

THE LACK OF U.S. STRATEGY IN SYRIA



By Omar Ahmed (Dec 2015)

Abstract

Four years have passed since anti-government uprisings began in Syria. Throughout the conflict, several actors have intervened both state and non-state. The United States has offered support to some of the rebel factions opposed to the Assad regime, however it is argued that the U.S. does not have a coherent strategy, which has often become entangled between bringing about a new regime and combating the Islamic State. This paper will analyse the perceived lack of U.S. strategy in Syria and its implications.

Introduction

The involvement of the United States in the Syrian civil war dates back to the aftermath of the so called Arab Spring in 2011, which swept across the region resulting in an overthrow from power of the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. As anti-government, pro-democracy protests flared up in Syria, they were quickly suppressed through violence by the Assad regime. Armed rebel groups started to emerge. Chief among them is the loosely connected Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was formed in the late summer of 2011 by Syrian army defectors based in Turkey. Soon, other groups would appear, some with secular-nationalist ideologies, others with more hard-line Islamist roots.

In the following year, and in line with their policy of encouraging democracy in parts of the Middle East whilst discouraging authoritarianism, the United States sought to support the oppositionists to Assad. Initially this support was through non-lethal means, whilst some U.S. allies were supplying arms.

However, small arms and light ammunition began making its way to Syrian rebels via the CIA in September of 2013 in response to instances of chemical weapons being used by the Syrian regime.

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Developments in neighbouring Iraq however would have drastic consequences for the situation in Syria, with unprecedented territory ceding to non-state actors. The Islamic State group (IS), an offshoot of Al Qaeda in Iraq, overran large swathes of northern and western Iraq as well as eastern Syria by the summer of

2014 and declared the restoration of the Caliphate.

This would have undoubtedly complicated U.S. strategy in Syria, for whilst the Obama administration was intent on the removal of Assad from power, the fact was that the Syrian armed forces were fighting against further IS expansion. Moreover there were alliances of convenience between what were deemed 'moderate' rebel factions and jihadists like Jabhat-al Nusra and Islamic State (IS) against the state.

After reluctance in issuing weapons supplies to Western backed rebels, in part due to the fear that said weapons could end up in the hands of jihadists, the U.S. formally authorised training and arming the rebels. This move was spurred on by the well-publicised beheading of two American journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff. It was hoped that supplying them with TOW (Tube-launched Optically-tracked Wire-to-command-link) armour piercing anti-tank systems would tip the balance in their favour against government forces. Yet, given the many dimensions to the conflict, the move was also framed as a response to the IS threat, specifically that the US "cannot rely" on the Assad regime in the fight against IS¹, which "terrorises its people".

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This would not be the first time the U.S. made strategic shifts, as there would be more to follow in the ensuing years of conflict. This paper will analyse the inconsistency of U.S. strategy in Syria and how its ambiguity is detrimental for the region's security.

Rival power Russia enters the conflict

As the ebb and flows of the war continued throughout 2015, with each belligerent making territorial gains and losses, IS managed to take over the ancient, UNESCO heritage site of Palmyra in June. Although several artefacts were safely relocated, IS destroyed two important temples and three funerary towers. It was a significant loss, not only for the Syrian state but also for world history.

With the Assad's forces firmly overwhelmed, coupled with low morale, battle fatigue and facing army defections, key ally Russia announced in September that they would commence air strikes. This was following months of sending much needed Russian supplies to prop up the regime.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the air strikes targeted beyond IS to include territory held by Western backed rebels, deemed as 'terrorists' by both the Syrian government and Russia and Assad's other main ally, Iran. Such a move was welcomed by Assad as it helped tip the military advantage back in his favour and also helped to relieve Iranian and Hezbollah efforts on the ground.

The decisiveness in Russia's actions stood in stark contrast to America's increasingly indecisive strategy. Indeed, it became safe to describe U.S. strategy as being lost in the 'fog of war'. No sooner than a month of Russian aerial bombardment gone by, the Obama administration signalled its willingness to allow Assad to remain in power during a transitional period until further negotiations took place in Vienna. The move was interpreted as a political victory in the favour of the Iranians and Russians, because it did not call for Assad to relinquish power.

U.S. back-tracks again

With the immediate implications of Russian airstrikes against Western backed rebels beginning to become apparent, the U.S. announced that it would formerly end a \$500m programme in training moderate rebels³⁴. The programme had not yielded the anticipated results, nor were there any guarantees that once trained, fighters would not simply hand over weapons or defect to jihadist groups once crossing the border. This did not necessarily mean that U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey would cease in their arms supplies (the Saudis alone having supplied some 500 TOWs)⁵.

