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Regime Change in Syria: Pick Your Poison

by Doug Bandow

DONALD TRUMP CAMPAIGNED on an “America First” foreign policy. But he hasn’t been immune to the vapors of the Swamp. Not even three months after his inauguration, administration officials were praising NATO; affirming commitments to Japan and South Korea; discussing troop surges for Afghanistan; talking about permanently stationing forces in Iraq, increasing aid for Saudi Arabia’s war against Yemen, and effecting regime change in Syria. It was as if Hillary Clinton occupied the President’s body.

Trump’s flip-flop on Syria was particularly shocking. Before the dawn of the Neoconservative Age no sane American would have suggested intervening in the horror that this ancient land has become.

Modern Syria was created during World War I. Under the heavy influence of France, it had little real geopolitical significance. During the Cold War Damascus was allied with the Soviet Union but was no more successful than other Arab states in fighting Israel. After Damascus was defeated in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the Hafez al-Assad

regime concentrated on oppressing the Syrian people and meddling in next-door Lebanon. None of this was of any practical concern to Americans.

When the Arab Spring came to Syria in 2011, the government of Bashar al-Assad responded brutally, opposition turned violent, and the country fractured into multiple bloody battlefields. The Obama administration insisted on Assad’s ouster, discouraging insurgents from seeking a political solution yet offering little practical aid to them, which in turn gave hope to Assad. Researchers Ryan O’Farrell and Cody Roche observed that “hard-line Islamist groups have steadily become more prominent, out-competing, marginalizing and on several occasions, violently displacing the defector-centric nationalist groups that were the nucleus of the initial militarization of the rebellion.”

The Syrian conflict quickly turned into a proxy war: The U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf states pushed for Assad’s ouster, while Iran (including Afghan and Iraqi militias under Tehran’s command), Lebanon’s Hezbollah,

and Russia supported the Damascus government. Turks and Saudis were pleased to work with the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front), which was the local Al Qaeda affiliate; meanwhile, Washington actively battled ISIS while tolerating al-Nusra. True to form, Ankara viewed Kurdish militias (allied with Washington) as the most dangerous faction and focused its malign military attention on them.

Syria became a mix of madhouse and charnel house. Hundreds of thousands were killed. Millions were forced to flee. The humanitarian consequences were almost indescribable. There was not the slightest chance that Washington could bring order to the chaos, but President Barack Obama was constantly besieged by ivory-tower warriors who demanded that he *do something*.

The same people are now at work on President Trump.

The most powerful actor in the Syrian conflict is the Assad government. Back in 2011, spring was in the air, and the overthrow of Assad looked like a good idea. Over six years of carnage, scores, even hundreds, of different fighting forces opposed to the regime developed and dissolved. Yet at present, Assad is in the ascendancy, having benefited from strong Russian support. However, Damascus shares command with its many allies and has little hope of reestablishing control over the entire country. Assad is a garden-variety dictator, presiding over a secular regime dominated by Alawites; Alawi Islam is an offshoot of Shia Islam. Assad himself represents no particular Islamic ideology, and thus threatens few outside of Syria's borders.

A few factions within the insurgency have received significant international attention, but overall it is a hodgepodge of groups unified only by their opposition to Assad. If the Assad regime totters, one could imagine more consolidation as the insurgents prepare for the final struggle. But contrary to the assumption of many advocates of U.S. military intervention, Assad's overthrow would not be the end of the Syrian conflict. Instead, it would inaugurate another round of combat to determine who takes over whatever remains of the Syrian state. And as has been the case with all modern revolutions, the winners would not likely be Western-oriented liberals determined to build the good society.

The Trump administration has no good reason to step into such an imbroglio.

THE MOST PROMINENT GROUP OPPOSING ASSAD is the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (variously known as Daesh, ISIL, ISIS, and IS). The group emerged in 2006 as an outgrowth of Al Qaeda in Iraq, following the destabilization brought about by the U.S.-led invasion and establishment of

sectarian "democracy." The Syrian civil war opened up new vistas, and ISI morphed into ISIL in 2013. Unification efforts between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra—still affiliated with Al Qaeda at the time—failed, and in 2014 Al Qaeda cut ties with ISIL.

The Islamic State wreaked havoc in Iraq as well as Syria. The violent Sunni-fundamentalist movement faced an unpopular, sectarian, and incompetent government in Baghdad and ineffective "moderate" insurgent groups in Syria. For a time Turkey and other Sunni states tolerated if not aided the Islamic State in its fight with the Damascus government. Given the group's brutality against anyone who does not share its views—Christians, Yazidis, Shi'ites, dissident Sunnis—the consequences of an ISIL victory in Syria would be horrific.

