



## A Peace Plan for Syria III

### Agreed Zones of Control, Decentralization, and International Administration

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This Perspective is the third in a series in which the authors argue for practical steps aimed at reducing the fighting in Syria to save lives, reduce refugee flows, combat terrorism and radicalization, and provide more time for a national transition process. The first Perspective argued for establishing safe zones paired with external guarantors as a ceasefire implementation mechanism; the second proposed decentralization as the most viable model for future governance in Syria.

As the international community continues to search for ways to resolve Syria's civil war, this Perspective argues that recent developments in Syria and the region—including the cessation of hostilities that was sponsored by Russia, Iran, and Turkey—reinforce the prospects for a national ceasefire based upon agreed zones of control backed by external powers, and it proposes a plan for the international administration of Raqqqa province. After nearly six years of humanitarian catastrophe and geopolitical upheaval from Syria, the prospects for the removal of the Assad regime and

a near-term transition to a “moderate opposition” are poorer than ever. But there is a chance for the new administration in Washington to make real progress on de-escalating the conflict and contributing to stability in Syria if it focuses on a realistic but achievable end-state: a decentralized Syria based on agreed zones of control recognized and supported by outside partners.

### Zones of Control, Decentralization, and International Administration

In two previous Perspectives, we have offered proposals for a realistic way forward in Syria based on five core elements: deferring a comprehensive political transition and the question of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's fate until prospects for agreement are more propitious; freezing the conflict in place more or less along existing battle lines; radical decentralization of Syrian governance and policing; security guarantees by outside powers who would oversee ceasefire implementation in agreed regional zones; and the

commencement of negotiations among all relevant local and international actors for eventual political reform in Syria.<sup>1</sup>

The logic behind these proposals is that, however desirable, the stated policy of the United States and its partners—supporting anti-regime opposition groups with a view to forcing Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers to accept Assad’s replacement or power-sharing with a “moderate” Syrian government—was not working and had almost no chance to work. An escalation of already considerable military support to the anti-Assad opposition would only be met by counterescalation, with little effect on the ground or on peace negotiations, while direct U.S. military action not only risked a slippery slope toward a costly intervention and confrontation with Russia but also had little chance of ending the war, producing stability in Syria, or empowering “moderate” governance. Under these circumstances, after nearly six years of war, humanitarian catastrophe, extremist radicalization, and the growing destabilization of Syria’s neighbors, even a highly imperfect political settlement that ended the civil war along the lines we have proposed still seems far preferable to the perpetuation of the conflict with all its attendant consequences. As we argued in our first Perspective, “almost any peace would be better than this war.”<sup>2</sup>

Since the publication of that paper just over a year ago, the situation on the ground in Syria has changed considerably. But the basic principles we put forward remain valid—if anything, they have become more feasible and more acceptable to relevant actors than when first proposed. Building on our previous work, this Perspective updates our proposals for de-escalating the civil war and stabilizing Syria. We assess developments in Syria and the region over the past year, explain how those developments reinforce the prospects for agreed zones of control backed by external powers,

and propose a particular solution for the particularly challenging issue of how to govern territory taken from the Islamic State—a plan for an interim international administration of Raqqqa province. The prospects for a comprehensive political transition in Syria remain poor, but there is a chance for the new administration in Washington to make real progress if it focuses on a realistic but achievable end state: a decentralized Syria based on agreed regional zones recognized and supported by outside partners.

### **The Impact of Recent Developments**

The situation on the ground and the role of outside actors in Syria have changed significantly in recent months. Perhaps the most important development has been the Assad regime’s consolidation of power and acquisition of additional territory, notably the December 2016 capture of eastern Aleppo. The second largest city in Syria, and an opposition stronghold since rebels took control of part of the city in 2011, Aleppo was of huge symbolic and practical importance.<sup>3</sup> The loss of Aleppo not only deprives the opposition of a major population center and a potential “capital” but also makes it impossible to maintain the supply lines that were the lifeline of many of its forces.

