

## Six Bad Options for Syria

Syria is at a crossroads; so is U.S. policy. The war that has killed over 250,000 people and displaced half of Syria's population has stalemated, with the regime too strong to fall at the hands of the fractious rebels, but too weak to reconquer the country and restore stability. Diplomacy, too, seems to offer no promise. The Assad regime, backed by Russia and Iran, thinks it can win and fears that negotiating would simply encourage the rebels. The Syrian opposition, meanwhile, is divided into myriad factions, often more at war with themselves than with the regime. As if this bad situation couldn't get worse, in fall 2015 Russia intervened decisively in the war, in conjunction with regime and Iranian forces, bombing Syrian opposition positions.

U.S. policy, too, is in crisis. The bloody terrorist attacks on Paris in November 2015 and the homegrown strike by Islamic State supporters in San Bernadino, California, in December 2015 led to immediate criticism that the Obama administration was failing in its efforts to combat the Islamic State. Diplomatic efforts in Vienna and elsewhere by Secretary of State John Kerry have repeatedly failed. The U.S. military's train-and-equip effort for the Syrian opposition has struggled, producing only 150 rebel soldiers out of a planned 5,000 and leading the president to suspend the program.<sup>1</sup> Obama administration officials seem to have washed their hands of the crisis, dismissing most calls for more aggressive action while serving the remainder of their time in office. Presidential candidates, meanwhile, run the gamut of aggression: Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) calls for large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground to defeat the Islamic State, Ted Cruz (R-TX) endorses a more aggressive effort to arm the Kurds and "carpet bomb" the Islamic State "into oblivion",<sup>2</sup> while Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton

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has called for safe havens to protect fleeing Syrians. In general, most of the candidates talk tough and criticize perceived Obama failures, but are vague on specifics themselves.

If the United States is to change course, what options are available? The range of choices is wide, and U.S. policy could change dramatically depending on who comes into office after the presidential election or if a major terrorist attack occurs on U.S. soil. On one extreme, the United States could further isolate itself from the strife in Syria, focusing on Asia and otherwise staying out of what some see as an unwinnable conflict; at the other extreme, Washington could lead a massive military campaign to destroy the Islamic State, overthrow the Assad regime, and pacify Syria, imposing a solution through force of arms. In between these policy poles, the United States could reinvigorate the effort to work with the Syrian opposition, create safe zones and havens within Syria, bolster the Assad regime to crush the Islamic State, or focus on containing the violence and ameliorating the humanitarian consequences flowing from the conflict. Any choice must take into account U.S. interests and politics, both of which restrain policymakers and introduce risks as well as contradictions into the overall U.S. approach. This essay surveys the main options proposed, assessing their potential advantages, limits, and costs.

All the options are bad ones. Some don't have a chance of ending the conflict or even reducing its scope or scale. Others are too costly, too risky, or politically infeasible. In the end, some form of containment is a necessary step, whether the United States wants to escalate its involvement or largely prefers to ignore the violence.

**P**olicymakers should be wary of politically attractive middle-of-the-road options.

Policy-makers should be wary, however, of middle-of-the-road options like safe havens that are politically attractive in the short-term because they “do something,” but in practice may accomplish little while dragging the United States unwittingly into greater escalation—a

problem of “mission creep” that is common when Washington is conflicted on the necessity, scope, and scale of a possible intervention.

### **Limited Interests, Restrictive Politics**

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To be sustainable, any policy must recognize the range of interests and political restrictions at play. U.S. interests in the Syria conflict are potentially implicated in three ways. First, the United States has stated its intention to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State.<sup>3</sup> The Islamic State is considered a potential