Although ISIL has ostentatiously murdered Americans and other foreigners who have fallen into its hands, it has focused its efforts largely on establishing a "Caliphate" rather than on committing acts of terrorism. The movement has attracted thousands of adherents from around the world, including in Europe, but the Islamic State never stood much chance of creating the earthly kingdom that it desired. It was at odds with virtually every nation in the Middle East, which collectively had a million men under arms. Apart from U.S. intervention against the Islamic State, those countries eventually would have been forced to act: If one thing binds together Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Jordan's Hashemite dynasty, Iraq's sectarian regime, and the Gulf's oil-rich rulers, it is the instinct for self-preservation.

At its peak ISIL may have had upwards of 30,000 armed fighters. Last August the Pentagon figured that the Islamic State was down to between 15,000 and 20,000 fighters; perhaps as many as 45,000 had fallen over the preceding two years. The group was losing ground in both Iraq and Syria, though it was still able to launch occasional offensives. Given its inability to halt the West's military advance, it has laid greater emphasis on perpetrating acts of terror, though most IS attacks have come from residents "inspired," rather than deployed, by the group. The Islamic State is likely to look more and more like Al Qaeda—fragmented, dispersed—as it loses territory; the recapture of Raqqa, the Caliphate's *de facto* capital, looms.

Jabhat al-Nusra also targeted the Assad regime. It received assistance from the Gulf states, while Washington tolerated cooperation between it and supposedly "moderate" groups. However, its transnational objectives, which were criticized by Western governments, impeded recruitment efforts. Last summer, al-Nusra formally broke with

Al Qaeda and renamed itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS, the Front for the Conquest of the Levant). Since then it has expanded by absorbing other independent jihadist elements.

Two years ago, several of these factious groups, including al-Nusra, ended up under the umbrella of Jaish al-Fateh (the Army of Conquest) at the instigation of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, in order to oppose Assad. Infighting over the proper application of *sharia* plagued the coalition.

Then in January of this year, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, the Levant Liberation Committee), was formed by the merger of JFS and other radical factions such as the Nour al-Din al-Zenki movement, another jihadist group that was once backed by the United States. HTS, now led by the former commander in chief of JFS, is thought to have around 31,000 men under arms. (Some estimates are lower.) As many as 18,000 of HTS's fighters are from JFS. Western-oriented insurgents, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA), contend that HTS's objective is similar to that of the Islamic State: the formation of a caliphate or emirate. Washington has formally designated HTS a terrorist organization.

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's uncompromising commitment to fight the Assad regime won it credibility in the region, but it is not strong enough to triumph on its own. Were HTS to achieve its goal of forming a supranational caliphate, its dominion would look something like that of the Islamic State, though perhaps not quite so ostentatiously brutal: repressive and Islamist, and hoping at least to inspire if not orchestrate violence elsewhere against "apostates" and other presumed enemies of Islam.

A bit less extreme is Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (AS, Islamic Movement of the Free People of the Levant), which was formed in 2011 and over time absorbed other groups, such as the Islamic Front. AS was supported by Turkey and the Gulf states, benefited from defections from JFS, and worked with the U.S.-backed FSA. Washington and Moscow accepted it as a participant in peace negotiations. AS is thought to have between 18,000 and 20,000 fighters, even after losing some personnel to the more radical HTS. In contrast to the transnationalism of al-Nusra and its successors, AS has confined its attention to Syria. It has also placed less emphasis on jihadist extremism, causing Washington not to apply the terrorism designation.

Still, AS is a Salafist group that supports the creation of a Sunni state operating under *sharia*. Exactly what that would look like is unclear, as AS has neither exhibited the Islamic State's extraordinary barbarity nor foreclosed the idea of democratic rule, stating its support for "political participation" by the Syrian people. It has rejected merger proposals by HTS, though AS may be equally concerned about main-

taining its independence as it is about maintaining a more moderate approach. HTS, reports the Middle East Institute's Charles Lister, has "been relentless, and patient, in pursuing" the objective of merging "all armed Syrian opposition groups under its broad transnational Islamic umbrella." By itself, AS obviously lacks the strength to take control of Syria. Ideologically, its objective appears to be something akin to the culture of Saudi Arabia: rigid Islamic rule without lawless violence. An agreement on such an objective would be a good starting point for a "compromise" if HTS and AS were to form a winning coalition.

AT THE START, WASHINGTON LAID ITS HOPES on Syria's so-called moderates—liberal, humane, and pro-Western fighters who would institute the democratic approach to governance that Assad rejected and eschew the violently Islamist tactics of ISIS. It was never clear how viable this option was.

At the beginning of the Arab Spring in Syria, defectors from the Assad government formed the Free Syrian Army, which received the bulk of Western support. Washington's attempts to vet the fighters it was arming were slow and cumbersome. The FSA and like-minded groups also suffered organizational problems and quickly fragmented. Within months jihadists took over the leadership of the opposition. Many "moderate" factions and fighters defected to Islamist groups, taking with them their U.S.-supplied weapons.

