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The Tourniquet

*A Strategy for Defeating the Islamic State
and Saving Syria and Iraq*

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Center for a
New American
Security

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THE TOURNIQUET: A STRATEGY FOR DEFEATING THE ISLAMIC STATE AND SAVING SYRIA AND IRAQ

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Obama administration has laid out an ambitious strategy for defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Iraq and degrading it in Syria. It has assembled a broad coalition in support of airstrikes, training and advising missions, and the curtailing of the flows of fighters and support to jihadist groups in both Syria and Iraq. These efforts have helped stabilize the situation and galvanize political change in Iraq, but have struggled to gain traction in Syria. As these initial efforts prove unable to deliver decisive progress against ISIS, the pressure will likely grow to expand the military campaign and its mission.

It is therefore vital that the Obama administration clearly articulate a strategic vision for translating its military and political efforts into a sustainable endgame. Alternative proposals to build U.S. strategy around regional confrontation with Iran or a new Global War on Terror, or to immediately expand the campaign to target the Asad regime, would likely quickly demand a dramatic increase in the U.S. military commitments without securing core U.S. interests.

As the Obama administration addresses the pressing ISIS challenge, this report recommends that the United States:

Use the ISIS crisis to create a sustainable regional accord. ISIS has already generated remarkable new forms of collaboration at the regional level and concerted consensus at the international level. The UN has passed a series of meaningful resolutions that open real opportunities for joint action, both on Syria and in the fight against extremism more broadly. Iran and Saudi Arabia have signaled a very tentative thaw in relations, and the GCC's crisis over Qatar has been dialed back over the recognition of the new challenges. Iranian-American joint pressure for the replacement of Nuri al-Maliki as Iraqi Prime Minister, supported by long-hostile Arab Gulf states, represents a rare example of effective regional cooperation. This will not last,

however. U.S. diplomacy should focus on building a regional and international accord to de-escalate the Iraqi and Syrian proxy wars and buy time to repair badly frayed partnerships.

Support the reconstruction of Iraqi state legitimacy and authority. In Iraq, the autocratic, sectarian rule of Nuri al-Maliki's government played a key role in the revival of the Iraqi Sunni insurgency, with ISIS as its vanguard. While military action against ISIS is essential, only a more inclusive and effective government can end the challenge. The ascendance of Haider al-Abadi, a Shia Islamist who has committed to forming a more representative polity in Baghdad, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for genuine ethno-sectarian accommodation; further steps to encourage local autonomy and power sharing will be required. The U.S. should offer strong, consistent, but conditional support for both the new Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The arming of Kurdish forces should be conditioned upon a renewed commitment to the integrity of the Iraqi state and should not be allowed to embolden a Kurdish bid for secession. The arming of Iraqi forces should be conditioned upon meaningful political reform, including effective accommodation of the vital interests of the Sunni community in both Baghdad and outlying areas. The United States should work to split key armed Sunni groups from ISIS – forging agreements through the Iraqi Security Forces, rather than as ad hoc arrangements that can once again be easily terminated once the crisis passes.

Force a strategic pause between Asad and rebel groups in Syria. The United States should make military action and aid in Syria clearly and explicitly conditional on acceptance of a de-escalation framework despite the real resistance on the part of the rebels. U.S. military and financial assistance to the fragmented opposition must be substantial enough to matter to them, coordinated with the other major external sources of support, and

Washington should not shy away from criticizing its allies for human rights abuses and sectarian incitement even as it cooperates with them to address common threats.

conditioned upon the groups' commitment to both combating ISIS and building a coordinated strategy that emphasizes local defense and governance. The goal of de-escalation is to get both the regime and the opposition to shift away from offensives against one another, and instead take up purely defensive postures. Military threats against the Syrian regime should be designed to enforce this cessation of hostilities and police lines of division, using deferrals of offensive operations to secure Asad's compliance. The U.S. should not collaborate with the Asad regime, as some recommend, and should mount an aggressive public information campaign against the regime's efforts to claim such a partnership. Damascus's fears of mission creep provide potential leverage to incentivize it to expand local ceasefires and governance initiatives, increase humanitarian access and train its sights on ISIS instead of more moderate opposition forces.

Tighten the Syria tourniquet to translate this strategic pause into a political transition. This regional accord should build upon UN Resolution 2170, which sanctioned supporters of ISIS and Jubhat al-Nusra, to restrict the flow of funds and fighters to all sides of the Syria conflict. Gulf states should be encouraged to continue their new efforts to cut off funds not only to ISIS but also to the many other jihadist organizations fighting in Syria. Iran, Hezbollah and Russia should likewise be

pressured to dial back their aid to the Asad regime, and to exercise their influence over it to force its acquiescence to a coordinated de-escalation. The de-escalation framework should aim at the consolidation of local governance through the large-scale provision of humanitarian aid in rebel-controlled areas and refugee communities, as provided for in UN Resolution 2165. The goal of “near term” regime change may have to be sacrificed to secure Asad’s/Iran’s buy-in, but the international community should continue to insist on a more inclusive Syrian state in the near and medium term, while seeking to build toward a long-term transition along the lines of the Geneva communique.

Don’t ignore human rights and democracy in the name of counter-terrorism. The urgency of the new campaign against ISIS could easily lead to the downgrading of concerns about human rights and democracy, particularly among members of the coalition. This would be a mistake. The sectarianism, extremism and proxy wars that President Obama identified in his UNGA speech as central to the region’s ills have a common origin in domestic repression. Many U.S. allies in the coalition would prefer to use the new struggle against ISIS to divert external attention on their own autocratic ways. Even as it partners with conservative Sunni states, the administration should take care not to give a blank check in support of their sectarian regional strategies or repression at home. Washington should not shy away from criticizing its allies for human rights abuses and sectarian incitement even as it cooperates with them to address common threats.

II. INTRODUCTION

On September 22, 2014, the United States and a coalition of partners began bombing extremist groups in Syria, including the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jubhat al-Nusra, Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate. President Barack Obama followed the launch of this aerial campaign with a forceful address to the United Nations calling on the world to unite against the forces of radical extremism. The UN Security Council responded with a unanimously approved resolution on curtailing support for ISIS and other extremists fighting in Syria and Iraq.

This culminated a remarkable shift in the Obama administration's approach to Syria and the broader Middle East. After nearly six years of determined efforts to reduce America's military posture in the region, Obama has now made apparently open-ended military commitments to Iraq and Syria. He has also formulated an international coalition in support of counter-terrorist goals that includes conservative Sunni Arab states, which fiercely opposed the democratic uprisings that only three years ago dominated American thinking about the region.

The administration has performed well at the tactical level in Iraq in this new campaign. It deftly engineered the formation of a potentially more inclusive Iraqi government and used air-power to halt the advance of ISIS fighters towards Baghdad and Erbil. It assembled a coalition of key regional and international state partners, and won widespread support for multilateral efforts to confront the supply-side of terrorist financing and ideology.

The airstrikes in Syria have had a rockier course. The decision to target the al-Qaeda affiliate Jubhat al-Nusra alongside ISIS and to not immediately expand the campaign to the regime of Bashar al-Asad each made strong strategic sense, but

nonetheless triggered widespread condemnation from the Syrian rebels and regional allies upon which the current strategy relies. Strikes against oil facilities and infrastructural targets risk exacerbating the humanitarian crisis for civilians across Syria. ISIS has quickly adapted to the initial round of airstrikes and is proving difficult to dislodge from the air. Already, loud calls are demanding additional efforts, from the establishment of a "No Fly Zone" to attacks on regime targets. Such calls will only increase in volume as the air campaign inevitably struggles to produce decisive results.

The administration had little choice but to respond forcefully to ISIS's consolidation of power over substantial swathes of both Syria and Iraq and the group's beheading of two American journalists. The sudden surge of the hardest-line jihadists and their declaration of a state challenged both the moderate Syrian rebels that the United States supports and the Iraqi government that the United States helped put in place at enormous cost. The prominent role of foreign fighters, many carrying Western passports, also alarmed security officials.¹ But the administration has thus far faltered at the strategic level of articulating a clearly desired regional end-state and identifying the resources that will be required to achieve that goal.

