

**The Aftermath of the Syria Decision, Part II:  
Potential Course of Action and Strategies**

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This is the second of a two-part series on the aftermath of recent decisions in the Syria conflict. The first part suggested the probability of a new stability and peace, as all the major players are roughly aligned in their interests. The United States has a basic choice before it, which is either to accept the outcome the other major powers are working towards, or else to oppose that outcome. Once that choice is made, there are various options for each basic path.

The arguments in favor of accepting the new stability are that it requires minimal diplomatic or military effort to achieve, as it is in line with the interests and desires of all the other major parties. It will bring a relatively rapid end to the large-scale fighting in Syria, though smaller insurgencies are likely to linger. It will allow major infrastructure investments in the Middle East to proceed, which is likely to increase prosperity broadly in the region, and to increase international trade that will bolster prosperity worldwide. This may enable the US to generate or finalize positive economic deals in return for our acceptance of the new, stable arrangement.

The arguments against accepting the new stability turn on the authoritarian nature and antagonistic posture toward long-accepted US interests of the regimes that would be dominant in it. The new investments are being funded to a large degree by the People's Republic of China, which could assume an even more dominant role in Asia and major leverage in the Middle East as a consequence of their success. The Chinese government is intensely oppressive, and engaged in cultural genocide and potentially worse against the Uighur even now. The Russian state would benefit to some degree. Turkey's President Erdogan would attain a significant victory that might lengthen his political career, which has been marked by authoritarianism, aggression towards the Kurds, and political repression at home. Iran's beleaguered regime could survive if the new stability is accepted, though they may be constrained through economic pressures as their patrons would have increased interest in this new stability's continued success as proposed investments become sunk costs. The Chinese have already begun to exert pressure on Iran in return for economic engagement. If the major powers can be

convinced to trade US acceptance of their territorial preferences in return for help restraining aggressive behavior by Iran, this could actually turn into a powerful complement to the US sanctions program.

Powers outside the Middle East and West Asia will be interested in this decision, and their interests may affect what is acceptable to American policymakers. Both Europe and India will be affected by the aftermath of this decision. If greater regional stability results, for example, Europe can expect to begin to recover from the pressures of the refugee crisis that have been bedeviling it for years now. Judging by their attitude toward Iranian investments in the wake of the 2015 Joint Coordinated Plan of Action, European powers would be delighted by the economic opportunities that a new stability would produce. An alternative American decision to reject the new stability in return for increased competition would be dismaying to the European states.

For India, the situation is more complicated. On the one hand, the new stability raises the profile of their major competitor, China. The Indian government will have concerns about a grand bargain between the major powers currently operating in Syria for that reason. On the other hand, America's more competitive options may increase regional instability in ways that are deleterious to Indian interests. In spite of often-fierce competition between India and Pakistan, for example, India benefits from having a more-rather-than-less stable Pakistan on its borders. Some of the options for asserting American interests have the potential to destabilize not only Iran, but also Pakistan, whose ethnic groups often overlap across their shared land border. Pursuit of these options might work to India's advantage by weakening Pakistan, insofar as Pakistan remains a stable competitor state; yet the same American options might also work to India's great disadvantage if our pursuit of those options should weaken Pakistan so much that the smaller nation becomes a failed state.

Ultimately, then, American policymakers need to make a basic decision about whether or not to accept the new stability that is growing out of the emerging resolution of the conflict in Syria. Once that

basic decision is made, US military and diplomatic efforts can be brought to bear in support of this decision. Even then, there will be choices that need to be made about how to proceed. If the new stability is to be accepted, is it most important to achieve the goods it offers or, alternatively, is it worth risking a loss of some of those goods in order to further the interests of minority groups with American affiliations, especially the Kurds? If the new stability is to be rejected to avoid empowering authoritarian powers that have traditionally been hostile to US interests, what degree of aggressiveness is acceptable in doing so?