source of international terrorism and has “threatened America and its allies.”<sup>4</sup> CIA director John Brennan warned, “Left unchecked, the group would pose a serious danger not only to Syria and Iraq, but to the wider region and beyond, including the threat of attacks in the homeland of the United States and the homelands of our partners.”<sup>5</sup> The group embraces sectarianism and denounces infidels and what it considers apostate regimes. Its propaganda trumpets, “Now, with the presence of the Islamic State, the opportunity to ... wage jihād against the Crusaders, the Nusayriyyah [‘Alawites], the Rāfidah [Shi’ite], and the murtadd [apostate] regimes and armies, is available to every Muslim as well as the chance to live under the shade of the Sharī‘ah alone.”<sup>6</sup> It has conducted or supported attacks in Lebanon, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, and local groups have pledged loyalty to it in places as diverse as Nigeria, Libya, Sinai, and Afghanistan. Moreover, thousands of foreign fighters, including Americans, have joined the Islamic State’s ranks and may attempt to return home and carry out attacks in the future.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the Syria conflict is destabilizing to the region, even beyond the Islamic State. The strife in Syria that began in 2011 and grew over time helped reignite the Iraqi civil war, contributing to sectarian tension there even before the 2014 Islamic State offensives that culminated in the group’s capture of Mosul and other parts of Sunni Iraq. Putting the Islamic State aside, the Syria conflict has brought the always-simmering Riyadh–Tehran rivalry to a boil. Although the West has focused on Sunni foreign fighters joining jihadist groups, thousands of Shi’a fighters from the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi militant groups have also joined the fray on behalf of the Assad regime. The atrocities many fighters have committed—highlighted by all sides’ propaganda to “prove” the brutality of the other—have inflamed sectarian tension throughout the region.

Finally, the United States has a humanitarian interest in stopping the conflict. The war is the deadliest conflict active today: over 250,000 people have died, the pace of the violence shows no sign of abating, and with Russia’s increased role, may be increasing. Over four million refugees fled Syria as of September 2015, and over seven million more are internally displaced.<sup>8</sup>

As horrible as this conflict is, more striking is how a war in the heart of the Middle East—a region that absorbed U.S. energies well before 9/11 put it front and center—actually does *not* immediately implicate many traditional U.S. interests. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have historically emphasized three core interests in the Middle East: oil price stability, halting nuclear proliferation, and ensuring the security of Israel. Syria is not a major oil producer; nor are Lebanon and Jordan, where violence might spread. So far, the fighting in Iraq has not spread to the oil-rich parts of the country, and the Islamic State’s strength and ability to conduct military operations outside Sunni-populated areas in Iraq and Syria, which have little oil, have proven to be limited. Advances in U.S. production and the current oil glut also make the United States and the

world oil market less sensitive to geopolitical crises. The collapse of Saudi Arabia—vital for oil price stability—would be another matter, but the Kingdom seems to be weathering the storm, seeing only limited (though real) low-level violence, with Islamic State sympathizers conducting attacks on Shi'a targets in the Kingdom.<sup>9</sup> Even when violence was far greater in the Kingdom, such as during the al-Qaeda-led insurgency after 2003, oil production was not affected.

Similarly, nuclear dangers have not increased nor is Israel in jeopardy. No country is reacting to the civil war by embarking on a quest for nuclear weapons. Whether or not one believes the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran over its nuclear activities represents diplomacy at its finest or appeasement, the Syria conflict matters little. Israel has ably stayed out of the conflict, confining itself to an occasional attack on forces of its nemesis, Hezbollah, based in Syria.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the civil war has removed, or at least gravely weakened, an important foe of Israel, focused attention away from the moribund peace process toward intra-Arab problems, heightened the Iran–Saudi rivalry, and otherwise improved Israel's strategic position. It is possible that jihadist groups might use the collapse of order to launch rocket or other attacks on Israel from Syrian soil, but Israel's military can manage this problem without requiring a significant U.S. role beyond diplomatic support.

**The terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland from Syria is real but often misunderstood.**

The major currently affected interest involves keeping the United States safe from terrorism. Here, however, the threat is real but often misunderstood.<sup>11</sup> The Islamic State's *potential* for international terrorism is considerable given its thousands of Western recruits. However, many of the foreign fighters who go to Iraq and Syria will die or never return home. U.S. and allied security services are on high alert, as a spate of arrests indicates. The Paris attack is a dire warning that the Islamic State is becoming more global in its targeting,

but as Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon argue, Europe faces a much larger restive Muslim population, easier transit from Syria, and most importantly less-resourced security services when compared with the United States.<sup>12</sup> The greater terrorism danger is to the region, where security services are uneven and which the Islamic State prioritizes. Yet the terrorist threat remains real to the U.S. homeland and the West, ranging from Islamic State-inspired “lone wolves” to the possibility that Paris is but the first of many Islamic State attempts to prioritize mass slaughter in the West.

