

The situation in Iraq and Syria and the threat posed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

Written evidence submitted by

Professor Scott Lucas

Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security, University of Birmingham and EA WorldView

&

Professor Stefan Wolff

Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security, University of Birmingham

Executive Summary

International coalition and British Government strategy is foundering over both the challenge of the Assad regime and the challenge of the Islamic State, because of indecision, lack of clarity, lack of coordination, and apparent lack of necessary information.

The current declared strategy of the US and its allies for a “political settlement” founders on an essential contradiction: the US and British Government continue to say a settlement would include the departure of President Assad, but the Syrian regime has made clear that this cannot be countenanced. This in turn means --- as evidenced by the Geneva II talks in early 2014 --- that discussions between the regime and the Syrian opposition for “political transition” are a non-starter.

Given this, there are three strategic options:

1. Acceptance of the Assad regime, including continued rule of President Assad and his inner circle of advisors, at least for a transitional period;
2. External “containment” of the Syrian situation, seeking to ease the humanitarian crisis and to prevent spillover of military conflict;
3. Internal “containment” of both the Assad regime and the Islamic State within Syria, through political and military support of an opposition within certain areas of the country.

Option 1 (Acceptance of Regime) is unlikely to lead to resolution through defeat of the insurgency. It is also unlikely to check the establishment of part of Syria under control of the Islamic State.

Option 2 (External Containment) is unlikely to stem the humanitarian crisis, with numbers of both refugees and internally-displaced Syrians increasing. It is unlikely to check the spillover of the conflict, notably into Lebanon and potentially into Jordan and Turkey, and to prevent the Islamic State from connecting control of territory and resources in Syria with control of territory and resources in Iraq.

Option 3 (Internal Containment) offers the possibility of a developing space in Syria which is free of both the regime and the Islamic State, and thus the possibility of the growth of a political alternative to both the regime and the “caliphate”. However, the creation of this space would require an acceptance of the insurgency “as is” --- including a faction like Jabhat al-Nusra and a bloc like Islamic Front --- and a recognition that this would be a long-term commitment. It also poses a challenges of coordination, given the diverse range of insurgent groups and their varying desire for local ceasefires (now also promoted by the UN) with regime and Islamic State forces, as well as the related risk of increased infighting within the insurgency in an effort by various groups to consolidate or extend their control of physical and political space.

We suggest a re-direction and focus of strategic thinking towards Internal Containment. If combined

with elements of an External Containment strategy, it could deliver a credible new approach to de-escalation and eventual resolution of the Syrian crisis.

The Current Situation

After 44 months, the Syrian conflict shows no signs of abating. It is both a war with multiple actors, including the Assad regime, the insurgency, and the Islamic State, and a “patchwork” war, with each of the actors holding influence in certain areas but facing defeat or remaining on the margins in others.

Contrary to claims in mainstream media, the Assad regime is not “winning”. It has lost much of northern and eastern Syria in the last two years to insurgents and then the Islamic State. Its military was expelled from Raqqqa Province in northern Syria by the Islamic State earlier this year. It lost territory in Idlib Province in northwest Syria to the insurgency this autumn, and Damascus is at risk of being cut off from southern Syria by insurgent gains from Quneitra near the Israeli border in the southwest to Daraa and the Jordanian border in the south.

The regime has made some gains near Damascus with local “ceasefire” agreements and military victory, but insurgents continue to hold much of the East Ghouta area and can still attack the capital with mortars. The regime still does not control all of Homs, despite claiming victory this spring with an evacuation agreement for insurgents. It is still trying to cut off insurgent access to the opposition-held area of Aleppo city, and the prospect of victory within the city --- divided since July 2012 --- is still distant. It is still in conflict with the insurgents between Aleppo and Hama in central Syria.

The insurgents are not “losing” throughout Syria. To the contrary, they have moved across the south, threatening to cut off Damascus from Israeli and Jordanian borders, and have extended control in Idlib Province in the northwest. They have withstood months-long regime offensives in the Damascus suburbs. They continue to hold out in the al-Waer section of Homs city, and move freely throughout Homs Province.

However, there is little prospect of the insurgency extending control of much of Syria's countryside into one of its major cities, apart from Daraa in the south. Although many insurgent factions have united under the Islamic Front, the insurgency is fragmented in some areas and marked by numerous “local” units, rather than a central organization, in others. It has been hindered recently by in-fighting among factions, sparked by accusations of corruption and war profiteering.

The Islamic State has defeated the insurgency to take control of territory in northern and eastern Syria, including the city of Raqqqa and much of the city of Deir Ez Zor. After the breakdown this spring of a non-aggression arrangement with the regime, it has expelled the Syrian military from Raqqqa Province and is moving into central Syria, briefly capturing more gas and oilfields. The gains add to already significant resources controlled by the Islamic State.

