

War in Syria: Next Steps to Mitigate the Crisis

Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Tamara Cofman Wittes

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Senator Cardin, for the invitation to appear before you today. I'd like to request that my full statement be entered into the record, and I'll give you the highlight reel. And let me begin by emphasizing, as always, that I represent only myself before you today – the Brookings Institution does not take institutional positions on policy issues.

Opportunities Lost

When I last testified before this committee regarding Syria, in April 2012, [I expressed my concern](#) that American reticence to act to shape the emergent civil war and the involvement of regional powers in it risked enabling an unbridled escalation of the conflict. I suggested then that uncontrolled escalation could entrench sectarian violence, empower radicals, destabilize the neighborhood, and generate wide human suffering. While the Obama Administration has taken incremental steps over the last four years to try and shape both the battlefield and the context for diplomacy, those steps have proved too little and too late to alter the conflict's fundamental dynamics.

President Obama's initial read of the Syrian conflict as holding only narrow implications for American interests was a signal failure to learn the lessons of the post-Cold War period, and the civil wars of the 1990s, by recognizing the risk that Syria's civil war could spill over in ways that directly implicated U.S. interests. The experience of the 1990s clearly suggested how a neglected civil war offered easy opportunities for a violent jihadist movement—just as the Afghanistan war did for the Taliban in the mid-1990s—and how large-scale refugee flows would destabilize Syria's neighbors, including key U.S. security partners like Jordan and Turkey. And as we now know, ISIS used the security and governance vacuums created by the Syrian civil war to consolidate a territorial and financial base that the United States has been seeking since late 2014, with limited success, to undermine.

Unfortunately, the realistic policy options available to the United States have narrowed considerably since 2012, the violence is entrenched, the spillover is creating serious challenges for the neighborhood and for Europe, and the number of actors engaged directly in the Syrian conflict has proliferated. All of this means that the continuation of the Syrian civil war has direct and dire consequences today, not just for regional order, but for international security. This reality, combined with the tremendous human suffering this war generates every day, drives two clear imperatives for U.S. policy: to intensify efforts to contain the spillover and misery, and to seek an end to the conflict as soon as possible.

Ending the War

We must be realistic, however, about what steps will, and will not, end the Syrian conflict. Recently, [some policy experts have suggested that](#), in the name of advancing great-power concord to end the war, the United States should relax its view that Bashar al-Assad's departure from power is a requisite for any political settlement. This view rests on the assumption that Russia will not bend in its insistence on Assad's remaining in place, and on the assumption that a U.S.-Russian agreement on leaving Assad in place would override the preferences of those fighting on the ground to remove him. Both of these premises, in my view, are incorrect.

We must therefore understand clearly the interests and imperatives driving the major players in this conflict, and we must understand, too, that the battlefield dynamics will heavily condition the prospects of any political settlement. Ending the bloody war in Bosnia in the 1990s involved getting the major external powers with stakes in the outcome – the United States, the Europeans, and Russia – to agree on basic outlines of a settlement and impose it on the parties. But imposing it on the parties required a shift in the balance of power on the battlefield, brought about by Croat military victories and ultimately a NATO bombing campaign. Bosnia also required a large-scale, long-term United Nations presence to separate the factions and to enforce and implement the agreement.

So I believe that, absent a change on the ground, diplomacy alone is unlikely to end the Syrian war – but I certainly agree with diplomatic efforts to advance a country-wide cessation of hostilities and advance a vision for a political settlement. A full-scale cease-fire could create more space for political bargaining, and in the meantime reduce human suffering and mitigate the spillover effects of the ongoing violence. Right now, however, the Assad government and its patrons in Tehran and Moscow have no interest in a sustained cease-fire, because the battleground dynamics continue to shift in their favor. They used the partial cease-fires of the past weeks to consolidate territorial gains from opposition forces and to further weaken those forces through continued air attacks. Without agreement amongst the various governments around the table as to which fighting groups constitute terrorist organizations, a ceasefire will inevitably disadvantage opposition factions as the Assad regime targets them in the name of counterterrorism. That will likewise advantage the most extreme among the rebel factions as well as jihadi groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda's affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, who will all continue to use force to acquire and hold territory and to force their political opponents and inconvenient civilians off the field.

