



A Peace Plan for Syria

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The conflict in Syria is radicalizing an entire generation of young Muslims, killing or maiming hundreds of thousands of innocents, forcing millions of Syrians to flee their homes, destabilizing neighboring states, straining the bonds of European solidarity, and fostering religious intolerance in the United States and elsewhere. Almost any peace would be better than this war. We offer here what we believe to be the most practical way to end the fighting.

This war began as a popular uprising against the tyrannical rule of President Bashar al-Assad. Over the past four years, the conflict has evolved into a Hobbesian war of all against all, pitting the regime against the opposition, Shi'a against Sunni, Arab against Kurd, and moderate against extremist. It has attracted tens of thousands of foreign fighters from Europe, North America, and Africa; exacerbated geopolitical rivalries among Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, the United States, and others; and drawn in the armed forces of nearly a dozen external states. There may have been a time, early

on, when it could be argued that the benefits of overthrowing Assad would be worth the human, strategic, political, and economic costs of achieving that goal, but that time has long past. At this point, whether President Assad stays or goes in the near term should be regarded as a matter of pure expediency; the United States should pursue whichever outcome will more quickly stop the fighting.

There are two paths to peace that differ in sequencing. The first would be to concentrate on brokering a comprehensive political arrangement among the warring Syrian parties and their external sponsors, including the reform of state institutions, the formation of a new government, and a plan for elections, accompanied by a ceasefire and the beginning of a process of reconstruction. The second approach would be to secure agreement to an immediate ceasefire, which would be followed by further negotiations on the shape of a reconstituted Syrian state and government.

Clearly, the former approach—the current objective of many of the key external actors and most of the Syrian opposition—would

be preferable. Unfortunately, however, there seems to be no prospect that the contending Syrian parties can agree on detailed arrangements for a new Syrian state, let alone on its leadership, anytime soon. At best, what might be achieved would be a general formula for eventual institutional reform accompanied by an immediate ceasefire. Without agreed arrangements designed to ensure the ceasefire is maintained, however, fighting will soon resume and further negotiations will collapse. We therefore advocate concentrating on securing an immediate ceasefire, accompanied by internationally agreed arrangements for its enforcement. This will be hard to agree to, but it is a more realistic goal, and its achievement would be hugely preferable to its main alternative—the indefinite continuation or even escalation of a devastating war. A ceasefire may not be a sufficient condition for an eventual political settlement, but it is likely to be a necessary one.

Were the fighting to be halted on the basis of the territory currently held, Syria would find itself divided into roughly four zones—one controlled by the government; one controlled by the Kurds; one controlled by diverse elements of the Sunni opposition; and one controlled largely by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹ As ISIS has no foreign sponsors, is largely immune to external influence, and is certain to reject any ceasefire, Syria would effectively be divided into three “safe” zones in which the parties agreed to stop fighting, and one zone in which all other parties would be free to wage war on ISIS.

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Safe Zones as a Basis for Peace

Any proposal to stabilize Syria must start with the goal of providing security to the estimated 16.6 million Syrians still inhabiting the country—seven million of those internally displaced.² Our proposal puts that goal front and center while also acknowledging three essential, if difficult, realities. The first is that four years of fighting and more than a quarter million dead have left Syria intensely divided by sect and ethnicity. It should be a goal to mitigate those divisions in the long run, but they must be acknowledged in the short run. Second, ousting the current regime by building up the military power of the opposition—the basic approach of the United States and its partners for the past four years—is unlikely to succeed. Russia and Iran have proven so committed to the regime’s preservation that escalation of the conflict has not led to Assad’s capitulation, but rather a significant counter-escalation, more killing and refugees, and radicalization of the opposition.³ Third, the current battle lines on the ground, while hardly ideal, would have to be the fundamental basis of any armistice. Limited territorial swaps may be necessary to facilitate the disengagement of combatants and assist in ceasefire implementation.