Ongoing hearings in Congress point up another difficulty: America's civil service has developed a philosophy independent of the elected government. There is substantial resistance from this professional class to ideas that they feel violate their philosophical norms. This is leading to substantial disruption of the administration's ability to lead foreign policy. How can whatever decision is made be explained to our professionals from the State Department to the Intelligence Community as a moral project, especially where it conflicts with their long-held assumptions about the proper way to proceed?

These questions need answers. The following pages sketch outlines of some of the options, with their upsides and downsides, considerations, and proposed strategies toward the success of each option. These are presented to US policymakers with the express aim of helping them think through a wide, at times even a radical range of approaches. Each option has a page of commentary following it explaining its philosophical underpinnings, and how to think about how these approaches may clash with the philosophy of the civil service. This will help policymakers to think through what conflicts they will encounter, and how to explain the decisions to those tasked with executing it. Once policymakers have made their choices, the Security Studies Group would be happy to help develop the chosen strategy for whole of government execution. In the meantime, this document is offered as a guide to the range of options and the problems and opportunities they represent.

## **Option One: Accede to the New Stability As Is**

Accept the current power dynamic and basic territorial status.

Downside: Stabilizing authoritarian regimes that will engage in oppression. Alienating Israel, which has reason to fear that it is going to be destroyed by a stabilized Iran and its proxy groups. Accepting the empowerment of major powers hostile to US interests in a strategically vital region.

Upside: Potentially end decades of instability and war. Radically fewer deaths and disruption within Middle Eastern societies. Economic benefits for nearly all people in the region, as well as in Europe, Asia, and America. Significant opportunity to win concessions from China on trade in return for supporting its role in developing the Belt and Road. Easy to effect diplomatically, since it merely entails accepting what the other major powers want. Opportunity for new grand bargain that will represent a historic legacy for the Trump administration.

Considerations: This path does not necessarily entail the successful rise of China as a global superpower. China has never tried to carry the weight that it is taking on with these programs, and its economy may fragment under that weight. Expensive foreign adventures, especially as they take on security guarantees, may prove to be the best way to retard the growth of Chinese power.

While this option is genuinely humane in that it is the best option for reducing the incidence and severity of war, it will provoke charges that the administration is siding with authoritarian regimes. To mitigate that aspect, it should be paired with highly visible US-led human rights campaigns aimed at protecting the minority groups in these regions.

### Strategies for effecting Option One:

- Immediate diplomatic outreach to China, Turkey, and Russia to propose a US embrace of this outcome.
- Second-tier outreach by those governments to Iran to reassure them of US willingness to accept Iranian regime survival in return for an end to regional destabilization efforts by Iran.
- Military deployments on a limited scale to protect oil assets in Syria, negotiated with the other major powers towards an eventual final US withdrawal as stability allows.
  - Part I of this series suggested that US supply lines should be re-routed through Israel and/or Jordan in order to mitigate the danger of them being used as pressure points by Iran/Iraq/Turkey/China. This is a general strategy that applies to all of the options proposed here.
  - However, in this particular option it may be desirable to allow these nations continued control over US supply lines as it may increase their comfort zone during the period of negotiations. It would still be wise to set up quick-to-activate alternative lines as a contingency plan.
- Begin refugee resettlement within Syria in zones roughly following SSG's "An End Game for Syria," available under separate cover, in order to ensure that the refugees are not placed under the authority of a power that is likely to ethnically cleanse them. Kurdish refugees may need special consideration given Turkish influence in what was originally proposed to be a Kurdish protectorate.
- Economic aid to Syria, conditional on establishment of good treatment of minorities.

## Commentary:

Option One comes in two variations, this hard realist (or “stark”) variation that accepts the interests of major powers in order to rapidly obtain a grand bargain, and a variation that aggressively pursues the interests of minority political and ethnic groups (Option 1A, below). Both of them entail accepting rather than attempting to disrupt the interests of all the major powers, some of which are authoritarian and traditionally hostile. Both variations prioritize the international stability and peace that can be achieved by this sort of bargain. As the page above demonstrates, there are significant goods to be obtained in this way. There are goods not only for the powerful, but perhaps even more for the powerless citizens of disrupted states like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, whose lives have long been in turmoil while the major powers clash by proxy.