Likewise, some suggest that the sectarian nature of the conflict, and the deep investment of regional powers in backing their preferred sides, mean that it is not possible to hasten an end to the war at all, and that it must be allowed to "burn itself out." This policy option is infeasible for the United States, from moral, political, and security standpoints. The scale of death and destruction already, over nearly five years of war, should shame the conscience of the world. Those seeking to escape this misery deserve our succor, and

those seeking to end the carnage deserve our support. And it is beyond question that Bashar al-Assad and his allies are the ones responsible for the vast majority of this death, destruction, and displacement.

In political and security terms, the war's spillover into neighboring countries and now into Europe can still get worse. Key states like Lebanon and Jordan are at risk of destabilization and/or extremist terrorism the longer the conflict goes on and the more of its consequences they must absorb. Turkey, as we know, has already suffered attacks by extremist groups. And the war has continued to be a powerful source of recruitment for extremists, drawing fighters and fellow travelers from around the world. ISIS and Al Qaeda feed on the civil conflict and the chaos on the ground is what gives them room to operate. It is indeed imperative that the United States remain engaged, and intensify its engagement as needed, to secure an end to the conflict as soon as possible.

Understanding the Geopolitical Context

In the ongoing diplomacy over how the conflict ends and what political settlement results, there are two issues on which the parties involved in the Vienna talks demonstrate sharp disagreement, and about which the United States needs to advance clear views. The first is a disagreement over the primacy of preserving the central Syrian government, currently headed by Assad. Russia, along with some regional actors (even some opponents of Assad), believe that the most important determinant structuring a political settlement must be the preservation of the Syrian central government, even if that means preserving Bashar al Assad in office. If Assad is ousted without an agreed-upon successor in place, they argue, then Syria will become a failed state like Libya, in which ISIS will have even more space to consolidate and operate, with dire consequences for regional and international security. It is this concern over state collapse and the desire for strong central authority that keeps Russia united with Iran behind Assad.

It's understandable to desire the preservation of Syrian government institutions as a bulwark against anarchy, and to want a central government in Syria with which to work on counterterrorism and postwar reconstruction. The problem with elevating this concern to a primary objective in negotiations is its embedded assumption that any Syrian government based in Damascus will be able to exercise meaningful control over most or all of Syria's territory after rebels and government forces stop fighting one another. That's a faulty assumption, for several reasons.

First, it is extremely unlikely that we'll see swift or effective demobilization and disarmament of sub-state fighting factions in favor of a unified Syrian military force. If the central government remains largely in the form and structure of Assad's government, and even more so if Assad himself remains in power, it is hard to imagine rebel groups agreeing to put down their weapons and rely on security provided by the central government. Thus, local militias will remain important providers of local order and also important players in either defeating or enabling extremist groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda.

Second, effective governance from Damascus is extremely difficult to imagine, much less implement. The degree of displacement, the extent of physical destruction, and the hardening of sectarian and ethnic divisions due to five years of brutal conflict (and decades of coercive rule before that) all present steep challenges to centralized rule. Those with resources and capacity within local communities will end up being the primary providers of order at the local level – and it is local order, more than a central government, that will enable communities to resist ISIS infiltration. Thus, countries concerned with having effective governance in Syria as a bulwark against extremists need to recognize the value and importance of local governance in any post-war scenario.

Finally, there is the unalterable fact that Bashar al-Assad and his allies have slaughtered perhaps as many as 400,000 of Syria's citizens; have used chemical weapons against civilians; have imprisoned and tortured thousands and displaced millions; and, through Assad's own horrific decisions, have broken Syria's government, the Syrian state, and the Syrian nation to bits. Those who demand his ouster as a prerequisite for ending the war are justified in their view that Assad does not have and will not have legitimacy to govern from a majority of Syrians, that his continued rule would be divisive and destructive of Syrian unity and security, and that he should instead face justice for war crimes and crimes against humanity. As a practical matter, and because of all this, many Syrian fighting factions on the ground and their supporters, are committed to Assad's ouster. US-Russian concurrence on setting that goal aside will not induce them to end their fight. The only way that might occur is if Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia – who are committed to Assad's ouster – relent on their demands and agree to curtail support to rebel factions who continue to fight. This is hard to imagine in the current circumstances.