Given these realities, the best hope for halting Syria’s carnage is the acceptance of agreed zones that take into account ethno-sectarian divisions and current battle lines while devolving significant power to local communities. Like most countries in the Middle East, Syria’s ethno-sectarian breakdown is far from clean. Syria’s communities have historically intermixed, so there is no such thing as a solid stretch of land inhabited by a single community. In addition, Sunni Arabs constitute more than 60 percent of the country’s total population. They are present throughout the country, comprise

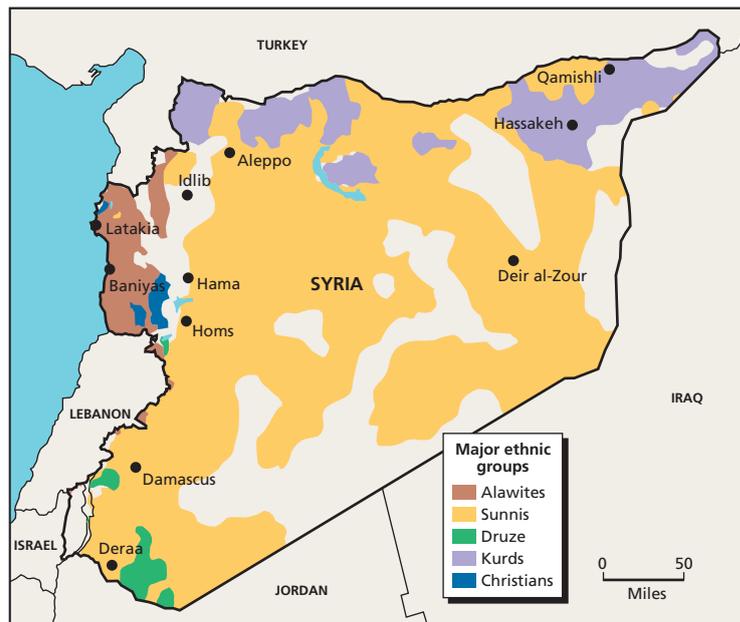
a majority even in regime-held areas, and in many cases remain loyal to the Assad regime.⁴

These important caveats aside, Syria's longstanding ethno-sectarian map does reflect regional groupings, which have been consolidated by internal displacement. Syria's Alawite and Christian communities are largely based in the country's western region that abuts the Mediterranean north of Lebanon. Syria's Kurds predominate on the northern frontier with Turkey, the Druze reside in pockets in the south, and Sunni Arabs dominate the rest of Syria, comprising an overwhelming majority in the regions east of the country's main spine that runs from Deraa in the south, through Damascus, Homs, and Hama, and up to Aleppo in the North. This Sunni-Arab heartland also includes the Euphrates River valley, the current ISIS stronghold. (See Figure 1 for a more detailed breakdown of the country's pre-war composition.)

Not coincidentally, Syria's ethno-sectarian geography is reflected in the current battle lines. The main exceptions are that the Alawi-dominated regime still controls Damascus and governs areas in which the population is predominantly Sunni, many of which still support the regime. The Sunni-Arab areas not controlled by the regime are divided between various opposition groups, ranging from moderate groups supported by the United States to al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, with other groups falling between those ends of the ideological spectrum. To add a layer of complexity, the Sunni-Arab opposition groups are often co-located, in the sense that "moderates" operate in the proximity of, and sometimes alongside, Jabhat al-Nusra. (See Figure 2 for a breakdown of territorial control.)

Our proposal involves the creation of three agreed zones in Syria, one geographically contiguous and two non-contiguous.

Figure 1. Syria's Pre-War Sectarian Breakdown



SOURCE: Data from M. Izady, "Gulf/2000 Project," web page, 2003. NOTE: Map does not reflect complex ethnic divisions in main population centers.

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The first, depicted in brown in Figure 3, would be a contiguous, regime-dominated enclave stretching from the southern suburbs of Damascus, through Homs, Tartus, Baniyas, and Latakia, to Syria's border with Turkey on the Mediterranean coast. The second, depicted in purple, would be a noncontiguous Kurdish zone encompassing the northern band of terrain east of Aleppo to Hassakeh and Qamishli, as well as the upper northwest of the country, territory already under Kurdish control. The third area, depicted in green, would be composed of the two chunks of the territory largely controlled by the opposition, one in the country's southwest around Deraa and the other centered in Idlib. Aleppo and Hama