Now that Washington has committed to confronting ISIS, it is essential that these fundamental questions about the longer-term political strategy be squarely addressed and publicly articulated.² This strategy must be designed to match its objectives with a determinedly realistic assessment of the available resources. The White House remains fiercely, and appropriately, opposed to the deployment of large numbers of U.S. combat troops to Iraq or their use in Syria, and President Obama is keenly aware of the risks of mission creep culminating in an inescapable quagmire. The current track makes such unwanted escalation exceptionally difficult to avoid, however. Avoiding such a disaster will only be possible by developing a

plausible political strategy focused on protecting vital American interests without opening the door to unsustainable commitments. Otherwise, the struggle against ISIS could easily expand into a U.S.-led campaign against the Asad regime and regionwide confrontation with Iran with costs surpassing those of the catastrophic decade in Iraq.

Syria has already become a catastrophe, and Iraq could easily follow it into the abyss. From the vantage point of American national interests, however, the situation could still be far worse. The United States could become mired in an expensive new war without materially enhancing the security of America or its allies, or advancing its regional and global policy goals. The emergent coalition against ISIS is only tentatively aligned and reflects an alarming degree of conflicting interests and perspectives, including major uncertainties over the place of Iran. The ultimate goal of the action – whether to contain or destroy ISIS, or to expand operations further to bring down the Asad regime – remains painfully unclear.

The extension of the war into Syria through airstrikes, in particular, has opened the path toward the kind of escalation that the administration has so effectively avoided for the last three years. The limits of the current military action will likely lead to stalemate on the ground and fierce pressure for increased involvement – particularly in Syria, where there are far fewer footholds to prevent a rapid slide down the slippery slope into large-scale intervention. Iraq's dysfunctional politics are already struggling to deliver on the promise of a new coalition government. Syria's rebel groups remain divided and disparate, and largely hostile to the first round of airstrikes.³ Should American soldiers be killed or captured by ISIS forces while assisting Iraqi or Syrian forces, the pressure to escalate would be intense.

The goals of destroying ISIS in Iraq and degrading it inside of Syria are correctly articulated .

The relationship between those goals and the aspirations of key partners, and the ability to achieve them at an acceptable cost, are far more ambiguous. Those goals must be aligned to fit within broader American policy objectives for the region. Escalation and mission expansion must be firmly resisted, and the necessary resources and legal authorizations for the military action clearly understood.

The major alternative policy proposals in circulation range widely in terms of their ambition and objectives. These proposals adopt dramatically different perspectives on both the primary objective of the mission and the desirable resource commitments. Some policies prioritize the battle against ISIS, others against Iran, and still others against the Asad regime. Some policies welcome the deployment of many thousands of U.S. ground forces.⁴ Some advocate working tacitly or openly with the Asad regime against the common threat posed by ISIS, while others view the removal of Asad as the only way to prosecute the campaign against ISIS effectively. Some view the ISIS crisis as providing a unique opportunity for Washington to serve as an honest broker to de-escalate tensions between regional Sunni powers and Iran, while others see it as necessitating doubling down on the U.S. alignment with conservative Sunni states to confront Iran. Some call for a renewed “global war on terror” (GWOT) focused on confronting radical Islamism everywhere.

The United States should focus on tamping down rather than escalating the armed conflict in Syria, squeezing off the sources of support to extremists on both sides, and conditioning military assistance to Iraq, Syrian rebels, and regional allies on political reforms that could forestall the forms of institutional failure that opened the door to ISIS in the first place.⁵ The strategic goal beyond the defeat of ISIS should be to rebuild not only Syria and Iraq, but, more broadly, a shattered regional order that rests upon resilient and legitimate local partners

and can function with a sustainable level of U.S. military and political commitments. Such a strategic goal will require a long time horizon.

These goals can be achieved in Syria only through an outside-in approach that harnesses a fleeting moment of international and regional accord to shift the direction of regional political confrontations. The United States should work to secure a strategic pause that can be used to de-escalate the violence between these parties, and to reverse gains by ISIS. Further, it should use a newfound alignment of interests against ISIS and regional collapse as the starting point for a more comprehensive “tourniquet” strategy to choke off support to the insurgency and civil war. The strategy should be built upon a new regional compact bridging the Iranian-Arab divide, conditional assistance to partner governments, and a de-escalation of the Syrian war.

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III. THE REGIONAL STAKES OF THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST ISIS

The dramatic surge of the Islamic State group through Syria and northern Iraq transformed a strategic landscape that for several years had been locked in a seemingly perpetual, devastating stalemate. Iraq had been suffering from a low-level but bloody insurgency for several years, fueled in part by heavy-handed security policies from an insular and sectarian government. Syria's multipolar civil war had settled into a highly fluid but robust stalemate, with ample external involvement sustaining its exceptionally bloody civil war. Syria's neighbors suffered under the burden of historic numbers of refugees, but seemed able to manage tremendous challenges with international aid and local efforts.

The sudden ISIS seizure of Mosul in June upended this sense of a sustainable, if painful, stalemate. But in fact, the conditions that led to this advance had been building for several years in both Syria and Iraq. The Syrian uprising had triggered renewed Iraqi Sunni protests and a brutal Iraqi government repressive response.⁶ ISIS emerged in the cauldron of the Syrian civil war, and for years appeared to be just one of many jihadist groups competing for local power and external support. Over the course of 2012 and 2013, the border between the two states grew increasingly meaningless as the insurgencies established a coherent infrastructure that could move men and materiel across it with ease. This interaction gave ISIS a distinctive advantage over its Syrian competitors, and allowed it to rebuild its relations with disgruntled Iraqi Sunni factions.

In Iraq, ISIS emerged out of the remnants of the al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) insurgency and its associated Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) organization. By 2004, AQI and its affiliates had established a strong foothold across western Iraq. The group overplayed its hand, however, alienating powerful nationalist

and jihadist factions as well as local tribes through its attempt to impose extreme Islamist governance and to monopolize local power. Their disillusionment culminated in the "Sunni Awakening" that swept Anbar and spread into Baghdad beginning in late 2006.

The Awakenings, supported by U.S. forces, dealt AQI a profound strategic reversal. The Awakenings grew out of decisions to confront AQI, not only by the Sunni tribes, but also by key "nationalist-jihadist" armed insurgency factions, such as the Islamic Army of Iraq and the 1920 Revolution Brigades. Those Awakenings forces aligned with the United States for a number of reasons, chief among them their losses to Shia militias and their fears of domination by a rising, extreme AQI organization. The U.S. "surge" and counterinsurgency campaign succeeded only through the support of these Sunni forces, which opted to align with the United States (though, crucially, not necessarily the Shia-dominated Iraqi government) against their former AQI partners.

The ISI was never fully defeated or eliminated, however. A low-level insurgency campaign continued after 2008, recovering strength along with the frustrations of Sunni factions and political forces with their government. The Awakenings had been sealed by a promise of political incorporation from the Maliki government, secured by U.S. forces, including payments and positions within the Iraqi Security Forces for Awakenings fighters. However, particularly after his hotly contested 2010 re-election, Maliki seemed intent on instead pursuing a sectarian agenda and concentrating power in his own office, squandering the Awakenings' fragile political gains. The promises were largely broken, as the Iraqi government slowrolled the integration of and payments to Awakenings fighters. Maliki's crackdown on rival Sunni politicians such as Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi and Deputy Prime Minister Rafi Issawi further shattered any remaining trust. The Iraqi government badly mishandled

protests in Anbar which began in late 2012, with a bloody crackdown on protestors in Huwija in April 2013 triggering widespread Sunni outrage. By early 2014, ISIS had established its presence in Fallujah and Ramadi and had set the stage for June's seizure of Mosul.