Beyond these real but limited interests, U.S. politics place many constraints on Syria policy and, in some cases, demand impossible contradictions. Polls indicate

Americans in general have little desire to put troops in harm's way, and any president who does so would be flying in the face of U.S. public opinion.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Americans expect the president to keep the country safe from terrorism and are highly alarmed about the Islamic State—and they are willing to make an exception to their skepticism of boots on the ground in this case.<sup>14</sup> This concern is deep, but it is also narrow: Americans are focused on the perceived threat the Islamic State poses to the U.S. homeland, but are far less concerned about its terrorist attacks or other violence in the Middle East.

Politics and interests also restrict whether and how much the United States can work with important actors in the Syria conflict. Many of the most important players in Syria are violent, anti-American, and just plain icky. The Assad regime's incredible brutality and historic anti-Americanism as well as anti-Israeli stances make it an undesirable partner. Much of the opposition works with Jabhat al-Nusra, an effective rebel fighting force that cooperates with other groups and is relatively disciplined in its treatment of civilians—and is an al-Qaeda affiliate and genuine terrorism risk to the United States. Despite the Iran nuclear deal, and perhaps even because of it, direct cooperation with Tehran and its Lebanese partner, Hezbollah, is political poison even though Iran and its Shi'a militia allies are important players in the ground war against the Islamic State. The United States has and does cooperate with Russia in different arenas around the world, but Putin's aggression in Ukraine, support for Assad's brutality in Syria, and general bellicosity increase the political and strategic price of working with Moscow.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, U.S. politics and interests lead the United States to emphasize the danger of the Islamic State, while U.S. regional allies (and, for that matter, foes) focus first and foremost on the Assad regime. Most Syrians hate Assad more than the Islamic State, pointing out that the regime has killed far more people than the jihadists. Important allies such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia also see Assad as an enemy who must fall and want to set his Iranian champions back, while Iran and Russia appear committed to the regime's survival despite Moscow's occasional statement that it would consider alternate leaders.

With these varying interests and the political restrictions on U.S. action in mind, the United States has six general options in dealing with the ongoing Syrian crisis.

### **Option One: Let It Burn**

The United States could simply turn its back on Syria, ending airstrikes against the Islamic State, abandoning mediation, and stopping efforts to train the Syrian

opposition. Such an approach would follow the lesson that many Americans, including perhaps the president himself, learned from the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq and the 2011 intervention in Libya: the Middle East is a quagmire. Intervention, this argument goes, is inevitably costly in U.S. lives and dollars. More important, it doesn't work—are Libya and Iraq better off than they were before the United States went to war in 2011 and 2003, respectively? Although the U.S. military has improved its counterinsurgency capacities dramatically, overall U.S. skills at state-building remain weak; the United States has not proven skilled at post-war reconciliation or security sector development, despite considerable efforts. And even if few mourn Qaddafi or Saddam, the ensuing chaos has allowed radical groups like the Islamic State to flourish.

Nor are the people the United States fights for grateful, this view maintains. The murder of Ambassador Stevens in Benghazi is only one example where Americans are dismayed that their presence is later met with bullets, not flowers. Perhaps the biggest advantage of staying out, however, is the weakness of the alternatives: anyone criticizing U.S. inaction regarding Syria needs to put forward a coherent and plausible alternative. And all of them, as discussed below, have many weaknesses.

Yet, letting Syria burn has its costs beyond continuing the humanitarian tragedy, and that alone is considerable. The biggest is that the conflict might

**Letting Syria burn has its costs beyond continuing the humanitarian tragedy.**

spread. The millions of refugees are one potential source of instability—they have no chance of returning for years, and if they are not integrated, they risk becoming a pool of alienated and politicized recruits for militant groups of all stripes. This could further link the conflict in Syria with instability among its neighbors. Terrorism could flow from the refugees and ignite more instability on its own, particularly in countries like Lebanon that already have a

deep sectarian divide. More moderate Syrian groups would become further disenchanted with the United States, increasing support for more radical organizations. And the Islamic State could become more global in its focus.

Neighboring states are already deeply involved in Syria, often in conflicting or opposing ways that make the violence worse and increase the risk that the conflict could become an inter-state struggle as well as a civil war. Local conflicts in the Middle East have a habit of becoming regional ones: a common Arab heritage and language, weak national identities, a shared religion, and transnational tribal bonds all lead conflicts to cross borders.<sup>15</sup> If left unchecked, such spillover could spread the conflict further, implicating key allies like Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

Given these risks, and given the daily horror for those in the region confronting the Islamic State or the Syrian regime, the pressure for some form of intervention will continue.