Aleppo’s fall thus effectively ends any realistic threat the opposition posed to Assad’s grip on power and consolidates the regime’s control over most of western Syria, with the exception of much of Idlib province, the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta, and some isolated pockets elsewhere. Idlib is now dominated by the al Qaeda–linked Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS, previously the al-Nusra Front) while more-moderate groups maintain strongholds in the south near Daraa and along the Jordanian border. The regime’s military advances on the ground have been bolstered not just by massive Russian airpower (which played a major role in the con-

quest of Aleppo) but also by manpower supplements—mostly Shia fighters from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. The takeover of Aleppo came at an extraordinarily high humanitarian cost and demonstrated the brutality of the regime and its sponsors, but it also resolved—however tragically—one of the most important obstacles to any conceivable end to the conflict.

There were also important developments on the ground in northern Syria. With significant support from the United States and other powers, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) consolidated their control of large amounts of territory along the Turkish border, including the cantons of Kobane in the northeast and Afrin in the northwest. As the primary partner on the ground in the fight against the Islamic State (IS), and with some of the most unified and effective fighting forces on the ground in the country, the Syrian Kurds have won a degree of political autonomy unlikely to be reversed anytime soon by the regime or neighboring Turkey, which—with some justification—considers the YPG an arm of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Indeed, in August 2016, Turkey intervened directly in Syria—not against the Assad regime but to prevent the unification of the two Kurdish-controlled zones. In Operation Euphrates Shield, hundreds of Turkish ground troops, backed by Turkish airpower and working together with Turkish-trained Sunni opposition groups, took possession of territory north of Aleppo stretching from Jarabulus on the Euphrates River to Azaz, some 50 miles to the west (and extending as far as 20 miles to the south to Manbij). The intervening Turkish forces fought not only IS but also YPG units, which Turkey sought to push back to positions east of the Euphrates. The Turkish intervention prevented the unification of the Kurdish cantons, but it also diverted Sunni Syrian fighters away from

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the conflict with the Assad regime and toward the newly emerging Turkish priorities of the Kurds and IS.

In the eastern and southern parts of the country, the international coalition has made good progress in its campaign against IS in recent months. Even as efforts to end the conflict between the regime and the opposition stalled, the coalition—led on the ground by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a combination of Kurdish and Syrian Arab forces dominated by the YPG—has succeeded in taking back additional territory and advancing toward the self-declared IS “capital” of Raqqa. Raqqa's supply routes are being cut off in preparation for an expected assault by SDF forces sometime in early 2017. The fall of Raqqa would leave eastern Deir Ezzor as the only major urban center left in Syria largely under Islamic State control. (The regime continues to control the contested western half.) But it would also open up major questions about who would hold the territory once liberated, an issue we explore below.

There have also been significant developments on the diplomatic front. Throughout the autumn of 2016, the United States worked extensively with Russia to try to conclude a national ceasefire between the regime and opposition that would provide for humanitarian aid to civilians; ground the Syrian air force; and allow for continued military strikes against such extremist groups

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as JFS and IS, to be coordinated by a Joint Implementation Center staffed by Russian and U.S. officers and officials. An agreement along these lines was reached in September 2016, but quickly fell apart after the United States accidentally killed up to 62 Syrian regime troops (the number is disputed) in a misdirected bombing raid, following which either the regime or Russia (also a matter of dispute) bombed an aid convoy trying to reach besieged citizens in eastern Aleppo.<sup>4</sup> Each side accused the other of bad faith, and the ceasefire—like so many previous attempts—collapsed, leaving the Obama administration to announce that it would no longer seek to work with Moscow to put a new one in place.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of 2016, with the Obama administration on the way out, the United States found itself pushed to the sidelines in Syria diplomacy. Russia, in coordination with Turkey and Iran, is increasingly taking the initiative, and the opposition's regional sponsors are increasingly dealing with Moscow. In December 2016, Russia, Turkey, and Iran announced their own ceasefire agreement—very similar in substance to what the United States and Russia had been trying to negotiate. In this version, the regime and a number of major opposition groups (including, Russia claimed, the extremist group Ahrar al-Sham, which cooperates closely with JFS) would cease military operations against each other, and all sides could continue to target extremist groups such as IS and JFS.<sup>6</sup> The proposed ceasefire and implementation mechanisms were further discussed in Astana, Kazakhstan—where the same external powers, the Assad