Nor did the flow of weapons cease from the U.S. either, as several days later the US. air dropped 50 tonnes of ammunition and small arms to rebel groups vetted by the U.S. known as the Syrian Arab Coalition⁶. This move was not without controversy as it was reported that most of the weapons ended up in the hands of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party and their armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG)⁷. This was of course not appreciated by Turkey who have stepped up their aggression towards Kurdish militias in both northern Iraq and north-eastern Syria and summoned the U.S. ambassador. However a U.S. military spokesperson later reaffirmed that weapons are being supplied to Arab opposition forces and that future supplies will go to Arab, vetted opposition groups⁸.

Although insisting it was not a strategic shift, the U.S. also dispatched 50 special forces to "train, advise and assist" Syrian rebels fighting against IS. It in effect still constitutes boots on the ground and Russia were quick to warn against the potential outbreak of a 'proxy war' should members of their armed forces clash. To exacerbate the blurring of alliances in this conflict, the Russians have also been co-ordinating with Western-backed rebels on IS targets.

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IS or Assad?

Indeed there is ambiguity in U.S. strategy as to whether their priority is combating and eliminating IS or working towards the removal of Assad from power. On the one hand, the rebels who were originally supported to defeat Assad face renewed pressure from the state army, Iranian backed militias and Russian air power. On the other, is IS who, although facing strategic set-backs of their own with the losses of Kuweires and Sinjar in Syria and Iraq, respectively, have arguably expanded their operations overseas. This is made clear by the bomb aboard a Russian airliner in Egypt, a twin suicide bombing in a Shi'a neighbourhood in Beirut, as well as the highly co-ordinated, near simultaneous, Paris attacks.

Arguably, since the Paris terrorist attacks, the international focus is firmly on IS. Perhaps, this focus is much to the dismay of jihadist rival Al Qa'ida, who at the time of writing launched an attack on a luxury hotel in Mali, killing 19 hostages.

The French president Hollande, for his part, was swift in response to the Paris attacks, declaring that France was "at war" with IS and has called for a coalition to annihilate them, accompanied with renewed French airstrikes in Raqqa. Although his response largely mirrors President Bush's after 9/11, there also appears to be little in terms of strategic substance on how to actually defeat IS, let alone prevent future attacks in France.

Whilst Obama has effectively ruled out sending troops on the ground in Syria, the debate surrounding how to tackle IS has found its way to U.S. presidential candidates.

Criticised by some Republican candidates as having "no strategy" or that the only way to soundly defeat IS would be to send in troops, fellow Democrat, presidential hopeful and former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, urged the implementation of no-fly zones and more use of special forces troops with increased air strikes.

What was most significant in Clinton's speech at the Council on Foreign Relations however, was that she recognised that "there is not going to be a successful military effort at this point to overturn Assad. That can only happen through the political process"⁹. Instead, she suggests the focus needs to be on IS which would be a strategic departure, should it become an official undertaking by Washington.

The 'Red line'

In 2012, a year into the conflict, President Obama made his famous 'red line' declaration, in which he warned that the usage of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would constitute a step too far and would result in the U.S. taking military action.

It was seen as a turning point in Obama's foreign policy and arguably an example of a strategy whereby the U.S. in threatening the use of military force, could help bring about a negotiated settlement in the conflict whilst deterring the regime from using chemical weapons.

Yet when the UN confirmed that sarin gas had been used on several occasions, resulting in deaths exceeding 1000 the following year, the U.S. failed to act when its red line has been crossed. With less than two days before the planned strike, the Commander-in-Chief of the United States military sought congressional approval¹⁰. Instead the strike was postponed and subsequently cancelled following a Russian brokered initiative which saw that the Assad regime surrendered their chemical weapons stockpile. Importantly this episode illustrated that the U.S. not only had a weak strategy, if at all, but that the U.S. also did not

have the political will to take the very action in which it had threatened to use.

Whilst the U.S. did deliver small arms to the opposition in response to the sarin gas attacks, they were clearly not an adequate deterrent for further attacks nor an effective “punishment” to the Assad regime. It has been argued that the decision to deliver lethal supplies was rather due to rebel losses inflicted by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah¹¹.

NATO v Russia

To add further layers of risk and uncertainty to the conflict, NATO member Turkey’s recent act of shooting down a Russian SU-24 fighter jet for breaching their air space near the Syrian border, using U.S.-supplied F-16 (there is of course speculation that this action was carried out with full knowledge and support of the U.S.), will have political and strategic implications for the stakeholders involved. It is the first direct clash between NATO and Russia since the Cold War and Russia has severed military contact with Turkey.

It is possible that Turkey’s decision was intended to maintain the focus on the Assad regime whilst the international attention is preoccupied with IS in addition to checking growing Russian power and influence in the region. Interestingly, two days before the Turkey-Russia incident, it was reported that Syrian Turkmen fighting against Assad had called on Turkey for support under heavy Russian bombardment¹². Thus there is ambiguity as to whether the action by Turkey was specifically due to zealously protecting their airspace or protecting theirs and by extension NATO interests on the ground. On the other hand, the incident did follow stern warnings from NATO in the previous month for repeated Russian incursions into Turkish air space¹³.