In spite of the broadly distributed goods of peace and prosperity, there is a danger that the stark option may be difficult for the United States to pursue. Our civil service bureaucracy has internalized a set of interventionist values that, on their own terms, are nobly intended. There are liberal and neoconservative variations, but the shared idea is that there are universal human longings for liberty and justice that the United States can appeal to in its foreign policy. Such an appeal not only makes the success of our policies more likely, the thinking goes, the appeal also puts us on the most moral path possible in our relationship with the world. It is understandable that these ideals have taken deep root, since foreign policy often entails ugly choices. It is easier to make ugly choices if one feels that the choice will lead to a greater good.

Unfortunately, this nobly intended set of philosophies are based upon a category error, which is a serious philosophical mistake. It misleads us into believing the appeal to universals will resolve particular conflicts. This often is impossible because of different value structures in the particulars, for example:

In some cultures the liberal values end up in conflict with one another. Consider “liberty” and “equality.” American culture expresses these two values in alignment: by equally defending everyone else’s liberty in a system of law, one defends one’s own liberty. Consider a culture that is genuinely tribal, though. Here, defending one’s liberty is chiefly about defending one’s tribe and its interests. The tribe keeping faith with itself allows its members to advance their own interests more than they would if the tribe broke faith with its own. That means that one advances liberty interests *not* by treating all people as equals, but by favoring one’s tribe. It’s very hard to talk people out of that model if it is what they have known their whole lives.

The same is true for genuinely patriarchal societies: equality and justice look to be out of order with each other. Confucian societies are a subset of these, but it is true of all genuine patriarchies. Justice in these societies is supposed to entail rule by a class of older men who are supposed to be exercising a natural fatherly authority for the good of all. ‘Equality’ would mean no longer being guided principally by these fatherly figures, and that would be out of order with these cultures’ basic picture of justice. The universals “Justice” and “Equality” still exist, but in the particular way in which the culture realizes them they are in conflict.<sup>1</sup>

All the same, until this conceptual conflict is sorted out, our civil service may believe it is being asked to do evil by abandoning this error. It is good that it is difficult to persuade them to do evil; they need to be engaged on why this error is in fact a conceptual error.

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<sup>11</sup> Brad Patty, “Fourth Quadrant Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies Group*, 15 February 2018.

## **Option 1A: As Option One, But Conditioned on Significant Positive Steps to Protect Minority Groups**

Move to obtain the benefits of option one, while protecting the interests of smaller US allies.

Downside: This variation will be much harder to negotiate than the stark version of Option One. The stark version accepts what the major powers want without substantial US conditions, and thus would be easy to codify diplomatically. This version requires the deployment of US pressures to obtain the conditions, which might be rejected. It is thus possible that there could be a major power settlement that the US is left out of, meaning that we fail to obtain the easy concessions of the stark Option 1 while also not obtaining the benefits for American allies.

Upside: Even if it fails this option is obviously superior from the perspective of America's Kurdish allies, as well as minority groups like the Uighur. Will bolster American credibility as a friend to its friends, at a time when that credibility is under stress. Will be much easier for America's internal civil servant class to accept and execute faithfully than the stark Option One.

Considerations: One thing to push for is a semi-autonomous region in North and East for Kurds and Sunni that is still under nominal Syrian sovereignty. This could limit the openly-controlled land bridge for Iran between itself and the Levant, although it will not stop Iran's well-established smuggling networks. Especially if coupled with profit sharing for the Kurdish semi-autonomous government of oil shipments from this region, this would go a long way toward repairing strained US/Kurd relations.

It is probably not possible to obtain a similar semi-autonomous zone for the Uighur. There is a risk of seeming unprincipled, however, in pushing for a semi-autonomous zone for the Kurds and not for the Uighur. Policymakers will have to decide between a policy of pursuing what can probably be obtained, versus a principled policy that accepts the consequences of likely US failure to obtain its ends.