Figure 2. Control of Territory by Armed Actors, September 2015

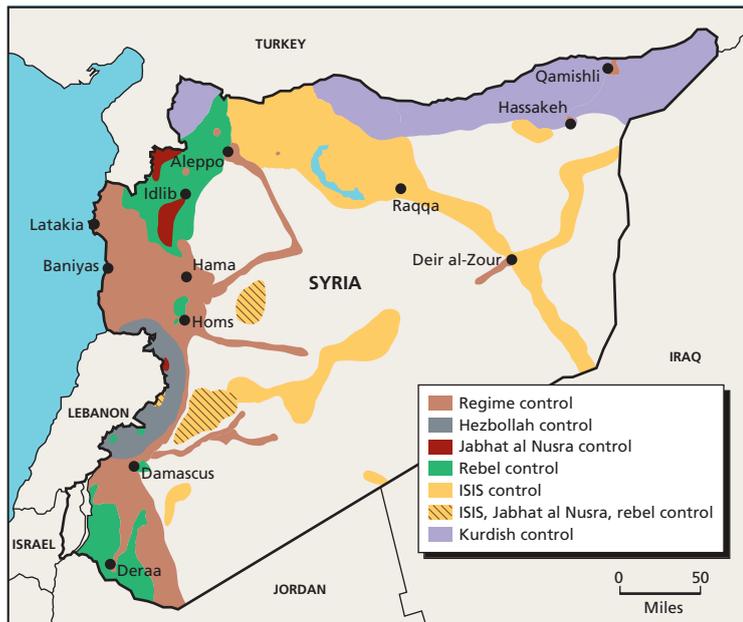
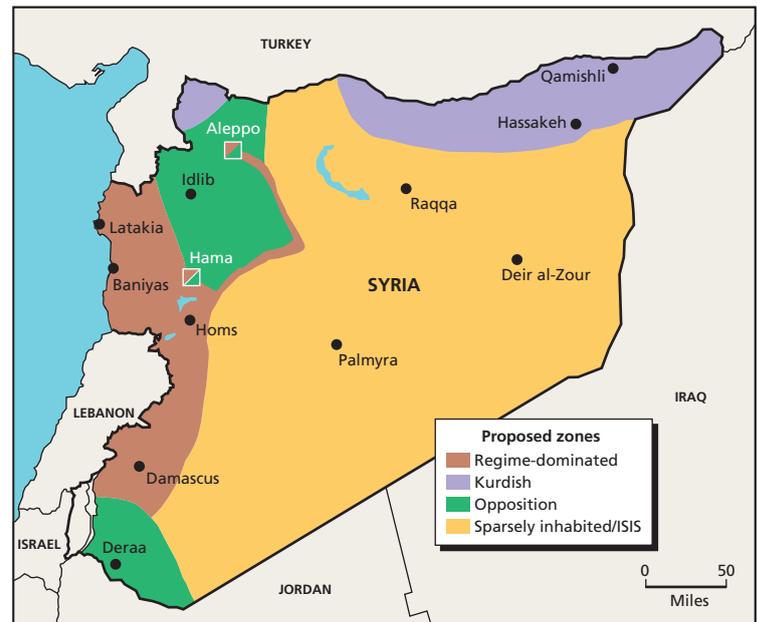


Figure 3. Proposed Zones in Syria



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SOURCE: Institute for the Study of War, "Control of Terrain in Syria: September 14, 2015," web page, September 14, 2015.

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would have regime-controlled and opposition-controlled areas, and the regime would be afforded a supply line to Aleppo, as is reflected in the current laydown of forces in the country. The fourth zone, depicted in yellow and currently held by ISIS, would encompass the remainder of the country, the bulk of which is very sparsely inhabited, with the main population centers in that zone being Deir al-Zour and Raqqa in the Euphrates River valley, and Palmyra in the country's center.

This fourth zone would fall under international administration as ISIS is progressively dislodged by the international anti-ISIS coalition. The other three zones would be administered by those in

control of the territory at the time of the ceasefire. It would fall to the external powers, currently supporting one faction or another, to guarantee adherence to the ceasefire. Thus, Russia and Iran would guarantee the regime's adherence; the United States would guarantee Kurdish adherence; and Turkey and Jordan would guarantee the Sunni opposition's adherence. All external parties would collaborate to dislodge ISIS.

Establishing the three safe zones might require some transfer of territory between the factions to establish clear armistice lines and supply routes. The most difficult concessions for the Assad regime would be leaving parts of Hama and Aleppo under the control of the moderate Sunni-Arab opposition. This would be offset by the

moderate opposition's withdrawal from, or at least acceptance of regime control over, the small islands of territory it controls within the regime zone and the removal of its brigades from the outskirts of Damascus, enabling the regime to secure the capital and isolate extremists in the free-fire zone.