The FSA no longer exists as an independent, cohesive fighting force. These days its name is often used as a brand for anti-Assad forces with limited ties to one another. While it was widely presumed that an FSA victory would deliver a democratic Syria, the defection of supposed moderates to Islamist forces suggests that the FSA's fighters may have been less liberal than advertised. The number of fighters is small and hard to estimate. If Assad falls, the FSA would have little influence in a new government.

The largest nonradical combat organization in the Syrian quagmire is made up of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a mix of Kurds and Arabs. They number around 80,000, give or take. Primarily active in Syria's north and northeast, the SDF's biggest component is the YPG (the People's Protection Units), a Kurdish militia with about 36,000 men. Indeed, the SDF was originally viewed as a subsidiary of the YPG, but over time the role of Arab forces within the SDF has swelled. Also active in the SDF are the Women's Protection Units, another largely Kurdish force, though it accepts Arab women as well. It deploys about 24,000 fighters. Finally, the SDF includes roughly 20,000 members of independent Arab, Assyrian (Christian), and

Turkmen militias. Washington has cleared about 13,000 of them to receive training and weapons. ❁

Notably, the SDF is not, strictly speaking, an insurgent force. Despite occasional clashes with government soldiers, the SDF and Assad military have for the most part left each other alone, creating an informal or tacit alliance. The SDF, which hopes to expand its numbers beyond 100,000 this year, is focused on opposing the Islamic State, an aim for which it won backing from both Washington and Moscow.

Ultimately, the Syrian people alone should settle their future.

Turkey's Erdoğan government was not nearly as welcoming in support of the SDF. Ankara claims the SDF—or more accurately, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)—is allied with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has long battled for autonomy from Turkey's central government. President Erdoğan initially tolerated ISIS's activity and, from late 2014 into 2015, refused to intervene in the lengthy battle between Islamic State forces and the YPG in the northern Syrian city of Kobani. Last year, the Turkish government implausibly claimed that the YPG staged a terrorist attack in Ankara. Then-Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu declared, "We cannot excuse any NATO ally, including the U.S., of having links with a terrorist organization that strikes us in the heart of Turkey."

Even after promising to battle the Islamic State, Ankara has devoted most of its energy to attacking the SDF; Erdoğan is determined to prevent the creation of an area of contiguous Kurdish control along the Turkish border. Ankara also backs some Turkish insurgents, principally Turkmen, in Syria. Earlier this year, Washington inserted U.S. troops between contending units of Turkmen and SDF forces in an attempt to halt fighting among those who are supposedly united in opposition to ISIS.

Despite the Trump administration's affinity for Sultan-wannabe Erdoğan, an Islamic nationalist who has dismantled Turkey's secular democracy, the Pentagon maintains its preference for the SDF to lead the liberation of Raqqa. Some analysts suspect that President Trump is accepting Erdoğan's pursuit of dictatorial powers as a payoff to win Turkish acquiescence in the SDF's role in fighting against the Islamic State.

If ISIS and other jihadist forces were defeated, what would the SDF do *vis-à-vis* Damascus? The answer would

likely depend on whether the Assad government is willing to accept something akin to self-rule in Kurdish areas. If it is, then the Kurdish components, at least, of the SDF would likely maintain *de facto* neutrality. That would be the most sensible policy for Assad, given the current balance of power. Indeed, Russia would be very unlikely to help the Syrian regime take on the Kurdish forces, which had been backed by Moscow. However, predicting Assad's behavior remains an iffy business.

WHAT IF BASHAR AL-ASSAD IS SWEEPED AWAY? Although it is the strongest nongovernment formation, the SDF could not form a stable national government on its own, especially given its internal divisions. The SDF certainly would oppose the sort of Islamist rule advocated by ISIS; Kurdish forces in particular have consistently resisted the urge to engage in religious persecution. However, while the SDF has the word *democratic* in its name, the Kurds are not a politically liberal people; Kurdistan, the one self-governing Kurdish territory, is not a multicultural democracy.

Syria's Kurds would at least want what the Iraqi Kurds have achieved and the Turkish Kurds desire: autonomy. That might be the best approach for the entire country in a post-Assad Syria. However, Ankara might be unwilling to accept any settlement in which the Kurds enjoyed substantial independence from Damascus. Yet Turkey could not easily impose her will on Kurdish militiamen who are both numerous and well-armed.

Syria is an extraordinary tragedy. But this is neither the first time nor the last time a terrible war has resulted in the slaughter and displacement of a large number of people and the destruction of a country. Absent outside intervention, Assad probably would not have been able to defeat his many adversaries. Then again, radical forces would just as likely have absorbed or defeated any "moderates" among the insurgents following Assad's ouster.

Unless the United States wants to fight an entirely new war, spilling more blood and treasure on the other side of the world, we should stay out of the Syrian conflict. The very complexity of the fight should remind us of our limitations. Ultimately, the Syrian people alone should settle their future.

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