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Why America Can't Win in Syria

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The Syrian Civil War will soon begin its sixth year. It has been—and remains—an unmitigated human disaster, most recently affirmed with the death and destruction resulting from the regime's recent capture of Aleppo. After witnessing the chaos firsthand from several vantage points within Syria, it is clear the war is no closer to a resolution today than it was six years ago, despite the employment of hundreds of U.S. military personnel and billions in aid. The conflict is not going to end on terms imposed externally, but only when a political settlement is reached by those who will have to live with its results.

Both of us have travelled extensively throughout the region since 2015, with one of us being among the few Western civilians to step foot on some of the most contentious locations in Syria. These visits included interviews conducted with warring parties ranging from regime officials in Damascus to Arab and Kurdish opposition groups in Raqqa. Viewing the situation from the point of conflict brings into sharp relief why U.S. efforts have failed.

First, it is crucial to understand the Syrian Civil War isn't like the U.S. version of "north versus south." It is more akin to the heads of a Hydra battling against each other. About two months ago, I was embedded with Rojda Felat, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) commander of Operation Wrath of the Euphrates, a campaign to surround and isolate Raqqa. Accompanying Rojda shortly after capturing al-Twelaa, a village north of Raqqa, I noticed a spray-painted logo of Ahrar al-Sham, the largest Islamist opposition group in Syria financed by Turkey, which fights alongside many U.S.-backed rebel groups. "This village has been under ISIS control for two years. What is this logo doing here?" I asked Rodja. She shrugged and said, "They are all the same."

It's not surprising that Rojda has this perspective. Groups like ISIS, Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and some Free-Syrian-Army-branded rebel groups may clash against one another today, but they are ideologically very difficult to separate. Rojda recalls events in Serekaniye, Til Kocher and Tell Hamis, in which all of these groups collaborated together against her forces before either being absorbed by ISIS or forcibly removed.

Opposition areas outside the SDF's control now resemble a hodge-podge of militant groups competing for authority of the region. The Islamist groups can temporarily align with each other against common enemies, but frequently end up warring with each other afterward.

Outside of Tal al-Saman—barely one thousand yards from ISIS front lines—I also met Abu Sayyaf, an Arab commander within the FSA group Raqqa Martyrs Brigade. Sayyaf echoed many of Rojda's observations. He described both FSA factions and Jabhat al-Nusra commanders pledging allegiance to ISIS in Raqqa. "Some of us resisted and fought, but we were overpowered by the extremists," he said. Sayyaf and his fighters took refuge north of Raqqa first and found themselves fighting alongside the YPG, a Kurdish militia, in the battle of Kobane. Today, there are thousands of Arabs in the SDF alliance fighting alongside the majority Kurdish YPG.

Second, despite the perception of some, the FSA is a branding exercise, not a homogenous movement. Early in the revolution there were hundreds of groups that formed in reaction to the oppressive nature of the Assad regime. Some of them were patriotic, freedom-loving people who

wanted to live in peace. Others were mafia-esque criminals who took advantage of the breakdown in state security to enrich themselves illegally.

As convoluted as the Syrian Civil War is—because of the ever-changing loyalties of the scores of antiregime elements—the bigger challenge is different and equally incompatible foreign powers support them: Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States. At this moment, frequent hostilities are taking place between Pentagon-backed groups within SDF alliance and CIA-backed groups among the Turkish-led Euphrates Shield campaign.

The solution to this regime change imbroglio is to first recognize it cannot be won militarily.

A solution to this intractable situation in Syria will only be found from within; the United States must recognize that regime change is a losing strategy that flatly doesn't work.

The United States should commit to increasing the diplomatic capital it expends to help the various parties find a solution before supplying more arms and training (you don't put out a fire by dousing it with kerosene). Efforts among the FBI, CIA and other elements of the Department of Homeland Security must continue to ensure that threats from Syria do not spread to the United States. Of the forces on the ground in Syria, the Kurdish and Arab SDF appear to be the most capable of defeating ISIS. But they must fight and win their own future.

U.S. policy toward Syria over the last six years has been an unmitigated failure—as it has been in large measure throughout the Middle East—because it has veered dangerously away from any coherent strategy, let alone any of America's vital national interests, and relied almost exclusively on the military instrument to achieve some unstated and unknown ends.

It is long past time to jettison what doesn't work and employ a new strategy that offers a viable chance of success.