regime, and members of the Syrian opposition met in January 2017.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the ultimate fate of this effort, what was striking about this diplomacy was that the United States was not involved in its negotiation and that Turkey was now working closely with two of what were previously its biggest opponents in Syria.

### **Why Prospects for De-Escalation Have Improved**

These developments have important implications for the future of the conflict, and while none is without cost or complication—there are never easy answers in Syria—together, they suggest improving prospects for de-escalating the war and decentralizing the country.

First, it is now clear that there is now no near-term prospect for Assad's removal, either via negotiations or military force. To be sure, the regime will continue to face resistance in pockets of the West, and it has not been able to fully compensate for the serious manpower shortages that increase its dependence upon external support. But despite these weaknesses, it is now clearer than ever that even the provision of more advanced weaponry to the opposition (including the anti-air assets authorized by Congress in December 2016) will not impose the costs on the regime and its sponsors that would be necessary to force it to give up or share power. For years, proponents of military assistance to the opposition have overstated the ability of this approach to force Assad to accept a political transition (that for him and many of his supporters was seen as a threat not just to their rule, but to their lives and to the place of non-Sunni Arab communities in Syria) and now those prospects are even dimmer. Barring a complete reversal of the U.S. approach toward large-scale military involvement, military and political confrontation with Russia, and willingness to provide more support to Islamist opposition groups—all of which seem unlikely in a Trump administration—it is now

virtually certain, and widely accepted, that Assad will remain in power for the foreseeable future. While the indefinite rule of a brutal dictator who has caused so much damage is distasteful and will doubtless lead some in the opposition to maintain armed resistance, the clarity about his near-term survival removes one of the biggest obstacles to any negotiated settlement, which was the resolution of his political fate.

Second, prospects for a sustainable national ceasefire have improved because the main objectives of the regime and its sponsors have now largely been satisfied. Assad would like to take back the entire country and may try to win support from Russia and Iran for doing so. Assad's own ambitions and pressure from his inner circle should not be underestimated in this regard. His most vital goals, however, have been to maintain power and control the main economic and population centers along Syria's "western spine," which, with the capture of Aleppo and other remaining opposition pockets, are close to being met. And realistically, without massive amounts of additional support from abroad—which are unlikely to be forthcoming—the regime will be fully occupied trying to put down pockets of resistance outside Damascus and Homs and containing extremists in Idlib province. This means the regime does not have the manpower or resources to seriously challenge Kurds or Turks in the north, IS in the east, or the opposition stronghold in the south. The regime's need to retreat from the central Syrian city of Palmyra during its final assault on Aleppo, which the regime had taken from IS in 2015, was a telling example of the difficulties it faces in holding all the territory it seeks to control.

Even more importantly, the primary objectives of the regime's sponsors have also been largely achieved. Russia's main goals in Syria have been to prevent regime change (which President Vladi-

mir Putin seems to believe could ultimately be a threat to Russia itself), demonstrate Russian military and political power, and prevent Sunni extremists (also seen as a threat to Russia) from coming to power in an important regional state. All of those aims can be considered achieved without Russia needing to take on the costly and risky task of assisting the Assad regime in efforts to take back the whole country. Iran's main goals—preserving a land bridge to its Lebanese proxy Hizbollah and preventing Sunni-majority rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar from gaining influence in Syria—can also be considered satisfied so long as Assad stays in power.<sup>8</sup> Russia and Iran were both willing to expend significant resources—to a degree often underestimated in the West—in order to pursue their core interest of keeping Assad in power; it is less clear they are prepared to incur similar costs and risks to help him retake, hold, and govern the areas he does not currently control, and which are less vital to his rule.