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In Syria, ISIS emerged as one of many factions fighting for territory, resources and power in the brutal civil war consuming the country. The Syrian opposition blames the regime for creating ISIS, pointing to the Assad regime's apparent policy of avoiding direct confrontation with ISIS while attacking other opposition targets. However, this is only part of the story.⁷ ISIS took advantage of opportunities created by the collapse of state authority over large stretches of Syria, as well as the possibilities opened by new intra-Islamist political competition. It broke with Jubhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda, rejecting the mediation efforts of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and bidding for support from jihadists around the world. Its ability to attract foreign fighters, to cross the border with Iraq and to extract resources from territory under its control gave it a distinct advantage in the intramural struggles with other rebel factions. So, arguably, did the Syrian regime's general tendency to focus its military campaign against other less extreme groups.

The broader regional terrain beyond Syria and Iraq also helped produce the environment in which ISIS emerged. By late 2011, the Syrian uprising had become a focal point for a massive public mobilization campaign, particularly in the Gulf, by a wide range of primarily Islamic public figures. Muslim Brotherhood-aligned leaders played a role in this mobilization, as did regimes and Salafist, sectarian styles of Islamism.⁸ These campaigns raised huge sums of money for Syrian rebels, primarily for those with an Islamist orientation, but in an uncoordinated way that encouraged the fragmentation and Islamization of the uprising.⁹ Kuwait emerged as a primary arena for the collection and distribution of funds from around the Gulf, due to its permissive legal environment and contentious domestic politics. Qatar funneled huge amounts of money to primarily Islamist local proxies, while Saudi Arabia did the same for their own preferred groups.

The mobilization of Sunni Islamist support for insurgents was matched by a growing Shia mobilization in support of the regime. Hezbollah's direct intervention in the fighting, and the indirect role of Iran's IRGC, was increasingly supplemented by militia groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). Collectively, such mobilization sharply increased virulent sectarianism across the region, to the benefit of the more ideologically extreme and militarily successful organizations. In turn, rising sectarianism reshaped politics in dangerous new directions, especially in countries with significant Shia populations, and rallied Islamist political movements in Kuwait, Yemen, Bahrain, and Lebanon.

All of these environmental conditions pushed the Syrian insurgency in directions that played to ISIS strengths. The ongoing public arguments over which Gulf states did or did not fund ISIS largely miss the point. The reality is that their collective role in the Syrian insurgency created the environment within which ISIS and other hard-line

jihadist groups flourished. Fueled by Gulf support, the insurgency's increasingly sectarian and Islamist rhetoric privileged those who preached the most radical vision. ISIS emerged to challenge not only governments, but also existing Islamist movements, which it accused of complacency and corruption. Its appeal to would-be jihadists is thus rooted in a powerful narrative, as well as in the demonstrable failures of key rivals. Uniquely amongst rebel groups, this enabled it to take advantage of state weaknesses caused by the 2011 uprisings and massive refugee flows.

The ISIS threat to the U.S. homeland is likely exaggerated in current feverish rhetoric justifying military actions. It does pose a serious danger to core American interests, however, and left unchecked could evolve into a direct threat. It imperils the stability of key states in the region, including several important partners, and has created a governance void at the heart of the Levant. ISIS fuels the sectarian carnage destabilizing the whole region, and could easily provoke equally radical counter-mobilization by Shi'ites and other opponents. How to confront such a threat is the focus of the remainder of this report.

IV. STRATEGIC OPTIONS

The U.S. has adopted a mixed, largely hands-off policy towards Syria and Iraq for the last few years. Since the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq at the end of 2011, Washington remained on the sidelines of Baghdad's dysfunctional politics, and refrained from efforts to shape political outcomes. This relative disengagement was an appropriate policy following the withdrawal, and necessary for any real normalization of Iraqi politics. The U.S. was well aware of the steadily rising Sunni insurgency, and repeatedly urged the Maliki government to adopt meaningful political reforms. Those efforts had little impact, however, on Iraqi politicians fighting their own narrow partisan and sectarian battles. Meanwhile, U.S. policy towards Syria remained ambiguous. On the one hand, the administration determinedly resisted efforts to drag the United States into the Syrian quagmire. It has offered significant humanitarian aid along with limited support to the opposition, slowly expanding its covert (but widely publicized) support, arming and training for Syrian rebels, and trying to nurture the emergence of a viable, representative and inclusive opposition political structure, but refusing to provide advanced weaponry or to directly intervene. It has maintained a formal position that Asad had lost his legitimacy and needed to go, but has preferred that this happen through negotiated political transition rather than state collapse.

The newly aggressive U.S. strategy in Syria and Iraq builds upon many previous threads, but has struggled to reconcile past reservations with new policies. It relies upon a moderate opposition that can fight and provide governance in the spaces vacated by ISIS, even though it has (correctly) maintained for years that no such moderate opposition exists. It has begun a campaign of airstrikes in Syria after years of warning that such strikes would not be militarily decisive. By launching airstrikes and introducing military advisers and

close air support into Iraq, the administration has crossed a very significant threshold, and is already setting in motion a range of consequences, some intended and some not.

As the United States engages more forcefully in both Iraq and Syria, what are its vital national interests? First, the U.S. should prevent the consolidation of an extremist safe haven, and take all necessary measures against terrorist operations that could arise out of it. Second, the United States has an interest in stabilizing and preserving the Iraqi and Syrian states within their present borders and preventing the further spillover of instability into their neighbors. Third, the United States has an interest in easing the humanitarian suffering of Iraqis and Syrians, preventing genocidal attacks on minorities and threatened communities, and returning refugees and internally displaced persons to viable homes. And fourth, the United States has a vital national interest in avoiding a quagmire that diverts its ability to address other regional and global issues.

As it formulates its strategy, Washington must recognize a number of key, albeit unpleasant, realities. The opposition is unlikely to win a military victory over the Asad regime any time soon, certainly without direct U.S. military intervention on a scale that would not serve American interests. The viable moderate Syrian opposition that many consider a strategic necessity does not currently exist and will not be quickly brought into being. Nor is the Asad regime likely to defeat the opposition conclusively and restore its authority over all of Syria. This likely stalemate, however, means that the conditions driving humanitarian catastrophe, state failure, and radicalization will continue and expand. There is no questioning the significance of the strategic threat posed by ISIS, as well as the broader ongoing civil war in Syria and political incapacity in Iraq. But the response to that challenge must not create new commitments that drag the United States into more unwinnable wars.

These interests and resource constraints must shape the strategy towards Iraq and Syria, and how the intended outcomes will be articulated. In Iraq, the desired end state should be a territorially unified but politically decentralized country in which ISIS has been pushed back and largely defeated. In Syria, the desired end state, at least in the short to medium term, should be a de-escalation of the conflict, the consolidation of a patchwork of local ceasefires in which large-scale humanitarian assistance facilitates the emergence of viable opposition governance and refugee return, and a longer-term political transition.

There is no shortage of advice to offer for responding to ISIS. Some of these recommendations suffer from strategic or conceptual flaws even more serious than those evident in the administration's current approach, however. Many rely on heroic assumptions about the capacity of local partners or the ability of the United States to achieve major gains through very limited means. Others view deeper U.S. military engagement in the region almost as an end unto itself, with mission creep viewed as a feature rather than a flaw in the strategic design.

The plans to offer might be usefully categorized according to two criteria: the degree of recommended military engagement, and whether the primary adversary is Iran or a Sunni jihadist organization.

On one axis, the disagreement is over whether the United States should try to protect its vital interests with the minimum possible level of direct involvement or should instead go "all in" militarily. Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham, for instance, call for a "military plan to defeat ISIS, wherever it is."¹⁰ Such approaches open the door, intentionally or not, to the reintroduction of a large-scale U.S. military commitment. Such potential is already obvious. For Robert Simcox, real political effects will require the deployment

of sufficiently large-scale U.S. troops "to become the indispensable military player there."¹¹ Michael O'Hanlon estimates that this might require up to 5,000 U.S. troops embedded with Iraqi units for a long time.¹² Max Boot proposes "a prudent and limited deployment of American trainers, special operators, air controllers and intelligence agents to mobilize indigenous opposition to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)."¹³ The Institute for the Study of War proposes no less than 25,000 troops in Iraq and Syria.¹⁴ It is highly unlikely that even such sizable deployments would remain limited, however. As their inadequacy to the task quickly became apparent, the drumbeat would likely return for larger deployments and active counterinsurgency strategy. Such proposals would effectively overturn the Obama administration's successful extrication of U.S. troops in 2011, and President Obama has been right to publicly reject them.