## **Option Two: Massive Intervention**

The other end of the spectrum would be a massive military intervention led by the United States, ideally as part of a broader coalition with European and regional powers. The initial military challenge is real, but not overwhelming. Even put together, both Syrian forces and those of anti-U.S. opposition groups like the Islamic State are weaker than Saddam Hussein's forces were in 2003. Although Syria's military looks big on paper, Bashar al-Assad's minority-dominated regime has used only a small part to fight the opposition, relying only on the most loyal units composed of, or at least commanded by, members of his minority Alawite community and on pro-regime militias from supportive communities. Analyst Joseph Holliday estimates that the Assad regime after 2011 was only able to use one-third of its paper combat power and suffered tens of thousands of defections, if not more.<sup>16</sup> Out of desperation, the Assad regime has been relying more on conscripts, but their loyalty and competence are suspect. Figures for Islamic State fighting forces are all over the map and run as high as 200,000, but the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights puts it at a more modest and believable figure of 50,000.<sup>17</sup> This is a large number for a state in a battered civil war, but tiny compared with the potential forces of intervening powers. And all this says nothing about the exponentially greater capabilities the United States and its allies have in technology, leadership, and training.

A successful military intervention would have many benefits. The Islamic State's fighting force would be crushed, as would the genocidal Assad regime. Syria's refugees and displaced could return, and seismic activity in the region could return to its traditionally high, but not off-the-charts, levels. But would it truly succeed? A significant military intervention would have little or at best shallow political support in the United States and within key allies in Europe and Turkey. Even if a U.S. president intervened in the face of popular opinion—or an Islamic State atrocity or terrorist attack led to a surge in support—public tolerance would likely be short-lived, and political pressure to cut the U.S. role would grow, particularly if few or no allies shared the burden.

The biggest problem is a long-term one: what happens after the initial military victory? Despite the U.S. military's significant conventional superiority, the Iraq 2003 analogy is apt for this reason as well. If the United States and its allies are to intervene well in Syria, it cannot be just a "get in and get out" operation; it must be a decades-long process involving more than just military

**Intervention would have to be a decades-long process involving more than just military might.**

might. The Islamic State and other groups would immediately try to spark an insurgency and use terrorism to push the United States out, and this must be suppressed. Assad regime remnants, probably working with Iran and Hezbollah, would try to do the same. The United States would also have to help create and install a transitional government, but no one speaks for the entire moderate opposition, or even a large part of it. Over time, a large and aggressive U.S. force could combat this, assuming we get the tricky politics right, but this would require decades and prove costly in lives and money.

Tensions with allies would also grow, as there is no unified vision of an endgame among U.S. allies. It is unlikely that the United States, European, and regional allies could all agree upon a singular goal for post-war Syria. It is hard to imagine the United States going to war on a massive scale and not trying to install a democracy in Syria, or at least a system that also recognizes the rights of minorities such as Syria's Kurds. Saudi Arabia would hate the democratic aspect, which it sees as weak and a threat to its own legitimacy, and Turkey, leery of empowering its own Kurdish population, would not want Syria's Kurds to have more autonomy.

### **Option Three: Work with Allies to Fight the Islamic State**

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The Obama administration has tried to walk a line between these extremes of avoidance and activism by working with allies to focus on one foe in particular—the Islamic State—and by using air power to minimize the direct risk to U.S. soldiers. The United States has gathered a coalition of over 60 countries, and it has tried to work locally with Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria, the Iraqi government, Sunni tribes, and elements of the Syrian opposition. The United States has deployed 3,500 troops to Iraq to train local forces, and in October 2015 the President announced that he would deploy several dozen special operations forces to Syria to work with local allies there against the Islamic State.<sup>18</sup>

The local forces in particular have skin in the game already, and, naturally enough, they loathe the Islamic State. Such a stance is also more domestically sustainable: Americans fear the Islamic State, but they care little about Assad's regime. And in theory there is potential here. UK envoy Gareth Bayley contends, "The Syrian Moderate Opposition are made up of people who subscribe neither to the values of the regime, nor of ISIL, nor of al-Qaeda."<sup>19</sup> Their fighters number

roughly 80,000, and this number excludes the much smaller but effective Syrian Kurdish forces.