Finally, prospects for de-escalation and decentralization have improved because the opposition's options have narrowed considerably. While there was once a reasonable basis for believing—and much of the opposition and many outside experts did believe—that Assad would fall under pressure as did other Arab spring dictators, this is effectively no longer the case. Opposition demands that Assad give up power as part of any agreement to end the war were certainly understandable, given his crimes against the people of Syria, but they became increasingly unrealistic as prospects for toppling him receded and Russia's and Iran's determination to prevent that outcome were demonstrated on the ground. As recently as autumn 2016, the anti-regime opposition could still hope that the election of Hillary Clinton—who was seen to be more interventionist than President Barack Obama and had called for no-fly-zones and safe zones in Syria—

would turn the tide in their favor. Under current circumstances, however, with Aleppo having fallen to the regime, Turkey abandoning regime change and pivoting to other priorities, and Saudi Arabia bogged down in higher-priority Yemen, much of the opposition now realizes it must adopt more-realistic goals.

Critics of U.S. policy in Syria assert that more-robust military intervention early on could have toppled the regime or at least forced it to share power, stabilizing Syria under a more moderate government and thus sparing many Syrian lives and preventing Russia and Iran from wielding influence. Analysts will continue to debate that point but it is now largely moot. What matters now is how, given the current realities on the ground, the United States can help to end a conflict whose humanitarian, geopolitical, economic, and strategic consequences have been so enormous.

### **A More Promising Approach: De-Escalation and Decentralization**

In our first two Perspectives, we argued that, given the alternatives, the only realistic way forward in Syria was to defer the divisive question of Assad's fate and instead proceed with an effort—involving major internal and external actors—to negotiate a national ceasefire and provisions for decentralized governance of the country. Among the main obstacles to such an approach, we acknowledged, were that key players inside and outside Syria might prefer to fight on, rather than acquiesce to Assad's continued rule; that the geography and demography of parts of Syria, including Aleppo, were so complex as to make even any sort of decentralization impossible; and that neither the regime nor the opposition yet showed signs of reaching the “mutually hurting stalemate” that some scholars have suggested is required for civil

wars to end, and that either or both might reject any compromise in the hope that their maximalist aims might be reachable at some point in the future.<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of the developments described above, those obstacles have been reduced, and it is now easier to see how a decentralized Syria, made up of agreed zones of control that are protected in part by external powers, could emerge. We say “emerge” because the most likely scenario is not that the regime, the opposition, and the external powers meet to sign a detailed peace treaty; rather, it is likely that the sort of outcome we propose would develop as a hybrid of broad, top-down agreements negotiated by diplomats and local understandings reached by parties on the ground. In this sense, like in Bosnia in the mid-1990s, peace will have been facilitated by demographic changes on the ground, external agreement to those changes, and the exhaustion of the fighting parties. Unlike in Bosnia, however, the peace would emerge not from a detailed formal agreement but rather from a series of local and international understandings.

To reach the sorts of understandings that will be necessary, the ceasefire agreement by Russia, Turkey, and Iran is a good place to start, but it is insufficient. Sustainable long-term arrangements will be most effective if they include agreement of other key actors, including the United States, its Gulf partners, and other providers of support to Assad's opposition. As soon as possible, all of those countries should come to the table to seek arrangements that would clarify participation in the ceasefire (ideally including as many opposition groups as possible—with the exclusion only of United Nations [UN]–designated extremist groups, such as JFS and IS), arrange for the provision of humanitarian assistance and prisoner releases, and set up a process for political reform in Syria. No one should have any illusions about the latter track, but even small steps