### Strategies for effecting Option 1A:

- Similar in most respects to Option One, except that there needs to be an initial planning period before beginning diplomatic outreach.
  - Policymakers must decide on the question of pursuing a principled approach to minority interests, versus a case-by-case approach of pursuing the best obtainable deals.
  - Once that decision is made, planning should follow to decide on particular conditions to ask for in the diplomatic process to ensure benefits to US allies.
  - Planning should also consider which US-led pressures and/or concessions to employ to condition acceptance of our proposed concessions by the major powers.
- This option entails a larger, longer US military presence in eastern Syria to ensure that we have major power standing at the negotiating table.
- Refugee resettlement can proceed early under this option, with the caveat that refugee resettlement is also a tool.
  - The governments of Syria and Turkey are resettling favored refugees in specific areas to try to create conditions on the ground favorable to their practical control of specific areas.
  - In the stark Option One, that is acceptable, which leads to a more rapid refugee resettlement process. In Option 1A, that process has to be controlled to prevent an unfair final disposition.

### Commentary:

The category error discussed in the stark Option One commentary notwithstanding, there are demonstrable practical advantages to being the defender of the rights of the weaker party. It may or may not be more moral to support resistance movements among oppressed minority groups, as one has to balance the disruption of peace and prosperity against the gains in human liberty obtainable by such movements. America may or may not benefit practically from a commitment to values over pragmatism. However, America clearly gains by building strong, alliance-like relationships inside the territory of opponent states.

This realist edge is also why the opposing powers will be deeply hostile to American efforts to defend their internal minority groups. It is not just that a power like China is affronted that anyone would dare to mention their treatment of groups like the Uighur. It is that they fear the leverage that Western powers would gain against them should we develop close, working ties with a group made hostile to their central government by its oppression. Thus, just as American efforts to help such groups are not purely magnanimous, efforts by the authoritarian powers to resist such efforts are motivated by a rational self-interest.

The benefit to adopting the alternative version of Option One, 1A, is that it will be much easier for America's civil service to feel good about doing it. Since they will feel good about doing it, they will be less prone to resist attempts to do it, and more inclined to support it via their best efforts. America thus might gain a practical realist benefit while also reaping the rewards of engaging the idealism of its civil servants.

The hazard is that the other major powers will be intensely and unalterably hostile to these efforts, which will bedevil what would otherwise be a straightforward negotiating process. Even those powers not currently involved in an internal conflict are likely to look with a jaundiced eye on the prospect of licensing Western meddling in their internal affairs.

As a consequence, it may be that the 1A alternative leaves America looking from the outside on an agreement that the other major powers make without us, and against us. In this case, the minority groups gain no more than moral support, while America loses out on all the goods it might have gained in the negotiations. In addition, the goods to be gained by a new stability are lessened because the United States will not be joined in the agreements underlying that stability.

Policymakers must decide whether these risks and hazards are worth running. If this alternative worked, it could harmonize US realists and idealists, while protecting minority rights in authoritarian countries to at least some degree. If it does not work, it could undermine the goods of peace and prosperity to an unacceptably large degree.

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### **Option Three: Attempt to Secure New Partition in Syria to protect Kurds, Sunnis**

Downside: Very likely to fail at this point where the Kurds are concerned.

Upside: The Sunni partition might not that difficult to effect. Regional troops with similar ethnic and sectarian backgrounds might reduce tensions compared to peacekeepers from further abroad.

Considerations: A partition could be formal, but need not be: the Turkish 'partition' in the north is informal in that it allegedly respects Syrian territorial integrity, but actual in that it allows for joint Turkish patrols. A similar system in the south would probably be easy to arrange, with Jordanian or GCC-led patrols.

It is possible to combine this option with one of the others, as it is compatible both with a grand bargain approach (Option 1), as a base for secret insurgencies (Option 2), or with a counterpole approach (Option 4).

