Not all of the Sunni elements in Syria are Islamic jihadists nor do many of them care about effecting anything outside of Syria's borders. This is why the Sunnis in Syria are split. The Sunni Arab rebel groups have no desire to support the goals of Sunni Islamic jihadist groups such as ISIS. They just want a representative

Sunni government in Syria. These Sunnis are opposed to the violent means and goals of Sunni Islamic jihadist groups such as ISIS. A government run by these moderate Sunni Arabs would likely work to suppress such violent groups.

Even though these moderate Sunnis are opposed to Islamic jihadists it would still be precarious for America to support or work with them. America cannot control what these groups would do or how they would run Syria if given the opportunity. While they are predominantly backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, they are not controlled by them nor do they answer to anyone. Supporting groups such as these would likely cause America to exacerbate problems in Syria.

Second, what constitutes the destruction of terrorist groups and when they are no longer threats needs to be defined. For instance, ISIS has almost been rooted out of Syria and Iraq, but Al Qaeda has started to rise in its absence. This could motivate America to remain in Syria so that it can shift its focus towards Al Qaeda, but America has never established what constitutes the satisfactory destruction of a terrorist group. Remaining in Syria without defining what constitutes a decisive victory over these groups results in never ending conflict as can be seen in Afghanistan. Terrorism alone is not a justifiable reason for America to remain involved in Syria, especially since its mere involvement elsewhere in the region has proven to perpetuate terrorism itself.

That being said, the major terrorism threat in Syria has mostly come to an end. With the counterterrorism mission in its last phases, America needs to decide what its new political objectives will be moving forward in Syria. America still ultimately wants Syria to become democratic and for Assad to leave. It also wants to continue countering Iran's use of Syria to prop up Hezbollah, threaten Israel, and destabilize the Middle East.

Lastly, America wants to prevent the conditions that allowed the rise of ISIS from occurring again. If America wants to remain involved in Syria, working towards these political objectives, it needs a military and diplomatic strategy for how it aims to accomplish them (Karlin 2018).

The Flawed Strategy

Because America is not welcome by the Syrian government, a thorough and well thought out strategy will be even more essential. America needs to figure out how it will validate its presence in Syria to all parties involved and to the international community as a whole. As the battlespace continues to shrink, it will also need to figure out how it will confront Assad's regime, the Russians, and the Iranians. Here is where those such as Kenneth Pollack, who believe America should stay involved, have plenty to offer on what they think America's strategy should be going forward.

Pollack proposes a strategy based on the assumptions that Iran will attempt to fight back against American confrontation, that America will need to be more involved with its Middle Eastern allies, and that the main goal should be to decrease Iran's influence throughout the Middle East. Pollack acknowledges his strategy calls for America to be more offensive and mentions two specific areas in which he believes America's strategy should confront Iran. He believes America should focus on those areas that would allow it to harm Iran more than Iran could harm America and that America should focus on helping weaker allies who cannot confront Iran sufficiently without America's help (Pollack 2018).

In Syria, Pollack believes America could confront Iran covertly through the use of indigenous Syrian rebel groups in a similar fashion to how America confronted the

Soviets in Afghanistan. This is an important distinction. Pollack is not suggesting America maintain an overt presence in Syria, but rather to go all in on maintaining a covert presence in order to work by, with, and through, Syrian rebel groups. Pollack proposes this would continue to frustrate Iran's efforts in Syria and continue to cost them more in precious capital and manpower (Pollack 2018). While Pollack's idea sounds enticing, it has many flaws.

Pollack addresses many of the flaws his proposed strategy has, but his explanations are lacking. There are too many conditionally dependent circumstances his ideas rely on, such as the situation with the Kurds, which could easily foil his plan. Pollack depends on American disruption to eventually create a situation that ousts Assad's regime and depletes Iran's efforts in Syria. He argues these two conditions would be necessary to convince the Kurds not to seek a sovereign nation for themselves, but rather to trust the new Syrian government to give them full autonomy. Regardless of who might run Pollack's proposed Syrian government, the Kurds would have no reason to put their trust in them. Pollack also bases Turkey's compliance on the presumption that the Kurds will accept an autonomous region instead of a sovereign state in Syria. While the PYD would certainly be content with autonomy and in many ways prefer it over independence, Turkey does not believe this makes the PKK backed PYD any less of a threat to its own sovereignty (Pollack 2018). Turkey has even allied itself with Assad, Russia, and Iran because of the threat it perceives from the Kurds (Idiz 2018).