This approach depends heavily on air power, which can act as a force multiplier. Air power can effectively strike fixed targets such as arms depots, military headquarters, and other sites. It can also devastate massed enemy forces and vehicles, making it hard for the Islamic State to gather large numbers of forces together to strike across distances or shift forces on the battlefield. When combined with precise intelligence, air power can also be used to strike Islamic State leadership. The United States killed Fadhil Ahmed al-Hayyali, perhaps the Islamic State's number two, in an airstrike in Mosul, for example.<sup>20</sup>

To go to the next level, however, air power needs to be combined with operations by allied forces on the ground. Airplanes, of course, cannot occupy territory: if the Islamic State is successfully pushed back, some group needs to fill in the space left behind. To avoid airstrikes, the Islamic State might scatter its forces—but this would prove disastrous for it, as long as a strong opponent pushed through on the ground and captured its key cities and bases.

The competence of local tribal allies and parts of the Syrian opposition to conduct such a ground offensive, however, is questionable. In Syria, the moderate opposition can effectively combat the Islamic State when unified, but it remains divided into dozens of smaller groups that usually coordinate in an ad hoc way. In both Syria and Iraq, despite years of U.S. training, local forces have not proven a match for the Islamic State, as we saw most painfully in June 2014 when perhaps 30,000 well-armed Iraqi forces fled Mosul in the face of perhaps 1,000 Islamic State fighters, leaving massive amounts of equipment behind, including Abrams tanks as well as small arms and ammunition.<sup>21</sup> Iraqi forces and other local allies have not proven able to conduct large-scale coordinated operations on their own.

Additionally, many Syrian groups have worked with Jabhat al-Nusra, the local al-Qaeda affiliate, because that group has proven an effective foe of the Assad regime and a cooperative partner with other rebel groups. U.S. calls for Syrian opposition groups to cut ties with Jabhat al-Nusra—at a time when the United States was not actively fighting Assad itself—were met with derision. Even beyond their ties to Jabhat al-Nusra, many of these groups do not share U.S. values or goals: the idea that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” is a poor guide for the United States in Syria. Perhaps most important, none of these local actors has national appeal. So they can conduct effective operations in their region, tribal zone, or ethnic area, but their ability to push back more comprehensively is limited both by their more parochial desires and by their limited appeal.

Without strong local allies, air power becomes far less effective. It cannot stop the Islamic State or other groups from using roving bands to infiltrate areas and kill people. It cannot conquer territory. Without competent ground forces to call in and direct strikes, it is harder to sustain a high pace of attacks during battles.

Although killing Islamic State leaders disrupts its command and control and forces its leaders deeper underground, the group has a deep bench and has proven it can weather the campaign.

Because of these limits, even if the Islamic State is pushed back, it is not clear who fills the void. The Assad regime might move in, or simply more chaos might result.

#### **Option Four: Work with the Devil We Know?**

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Given the concerns about the Islamic State, some experts, like seasoned diplomat Ryan Crocker, have called for working with Assad, pointing out “as bad as he is, there is something worse.”<sup>22</sup> In theory, the Assad regime does offer a true alternative to both the Islamic State and chaos. He and his father before him imposed a brutal order on the country in the past. Assad the elder killed thousands during a civil war from 1978–1982, leveling parts of the city of Hama, a key opposition hotbed, as a lesson to those who defied him. Both he and his son ruled as dictators, where torture and other human rights abuses were common.

Although hostile to the United States, Assad is pragmatic—for example, in 2013 he agreed to rid himself of chemical weapons in a successful effort to avoid U.S. airstrikes (though his actual compliance is incomplete). The United States could push deals regarding Israel in particular as the price of cooperation, demanding a peace treaty with Israel and other concessions. And cooperation with Assad could bolster rapprochement with Tehran, Assad’s closest ally.

Yet, the costs and risks are high. Diplomatically, U.S. allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia would strongly oppose this policy and probably work to undermine it. The Saudis (correctly) see Damascus as a close ally of Iran, and leaders in both countries share the outrage of Sunnis in general at Assad’s sectarian brutality: a U.S. decision to ally with Damascus would be seen as a stab in the back. At a popular level, a deal with Assad would make the Sunni Arab world in general, already hostile to the United States, even more so, and could prompt groups like the Islamic State to focus their energies more exclusively on the United States. Additionally, although U.S. air power and other support would help Assad’s forces advance, they would be unlikely to pacify all of the country, at least in the near-term, given the size of the opposition. Lastly, if morality matters at all, this policy involves securing the power of a mass killer. Even if the world lets bygones be bygones in the name of future peace, there is no reason to trust that he wouldn’t take brutal revenge on any former foes who return home.