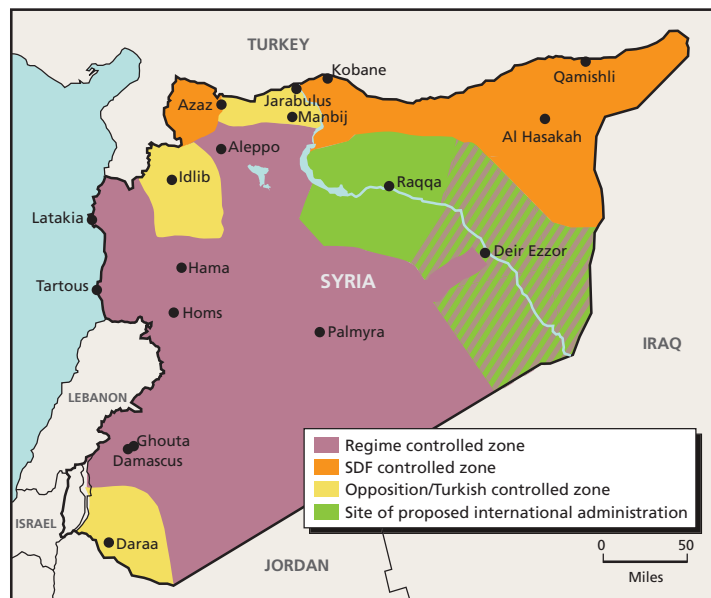
in the direction of including some opposition members in Syrian institutions—and formalization of some degree of decentralization through a constitutional reform process—could start a process of mutual tolerance and ultimately practical cooperation. Similarly, delineating agreed zones of control and maintaining a ceasefire based on them will be extremely difficult, but it should be possible with understandings among the outside powers, who would all benefit from an end to the fighting.

What might such an arrangement look like on the ground? The map indicates what an agreement on zones of control in Syria might produce.

In the west, the regime would be primarily focused on consolidating its rule, stamping out pockets of resistance, dealing with extremist threats from JFS in Idlib, and rebuilding areas devastated by six years of war. Russia and Iran, having committed to preserve the Assad regime but not to assist in efforts to reconquer the areas it does not currently control, would focus their assistance on reconstruction and defense, rather than continued offensive operations.<sup>10</sup> Given its severe manpower shortages, it is even possible the regime and the extremists in Idlib might themselves abide by an uneasy truce, although the more likely outcome is that this region, denied external support, will eventually fall to the regime.

In the north, the situation could also stabilize more or less according to the current battle lines. Having successfully taken territory to prevent the unification of the Kurdish provinces, Turkey is now unlikely to give it up; the burden of holding that territory is less than the effort that was expended to take it. With continued Kurdish terrorist attacks in Turkey and tensions still high, it is possible Turkey will seek to further expand its territory; indeed, a Turkish effort to include the area from al-Bab to the Euphrates,

## Syrian Zones of Control



NOTE: This map should be treated as a notional breakdown of territory and includes several changes in control that we anticipate, but have yet to occur. Those include Turkish control of Manbij, regime control of Ghouta, and contested pockets in Homs and Palmyra. As for Deir Ezzor, it could be integrated into the proposed international administration of Raqqa or could fall to regime forces. Given the uncertainty, the governorate is striped to indicate both potential outcomes.

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including Manbij, is likely and would make for a more natural and sustainable “zone.” But Ankara will be reluctant to try to occupy all the Kurdish areas of northern Syria, which could stretch its forces and revive even more violence at home. Equally, while the Syrian Kurds would like to consolidate their territories and achieve greater autonomy and eventual political independence, they know they currently lack the means to drive Turkey out militarily or hold large Sunni-Arab population centers coercively. In exchange for their help in continuing to liberate territory from IS, they will seek



further political and military support from the United States, but they know formal recognition of autonomy or support in taking on Turkey is unlikely. Thus the situation on the ground in northern Syria could be frozen into three agreed zones of control—two Kurdish zones separated by an Arab one backed by Turkey.<sup>11</sup> The United States could continue to support—but also to restrain—both its Kurdish and Turkish partners.