The president's UNGA speech and subsequent statements clearly identify ISIS as the primary adversary, and that has been the target of the coalition Washington has assembled. Most of the Syrian opposition and their international supporters have consistently argued that the priority must be the overthrow of the Asad regime, even now that ISIS represents the most immediate threat.¹⁵ Former State Department official Frederic Hof, for instance, has long advocated such a focus on Asad and warned that ISIS cannot be defeated without also removing the Syrian regime. Turkey has made a commitment to Asad's removal a condition for its participation in the military campaign. A wide range of Syrian rebel groups have condemned any intervention, which does not target Asad. These arguments are the same which have made for the last three years, and face many of the same enduring problems, including the real incapacity of the Syrian rebels to win such a war, the aftermath of state collapse, the response of adversaries such as Iran and Russia, and the

degree of U.S. commitments which would be required.

Beyond the question of Asad's regime, however, lies a deeper question about the fundamental orientation of American grand strategy. Three major alternatives have emerged:

Iran (Cold) War

For former Bush administration official Michael Doran, the real regional challenge is the struggle with Iran and its regional allies.¹⁶ Efforts to reach a nuclear bargain with Tehran and seek a political accord over Iraq or Syria are, in this view, profoundly misguided, since they misunderstand the existential nature of Iran's war with the West. Instead, the United States should double down on its support for Sunni forces, including the Free Syrian Army and the monarchs of the Gulf, and fully commit to supporting a proxy war against the Asad regime. From this perspective, even defending Baghdad against ISIS is little more than assisting an Iranian proxy state.

The Iran-centric approach is popular with U.S. allies in the Gulf and with Israel, and offers clear recommendations for a regional grand strategy. But it suffers from a fatal flaw in Iraq in particular, rendering the associated strategy terminally incoherent. Iran's role in Iraqi political and security institutions is deeply rooted and wide-ranging. There is simply no Iraqi state to support if Shi'ite or pro-Iranian elements are to be excluded. In this context, calls to work only with Iraqi military units and government agencies that are not aligned with Iran simply make no sense at all.

In Syria, it would (by design) make a political resolution of the civil war virtually impossible. Unless the United States is willing to directly and massively intervene to tip the scales on the battlefield, Iran will inevitably have to play a role in any effort to tamp down the conflict and push the regime and its supporters towards a political agreement.

Moreover, providing a blank check to America's Sunni allies so long as they engage in a duel fight against ISIS and Iran is a recipe for escalating, not de-escalating, the sectarian polarization and bloodshed tearing the region apart. The negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program should not be held hostage to the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, but cooperation in one domain could plausibly be used to generate progress in others.

In short, a regional strategy based on enabling an endless sectarian cold (or hot) war with Iran is unlikely to work and could easily backfire in Syria, Iraq and the broader region. This report adopts in part an alternative Iran-centric approach, one built upon seeking a working accord with Iran rooted in common interests in avoiding war over its nuclear program, stabilizing Iraq and Syria, and fighting jihadist groups.

A New Global War on Terror

An alternative maximalist strategic vision would reorient the anti-ISIS struggle toward the threat of radical Islam in general. The advocates of a renewed Global War on Terror (GWOT) present all forms of Islamism as an existential threat to be combatted in a multidimensional war. For Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi or the leaders of the United Arab Emirates, the West should be supporting "secular" leaders against their Islamist opponents of all stripes. Advocates of this strategy do not appear to have learned the lessons of the last decade's war on terror, however. Just as there is no Iraqi solution that excludes Iran, there is no Syrian solution that excludes Islamist forces of various stripes.

Such a new GWOT has obvious appeal to key actors in today's region, and fits comfortably within American strategic thought over the past thirteen years. The failures of the first GWOT should give pause, however. The United States proved far more effective in its struggle against al-Qaeda after 2006, when it adopted a more nuanced

approach to Islamist movements.¹⁷ The possible moves against ISIS are limited by the current enormous destabilization in Islamist movements. The Arab uprisings that began in late 2010 had generated a highly mobilized public and weakened state authority, but largely failed to deliver on the promise of peaceful, democratic change. The ferocity of the uprisings and of the subsequent counter-revolutionary repression has left the region wracked with profound institutional dysfunction, governance failures, and economic catastrophe. Further, dashed political expectations – especially the failure of democratic consolidation in Egypt – left few obvious avenues for those seeking peaceful change.

This is not only an historical question about ISIS's origins. It also has serious repercussions for strategy, since the repression of mainstream Islamists has reduced the available options for combating its appeal. The Muslim Brotherhood long represented a key Islamist rival and alternative to al-Qaeda and could have played a role in countering the ideological appeal and the recruitment of foreign fighters into the jihad. In the mid-2000s, for instance, the public criticism of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's brutal sectarian campaign in Iraq by Muslim Brotherhood figures and popular Islamist personalities like al-Jazeera's Yusuf al-Qaradawi contributed to the broader Sunni turn against AQI. Brotherhood-linked organizations formed an important component of the Awakenings against Iraq, for instance, and were a key part of the pre-ISIS Syrian opposition.

Such assets no longer exist in the same form. The crushing of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood after the July 3, 2013 military coup and the regional crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood organizations badly weakened a traditionally powerful model and delegitimized it as a strategic alternative. Indeed, Muslim Brotherhood organizations and associated individuals around the region have been critical of the operation against ISIS, in no small part

because of their antagonism with the regimes in the coalition. For ISIS and other more extremist Islamist groups, this removed a formidable rival for the adherence of potential recruits. The "firewall" has been breached, opening the path for extremist recruitment efforts. Angry, Islamically-inclined youth from Cairo to London see that democratic participation ends in prison and repression, and now have little reason to believe in such a strategy. Their current disarray has left the field open for a wide range of small radical groups to take hold and recruit disillusioned youth.

The campaign against Islamism by most of the region's regimes remains a cynical cover for repression of domestic political challengers and regional proxy struggles – and, by crowding them out of political process, leaves a political void filled by the worst forms of violent jihadism. Indeed, it would be more accurate to see the current ISIS threat as inflamed by the ongoing crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood than to see the crackdown as the solution. There is no immediately plausible path to undoing the damage done by that repression, and no sign that existentially threatened regimes would contemplate doing so. Over the longer term, however, the inclusion of mainstream Islamist groups in legitimate political institutions will be necessary to provide options to extremism.

The killing of Osama bin Laden and the effective campaign against al-Qaeda Central also had the unintended consequence of opening up opportunities for local organizations to bid for leadership within the jihadist milieu. New forms of jihadist organization evolved rapidly in response to the opportunities and challenges posed by the Arab uprisings. In Libya, Yemen and Tunisia jihadist organizations with loose connections to al-Qaeda established a strong presence, which included the kinds of public postures and social services that in the past had been largely the preserve of the Muslim Brotherhood. Such organizations drew upon a distinctive universe of theoreticians,

scholars and religious authorities, and tended to focus on localities rather than global jihad. ISIS, Jubhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and many other Syrian insurgency factions represent forms of this evolutionary adaptation. They compete intensely on the same basic political and doctrinal terrain, as they seek attract similar potential recruits and sources of external support.

Realpolitik: Realignment with Asad

Finally, a number of analysts now call for the United States to openly or quietly cooperate with the Asad regime against the ISIS threat. This is perhaps the leading minimalist approach, presented as the only way to effectively fight ISIS without a major commitment of U.S. troops. The regime itself has enthusiastically adopted this vision, presenting itself as a partner in the new coalition. The United States should actively disabuse Damascus and the world of this notion, and make very clear that Asad cannot be rehabilitated. Alignment with Asad would almost certainly strengthen rather than weaken ISIS by driving other opposition groups and insurgency factions into its arms.¹⁸ His devastation of his own country and people created the environment within which ISIS thrived, and his participation in any future campaign would only offer more of the same.