In other words, while preserving the Syrian state is a laudable goal, it will not alone achieve the objectives set by those who hold it out as the primary imperative in the political negotiations over the future of Syria. I would suggest that, while the fate of Bashar al Assad is not perhaps of primary concern from the perspective of U.S. interests, the United States should be pressing Russia and others involved in the talks to relax their fixation on Syria's central government (and who runs it) as a counterterrorism goal, and to recognize that a significant degree of decentralization and international engagement with local actors inside Syria will be necessary to preserve the peace, to carry out reconstruction, and to defeat ISIS. Likewise, the Syrian opposition and those states demanding Assad's ouster as a precondition for peace must recognize that they have even more to gain from insisting on decentralization and local autonomy than they do from Assad's departure from power. They might even be able to trade their current demand for Assad's immediate departure against robust assurances for empowerment of local authority, release of detainees and internationally guaranteed transitional justice.

The second major issue under contention regarding a negotiated end to the Syrian war is the role that Iran will play in post-conflict Syria. Iran's efforts to expand its influence – in Syria and in the region as a whole – present a concern that unites all of the United States's partners in the region, and should be a major concern for Washington as well. The gains made by the Assad regime (with Russian and Iranian help) over the past eight months enhance the disturbing prospect of a Syrian government remaining in power in

Damascus that is dependent on Iranian funding, Iranian military support, and the importation of Iranian-backed militias. While the Russians are perhaps concerned more about the Syrian state as a bulwark against extremism, Iran is deeply committed to the survival of its Alawi client and the maintenance of Syria as a channel for Iranian support to Hizballah. And while some Sunni Arab states embrace the goal of preserving Syrian territorial integrity and the central government, all are troubled at the prospect that this government would be under the thumb of Tehran. Any political settlement that institutionalizes Iran's overwhelming role in Syria will likewise increase Iran's ability to impact to threaten Israel's northern border, to destabilize Lebanese and perhaps also Jordanian politics, and to interfere with ongoing efforts to assuage the anxieties of Iraqi Sunnis and bring them back into alignment with the government in Baghdad.

The rising likelihood of an Iranian-dominated Syria emerging from the war has induced a change in attitude toward the Syrian conflict by America's closest regional partner, Israel. Israeli officials took a fairly ambivalent stance toward the civil war for several years, although they were always wary of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. But today, they judge Assad's survival as possible only through effective Iranian suzerainty, putting their most powerful enemy right on their border. Iranian domination of post-conflict Syria would also likely spell an escalation in Iranian weapons transfers to Hizballah – and Israel cannot expect to have 100% success in preventing the provision of increasingly sophisticated rocket and missile technology to Hizballah. These and other types of support from Iran through Damascus could increase Hizballah's capacity to wage asymmetric war against Israel, at great cost to Israel's civilian population. Israeli observers are increasingly alarmed at this scenario, and Israeli officials now [state clearly](#) that, if faced with a choice, they'd prefer to confront ISIS than Iran across the Israeli-Syrian frontier.

American diplomacy in Vienna must take greater account of the destabilizing implications of an Iranian-dominated Syrian government, even a rump government that does not control all of Syrian territory. A U.S. focus on constructing a political settlement that limits Iran's influence in postwar Syria could induce greater coherence among American partners in Vienna currently divided over the fate of Assad; and it could prevent a situation in which the United States trades the threat of ISIS in Syria for the threat of Iranian-sponsored terrorism and subversion emanating from Syria.

Al Qaeda and the Syrian conflict

Al Qaeda's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has particularly benefited from the war's continuation, from the weakness and partiality of the ceasefires negotiated earlier this year, and from the inability of the U.S.-Russian diplomatic process to generate any progress toward a political transition. Shrewdly, Nusra has focused on building its reputation as the most consistent, and most effective, military opponent of the Assad regime, and on its readiness to cooperate with anti-Assad factions with whom it has other, ideological and political, disagreements. The failures of diplomacy feed Nusra's strength and win it allies amongst more nationalist rebel factions. And while it's tempting for American efforts to focus on rallying forces to defeat ISIS, our diplomats and decision

makers must beware that leaning too far back on the issue of political transition for the sake of building an anti-ISIS coalition might just end up pushing more hardline opposition elements into the arms of a different extremist movement, one with demonstrated intent and capability to attack the United States.