#### Strategies for effecting Option Three:

- This is a modified version of the SSG Syria protectorate plan, "An End Game for Syria," available under separate cover.
- Approach the GCC nations and Jordan about providing security forces for a Sunni protectorate.
- Approach the Turkish and Russian governments about the possibility of US forces joining the joint Turkish-led patrols in the Kurdish region, at least on an observer basis.
- US military deployments to secure the oil in Syria can also serve as platforms for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) efforts vs. Iranian-backed Shi'a militias inside Syria. ISR can also be deployed to monitor the potential resurgence of the Islamic State (ISIS).
- This ISR can support kinetic strikes as necessary.
  - ISR can also be shared with Israel in cases in which the United States does not wish to bear responsibility for a strike, especially on Iranian-aligned targets.
  - Sharing of intelligence may mitigate Israeli concerns about Iran's role in Syria, especially in the case that this option is paired with Option 1.

### Commentary:

This option is the one that will be easiest to convince the bureaucracy to undertake, because it best aligns with their existing assumptions about the right way to proceed. It respects the existing territorial claims of the various states, while working to protect the interests of oppressed minorities within those extant states.

Option Three is also the closest thing to a straightforward update to the strategy requested by the administration from SSG on Syria, "An End Game for Syria." Instead of a quartering of Syria into three protectorates and one area directly governed by Assad's regime, emergent circumstances suggest a three-way division. The Turkish government will be unlikely to relinquish the control they have won in the north, which can be acceptable insofar as they agree to work against Iranian proxy militias in that region and to respect the rights of the Kurdish and other minority groups. The Assad regime will end up controlling a larger space than we had estimated two years ago, but that is consistent with having found an alignment with Turkey. The Russians will serve as guarantors of that agreement, reducing the weight on US forces compared with our 2018 plan. Thus, this plan has the advantage of being a relatively simple shift from a plan already in play.

If Option Three is chosen, it will be crucial to set up the supply lines via a southern corridor through Israel and/or Jordan. The Iranian regime's influence within Iraq makes supply lines through Iraq a key pressure point that we should take steps to avoid.

Obtaining Gulf Coordination Council (GCC) support is also a key to the successful execution of Option Three. The split between the Saudi government and the Qatari government is going to require navigation. Both of them have been backing Sunni tribal groups within Iraq and Syria, but not usually the same ones. These will need to be deconflicted to serve as the backbone of "Sons of Iraq"-style militias within Syria, which will also need trainers ideally from the GCC states. Ensuring that the split within the GCC does not lead to factionalism among these militias will be a significant problem requiring American diplomatic or Special Forces oversight, if not both.

There is also a problem with the move by Iran to try to convert traditionally Sunni tribes to their version of Shi'a Islam. The Washington Institute's Philip Smyth reports that Iran has had a worrying degree of success among the Shamar, one of the largest and most powerful of the Sunni tribes. The Shamar are not only a large but a prestigious tribe, with a proud Bedouin history of camel herding across the desert that lies on the Syria/Iraq border. A history of camel herding is the mythic equivalent of a family having its roots in being a cattle-driving cowboy in the American West, as opposed to a shepherd or a merchant. The parallel is close: the second most crucial tribe grouping in Eastern Syria and Western/Central Iraq is the Dulaimi, who were shepherders rather than camel herders. That difference in history remains a point of pride to the Shamar. Meanwhile the Dulaimi have factionalized, and are currently unable to serve as a counterweight to Iran's proxy efforts unless those divisions can be healed.

A strong GCC-backed effort in the south may begin to work to undo Iranian efforts at proselytization. It is unlikely that recent conversions are deeply-felt as much as a political need to align with Iran against the Islamic State (ISIS) and other threats. If the balance of power changes, it may be easy to undo these recent conversions.

Option Three is compatible with several of the other options, especially Option One and 1A.

#### **Option Four: Set up an “Arab NATO” Counterpole to the Chinese/Iran/Turkey/Russian axis**

Downside: Not very likely to succeed vs. Chinese interests given the extent of Chinese investments among the members of an ‘Arab NATO’ system. More likely to create effective partners for the Chinese in securing their oil supplies, which will bolster rather than retard Chinese growth as a global power. Would potentially require a second Trump term to gain staying power to convince Arab states to join

Upside: Somewhat likely to succeed partially insofar as it sets up a deterrent force vs. Iran. Equally likely to reduce US need for expensive force commitments in the Middle East.