Indeed, the U.S. currently urgently needs to combat the growing perception in the region that this is in fact its policy. Asad has been seeking to encourage this perception and to suggest that the U.S. and its partners have now simply come along to the regime's way of thinking about jihadist threats. The U.S. must continue to reject such rhetoric and to emphasize its continuing rejection of Asad's legitimacy.

Summary

These proposals share an admirable recognition of the need for the U.S. to formulate a comprehensive regional strategy that articulates objectives and commits appropriate resources. They rightly

assess that the highly complex interconnected region-wide nature of the challenges outlined above precludes the success of a country-by-country piecemeal approach. Neither the "Iran Cold War," the "Neo-GWOT" strategy, nor a Realpolitik realignment with Asad can provide such a foundation, however. Each would require far more resources and direct U.S. involvement than is realistically forthcoming, and each suffers from profound internal contradictions.

This report shares the Obama administration's commitment to an ISIS-focused, minimalist strategy, and views the inclusion of Iran in a regional accord essential to any plausible strategy. It worries, however, at the potential unresolved contradictions between this starting point and the means thus far adopted in the pursuit of such a strategy. Airstrikes and international consensus against ISIS must be accompanied by a political strategy that solidifies the Iraqi state, de-escalates the Syrian conflict, builds up Syrian rebel governance structures and addresses the broad regional conditions of repressive rule and proxy sectarian war, which fuel extremism. This requires an "outside-in" strategy built upon a temporary but very possible regional and international accord.

V. HOW TO EXECUTE THE TOURNIQUET STRATEGY

The United States should begin by recognizing the need to use this moment to forge a new regional accord, designed to accomplish three tasks: de-escalate the Syrian war, defeat ISIS politically and militarily in Iraq and use conditional aid to incentivize effective and legitimate governance. It may be a cliché to note that there is no purely military solution to these problems, but it remains profoundly important to keep the political dimensions of the crisis at the center of analysis.¹⁹ The tourniquet strategy proposed here is neither containment nor neglect. It is an active strategy of cutting off the flow of blood to the affected areas, and of using the time purchased through such measures to put in place alternative governance structures and enhance the robustness of partner state institutions.²⁰

The outside-in strategy begins by seizing a moment ripe for the construction of a broad regional and international coalition – including Iran and the Gulf states, as well as Syria's neighbors.²¹ That such an opportunity can even be envisioned is surprising, given the intensity of the struggle for regional leadership in recent years.²²

The advance of ISIS has generated remarkable new signals of potential collaboration, however, which do open new diplomatic possibilities. Iran and Saudi Arabia have begun tentative contacts, and the GCC has dialed back its internal crisis over Qatar to focus on the looming collective challenge.²³ In Iraq, joint Iranian-American pressure for the replacement of Nuri al-Maliki as Iraqi Prime Minister, working in concert with long-hostile Arab Gulf states, represented a rare example of effective regional cooperation.²⁴ For Hezbollah, the rise of ISIS is as an affirmation of its own intervention in Syria; in Hassan Nasrullah's words, "what we used to say three years ago is today what everyone is talking about."²⁵ Meanwhile, even

hardline Salafi-jihadists such as Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi have condemned ISIS, as have a large and growing number of mainstream Salafi Islamist figures in the Gulf. U.S. diplomacy should focus on building upon this moment to craft a regional accord with its Arab Gulf allies, Turkey and Iran to de-escalate domestic conflicts and proxy wars, coordinate efforts against ISIS and focus on rebuilding Iraq and Syria.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Bahrain participated in the Syrian airstrikes, even if their contributions thus far appear more symbolic than substantive, and a growing number of states have joined the campaign. The moment for building such a coalition is not likely to last long, however, and is already fading as the urgency of the threat fades and long-standing political differences re-emerge. U.S. allies are deeply divided over all of these issues as well, with some prioritizing Iran or the removal of Asad over ISIS and some more welcoming than others of increased U.S. involvement. The Iraqi government's momentum towards a more inclusive coalition quickly bogged down again in political maneuvering. What is more, the internal conflicts within the current coalition are often as or more intense than the Gulf – Iran struggle. The pathologies of the Syrian opposition have been nourished by the intense efforts of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to develop local proxies through which to assert control. The urgency of confronting ISIS only temporarily masks the deep divisions between the partners in the coalition on virtually every issue. Their intense domestic problems and regional rivalries shape their foreign policy choices more than do American hopes to formulate a rational strategy.

There have already been changes in the policies of most of the countries now in the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS. Saudi Arabia significantly changed its approach to the Syrian insurgency in the face of growing fears of a domestic backlash and international criticism. After years of

indiscriminate support for rebel proxies, the Saudis now radiate caution over domestic radicalization. Riyadh has forbidden travel to Syria and domestic fundraising for Syrian rebel groups, and has directed religious authorities to counter extremist messages. Widespread domestic sympathy for fanatical religious views poses a serious problem, however, putting the Kingdom in a very delicate position. Saudi Arabia, along with Bahrain, has the most intensely sectarian outlook and the greatest reservations about an Iranian or Shia role in any political solution.

Qatar's role in the coalition is even more fraught. Its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups has been a key point of contention with the UAE and Saudi Arabia for several years. While the intense public rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council has subsided for now, the deep divisions remain unresolved. Despite the importance of the Udeid military base, U.S. officials have increasingly publicly signaled their dismay with Qatari policy towards extreme Islamist groups, as have Israel, Egypt and other regional partners.

The United Arab Emirates occupies the other far end of the spectrum, with a foreign policy dominated by intense antipathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists. It cares less about the sectarian dimension, and more about Islamism writ large, creating potential tensions even within the very close UAE-Saudi axis of recent years. Jordan, another very close U.S. ally, faces near-existential concerns over the enormous number of Syrian refugees on its soil, and has long considered the powerful domestic Muslim Brotherhood movement and the Palestinian Hamas to be serious potential threats to the security of the monarchy.

Meanwhile, Kuwait has awoken to the potential costs of international and American fury over its facilitation of fundraising for Syrian rebels. Kuwait is accustomed to a privileged status as

a very close American ally, and has been taken aback by public accusations over toleration of the financing of extremists. It has recently taken aggressive measures against some of the key figures in the campaign to support Syrian insurgents, including the stripping of citizenship of Islamist personalities such as Nabil al-Awadhy. Its decision to do so has at least in part been shaped by local politics, however, as a besieged government has sought to divert and placate a powerful Sunni Islamist constituency, which has been outraged over official support for Egypt's military coup and the government's alleged deference to Shia citizens. Political activists have been targeted by the same measures as alleged extremist financiers, raising questions about the ultimate purpose and impact of the crackdown.

Turkey has come under similar pressure for its blind eye policy towards the Syrian border and its toleration of extremist Islamist groups such as Jubhat al-Nusra. It has recently pledged to exert more control over the border, but serious doubts remain about its ability or intention to do so. It has also reportedly refused to allow its territory to be used for surveillance or operations in Syria, though this may change now that ISIS has released its diplomatic hostages. It most recently has suggested that it would only participate in the coalition of the removal of Asad were the stated goal.

The coalition, despite its initial show of partnership, therefore remains divided over nearly every significant strategic question, from the primary enemy to be targeted to the extent that each is willing to participate in the fight. The longer the campaign goes on, the more overt the American role, and the more images of civilian casualties emerge, the more likely that anti-American sentiment and domestic opposition to the campaign will mount. Participation in the coalition will make these countries even more of a target for ISIS attacks. Meanwhile, Washington should not overestimate the legitimacy or operational

benefits of its partnership of these Arab regimes. They enjoy little popularity or legitimacy with much of the Arab public, and certainly not with those sectors most at-risk of radicalization and supporting ISIS.

