



Yes, Bashar Assad's success will fuel ISIS

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I disagree with professor Max Abrahms and John Glaser of the Cato Institute when they argue that Syrian leader Bashar Assad did not and will not empower the Islamic State.

But they are right about one thing: their sympathy for realism. As they put it, "The realist paradigm reminds us that the U.S. need not share the same ideology of a nasty international actor to countenance working with him against a mutual foe ... Realism also emphasizes the dangers of militarily picking foreign governments around the world."

I just don't believe working with Assad represents realism in action. Instead, I believe that perceiving Assad to be a realist partner is to obsess on short-term hopes at the expense of the long term.

First off, I do not share the authors' assessment that reduced American support for more moderate Syrian rebel groups has helped Assad fight ISIS. The authors suggest that ISIS "imploded right after external support for the 'moderate' rebels dried up. The weakening of the rebels was a major setback for Islamic State because Assad could finally focus his firepower on the group. Fewer weapon shipments into the theater, moreover, meant fewer arms fell into the hands of Salafi jihadists."

The authors are confused.

ISIS' territorial "implosion" was not a consequence of decreasing external support for moderate rebels and Assad's redirection of firepower against ISIS, but rather the result of escalated U.S. military pressure against ISIS. Put simply, the terrorist group lost its strength in being corralled into Raqqa by a mix of U.S., allied and Kurdish militia forces. Losing Raqqa and compressed from the Iraqi side of the border, ISIS has been forced to hide in a narrow element of border towns north of the Euphrates river valley.

As Aymenn al-Tamimi (who the authors reference in their article) put it to me, "Much of the territory [Assad's] regime swept into in the east was sparsely populated desert compared to the long and grinding urban battles fought in Mosul and Raqqa. Some weapons supplied to the rebels did end up in Islamic State hands, but it's overstated in [the Abrahms/Glaser] piece."

Another problematic claim from the authors is their assumption that ISIS' "demise was inversely related to Assad's power. Islamic State's fortunes decreased as his influence in the country increased."

Again, however, Assad's empowerment has had very little to do with ISIS defeats. Targeting data on Russian and Assad air force strikes shows that ISIS has been a distinctly secondary target in the eyes of the regime. Instead, regime action focuses on the last major remaining rebel strongholds in Idlib province in western Syria.

Moreover, as Tamimi noted to me in regards to Assad's eastern push against ISIS, "there were other considerations behind [Assad's increasing focus on ISIS] than merely 'fighting terrorism' ... reclaiming key resources and reopening trade routes to ensure the regime had means to restart its own economy, & blocking U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces from controlling those assets."

As I've noted, Assad, Russia and Iran are determined to prevent the U.S. from securing influence for Sunni and Kurdish interests in east and northern Syria. This is why the Assad-axis continues to threaten U.S. forces in Syria on a consistent basis: they want the U.S. gone much more than they want ISIS defeated.

Yet the oddest element of Abrahms and Glaser's thesis is its preaching of the virtues of academic literature and thus introspective analysis alongside its simplistic fealty to Assad's binary narrative for the Syrian Civil War. As the authors conclude, "Although the Islamic State's caliphate is dead, Assad's war on terrorists in Syria is very much alive."

As the rubble of Aleppo attests, this contention only true if you include Syria's Sunni population as one and the same as the "terrorists."

This hard brutality explains why the authors believe that Assad's success can be celebrated: they believe it won't empower ISIS. As Abrahms and Glaser put it, for ISIS, "the 'opportunity model' of terrorism was always a better fit than the 'grievance model.' After all, this is a group that set up shop in the desert, far away from the Syrian military; preyed on soft targets like the Yazidis who never oppressed the Sunni population; and planted affiliates in countries known not for their anti-Sunni government, but the lack of a functioning one."

This is an extraordinary reimagining of history.

The authors forget, for example, that ISIS found its original empowerment not in the Syrian desert, but in the disaffection of Iraq Sunni men infuriated by the governing abuses of Nouri al-Maliki's former Iraqi government. They forget that ISIS ideology in 2012 and 2013 was centered around Sunni "liberation" against perceived Shia oppression — physically rendered by prison breaks and attacks on Maliki's government.

They forget that Maliki's aggressive crackdown lit the fire of ISIS empowerment and enabled ISIS, alongside the chaos of the ongoing Syrian Civil War, to metastasize across the Iraq-Syria border regions.

That history is the key here, because it speaks to what Assad's unchallenged empowerment is likely to mean for Syria's future.

Based on Assad's penchant for untrammelled brutality, and his subjugation to Shiite-sectarian Iran's imperial interests in the Sunni tribal heartlands of eastern Syria, I believe his regime will take actions that lay the ingredients for ISIS' rebirth. This is not to say we should overthrow Assad, but in encouraging his concessions, the U.S. must act to fray the borders of the dictator's power.