In the south, one can imagine a similar freezing of the situation on the ground. Unlike in Idlib, where the opposition is now dominated by extremists, more-moderate groups supported by the West are in control in Daraa and territory along the Jordanian border. These groups no longer pose a strategic threat to the regime, which would have an interest in tolerating them in the context of a national ceasefire. The United States and other nations that have supported these groups could continue to do so in exchange for their cooperation with a ceasefire and continued resistance to IS. Even if the regime decides to target this pocket or the one under Turkish influence in the north, civil war scholarship has shown that it is incredibly difficult to stamp out insurgents that have access to cross-border havens, and both Daraa and Jarabulus sit on borders that provide these sustaining conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all in a decentralized Syria will be what to do with territory taken from IS. While U.S.-supported Kurdish forces, along with their Arab auxiliaries, appear capable of taking Raqqa, holding it is another matter. Allowing the Kurds

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to control Raqqa province is not a viable option in the long term because Raqqa city and its surrounding province are predominantly Arab and would resist Kurdish domination—as would America’s regional allies, particularly Turkey. Similarly, inviting the regime to control Raqqa after its liberation is highly problematic, not only because it would antagonize most U.S. allies in the region but also because it would be resisted on the ground and the regime is likely not capable of preventing a return of IS. But just helping the SDF take Raqqa and then pulling out and leaving the various factions to their own devices is a recipe for renewed conflict—which could then undermine whatever stability might be emerging in other parts of Syria and allow a resurgence of IS. Therefore, whereas relatively stable arrangements for the rest of Syria along the lines described above might emerge naturally with only tacit understandings among the outside actors, Raqqa might require a more assertive and cooperative international effort—requiring, at a minimum, agreement among Russia, the United States, and Turkey. We therefore recommend that the United States propose to put Raqqa province, once liberated, under an interim international administration, thereby creating a neutral area held by neither the regime nor the opposition, pending the ultimate resolution of the civil war.

### **An International Administration for Raqqa Province**

Our proposal for the international administration of Raqqa province is predicated on Raqqa city being captured by a mixed Kurdish and Arab force and supported by airpower provided by the United States, possibly in cooperation with Russia and other international actors. The Kurdish component of the force would depart once the city was taken, leaving behind the Arab component plus



whatever additional militia that might be raised locally. A small number of U.S. personnel would continue to advise and support this force. The city and the surrounding province would be administered by the United Nations, working through newly formed or reformed city and provincial councils. A small UN blue-helmeted force would be deployed, largely to protect the international administrators. The UN representatives, in coordination with the local councils, would coordinate international and humanitarian assistance. An alternative to a UN-led peacekeeping force would be a UN-mandated coalition force, which Russia and the United States might jointly organize.

International administration of Raqqa would require approval by the UN Security Council and thus Russian support. But while the United States and Russia have failed to find sufficient common ground to work together so far, Moscow might be attracted to an arrangement that helped bring the conflict to an end, effectively contained IS resistance, and gave Russia a share in the control over this region. Such a move would also give Russia a chance to reciprocate a less-confrontational U.S. approach with Moscow, should the Trump administration move in that direction, as well as give President Donald Trump an opportunity to demonstrate, as he has frequently asserted, that the United States can benefit from cooperation with Russia.

Turkey and other U.S. regional allies would also likely prefer international administration to any of the alternatives—Kurdish, IS, or regime control. The result could be to create a reasonably secure zone in the east of the country comprising the three Kurdish cantons under Kurdish administration and Raqqa province under international administration, all enjoying a degree of U.S. or broader international protection.

Such an initiative would have both symbolic and practical effects. Raqqa and Mosul are the two cities most associated with the IS project and the Sunni-Arab grievances that the group attempts to tap into. Investing in Raqqa's future and protecting it from conflict recurrence are crucial to the symbolism of the counter-IS campaign.