Considerations: This differs from option 1 chiefly in the absence of a grand bargain between the factions. Increasing military capabilities in the absence of such a bargain also increases the probability of a future war between the factions for emergent reasons.

#### Strategies for effecting Option Four:

- Convene summit aimed at laying the groundwork for the announcement of such an organization. Likely members include Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Egypt.
- Be prepared to execute increased military training exercises on combined joint operations (“combined” meaning international, and “joint” meaning interagency).
- Standardize platforms among the new counterpole to the greatest possible degree, e.g., rifles should share ammunition; planes should share parts.
  - Replace Soviet/Russian equipment remaining in allied stockpiles as possible.
  - Encourage use of US or NATO standard equipment rather than Chinese or Russian, even if it is necessary to sell at a loss. Keeping the new alliance tied to NATO supply chains will help mitigate the danger that they will end up serving others’ ends.
- Explore the possibility of joint exercises including Israel, with an eye toward eventual Israeli inclusion in the alliance.
- Effect economic development plans with the member nations to encourage them to remain closely tied to US interests. (See SSG’s “A New Way Forward in the Middle East: Nine Stratagems” for suggestions.)

## Commentary:

Option Four has a long history, but that history is troubled. Divisions between the republican and monarchist governments have proven difficult to bridge, and issues of cooperation with or resistance to Israel or Iran have both bedeviled a potential alliance. American conservative commentators have often also pointed to the despotic nature of some of our Arab allies, and suggested that it might not be wise to create a strong alliance among them even if we could do so.

In the current moment, the problem posed by relations with Israel is at a historic low ebb. Israel has been enjoying much improved relationships with Arab states, both due to their own outreach efforts and due to the realization by the Arab states of the benefits of better relations with a high-tech regional economy. The effect of radical Islamist movements such as the Islamic State (ISIS) on the stability of Arab states has also inclined them to work with the Israelis against a common enemy. Likewise, the rise of Iran as a destabilizing and aggressive regional power has driven Sunni states, especially Saudi Arabia, into a newly friendly posture towards the Israeli nation.

At the same time, Iran poses a larger problem than ever. The main point of Option Four is to create a counterweight to Iran's power, especially as it draws closer to China and Russia (and even Turkey, which has joined Iran in supporting Qatar against the Saudi blockade). But it will be difficult to create an alliance among the Arab states that omits Iraq and Syria, both of whom are much more closely aligned with Iran than previously. Qatar also has shifted from a middleman between the Saudi and Iranian governments into a reliable ally – though not a proxy – for Iran. This divides the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the most obvious kernel from which an effective military alliance might sprout.

Philosophically, the creation of international organizations to tackle common problems is very compatible with the American civil service's worldview. The chief objection from our civil service will come from concerns about the authoritarian nature of some of the leading states for such an alliance. Egypt's al-Sisi took necessary steps to suppress an attempt to throw out Egypt's constitution, but the civil service tends to be troubled by the fact that the Morsi government that tried to do so was elected, and that Sisi's steps were effectively a military coup. Egypt like Saudi Arabia is attempting internal reforms, but there remain troubling internal acts of political suppression. The Gulf states, especially, have human rights issues that violate the norms of America's civil servant class. Qatar's approach to contract labor approaches slavery, and foreign workers are horribly treated throughout the region, as are LGBT+ citizens and women.

It may be possible to overcome those concerns to some degree by emphasizing the degree to which this organization can be used as a lever on issues of rights and reform. However, the use of the alliance as a lever in this way will further complicate an already-difficult process. For Option Four to succeed, it will be necessary to retain focus on crafting an effective military alliance toward restraining Iran, putting the moral concerns of our bureaucracy on something of a back-burner. Nevertheless, some efforts at effecting progress on these issues will ease the civil service's concerns and make them more supportive of the effort.

Option Four is quite compatible with Option Three, and potentially compatible with Option Two. It may be compatible with Option One and 1A as a method of securing US interests among the grand bargain. It is certainly compatible with Option Five as a means of contesting the other major powers.

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