Immediately following the ceasefire, if not before, the United Nations would convene representatives of all the Syrian factions that accepted the ceasefire to begin constructing a new basis for a unified Syrian state. Restoring a unified Syria is likely to take time, if it is possible at all. The resultant state might be federal, or confederal. It would likely involve granting extensive autonomy, including control over local security, to local authorities. It might encompass some explicit form of sectarian power-sharing, as in Lebanon after its long civil war. It might provide specific guarantees and protections for minorities within each region and in the country as a whole. It might involve significant constitutional reform to redistribute power among national institutions and an election in which Assad would not run. Ultimately, it would likely involve practical arrangements whereby a Damascus-based regime could supply certain services and utilities to different regions while locals would retain responsibility for local governance and security. These would all be issues for the Syrians to work out, under United Nations (UN) auspices and with the encouragement of the external powers. They will be hugely difficult to resolve, but less difficult than while the killing continues.

International oversight of the ceasefire and support for the political process would be undertaken by a Peace Implementation Council, on the Bosnia model, made up of the above-mentioned states plus others ready to contribute significantly. This council would be mandated and empowered by the UN Security Council

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to ensure observance of the ceasefire. Either the UN or the Peace Implementation Council would appoint an international administrator to establish provisional governance of liberated ISIS-held areas.

ISIS aside, questions will arise regarding participation in the ceasefire by other groups considered by many to be terrorists. At the very least, for example, Hezbollah's adherence to the ceasefire will be essential to its maintenance. The condition for participation in the ceasefire should be the provision of a credible pledge to cease violence within Syria and also cease the instigation of violence from Syria against external targets. ISIS will certainly refuse such a pledge. So, in all likelihood, will al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra. Rather than engage in a prolonged argument among the external sponsors as to who is in and who is out of this arrangement, it is probably better to agree on the terms of the ceasefire among external powers and as many internal groups as possible and allow the extremists to exclude themselves by refusing credible pledges of adherence. It would have to be clear to all groups that external support will be cut off for groups that violate the ceasefire.

Some level of international military presence will likely be necessary to monitor and ensure maintenance of the ceasefire. External forces can be deployed in areas friendly to them. Russian forces are the obvious choice for the government zone. U.S. troops make sense for the Kurdish zone, since the United States is best placed to assuage Ankara's anxieties that this safe zone would morph into a base for Kurdish attacks on Turkey or emerge as a Kurdish proto-

state. Finally, forces from Sunni states would be the logical external guarantor for the Sunni-Arab opposition zone—perhaps Turkish troops in the northern segment of this zone and Jordanian forces in the south. The northern segment of the Sunni opposition zone is likely to be the most problematic, as it is an area in which extremist and more moderate opposition groups are intermingled.

The exception to matching zones with external guarantors would be in the zone currently controlled by ISIS. In order to forestall renewed conflict among the parties to the ceasefire over control of this territory, the ISIS-controlled zone would fall under international administration pending the creation of a broadly representative Syrian government. Security in areas newly liberated from ISIS would need to be maintained by an international force, perhaps drawn from members of the Peace Implementation Council, perhaps from a much wider circle of states. A small force of neutral monitors might also be deployed, perhaps under UN auspices. This force would only monitor, not enforce, the ceasefire. Enforcement would fall to the major powers, employing their leverage with their local clients.

The Diplomatic Challenge

While an agreement along these lines will obviously be difficult to achieve, it should be urgently pursued, given the costs of the status quo and the even longer odds of achieving a comprehensive politi-

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cal agreement anytime soon. The creation of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG)—which brings together foreign ministers from all the key external actors, including both Iran and Saudi Arabia—constitutes a useful first step. While key players remain deeply divided on the question of whether, how, and when to require Assad's departure, they have at least agreed to discuss both a possible ceasefire and a political process that would eventually lead to a new constitution and elections. Only by recognizing the costs of the status quo and exploring options short of unattainable maximalist ends can the parties possibly agree on a way to stop the war.