#### **Option Five: No Fly Zones, Safe Zones, and Safe Havens**

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Another measure is to create humanitarian space for Syrians, either unilaterally or by working with European allies, to create a no-fly zone or carve out a safe zone

within the country where the displaced would enjoy a respite from both the Islamic State and Assad regime attacks.<sup>23</sup> Former Secretary of State and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has called for such safe zones, as have prominent Republican champions such as Senator John McCain (R-AZ).<sup>24</sup> Such zones are intuitively appealing. They help offer a light for Syrians in the darkness, yet do not seem as risky and costly as invasion. Safe havens might also ease the burden on Syria's neighbors by offering a place within Syria where potential refugees can find sanctuary.

In reality, however, such zones are uncertain and costly—and a risky humanitarian gesture. In order for a safe zone to succeed, the United States would need to destroy Syrian air defenses so that they could not target U.S. aircraft patrolling the zones, bringing the United States directly into the war against Syria and its allies. The United States would also need to maintain a constant air presence to guard the zone, which in turn would be draining to the U.S. Air Force. A haven in northern Iraq in the 1990s led to constant concerns about operational and personnel tempo. Given the role Russia is now playing in the conflict, the United States would also need to secure the zone against possible Russian air attacks, especially if opposition forces fled to the zone, a challenge that further strains the U.S.–Russia relationship.

Ultimately, air power alone cannot secure safe zones. To prevent massacres, the United States would have to ensure that Islamic State or Assad regime forces cannot infiltrate the zones, as small numbers of these forces could wreak havoc among the refugees. In addition, if they are truly humanitarian, the zones should not become a place where opposition fighters could organize, arm, train, and then venture back out of the zone to fight. Preventing this would require thousands of ground forces to secure and police the zones—and the numbers would increase as the number of displaced grew, which would be likely as Syrians seek relief from the horrors of war and Islamic State cruelty. (Alternatively, the United States could treat them as bases to help foster the armed opposition, but that would make it even more likely that both the Assad regime and the Islamic State would challenge the zones.)<sup>25</sup>

Even with thousands of troops, securing the border would be difficult, and the zone would probably become a target of Islamic State attacks and the Assad regime as well as its Iranian allies as a way of undermining the U.S. effort. By creating the zone, failure would not be an option. The United States would be making a promise to keep people safe, a promise that could very likely require decisive action. For example, when NATO created six safe zones in the Balkans, two of

**Safe havens are intuitively appealing, but in reality uncertain, costly, and may even lead to conflict.**

them fell to Serbian forces, leading to the horrific 1995 Srebrenica massacre in which roughly 8,000 Bosnian men and boys were rounded up and slaughtered. Such horrors prompted the United States to intervene more decisively to end the war.<sup>26</sup> In Syria, creating a limited safe zone might put the United States in a dilemma, should it be challenged: either escalate and risk mission creep, or step aside, which would risk U.S. credibility and the lives of those we promised to protect.

Even if the zones could be secured, they would become places of economic desolation and lost hope. Most of the residents would seek to leave the zones in search of a better life. But the surrounding countries and the world in general would have an airtight excuse to deny them entry. Thus, in the end, a safe zone does not actually end the war or otherwise resolve the deeper issues. In fact, it may even lead more directly to outright conflict.

### **Option Six: Contain the Violence**

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The last option to consider is also a palliative, containing the fires consuming Syria rather than extinguishing them.<sup>27</sup> In contrast to creating a safe zone within Syria itself, the United States would help with caring for refugees who are located in many camps, cities, and towns within Iraq and Syria's neighbors. Already, the United States and its allies have given billions, but neighboring countries, especially the poorer ones like Jordan and Lebanon, need additional financial support. Other states should help with the burden. Germany has made impressive efforts,<sup>28</sup> but many European countries and the United States can do far more.

Host-country efforts to police refugee camps need international support. The large population of the camps necessitates large security forces to police them. In addition, intelligence assistance will be necessary to ensure that host governments are aware of potential militants and able to disrupt their activities. In addition to caring for refugees, an effort should be made to resettle them far from the borders of the conflict zone and integrate them into their host societies, thus making refugees both less willing and less able to join or support militant groups back in their home countries. Integration efforts are not popular in host countries and would require leveraging financial and other assistance.