Nobody believes that there is a true alignment of views on Syria's future or the endgame of the campaign. Indeed, few seem to believe that the strategy to which they have signed on is likely to succeed. U.S. diplomacy must work constantly on cultivating their recognition of the unavoidability of political settlements in order to defeat ISIS. This is already being challenged by discontent over the targeting of jihadist factions beyond ISIS and the non-targeting of Asad – both of which are clearly necessary at this stage for the strategy to have any hope of success.

The strategy proposed here focuses on de-escalating the Syrian war through a strategic pause, allowing for the concentration of force on ISIS, and the reconstruction of the Iraq state along more inclusive and effective lines. Where the Arab regimes can play a key role is in influencing their clients on the ground, and winning internal support for the de-escalation strategy. Neither will be accomplished easily or quickly, of course, but both are essential for achieving any sustainable regional order, derailing the ISIS threat, and addressing the almost inconceivable humanitarian crisis.

The strategy involves two distinct, but related, campaigns: de-escalating Syria and rebuilding Iraq:

De-Escalating Syria

The stalemated situation in Syria had remained broadly static at the strategic level for the last several years, despite the daily fluctuations and relentless horrors of the war.²⁶ Asad remained in power, trying to project victory but still unable to expand control over rebel-held territories. The mainstream Syrian opposition remained

fragmented and weak relative to the regime and ISIS, getting enough covert infusions of weapons and funds to prevent defeat. Fighting and power remained highly localized, leading to a de facto cantonization. Neither side had a serious prospect of either achieving victory or negotiating an end to the conflict.²⁷ The war was fueled by external powers on both sides, from the direct intervention of Iran and Hezbollah to the indirect support of the Gulf and Turkey.

The Obama administration understood, better than its critics, that for American support to the Syrian opposition to meaningfully help, it would need to overcome several well-established problems.²⁸ The issue was not primarily “training,” despite the American emphasis on its plans to train rebel fighters, nor was it “vetting” given the manifest nature of the rapidly shifting alliances and ideologies of the fractured opposition. The issue instead was figuring out how to align the opposition's ambitions with American national interests, while avoiding being dragged into another quagmire or causing the complete collapse of governance should Asad fall before an alternative had emerged.

The U.S. tried for years to build a moderate opposition force by effectively coordinating the flow of aid through a single channel. It has had little success thus far in encouraging the evolution of an effective, unified opposition command structure, however. While the U.S. talks frequently of a moderated, “vetted” opposition, the realities on the ground are very different. Patterns of rebel cooperation and conflict have been fluid, and the strongest forces within the rebel ranks have long been at the Islamist end of the spectrum. The opposition has been almost uniformly hostile to the U.S. airstrikes against ISIS and, especially, against Jubhat al-Nusra. Advocates of arming Syrian rebels frequently appeal for a very restrictive definition of which groups other than ISIS should be considered beyond the pale. Many

criticized even the targeting of al-Nusra because of its effectiveness in the war against Asad. In fact, the U.S. was right to refuse to work with groups affiliated with al-Qaeda such as Jubhat al-Nusra. Other groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, a key member of the Islamic Front and major recipient of Gulf financial support, are likewise, only slightly less jihadist than Jubhat al-Nusra or ISIS.

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The current U.S. plan to arm and train the Syrian opposition and build the core of a moderate rebel army would have to overcome powerful obstacles and defy the historical experience of such efforts. The record of its Military Operations Center (MOC) is instructive. The MOC struggled to win over the support of powerful factions or to effectively coordinate strategy, and was frequently criticized for failing to deliver sufficient or timely military aid. Saudi-Qatari competition divided potential partners, while few forces on the ground saw good reason to subordinate their self-interest to its demands. For the current plan to do better, it will need to address these shortcomings – at a time when suspicions of American intentions run higher than ever.

Almost all policy proposals for Syria involve some form of support to the Free Syrian Army. The appeal of the idea that there exists a plausible proxy force in Syria is understandable. Former State Department Syria coordinator Robert Ford advocates a robust mission to arm and train FSA fighters, while unifying funding flows through a single chain of command.²⁹ This strengthened FSA would then be in a position to negotiate a political transition with the Asad regime as it regains control of the opposition-dominated areas from ISIS. Kenneth Pollack goes further, recommending the construction of a new Syrian Army to overthrow Asad and enforce order in the aftermath of regime collapse.³⁰

The problem with this approach remains the deep divisions and incapacity of the Syrian opposition. The Free Syrian Army never represented a truly viable organization, and links between the diverse fighting groups on the ground and the political leadership in exile were always tenuous. Many of the early civic activists certainly shared values and aspirations with the United States, but they were largely driven out or silenced when the insurgency picked up steam. The current armed opposition is dominated by Islamists of various stripes, who have been empowered by massive aid flows from Gulf states and private individuals.³¹ The highly localized Syrian insurgency was comprised of hundreds of smaller groups, each relying on local support and foreign patrons for money and weapons. The lines between these groups were always fluid, as were their alliances and rivalries. On August 25, for instance, the Free Syrian Army fought alongside Jubhat al-Nusra to capture Quneitra – an opportunistic alignment that had little to do with ideology.

This poses serious problems not only to the insurgency's campaign against Asad, but also against efforts to broker tacit ceasefires and a strategic pause. There is no central authority within the Syrian opposition capable of making and enforcing

such an agreement. Many groups – particularly Islamists such as Nusra that are cut out of the new arrangements – will see strong incentives to continue their attacks. Groups that join them in defying ceasefires must be the targets of collective funding and arms embargos, in order to raise the costs of their defection and reduce their relative power within the rebel coalition.

Given the current U.S. strategy, there is little choice but to try to overcome this history and significantly increase military and financial aid to the opposition. This aid should be large enough to provide a real incentive, and tightly conditioned upon alignment with the U.S. strategy. This should be coordinated with the restriction of alternative sources of funds, as the Gulf states and Turkey do their part to clamp down on private and direct funding to preferred rebel groups. After years of failure, this has finally shown some preliminary signs of success due to the newfound fears of ISIS among those regimes. The UN has supported U.S. Treasury designations of terrorist financiers. Kuwait has arrested and even stripped citizenship from several prominent individuals involved in such activities. Saudi Arabia has arrested numerous individuals for traveling to Syria and has banned the use of charities to raise money for rebel groups. It is not clear yet whether this has translated into a serious change in the flow of funds and arms into the various rebel groups.

Current efforts in the Gulf to assert control over the flow of money, arms and fighters to Syrian jihadist groups will likely hurt opposition-aligned Islamist factions more than they hamper ISIS, at least initially. ISIS has developed a marginally self-sustaining internal economy rooted in hostage ransoms, oil sales, and local taxation.³² It relies less on external patronage than do groups such as the Islamic Front's Ahrar al-Sham. Tighter controls on the Turkish border or a change in Qatari policy might hurt Jubhat al-Nusra. Some of those groups are already feeling the pinch; others face

existential crisis, like Ahrar al-Sham, whose leadership was wiped out in a yet-unattributed bombing. Weakening such Islamist Syrian factions is an important, indeed crucial, component of a tourniquet strategy, but there should be no illusions about its impact on the insurgency against Asad. Cutting off support to the extremist trends in the opposition would magnify the impact of increased support to the more moderate groups rather than have such aid drown in competitive funding streams.

Such aid flows, if coordinated with major humanitarian financial flows into the areas under the control of such groups, and the curtailment of Gulf financial flows into more Islamist groups, could begin to shift the balance of power within the rebellion. Those efforts in turn should be coordinated with the building of effective governance in successfully defended rebel-controlled areas, then over time this could put flesh on the bones of a viable political alternative to Asad. None of this, however, is likely to make the FSA capable of bringing down Asad in the short to medium term.