However, the ISSG is not enough. Given the impossibility of working out a detailed agreement among more than 20 participants around a table, the United States will also have to initiate private bilateral discussions, including with Russia and such key U.S. partners as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. With Russia—now an even more central player given its growing military role in Syria—the goal would be to explore a quid pro quo to assure Moscow that the Assad regime will not collapse (a core Russian interest) in exchange for a ceasefire between the regime and the opposition and joint campaign against ISIS. If Russia continues to insist on simply propping up the regime and indiscriminately bombing all elements of the opposition, the United States and others will maintain their support for opposition fighters, the war will go on, and Russia will alienate the Sunni world and become a growing target for terrorists, as was made clear by the October 31 bombing of a Russian plane over the Sinai. Indeed, some expansion of U.S. assistance to Sunni opposition groups to allow them to withstand recent Russian-backed regime offensives may be a necessary precursor to securing Russian support for this approach. If, however, Moscow is willing to press for policy changes from Damascus—including support for a ceasefire

and recognition of opposition autonomy in the parts of the country proposed here—a diplomatic agreement might be achievable in the immediate term. Such an outcome would be preferable to and more achievable than an uncertain and costly effort to reinforce the opposition's bargaining power in hope of winning Russia's assent to remove Assad. A U.S.-Russia agreement along these lines would be a solid basis to try to get other countries on board.

Among the countries most difficult to get on board will be Saudi Arabia. Riyadh is strongly committed to Assad's removal, a determination enhanced by Saudi Arabia's growing competition with Assad's sponsors in Iran. At present, the Saudis are strongly opposed to any agreement that does not include at least a concrete, short-term timetable for Assad's departure. Saudi representatives insist that the alternative to an acceptable political solution is a "military solution"—i.e., the violent overthrow of Assad and elimination of Iran's influence. Largely unaffected by the refugee crisis and wealthy enough to continue supporting the opposition, the Saudis seem prepared to continue the war as long as necessary in order to bleed or sideline Iran. The United States will need to persuade Riyadh that this is a recipe for a costly quagmire, with rising extremism throughout the region and beyond. Washington may be able to enlist the help of other Sunni Arab states that are already focused on the need to stop the war and protect Sunni populations, including Jordan, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. Washington can make it clear to Riyadh that while the United States will relentlessly work to stop the killing, protect Sunnis, fight ISIS, and contain Iran, it will not be party to a military escalation that subordinates all other interests to the goals of removing Assad and eliminating Iranian influence in Syria, which, after all, predated the current war by several decades.

Turkey will also be difficult. Like Saudi Arabia, Turkey is committed to ousting Assad, whom it blames for driving two million refugees into Turkey, fomenting the rise of ISIS, and fostering the conditions for a potential Kurdish entity in Syria. Ankara's policy has thus been to support whichever groups are most effective at dislodging Assad. The result has been disastrous growth in the number of extremists and a permissive climate for foreign fighters to cross from Turkey into Syria. Ankara will need to be persuaded that Kurdish power and independence in Syria will only grow if the war goes on and that an autonomous but not independent Syrian Kurdish region could ultimately become a partner to Turkey, as has a similar entity in northern Iraq. As with Saudi Arabia, a key element for getting the Turks to make this leap will have to be the knowledge that the United States and others will not extend the war for the purpose of ousting Assad or preventing regional Kurdish autonomy if there is a realistic chance of ending it on the basis presented here.

Likely Objections

Critics of this proposal will attack it on several grounds. One is that dividing Syria into agreed zones could exacerbate ethnic and sectarian cleansing of the minority populations that reside within them. The authors do not take lightly the prospect of inter-communal fighting that would precede and follow implementation of this plan. However, that prospect must be weighed against the certainty of the carnage we know is occurring with no end in sight, and with such devastating political and geopolitical consequences. Moreover, this plan would put in place capable external guarantors to observe and enforce the ceasefire who would operate as a greater deterrent to reprisal killings than exists today. Certainly the perpetuation of

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the current conflict is unlikely to avert Syria's permanent division; in fact, it is more likely to lead to more division and further ethnic cleansing. It will be important for the UN Security Council and the members of the Peace Implementation Council to agree not to regard these divisions as permanent and to use their influence with the Syrian parties to promote agreement on the design of a new Syrian state.

Another critique is that it would be immoral to accept anything less than Assad's immediate departure, given his vicious attacks on the people of Syria. Assad is a brutal dictator who deserves to face justice. If there were a practical way to remove him from power and ensure that Syria would be governed decently and inclusively after his departure, that would be far preferable to accepting a ceasefire with his fate unresolved. However, that option does not exist in the real world. Four years of gradual military escalation and isolation of Syria have not led Russia and Iran to remove Assad but instead to double down on his defense. There is little reason to believe that some modest increase in support to the opposition—whether in the form of more advanced weapons, no-fly zones, or even direct military strikes—would change that, and such steps would have other costs and consequences.