While the alliance among Turkey, Assad, Russia, and Iran is loose, it is still sufficient enough to cause America and its allies serious problems (Idiz 2018). This breaks one of the two areas Pollack said America should focus on, those areas where

America can harm Iran more than Iran can harm it (Pollack 2018). America risk significant losses in lives, old allies, international standing, and mistakes being made in Syria that could create significant problems in the future. Pollack's suggestion to support rebel forces in order to disrupt Iran and Russia's support for Assad's regime is understandable, but it is not a safe enough strategy to implement. Without having a better understanding of who it is supporting, America risk repeating similar mistakes from its past endeavors.

America's past is full of botched attempts at regime change and other actions that were undertaken to secure American interests abroad. Ironically, the main instance of this dealt with the very enemy that Pollack and others want to confront, Iran. It also is what arguably has led up to America's tenuous relationship with the Middle East today. This sequence of events should serve as a dire warning for Pollack and those who side with him.

The Iranian Preamble

In 1953, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) orchestrated a coup to oust the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. America's motivation for doing so was to prevent Iran from falling into the hands of the Soviet Union (Brew 2017). Unfortunately, Iran suffered social and political oppression and economic despair under the American installed Shah's regime. This drove Iran's citizens to overthrow the Shah's government and replace him with an Islamic government led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Iranian Revolution of 1978–79"). Overnight, Iran became an enemy of America.

In 1980, Iran and Iraq went to war with each other over disputed land and political differences. America sided with Iraq in order to insure Iran's defeat. This became a black eye for America since it was supporting the aggressor, Iraq, who used chemical weapons against Iran. This support for Iraq further radicalized Iran's hatred for America. Then shortly after the war, America had to confront Iraq after it invaded Kuwait (Riedel 2013).

Iraq invaded Kuwait because it felt abandoned by the Gulf Arab states that supported its war against Iran and by its suspicion that Kuwait, whose borders Iraq did not recognize, was stealing its oil. Iraq also assumed America would not interfere with its invasion of Kuwait because of the declining communist threat and because it promised America cheap oil. When Iraq invaded Kuwait it was immediately met with a United Nations' resolution condemning its actions followed by the American led campaign to liberate Kuwait. Just like America's support led up to the Persian Gulf War, its intervention in the Persian Gulf War led to the most significant modern attack on American soil (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "The Persian Gulf War").

When America deployed its military to the Middle East to confront Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, Osama bin Laden took notice. He returned to Saudi Arabia in 1989 with a list of fighters who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. They called themselves Al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden's hatred for America began when Saudi Arabia rejected his proposal to use Al Qaeda to defend Saudi Arabia from Iraq. Saudi Arabia instead chose to host America's military and rely on it for protection. This cut bin Laden deeply and fueled his efforts against America in the 1990s culminating in the 9/11 attacks. Those attacks led to America's war on terrorism, Al Qaeda's rise in Iraq, and eventually ISIS. Actions have consequences and some of them take a long time before they are fully

realized. Perhaps this is evidence for a different American strategy in Syria and the Middle East as a whole (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. “The Persian Gulf War”).

America certainly cannot avoid the Middle East and, as the world’s hegemonic power, it has the potential to be more of a stabilizing force than a destabilizing one. The disconnect happens when stability and intervention are made synonymous. America’s military is not the panacea for all of the world’s ills. Not every situation or state is a vital interest to America. Only interests that are vital to America’s interests should be met with military force and only when absolutely necessary. This means the might of America should be focused on countering states like China and Russia to insure it remains the most powerful country in the world, not bogging itself down in places like Syria where it has no real strategic interest nor effective means to change anything (Mearsheimer 2014, 9-30).

Effects of America Staying

America must understand that if it decides to remain involved in Syria it may continue to get results similar to those it has seen elsewhere in the Middle East. More than likely, America’s continued presence in Syria will serve to exacerbate the problems it has seen elsewhere. America does not have much to validate its presence in Syria and is in a weak position to influence anything (Stein 2018). For America to accomplish any of its goals in Syria at this point would require significant amounts of capital and probably the lives of many Americans (Sokolsky 2017). America remaining in Syria would probably detract from what it hopes to accomplish while simultaneously weakening its position across the region.