There are also practical considerations at play. Because the liberation force that expels IS is likely to comprise YPG and SDF forces, Turkey will almost certainly block any flow of stabilization assistance to the city out of concern that it would inadvertently empower the Democratic Union Party's project. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which is the only other feasible land border for assistance delivery, is expected to be more accommodating, although even that border might be shuttered to certain assistance given Turkey's influence with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership and the Iraqi Kurds' own rivalry with their co-ethnics in Syria.

It is not only Ankara that will have issues with the provision of stabilization assistance to future governance structures in Raqqa. As a matter of policy, the United States and its Western partners are willing to provide humanitarian assistance based solely on need, but stabilization assistance requires more-stringent conditions, namely that the local governance structure is inclusive. Where the Kurds have taken majority Arab areas inside Syria, which include Tal Abyad and Manbij, they have not set up inclusive governance structures. Rather, they have preferred to work through local military councils or councils of notables that are under Kurdish influence. Leaving Raqqa under Kurdish control would likely be a barrier to most forms of international assistance.

Working out all the details and winning international support for an interim international administration of Raqqa will not be easy and could fail, like all previous efforts to bring outside actors

together on any plan for Syria. But if it succeeded—and we believe international interests are now sufficiently aligned that it might—Raqqqa province could represent a small island of neutrality, aligned with neither the regime nor its opposition, alongside other zones controlled by the respective parties to the national ceasefire, as well as an initial basis for increased international cooperation in Syria. In the long run, control over Raqqqa province would be returned to whatever government in Damascus emerged from internationally sponsored negotiations between the regime and its non-extremist opponents.

Following agreement on arrangements for Raqqqa, Washington and Moscow should discuss the possibility of joint efforts to liberate the last IS bastion in Syria, the oil-rich region around the town of Deir Ezzor. This area might also be put under international oversight pending some broader settlement in Syria, but given that the Damascus regime already has a foothold, it is more likely this region will fall under that authority once the IS is driven out.

Of course there are any number of ways in which this plan might be rejected by the key parties or otherwise go awry. Russia and Iran might prefer to back an effort by the regime to take Raqqqa once the IS is driven out. Turkey could conceivably prefer that outcome to any remaining Democratic Union Party influence there. The United States might choose to declare “mission accomplished” once Raqqqa is liberated, abandon the city to the regime and leave its Kurdish allies to fend for themselves. The international community may be wary about taking on the administration of territory in an area as war-ravaged as Syria.

There is little downside, however, to the United States proposing the arrangement we suggest. If the other main players balk, nothing has been lost, and Washington remains free to explore other options. If a consensus emerges around the proposal for an internationally

administered zone, most of the main players will have a stake in making it work. Continuing to secure the city from residual IS forces and other extremist groups would remain demanding, but at least it would not need to be defended against the regime, the Turks, the Russians, or the mainstream Syrian opposition.

## Conclusion

Nearly six years of war in Syria have killed almost half a million people, destabilized Syria’s neighbors, caused the biggest refugee crisis since World War II, radicalized Muslims in the region and around the world, intensified the region’s sectarian and geopolitical divides, and brought international powers into direct political and military confrontation. The U.S. interest in ending this conflict now vastly exceeds other legitimate interests, including ending Assad’s rule, bringing his henchmen to justice, and limiting Russian and Iranian involvement in the region. Continuing to pursue those goals unsuccessfully would be a recipe only for more, and more devastating, conflict, whereas doing “whatever it takes” to achieve them would carry enormous costs and almost certainly result in unwanted and unintended consequences—including the likely escalation of the war, even greater refugee flows, and chaos instead of moderate governance in Damascus. The alternative we propose—an indefinite, national ceasefire; the emergence of a decentralized Syria based on agreed zones of control backed by outside powers; the delivery of significant reconstruction and humanitarian assistance; mutual prisoner releases; and agreement on a plan for the international administration of Raqqqa province pending broader agreement on the country’s political future—offers no guarantees but provides a far more realistic way forward than any alternative. The new administration would have little to lose, and much to gain, by pursuing it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See James Dobbins, Jeffrey Martini, and Philip Gordon, *A Peace Plan for Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-182-RC, 2015. As of January 30, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE182.html>; James Dobbins, Philip Gordon, and Jeffrey Martini, *A Peace Plan for Syria II*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-202-RC, 2016. As of January 30, 2017: <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE202.html>

<sup>2</sup> Dobbins, Gordon and Martini, 2015, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Aleppo was the largest prewar population center in Syria, but internal displacement leaves Damascus as the largest today.