What we do know is that short of direct military retaliation, Russia has responded by dispatching the Moskva warship off the Syrian

coast in addition to deploying their advanced S-400 air defence system to the Hmeymim air base in Syria. With Russia’s bolstered defensive tactics it seems as if a no-fly zone has in effect been implemented on Russian terms, thus potentially hampering Western efforts from the air.

Conclusion: What is “Strategy”?

It is a term easily dished out but it is important to understand what exactly is meant by having a strategy. As Colin S. Gray described it, “Strategy provides the ‘how’ answer to what in its absence are political ambition and military activity, with each effectively isolated”¹⁴.

Therefore, it is one thing to announce that Assad must go or that IS must be destroyed. Yet without an effective and coherent strategy, articulating how this will be achieved is blanketed by shallow political statements and the dropping of bombs; a move we have also seen France take in recent days.

Due to the confusion and uncertainty of what the U.S. is supposed to be doing in Syria, such actions and indeed inactions will cost the Obama administration and their allies politically. The often short-term U.S. foreign policy and strategy in comparison with a more consistent longer-term Russian, Chinese and Iranian counterpart is becoming manifest.

The Russians, for instance, have been determined to back Assad and uphold a commitment, as they see it to the Westphalian

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system of state sovereignty, along with combating IS and “other terrorists”. Meanwhile, the stance of the U.S. has changed over the past four years from supplying, training and arming rebel groups, to suspending their training programme, to sending in special forces on an advisory basis whilst re-arming rebels and now increasingly focussing on IS.

In the backdrop of an unclear U.S. strategy, the U.S. and other parties to the Vienna talks seek to move closer to a political solution involving the Syrian government and opposition factions. With a transitional government followed by elections anticipated in the next 18 months, there is a level of uncertainty whether the Assad regime and their allies may not seek to capitalise on their war against non-IS opposition forces. They are especially free to do so now that IS is the attention of the international community and the U.S. prioritising IS over Assad for the time being.

It is also clear, with the increasingly brazen attacks occurring beyond IS-held ¹⁵territory, that terrorist groups seek to not only remain a threat to the West, but also to invoke the wrath of Western policy-makers from shocking acts of terrorism. Air strikes alone may be insufficient, thus troops on the ground may eventually be an option. It is in this aspect of conflict where there has been much learnt over the years in terms of urban guerrilla warfare against Western forces following the Iraq invasion in 2003.

Although in fairness, the Obama administration has been consistent with a refusal to send in troops in a conventional sense, it is not known how, if in power, a Republican leader would share the same strategic view.

While the U.S. can be credited with enlarging the international coalition against IS, many questions still need to be asked such as: What will the U.S. policy be in a post-Assad Syria? What will the U.S. relationship be like with an empowered Kurdish populace? Will there be a

conflict of interests with NATO member Turkey? What of the potential strategic shift of Iraq towards a Russian-Iranian axis? And lastly, how to contain and respond to future IS or Al Qaeda attacks? Emanating not only within the Middle East and North African regions, but also from the West.

Meanwhile, following parliamentary debate and votes, the UK has now extended their air campaign against IS targets from Iraq into Syria, similarly without an apparent end game or exit strategy in sight.

As one Western diplomat recently stated, “the Western coalition has no strategy or endgame. One thing is clear – we need a significant victory over IS now. The attack on Paris needs an appropriate response, but a response isn’t a strategy”¹⁶.

About Neo-Jihadism and Transitional Challenges programme:

Within in the last decade, the Islamic world has gone through monumental shifts that have had severe implications on its landscape. This programme aims at analysing the impact of these critical factors on the region. On the one hand, we aim to capture how the concept of Jihadism has – and continues to – evolve in order to identify its implications on the broader social, political, and religious spheres. And on the other, we aim to address how states deal with emerging transitional challenges. While these focuses were previously separated, combining these two research programmes offers a holistic, interconnected approach.

As the Jihadists' landscape changes, the study and understanding of Jihadism must also adapt to address the developing movement of 'Neo-Jihadism':

“Neo-Jihadism is a diverse, syncretic form of global organisation and interaction that emerged from within Islamic Jihadism, is unique to early-twenty-first-centuries, is increasingly sectarian and through its advocacy of violent form of war and selectively literal interpretations of sacred texts, radically differentiates itself from the traditional Jihadist forces, the faith's mainstream and constitutes a new body of thought and actions”.

Furthermore, it is necessary to also analyse the challenges that many transitional states face in order to understand the broader implications that these issues may have on regional stability.

Programme's Deliverable:

1. Mapping the interplay between militant groups, the states and other external actors
2. A conflict and forecast analysis on current and emerging threats that might change the Jihadist landscape
3. In depth situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.
4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels
5. Strategic foresight for business and stakeholders that might be involved in the crisis affected regions

For full scope and key features of the programme, please visit our website on the link below:

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About IISA:

IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create transIslamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and sociopolitical issues/crises of the Islamic world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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