However, the Islamic State has been expelled from all of Idlib Province and much of Aleppo Province in the northwest and in East Ghouta near Damascus by the insurgency. It has also been unable, after almost three months, to complete its offensive against the isolated Kurdish center of Kobane in northern Syria or to regain territory in Aleppo Province, even in the absence of US airstrikes in that area.

The Coalition Intervention

On September 22, the US-led coalition began airstrikes inside Syria. It attacked not only its declared target of Islamic State, including in the area near Kobane, but also the insurgent faction Jabhat al-Nusra. The coalition has continued regular airstrikes on the Islamic State, both in northeast Syria near the Iraqi border and the Kobane area. It launched a second wave of strikes in early November against

not only Jabhat al-Nusra --- again in the form of attacks against the “Khorasan Group”, which the US said is a cell planning terrorist operations --- but also the insurgent faction Ahrar al-Sham, which has no connection to Al Qa'eda and which is part of Syria's largest insurgent bloc, the Islamic Front.

The intervention has helped defend Kobane but has not defeated the Islamic State, which continues to hold almost half of the city. Beyond Kobane, its effect on the Islamic State appears to be limited, with no degradation of the organization's hold on its areas of Syria or on its organization. While oil facilities have been struck, there is no sign yet of a significant impact on the Islamic State's finances.

The manner of the intervention has been counter-productive in both immediate and long-term effects. The failure to inform insurgent factions, including the Free Syrian Army, of the operations --- let alone coordinate the actions --- has meant there is no ground support for the airstrikes against the Islamic State, apart from limited Kurdish support in and near Kobane. The airstrikes on insurgent factions has alienated much of the insurgency, with some groups approaching the Islamic State for a cease-fire. This is clearly deeply problematic also in light of the UN initiative to promote more local ceasefires to ease the humanitarian in Syria. The attacks have also turned residents in Idlib and Aleppo Province against the coalition.

The Syrian regime has given cautious support to the intervention because of the prospect that it will damage both its long-term challenger, the insurgency, and its emerging challenger, the Islamic State. However, it has made clear that the support is contingent on an American assurance that regime elements will not be struck.

The Strategic Scenarios

Acceptance of Assad Regime

The shift from the stated British and American goal of the departure of President Assad in a “political transition” to acceptance of the regime --- and possibly cooperation with the regime against the Islamic State --- has been espoused recently by former officials such as Leslie Gelb in the US and General Lord Dannatt in Britain.

Beyond the moral issue of acceptance of a regime responsible for the large majority of the more than 200,000 deaths and displacement of more than 10 million Syrians in the conflict, the proposal faces serious practical hurdles.

The Assad regime controls a minority of territory in Syria. Its forces have been ejected by the insurgents from much of the northwest and south by insurgents, and from much of the north and east by the Islamic State. It relies on airpower to maintain its hold on parts of all of key cities, such as Aleppo, Homs, and Hama, and it has been unable to remove insurgents completely from a ring of territory around Damascus.

“Acceptance” of the regime would do little to alter this situation, given the difficulties faced by Syrian ground forces --- even aided by Hezbollah, foreign militias, and Iranian units --- in fighting across the country.

A campaign against the Islamic State would require some level of co-operation with Damascus and its military on the ground, assisting the Syrian military in its attempt to regain the offensive in central Syria in Hama Province --- where it has been under pressure from the Islamic State, including the prospect of losing the country's major gas field --- and to re-establish a strategic foothold in Deir Ez Zor and Hasakeh Provinces in the east.

In return for this co-operation, the Syrian regime would demand acceptance by the US and Britain of

its continuing aerial campaign, including barrel bombs and on occasion chlorine, as well as its “surrender or starve” siege strategy against insurgent-held areas.

Damascus would also require the US and Britain to drop any support for a meaningful “political transition”, abandoning any process for talks with the Syrian opposition inside and outside the country.

External Containment

As the threat of the Islamic State has grown inside Syria, some commentators have advocated “external containment”, eschewing intervention in favour of support of neighbouring countries. Fareed Zakaria wrote last month, “The only strategy against the Islamic State that has any chance of working is containment — bolstering the neighbors (who are threatened far more than the United States) that are willing to fight militarily and politically.” Others have added the imperative of providing additional assistance to deal with the humanitarian crisis of 4 million registered Syrian refugees, most of whom are in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey.

External containment is unlikely to assuage the situation inside Syria. It does nothing to address the advance of the Islamic State, whose latest offensive led to about 200,000 people fleeing into Turkey from the mainly-Kurdish Kobane area in northern Syria. It does nothing to meet the crises caused by fighting, notably the regime's aerial bombardment, which has prompted further internal displacements this autumn to add to the more than 6 million already forced from their homes.