Chapter Three

If America Leaves

America remaining involved in Syria with few advantages to accomplish its will is a recipe for disaster. America would be better off leaving Syria alone. The political objectives America had at the onset of the Syrian conflict and at the beginning of its involvement are not realistic anymore. A different strategy earlier on in the Syrian conflict might have made it possible to accomplish them, but moving forward America will need to reevaluate its political objectives in Syria.

Leaving Syria will affect how America disrupts Russia and Iran's efforts in Syria. It will no longer be able to shepherd proxy forces with air support and imbedded advisors to stall Russia and Iran's military campaigns. Nonetheless, America can still disrupt Russia and Iran's efforts throughout the Middle East without being involved in Syria. It can leverage sanctions against Russia, Syria, and Iran. It can supply rebel groups with arms and supplies; however, there may not be any real utility in countering Russia and Iran's efforts in Syria.

As much as they are at odds, there are actually very few justifiable reasons for America and Russia to not cooperate in Syria. Both want stability, not only in Syria, but also in the Middle East. Both are concerned about the threat of Islamic terrorist groups. Both need partners to successfully achieve their desired outcomes and maintain their interests. Both believe stabilizing Syria is necessary for the Middle East's future progress (Herrera, Kydd, and Lukyanov). A partnership between Russia and America would allow both to defeat their common enemy with more ease and resoluteness. It also may provide America with more influence later on, as it would foster a greater working relationship

with Russia and the Syrian government. In turn, this could allow America to have more of an effect on matters that are important to its own regional allies, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia.

America does not need to be fully complicit with Russia. Obviously, Assad is not the perfect solution. He rules his people harshly and corruptly, but his continued rule is better than creating another vacuum in the Middle East by toppling his government and allowing malicious groups free reign in yet another failed state. Especially since America has never successfully backed the overthrowing or installation of a government in the Middle East. Furthermore, whatever America does accomplish on its own in Syria will be undone in short order by Russia and Iran. Neither is perfectly content with the other and they both distrust each other to some degree, but unlike America, Russia and Iran have been able to put their differences aside in pursuit of their common interests in Syria. With America in such a weak position in Syria, it really should reevaluate its stance on Russia (Aleksashenko 2015).

Partnering with Russia also helps America be in a position to gracefully disengage from Syria. America can leave Syria without the appearance of being forced out. It can let Russia take the brunt of stabilizing Syria as nation-building and stabilizing have proven to be exhausting and perilous undertakings for any state to take on. If America can forfeit its desire for regime change in Syria, then it stands to make significant diplomatic gains throughout the Middle East by allowing Russia to have its way in Syria.

America will not lose anything by allowing Assad to remain in power. Syria has never been an ally of America and it is unlikely it ever will be. A Syria ruled by Assad and supported by Russia presents a far more stable situation than a Syria torn apart by

proxy wars and ruled by various rebel groups, terrorist groups, and foreign states. A stable Syria would at least afford a higher probability of containing terrorism. This is important as America cannot abolish ISIS or any other group completely. It can only realistically aim to contain them (Sokolsky and Miller 2017).

The two American allies with the most to lose from America leaving Syria will be Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israel finds itself in an increasingly precarious situation as Iran establishes itself more in Syria and continues to support Hezbollah. The recent downing of the Iranian drone in Israeli airspace and the downing of an Israeli F-16 are a testament to this (Cooper 2018). Iran and Hezbollah have utilized their operations in Syria to build weapon factories and transfer weapons between each other in an effort to build up Hezbollah for operations against Israel. Israel claims it will not stand for this and will destroy weapon factories and other targets in Syria and Lebanon that pose a threat. If America leaves Syria, it is understandable why Israel, as America's closest ally in the Middle East, would view this as a detriment to its own security (Alami 2018).

Saudi Arabia is not fond of America leaving Syria either. Saudi Arabia is a close American ally and counters Iran's efforts to establish itself as the regional hegemonic power in the Middle East. The power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been evident throughout the Middle East, especially in their proxy wars against each other in Syria and Yemen (Nader 2017). America has steadily supported the Saudis and its departure from Syria would be a significant shift in its support.