To summarize, it's imperative that American diplomacy to produce a political settlement of the Syrian war be firmly focused achieving two goals crucial to the interests of the United States and its regional partners: first, enabling and institutionalizing local governance as a bulwark against ISIS (more than central government institutions), and second, establishing hard limits on Iran's role in a post-conflict Syria and on its ability to use Syria as a conduit for support to Hizballah.

Managing Spillover and Restoring Stability

A second major priority for US policy, in addition to this refocused diplomacy, must be stepped-up efforts to mitigate the destabilizing consequences of the Syrian war, no matter how long it goes on. And, while the United States continues to work through diplomacy and pressure to produce an end to the war, work must also begin now to prepare for the long-term and wide-scale effort needed for post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction.

The scope of death, displacement and destruction threatens to rob Syria of the basic ingredients for social stability, regardless of what lines might be drawn at a negotiating table in Vienna. Without concerted effort to ameliorate the effects of this conflict for people on the ground, to rebuild social trust, and to nurture resilience within these battered communities against conflict and division, any peace settlement could quickly unravel the face of local security dilemmas and intercommunal tensions, as well as in light of the unaddressed scars and grievances of Assad's brutality against the Syrian people.

Meeting this challenge requires at least four lines of effort:

- doing more to engage Syrians in building local governance and community resilience, especially skills and platforms for conflict resolution;
- doing more to stabilize and secure frontline states, including support for integrating refugees into the economy and society;
- helping more refugees create new lives far from the conflict zone, including much more resettlement in the United States; and
- working diligently with regional partners to tamp down the sectarianism that both drives and is driven by the war, and that feeds extremist recruitment and violence.

As we have seen, ISIS markets itself partly on the order it provides to local communities – a brutal order to be sure, but still a contrast with the chaos and insecurity of civil war. To counter ISIS effectively, we must help local communities with governance and service delivery. More can be done even now to put into place the ingredients for

successful and sustainable conflict resolution for Syrians. These steps include enabling and encouraging Syrians displaced by the fighting, whether in neighboring countries or in areas of Syria not under ISIS or regime control, to engage in dialogue over, and planning for, their own communal future. Neighboring states accepting refugees have understandably sought to tamp down political discussion and debate within refugee camps, for example. But these refugee populations need to engage in dialogue to build the basis, in social trust, that will enable them to manage daily governance and resolve differences peacefully if and when they are no longer living under refugee agencies and host-government security services. These processes can also connect, over time, to negotiating efforts on a political transition in which the Syrian opposition is represented, yielding greater legitimacy and efficacy to that more formal political process.

Too often, in discussing Syria, we posit a choice between working with the central government and working with unsavory non-state actors. There is an obvious additional option, already in play, that deserves greater emphasis: empowering and engaging local municipalities, local business sectors, local civil society, and other actors who exist in territory not under extremist or regime control and who have an obvious stake in the success of their own communities and their defense against coercion either from ISIS or from the Assad government. It is these local actors who will make or break the implementation of any political settlement, because they are the ones who will give it life and legitimacy. They are the ones who will help manage differences within their own communities and with their neighbors to avoid outbreaks of violence, and they are the ones who will lead the establishment of a new social compact to enable long-term stability in Syria. USAID and its implementing partners have been creative in developing programs to engage local communities and local governing institutions, and this work deserves robust, sustained support from Congress.

The United States continues to lead in international support for refugee relief – but it lags woefully in refugee resettlement. Only about [1300 of the 10,000 Syrian refugees](#) the Obama Administration promised to admit into the United States have been resettled here so far; and the United States can and should accept more.

In addition, American policy efforts to address the refugee crisis must go beyond humanitarian relief and expanded resettlement. Working with European partners, the United States government can work to save lives along the transit routes for refugees fleeing the region, can support successful integration of refugees into European cities (again, working at the municipal level), and can do more to support social stabilization, livelihoods, and development for the large refugee communities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey and for the societies hosting them.

On June 14 and 15th, the Brookings Institution will convene a high-level gathering of regional, European, and American leaders to develop new responses and more robust forms of cooperation to meet this global humanitarian crisis. I look forward to reporting back to you on our results.