<sup>4</sup> See Karen DeYoung, “U.S., Russia Reach Deal on Cease-Fire in Syria,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016. As of January 30, 2017: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-foreign-minister-lavrov-says-he-was-thinking-of-calling-it-a-day-on-syria-talks-with-the-united-states/2016/09/09/f37ca320-75ff-11e6-9781-49e591781754\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.208f9151a4d3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russian-foreign-minister-lavrov-says-he-was-thinking-of-calling-it-a-day-on-syria-talks-with-the-united-states/2016/09/09/f37ca320-75ff-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html?utm_term=.208f9151a4d3); Kristina Wong, “Pentagon: ‘Not All Terms’ of Syrian Cease-Fire Being Met,” *The Hill*, September 15, 2016. As of January 30, 2017: <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/296213-pentagon-not-all-terms-of-syrian-ceasefire-deal-being-met>

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, Daily Press Briefing transcript, October 3, 2016. As of January 30, 2017: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/10/262717.htm>

<sup>6</sup> According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, Failaq al-Sham, Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, Thuwar al-Sham, Jaish al-Muhajideen, Jaish al-Idlib, and Jabhat al-Shamiyah had joined a nationwide ceasefire. Ahrar al-Sham, however, has denied participation, and a number of opposition groups withdrew from the continuing negotiations, citing regime violations in Damascus suburbs. See Ben Hubbard, Eric Schmitt, and Michael R. Gordon, “Cease-Fire in Syria Frays but Holds, Giving

Hope to Peace Talks,” *New York Times*, December 30, 2016. As of January 30, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/world/middleeast/syria-cease-fire.html>

<sup>7</sup> See Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, “Iran, Russia, and Turkey Agree to Enforce Syria Cease-Fire, but Don’t Explain How,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2017. As of January 30, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/world/middleeast/syria-war-iran-russia-turkey-cease-fire.html>

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that Iran is more maximalist in its objectives than Russia. While Moscow shows an inclination to accept partial political reform as part of a negotiated settlement, Tehran is less accommodating in this regard.

<sup>9</sup> On the concept of “mutually hurting stalemate,” see William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments,” *Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2001. See, also, Max Fisher, “Syria’s Paradox: Why the War Only Ever Seems to Get Worse,” *New York Times*, August 26, 2016. As of January 30, 2017: [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/27/world/middleeast/syria-civil-war-why-get-worse.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/27/world/middleeast/syria-civil-war-why-get-worse.html?_r=0)

<sup>10</sup> Iran would be less inclined than Russia toward this arrangement. However, since it protects Tehran’s core interests—Hezbollah resupply and preservation of Assad—we believe Iran would accede to the formula if Russia exerted pressure on its partner to accept.

<sup>11</sup> There is also a small but strategic Turkomen population in this area that has linguistic and historic ties to Turkey.

<sup>12</sup> See Erika Forsberg, “Transnational Dimensions of Civil Wars: Clustering, Contagion, and Connectedness,” in T. David Mason and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, eds., *What Do We Know About Civil Wars?* Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016, pp. 75–93; and Harvey Starr and G. Dale Thomas, “The Nature of Borders and International Conflict: Revisiting Hypotheses on Territory,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 1, March 2005, pp. 123–139.

## About This Perspective

This Perspective is the third in a series in which the authors argue for practical steps aimed at reaching a durable cessation of hostilities and separation of forces in Syria. The Perspective recommends zones of control backed by external powers as the most promising approach to achieving that outcome. The authors argue that within this formula, Raqqa presents particular challenges best addressed through the introduction of an international administration in that Syrian province.

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