America needs to maintain its relationship with Israel and Saudi Arabia, but it should refrain from heeding to their every beck and call. Not every goal of theirs is aligned with or beneficial to America's goals in the region. Furthermore, many of the

actions America has taken on their behalf has served to complicate America's problems with terrorism in the region, especially regarding Israel (McConnell 2010). America can remain an ally of both Israel and Saudi Arabia while leaving Syria. Both states will be perturbed with America's departure, but they have more to lose by isolating themselves from America than America does by upsetting them. Israel nor Saudi Arabia can overcome their international challenges without the assistance of the United States. This gives America leverage that it should use to tame both of them and in trying to orient their diplomatic and military actions.

Chapter Four

Conclusion: America Leaves

America needs to leave Syria. It has accomplished its objective of destroying ISIS. While ISIS, Al Qaeda, and others like them can never truly be eradicated, enough has been done to contain the terrorism threat in Syria and Iraq. America did not accomplish its objective of replacing Assad with a democratic government that would partner with America and its allies to prevent Syria from being a proxy of Russia and Iran, but America cannot accomplish this objective. Russia and Iran have solidified Assad's regime. Short of a major military interdiction, there is nothing America can effectively change in the foreseeable future (Sachs 2018).

America has not lost Syria to Russia and Iran. It did not suffer a major diplomatic or military blow in Syria. It has not been adversely affected by anything that occurred during Syria's civil war. The same cannot be said for America's allies Israel and Saudi Arabia, but their situations alone should not dictate America's involvement in Syria. After all, the only thing that has changed for them is Iran now has a stronger presence in Syria, but that increased presence has also stretched Iran thin and depleted its resources.

Between Yemen and Syria, Iran has overextended itself and Russia has caused itself similar problems by coming to Assad's aid. Neither Russia nor Iran have the capital to indefinitely prop up Syria. America and its allies should capitalize on this and allow Syria to burden Russia and Iran financially and militarily. This would free America and its allies of having to invest in stabilizing Syria. It puts the onus and the expense on Russia and Iran to achieve stabilization in Syria. They want and need Syria to be stabilized far more than America does. So, let them carry that burden. Syria under Assad and propped up by Russia and Iran is not destabilizing to America or its interests in the Middle East. It actually does the opposite. It causes Russia and Iran to get tangled up in supporting Assad's weak regime giving them fewer resources to expend elsewhere in the Middle East attempting to undermine America and its allies. These are all positive outcomes for America and its allies.

Terrorism will likely continue to be a problem in Syria, but that will be a problem for Russia and Iran to handle now. Terrorists groups will disapprove of Russian interference in the Middle East just as they have America's and they will continue to oppose Assad's regime. If America no longer involves itself in Syria, these groups will have less of a reason to oppose it. They certainly will not be fans of America, but there will not be any more fuel added to the fire as America's interventionist foreign policies have proven to be one of the biggest driving factors in the propagation of terrorism. (Thrall and Goepner 2017, 5-9).

Another problem that will arise from America's departure will be the lack of support for Kurdish independence or autonomy. Without America's presence in Syria, it is unlikely the Kurds will find enough support for the formation of their own state or

autonomous region in Syria. However, America's relationship with Turkey is not worth losing over the Kurds, let alone increasing tensions with Iran and Iraq. By leaving Syria, America will resolve this issue and likely regain its relationship with Turkey. The Kurds will likely continue to fight for their own independence and autonomy, but this would serve as another distraction for Syria and its allies.

America needs to leave Syria now. America does not possess the political necessity to stay involved in Syria. America has had little success in nation-building and there is no reason to expect Syria would be any different. America needs to realize that it holds the weakest position in Syria. The other parties involved have far more developed relationships and interests in Syria. America needs to think long and hard about what its genuine interests are in Syria and the Middle East. For now, it is the world's hegemonic power, but this may not always be the case. Ironically, it may not be the case because of its very actions in the Middle East. A tactical retreat from Syria could be just what is needed for America and its allies to accomplish a much more important strategic victory throughout the Middle East.

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