The real question is whether a ceasefire along the lines we propose can be achieved. No one should have any illusions about the difficulty of doing so. Assad, backed strongly by Russia and Iran, may feel he has time on his side and no reason to stop killing

until his main opposition is crushed, while most of the opposition groups and their sponsors seem equally determined to fight until their maximalist objectives—in this case, the destruction of the regime—are achieved.

However, it is also true that a serious ceasefire proposal along these lines has never been presented to the parties. Assurance that the regime can continue to govern Damascus and other cities up and down Syria's western flank might just be enough to persuade Assad and his external sponsors that stopping the fighting is in their interest, as opposed to perpetuating a costly war whose outcome cannot be predicted. It is, in any case, perverse to criticize our proposal as impractical on the grounds that Assad would never agree to a genuine devolution of power, while instead advocating an approach that requires him to relinquish power altogether.

As for the opposition and its sponsors, they have also not been presented with what would be on offer here: a ceasefire that finally stopped Assad's offensives, including barrel bombs; granted local autonomy, backed by the international community and accepted by the regime, in the zones they currently control; the delivery of badly needed humanitarian aid to a beleaguered population; prisoner releases; and an agreed process to ultimately sort out Syria's political structures that might include a path to get beyond Assad.

A third critique is likely to be a perceived lack of political will by key external parties to serve as guarantors to the safe zones. This proposal would, after all, entail U.S. forces operating in the Kurdish areas; some combination of Turkish and Jordanian forces ensuring that Sunni-Arab oppositionists do not renew attacks on Damascus and Homs; and Russia and Iran agreeing to restrain the regime from attempting to reconquer Aleppo, Deraa, and other population centers that will fall under Sunni-Arab control. Coop-

eration among these external governments will not be easy, but it is much more feasible than cooperation among their clients on the ground. The key to securing the necessary cooperation among all the external parties is to persuade them that these arrangements are the least bad option when the alternative is a continuation of the wider war with all its consequences.

A final critique will likely be that the design of the process we advocate does not conform to best practices in conflict resolution and stabilization. Specifically, it may be argued that contiguous zones are preferable to non-contiguous zones or that a political settlement must precede a ceasefire to make the latter sustainable. These outcomes are indeed preferable, but it is not possible to achieve them anytime soon. We believe the only real near-term alternatives are the messy and fragile peace we describe here or a

continuation of the war well into the future. Those who believe this approach is impractical should explain how their preferred outcome is more achievable; those who find it objectionable should explain why continuation of the war is better.

No one should pretend there is a way forward in Syria without significant costs or risks. But as President Barack Obama recently noted, it is not helpful to offer up “half-baked ideas as if they are solutions” or to “downplay the challenges involved in the situation.” Instead he called on critics to say “specifically” and “precisely” what they would do and how they would do it.⁵

This proposal is an attempt to do just that. It is not without challenges, downsides, or risks, but we believe it is far better than the status quo and far more practical than any of the available alternatives.

Notes

¹The organization's name transliterates from Arabic as *al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-'Iraq wa al-Sham* (abbreviated as Da'ish or DAESH). In the West, it is commonly referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (both abbreviated as ISIS), or simply the Islamic State (IS). Arguments abound as to which is the most accurate translation, but here we refer to the group as ISIS.

²"Syria's Drained Population," *The Economist*, September 30, 2015.

³Philip Gordon, "It's Time to Rethink Syria," *Politico*, September 25, 2015.

⁴Fabrice Balanche, *Ethnic Cleansing Threatens Syria's Unity*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2528, December 3, 2015.

⁵Office of the Press Secretary, "Press Conference by the President," Washington, D.C.: The White House, October 2, 2015. As of December 10, 2015: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president>

About This Perspective

This essay presents a peace plan for Syria that is focused less on defining the nature of the Syrian state that might emerge from the conflict and more on the steps necessary to secure and sustain a ceasefire for the extended period that is likely to be needed for the Syrian parties to actually agree on new governing arrangements. It concludes that the external parties that have supported one side or another in the current conflict will need to come together to guarantee and enforce any such ceasefire, if it is to hold.

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