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Bipartisan wishful thinking on Syria

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Despite bitter partisan controversies on foreign policy issues such as the Iran nuclear agreement and the normalization of relations with Cuba, there is one issue where liberals and conservatives share a common delusion. That issue is policy toward Syria. The Obama administration persists in wanting to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and at the same time crush the ISIS insurgents. Washington continues to flirt with establishing a no-fly zone in northern Syria to protect supposedly moderate rebels, and it is moving forward with its much-mocked scheme to train a moderate insurgent force that would oppose both Assad and ISIS. The latter plan is hopelessly behind schedule and has thus far produced only a handful of graduates from the training program.

Conservatives are no more realistic than the Obama foreign policy team. Presidential candidates and conservative pundits alike routinely talk of escalating the fight against ISIS, but then, in almost the same breath, stress the need to defeat Assad and his principal ally, Iran. I had the “pleasure” of witnessing such illogic in two major broadcasts within the past week. The first occurred in a September 5 segment on CNBC, in which Larry Kudlow, a prominent economist and possible candidate for the U.S. Senate, raged against the Obama administration’s alleged unwillingness to conduct a concerted campaign against the twin evils of ISIS and Iran. On Labor Day, the Fox News program “The Five” featured a discussion in which nearly all of the participants adopted arguments that echoed Kudlow’s rant.

What is striking about all of these episodes—and many others like them — is that the advocates of decisive, simultaneous U.S. action against both ISIS and the Assad-Iran alliance are in denial that those two goals are hopelessly contradictory. Like it or not, the principal forces arrayed against ISIS are Assad’s “coalition of religious minorities” in Syria together with Iran and its Shiite allies in Iraq. The Syrian Kurds have their own agenda, seeking to create a de facto independent Kurdish state in northeastern Syria akin to the self-governing Kurdish region next door in Iraq.

Secular Syrians committed to a united, democratic Syria are few in number and badly factionalized to boot. U.S. officials need to stop basing policy on the expectation that a mythical moderate Syrian insurgency will emerge. The reality is that there is no credible moderate alternative to Assad and ISIS. If Washington moves to oppose one side in that bipolar struggle, it automatically strengthens the other.

Of course, the option always exists to drastically lower the U.S. profile in the Middle East and let the contending forces, which reflect a broad Sunni-Shiite regional struggle for power, fight it out. But hawks of whatever ideological stripe are unwilling to adopt that strategy. Therefore, their only option is to choose their poison. Which outcome do they find less unpalatable: an ISIS victory and the triumph of Sunni extremism, or an Assad victory and the expansion of Iranian influence? As much as they might wish to avoid that choice, the notion of a defeat of both Assad and ISIS is nothing more than wishful thinking. And that is never a good basis for foreign policy.

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