The immediate goal should be more modest than the overthrow of Asad, despite the objections of the opposition. The opposition loses more than it gains from expanded confrontation with the regime at this point, and would benefit enormously from a strategic pause that would allow it the space to regroup and rebuild. The goal, as outlined by Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, should be to build upon existing local ceasefires to create a national model (or template) that both the regime and opposition groups could accept.³³ The United States could then condition its support to opposition groups based on their agreement to adhere to the formula. Not all will sign up right away, but an expanded patchwork would increasingly distinguish parts of the country controlled by the non-ISIS/Jubhat al-Nusra opposition, the regime, and ISIS/Jubhat al-Nusra, and allow the development of the first at the expense of the latter two.³⁴

A strategic pause would offer the opportunity to consolidate the existing cantonization and coordinate the delivery of serious humanitarian relief, security and governance to rebel controlled areas. UN delivery of cross-border aid should be an integral part of this, even as Asad tests the world's willingness to defend against small-scale harassment and attacks. There is little prospect of any negotiated agreement at the moment, with the opposition divided and Asad secure within his own zones of control, but such talks become significantly more likely should the pace and intensity of the war recede and the opposition become able to establish some form of governance in the areas it controls.

The U.S. airstrikes inside Syria have not to this point made the promised strategic difference. Their introduction and then failure to quickly deliver results pose a real risk of rapidly dragging the United States into a quagmire, which the administration has worked hard to avoid. This is particularly the case if the United States does not clearly articulate its objectives before beginning such a campaign. An air campaign against ISIS is one thing; an air campaign against the Asad regime something else entirely. Now that the barrier to airstrikes has been broken against ISIS, the pressure to expand this military campaign to the regime's forces will be nearly irresistible.³⁵ This would put the United States in the unenviable position of bombing two of the most powerful players in a multi-polar civil war, without inflicting decisive results on either.³⁶

Asad understands that anything the United States does to hurt ISIS in Syria will in the immediate sense also help the regime. For all its current enthusiasm for coalition airstrikes against ISIS, the Asad regime understands how easily the U.S. air campaign could expand to include regime targets, given pressures from the opposition and coalition partners. The possibility of such escalation may be a useful source of leverage on the Syrian regime

and its backers. The regime may not think it will lose the war, but it is stretched thin and also knows that it cannot win in the near term. It has proven unable to recapture territory, and faces growing internal discontent over war strategy. The longer the stalemate lasts, the higher the costs and risks, and the greater the likelihood that a mistake could spiral out of control. A ceasefire and toleration of local governance (and even a long-term transition) may seem preferable to near-term regime change – particularly if Iran is sending strong signals that it agrees.

The strategic goal of a political transition following de-escalation should remain clearly articulated, however. It is essential that Washington push back clearly and consistently on Asad's efforts to make political gains based on the bombing campaign. Asad's brutality and well-documented war crimes make it morally and, probably, legally impossible to contemplate his rehabilitation. Even if such qualms might be set aside, Asad has little to offer. The core strategic objective of supporting and building legitimate local partners rules out coordination with or rehabilitation of the Asad regime. Hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded speak more loudly than today's momentary realpolitik. Indeed, an alignment with Asad would likely play a similar role as Maliki's misrule of Iraq, driving other insurgent factions toward ISIS as a better guarantor of their interests. What is more, cooperation with Asad would further alienate U.S. regional partners, who have long been publicly committed to his removal.

The U.S. should signal very vocally that it continues to reject the legitimacy and viability of the Asad regime, and push back against the regime's messaging that it is a partner in the coalition against ISIS by making clear at every opportunity that it still considers Asad to be a war criminal and beyond the pale.³⁷ The de-escalation strategy outlined here could well prove more destabilizing to Asad than the insurgency strategy. Asad

has thrived on the crisis by cultivating a devoted constituency convinced that only he can save them from slaughter. Like Slobodan Milosevic in the Balkan wars, Asad is less likely to survive a de-escalated but internationally penetrated political landscape than he is to cling to power against insurgency.

Airstrikes should be tightly limited against ISIS and in defense of rebel areas, as long as Asad complies by his side of the tacit ceasefires. Airstrikes should for now therefore be defensive, in the sense of implementing and reinforcing a strategic pause with Asad, while going on the offense only against ISIS and other extremist groups. The message that this could nevertheless escalate to include Asad targets, if necessary, might be cultivated in order to provide incentive for his cooperation. Uncertainty about the expansion of the conflict is a useful way to keep Asad in line. But the U.S. should have long since learned the limits of its ability to control expectations or manage complex strategic dynamics in Syria or the broader region. Threats of escalation will likely prove harder to control and manage than they appear on paper.

Political goals should not be subordinated to military exigencies. U.S. airpower should be made tightly conditional on the rebels and their external sponsors aligning their combat strategy with the strategy of de-escalation by focusing their fire on ISIS and the defense of liberated areas. In turn, the regime and its supporters should be on notice that restraint would not last should it fail to honor the ceasefires. The uncertainty over whether they will ultimately target Asad should be used to compel the regime's cooperation with the strategic pause. Obama has already hinted that the targeting of U.S. aircraft by Syrian defense systems would be viewed as a cause for war against the regime. This deterrent threat should be extended to attacks on civilians and opposition forces in rebel-controlled areas. Iranian pressure should be added to this deterrent posture.

The regional accord should, building upon UN Resolution 2170, focus on restricting the flow of funds and fighters to all sides of the Syria conflict. Gulf states should be encouraged to continue their newfound efforts to cut off funds to ISIS and the many other jihadist organizations fighting in Syria. Iran, Hezbollah and Russia should likewise be encouraged to pull back in a coordinated de-escalation. The de-escalation should aim at the consolidation of local governance through the large-scale provision of humanitarian aid in rebel-controlled areas and refugee communities, as provided for in UN Security Council Resolution 2165, which authorized cross-border humanitarian aid into rebel-controlled areas. This offers the opportunity to finally implement existing ideas about how to use aid as a tool to build rebel governance.³⁸ The international community should support the establishment of governance and humanitarian relief in rebel-controlled areas. If the ceasefires hold, then gradual refugee return and the restoration of a semblance of ordinary life will be possible. As Yezid Sayigh argues, "If such a truce takes hold between the regime and rebels in Syria, it would embolden and empower civilian communities on both sides that are desperate for a respite, making it harder for their leaders and commanders to order a return to armed conflict."³⁹

This strategy will be as hard sell as has been Obama's current strategy with the Syrian rebels and the Gulf states, which have staked everything on overthrowing Asad. By offering a plausible endgame, however, along with serious financial and targeted military contributions, it might prove more attractive. The United States is becoming far more active in Syria in ways that it has long resisted, and that the Gulf and the Syrian opposition have long demanded. They must be made to understand that American support for their long-term goals, and access to U.S. funding and arms, will be contingent up on their cooperation. A common focus on the threat posed by ISIS has been the

cement for the tentative coalition to this point, as has continued American rejection of Asad's legitimacy as a partner. Demonstrated success in saving and improving civilian lives in Syria should also pay dividends.

Finally, there is the contentious question of Iran's role. This is less of a direct obstacle in Syria than in Iraq, but still goes to the heart of the potential end state. Whether Iran is a viable potential partner in making and enforcing this outside-in strategy is one of the most fundamental questions at stake. Iran is the only actor capable of influencing Asad's calculations, determining Hezbollah's actions, and shaping the nature and extent of Shia militia activity. Gulf states (and Israel), in turn, are terrified of what Iran's emergence as a strategic partner to the United States in Syria and Iraq might herald for the future of their strategic relations with Washington. As with the Syrian regime, Iran's calculations will be shaped by its recognition of the transformed nature of the war and the potential for undesired escalation. The Iranian regime's domestic and regional policy goals currently require de-escalation with Saudi Arabia and joint efforts on Iran, and it has real fears about the mutation and expansion of ISIS and other jihadist forces. Iran could well accept a deal that protects its stake in Iraq and core equities in Syria, and keeps alive hopes for a badly needed nuclear deal.