Neighboring countries will also need significant border security and counterterrorism assistance, both to monitor and police the refugee camps and to prevent groups like the Islamic State from launching attacks at vulnerable refugees and exploiting the camps to recruit and launch attacks. Money will talk, as the security services will need additional resources to meet the additional threat. The United States in 2015 provided roughly one billion dollars in overt security aid to Jordan, and this figure may need to increase.<sup>29</sup> Some countries will also need more robust

security force training programs, though several, notably those in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, are strong already.

Containment is not only defensive. Part of containment involves bolstering anti-Islamic State forces locally and continuing to use air strikes in order to consume the radicals' energies and focus them at home. The expectation would not be to "defeat" the Islamic State but rather to prevent it from becoming stronger, and ideally to make it weaker. Setbacks on the battlefield are likely to prove especially effective in reducing the risk of spillover related to the Islamic State. Part of the Islamic State's appeal is that it is a "winner," and is successfully standing up to Iran, apostate Sunni regimes, and the West. In addition, it taxes, extorts, and otherwise extracts resources from the territory it controls.

In countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan, reducing regional radicalization pressures will require pushing the regimes to reduce sectarian hatemongering. The Islamic State has successfully portrayed itself as the defender of the Sunni people against the Shia–Iranian menace. When Riyadh and others play up that menace, it indirectly benefits the Islamic State. Regimes should use their influence with local religious officials not only to condemn the Islamic State but also to counter the narrative it champions. Still, the U.S. role in fostering this will be indirect and limited at best as the United States itself lacks credibility on this issue and regional regimes are not prone to listen to Washington when it comes to how to manage religious sentiment in their own countries.

A final component of containing spillover is to put diplomatic pressure on allies like Turkey and Saudi Arabia—and coercive pressure on adversaries like Iran—to discourage them from intervening further in ways opposed to U.S. goals and to promote a more unified strategy to confront transnational threats. In October 2014, Vice President Joe Biden complained that "our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria" and that they were contributing to a "proxy Sunni–Shia war."<sup>30</sup> There has been some progress in this regard. In 2015, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and Turkey worked with the United States to train and equip several thousand troops to fight the Islamic State in Syria.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, disparate interests of regional actors will likely continue to plague U.S. attempts to coordinate a unified effort among allies.

Compared to many other options, containment's cost is low because significant numbers of ground troops would not be needed either to fight a war or to ensure successful post-war state-building. Containment also addresses the risk that the civil war would spread further in Iraq to oil-producing areas or to key U.S. allies like Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The overall risks of terrorism and instability would drop.

Yet, containment is more a band-aid than a cure. It does nothing to stop the current violence, and the Islamic State and the Assad regime would continue atrocities in areas they control. It also requires regular U.S. involvement with no end

in sight. Nor is there any guarantee that containment will work as advertised: some aspects, such as working with local allies and convincing regional states to scale back intervention, are likely to prove challenging. With the war raging, allies' and local actors' interests are strong and hard to change, particularly if the U.S. commitment is limited.

### Choosing the Best Bad Option

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**The window for straightforward and low-cost interventions in Syria has closed.**

The window for straightforward and low-cost interventions in Syria has closed. Supporting the opposition robustly in a way that leads them to victory, which might have led to a more unified opposition dominated by moderate forces if done in early 2012, is now much harder and may be effectively impossible.

Politically, presidents are damned either way: Americans don't want to pay the price of interventions, but at the same time they

will blame any U.S. leader should the Islamic State or another Syria-linked group conduct a major attack on their watch. As a result of this conflicting pressure and the limited nature of U.S. interests, administration officials are likely to try to strike a middle ground, doing enough to reduce the threat (or at least deflect criticism for doing nothing), but not sending large numbers of troops or otherwise making a massive commitment.

Containment is necessary in any event. Whether U.S. leaders choose to step up involvement or draw back, they will want to stop the violence from spreading. At the same time, the United States should consider other options with contingency plans should political conditions change or surprises on the battlefield arise.

For now, however, the United States only has bad options in Syria. This is not an excuse for throwing up our collective hands, but a more realistic discussion of policy options should reflect their many problems and limitations.

### Notes

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