Nor does external containment provide a lasting security for neighbouring countries. Conflict has escalated in northern Lebanon since the summer. The fighting around Kobane spurred mass protests in eastern Turkey, in which at least 38 people were killed in October. Jordan and Saudi Arabia have so far not seen any spillover, but the Islamic State has threatened to take attacks to those areas. The continued deprivation and tension around Syria, as well as inside it, is likely to feed extremism rather than check it as people desperately search for a way out of a long-term predicament.

External containment cannot be a solution on its own, but needs to be part of a strategy that would also facilitate building security from the outside in. It would assist neighbouring countries to deal more effectively with the humanitarian and violent spill-over of the Syrian crisis. It would also secure vital allies whose support would be critical in delivering an internal containment strategy that forms the heart of our proposal and would involve the establishment of secure humanitarian corridors, supply routes, and possibly training camps and staging areas for insurgent forces.

Internal Containment

To offer the prospect of stability in even a limited area of Syria, a plan must provide for security from both the attacks of the Assad regime and the Islamic State. A local population cannot pursue governance and the provision of basic services if there is perpetual insecurity.

In earlier periods of the Syrian conflict, local councils attempted to fulfil these tasks. However, they have been overwhelmed --- by the Syrian military's aerial and ground assaults, as in the protracted assaults on Homs in 2012, on Hama in 2013, and the Qalamoun offensive of 2014; by the regime's siege strategy, forcing capitulation in Homs and areas near Damascus in 2014; by the Islamic State's advance; and by in-fighting among insurgents in parts of Idlib and Aleppo Provinces in 2014.

A return to local stability must have the guarantee of protection from air and ground attacks, as well as the provision of assistance to prevent imposition of a siege. In the current situation, a starting point would be a protected zones in northwest Syria, along the Turkish border, in areas held by insurgent forces. The proximity of these zones to Turkey allows for provision of supplies and aerial protection, offering space for political discussions which have precluded by the permanence of military crisis.

In pursuing internal containment, it must be recognized that outside countries cannot just impose a favoured faction for political development. Labels such as “US-supported” and “moderate” --- often juxtaposed with “extremist” and “Al Qa’eda-linked” --- have raised barriers in recent months, as they tend to take little heed of local situations.

Instead, outside powers would provide the protection for indigenous groups to establish their own coalitions for political, legal, and social institutions. These coalitions would work with insurgent groups who are already present in the area, including blocs and factions such as the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic Front, and Jabhat al-Nusra.

Internal containment will have to recognize that the US and Britain cannot play pick-and-choose with Syrian opposition groups. Doing so is likely to exclude factions who command significant local support, furthering division rather than establishing a zone for political, humanitarian, and military advance.

Internal containment would need to involve establishment and enforcement of a no-fly zone, initially in the northwest, and increased support to, training of, and coordination with a broad range of insurgent groups, including sharing of tactical and operational intelligence. It would also require not only a continuation of current efforts in the air campaign against the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria but also coordination of that campaign with local ground forces.

Pursuit of this strategy has been hindered in part because of the framing of an insurgency dominated by “extremism”, in particular, by Jabhat al-Nusra with a leadership linked to Al Qa’eda. However, reliable sources inside the country estimate that 70% of Jabhat al-Nusra’s fighters are Syrians who joined jihadist factions because other groups lack weapons, money, and resources.

A coherent implementation of internal containment would lead to many fighters returning to the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic Front, and would encourage a political process which is likely to lead to departures from Jabhat al-Nusra or a shift in its politics towards a more “moderate” position and behaviour. It would gain support and trust from Syrian people, whose acceptance of Jabhat al-Nusra is primarily because of the perception that “only” the Islamist faction helps them. Beyond the specific issue of Jabhat al-Nusra, the protected zones can reduce corruption and war-profiteering --- key causes of tension within the insurgency --- through better control of supplies and resources.

An effective implementation of this internal containment approach would put the West in a stronger position vis-à-vis Iran and Russia, both of whom have significant vested interests in the crisis. It would also provide a more sustainable foundation for cooperation with allies among Gulf States, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, whose vested interests in the conflict are linked to a strategy of confronting the Assad regime. It would also go some way to meeting the concerns of Israel, whose anxieties have been heightened by fragmentation of the conflict and the emergence of Islamic State.

Conclusion

This proposal --- centred on a strategy of internal containment, supplemented with elements of an external containment approach --- is offered as a starting point. It needs to be seen as the beginning of a long process towards a de-escalation and resolution of the Syrian crisis, rather than its end-point. Critically, it will involve contact and discussion with groups who have heretofore been considered off-limits for US and British diplomacy. However, pursued carefully, it will:

- 1) Establish a working relationship with groups who have established their presence in Syrian communities;
- 2) Renew relations with allies, including France, Turkey, and Gulf States, who have expressed frustration with indecision in US and British policy;

- 3) Offer an alternative to the long-term prospect of deadly stalemate with the Syrian regime and the consolidation of territorial control by the Islamic State;
- 4) Start a process to assist in dealing with the growing humanitarian crisis;