The tourniquet strategy for Syria also requires significant efforts to harden all borders with Syria. The military and political strategy for Iraq discussed above would include a sustained effort to regain control over the Syrian border and to sever those cross-border connections that sustain the Islamic State. Turkey's border too should come under much tighter control, with more robust efforts to police the movement of militants crossing into Syria. This should also involve an even more robust effort to support and assist the Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and beyond. It is vital that this aid not become an excuse to avoid

desperately needed political and economic reforms, however, since this would only recreate the repressive conditions that brought the region to this pass.

Finally, sustaining this campaign will require not only international consensus but also domestic legal standing. The war will almost certainly become a partisan political issue. Even if it did not, it would still pose important constitutional questions about war powers and executive autonomy. The Obama administration would be well-served to gain Congressional approval for the war, preferably with robust majorities, to ensure that this long and difficult struggle can be sustained.

Reconstructing Iraq

By comparison to this Syrian landscape, Iraq almost looks easy. It is not. The United States has already made significant progress in responding to the urgent threat posed by ISIS to Baghdad and Erbil. Its limited airstrikes and close support to Kurdish Peshmerga forces blunted the ISIS drive towards the Kurdish capital and stabilized front lines. The ISIS drive toward Baghdad also stalled outside the capital. Still, neither Kurdish nor Iraqi forces have yet proven able to recapture significant territory or dislodge ISIS from their maximal positions. Airpower and advising, in general, seems more likely to stabilize these new frontlines and prevent new ISIS armed advances.

Most of the insurgency factions and tribes of the Awakening are now fighting alongside ISIS, but at least some seem eager for political concessions that would allow them to flip back. Once again, reversing that alignment is the key to defeating ISIS inside of Iraq. Waiting for ISIS to alienate its partners through radicalism or bad behavior would be a mistake. They will only jump when they feel that their survival and political interests can better be served by alignment with the government, and when that government can make credible commitments to honor its pledges. As long as Maliki remained in power, this reversal was virtually

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impossible, given their bitter experience with his broken promises. His replacement with Haider al-Abadi opens the door to a reversal, but it will only become meaningful if the Iraqi government can credibly commit to meeting their demands for decentralization and incorporation.

The U.S. policy should therefore clearly and consistently place conditions on its military assistance to the Iraqi government to ensure that Iraq makes and honors such commitments. Airstrikes, embedded trainers, and intelligence sharing should all be used to support the reassertion of Iraqi state authority, but support should be tightly tied to demonstrable progress on political accommodation. The United States should commit to supporting the Iraqi government if it adheres to these commitments, but should also make clear its willingness to walk away should it return to sectarian politics or to indiscriminate military and repression campaigns against Sunni citizens. Consistent with the Iraqi constitution and the provincial powers law, the United States should push the Iraqi government to offer substantial local autonomy over service provision and security, as well as amnesty and the promises of assistance to insurgents that flip against ISIS. Any U.S. aid should be pushed through Baghdad, but

conditioned on promises for decentralization (or what Vice President Joe Biden called “functioning federalism” in an op-ed for the *Washington Post*). In Anbar, at least, this aligns with the stated preferences of key Sunni players. “We don’t want a new Sahwa, or militias that will be targeted or let down later,” Ahmed Al Jubouri, the governor of Salaheddine province, told the *Wall Street Journal*. “We need a formal force connected with the defense ministry that can protect our borders, maintain Iraq’s unity, and fight terrorism.”⁴⁰ Such a force should be part of the political endgame.

Crucially, military aid was accompanied by deft diplomacy, which contributed to the removal of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.⁴¹ The United States has done well to condition its support for the Iraqi military on political reforms, and has thus avoided one of the most pressing dangers associated with such action. The Maliki government played a vital role in inflaming the current insurgency through its exclusionary practices, sectarianism and efforts to dominate power. Intervening militarily prior to the change in government only would have enabled this destructive behavior. There have been troubling signs that the passing of the immediate threat have enabled a return to destructive Iraqi political habits. Persistent diplomacy and the reality of a continuing existential threat should help to keep this process on track.

Support for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) should also be tightly conditioned upon its recommitment to a federal Iraq. Unconditional support to the KRG is fraught with problems. No U.S. interest is served by the declaration of Kurdish independence, and Washington must be careful that its defense of the Kurds against ISIS is not used to enhance a Kurdish secessionist bid. The Kurdish areas are not nearly so democratic and inclusive as they are being portrayed in the media, and their risky attempt to take advantage of Baghdad and Mosul’s woes by seizing Kirkuk arguably left them open to the ISIS thrust towards Erbil.

The United States has already moved beyond supporting proxies on the ground, effectively using airstrikes in Iraq to blunt ISIS advances, protect Erbil, relieve Mt. Sinjar and Amerili, and liberate the Mosul Dam.⁴² These limited strikes were necessary in the face of an imminent threat to the survival of Erbil, and came at the request of the Iraqi government. The popular argument for the large-scale arming and advising campaign for the Kurdish Peshmerga raises similarly troubling issues, which require careful diplomatic conditionality.⁴³ Unlike the FSA, the Kurdistan Regional Government has well-established political and military institutions. Military assistance to the KRG does not go into the void of a chaotic, deinstitutionalized war zone, but rather to a friendly and reasonable effective government.

The primary challenge with such support is its potential impact on the KRG's status within the state of Iraq. The United States has again done well in securing the consent and support of Baghdad for its operations in support of Erbil. As the Kurdish military grows in power, however, the temptation will rise accordingly to press the KRG's demands against the Iraqi government or to declare independence. Kurdish secession would serve neither U.S. nor regional interests.

Aid to both Kurdistan and to Sunni groups should be closely tied to their commitment to reforming an Iraqi central state. Keeping the KRG engaged with Baghdad will be more difficult. Kurds have been emboldened by external support and Baghdad's woes, and have made their ambitions for an independent state plain. The United States should not encourage these ambitions. Rather, it should continue to oppose independent KRG oil sales and to tie its military assistance to cooperation with Baghdad. There are already signs of unprecedented coordination between the Peshmerga and the ISF, which should be encouraged and sustained.

VI. CONCLUSION

The president's vision for a regional and global coalition against ISIS, and his military actions in Iraq and Syria, have moved American engagement with the Middle East into new terrain. These efforts will flounder in the absence of a realistic strategic framework that identifies a clear desired end state and matches it with appropriate resources. This report has advocated such a strategy focused on the consolidation of a regional accord to confront ISIS, rebuild Iraq, and de-escalate Syria. Obama must pursue his goals with a constant eye towards resisting the demands for military escalation and mission expansion, which began before the first bomb dropped. It would be tragic for Obama to squander America's hard-won retrenchment from the region with a hasty return to unsustainable military deployments.

In Iraq, the United States should prioritize a reversal of ISIS gains through military actions based on consistent political conditionality. Military deployments should be kept as limited as possible, with clearly defined missions and an eye toward avoiding the kind of civilian casualties and sectarian atrocities that drive Sunnis and Shia alike toward extremist militias. In Syria, the United States should prioritize a national strategic pause and regional tourniquet designed to cut off the drivers of the civil war, including both external support for Sunni jihadist groups (including al-Nusra as well as ISIS) and Iranian support for Shia militias and the Asad regime. Air power should be used to pressure ISIS and to enforce a defensive posture by the regime and the non-jihadist opposition, while development, governance and humanitarian aid should be channeled toward the rebel-controlled areas.

For this plan to succeed over the longer term, it must be paired with a firm commitment to political reforms across the region. The sectarianism and extremism that nurtured ISIS have their

roots in the repressive regime survival strategies of states that make up core parts of the current coalition. It will likely be seen as expedient to turn a blind eye to their abuses in the name of securing cooperation. But this would be a mistake. A counter-terrorist campaign based on repression will only have short-term success, and will over the longer-term actually strengthen the extremist trends in the region. A regional war that lacks domestic or international legality will only undermine the international norms that need to be built.

President Obama has a unique opportunity to get this balance right. The tourniquet strategy would enable him to align American values and interests, and to effectively combat ISIS without overcommitting the United States to endless war and fiscally draining quagmire.

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