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# SETTING THE STAGE FOR PEACE IN SYRIA

**The Case  
for a  
Syrian  
National  
Stabilization  
Force**

FREDERIC C. HOF, BASSMA KODMANI, AND JEFFREY WHITE

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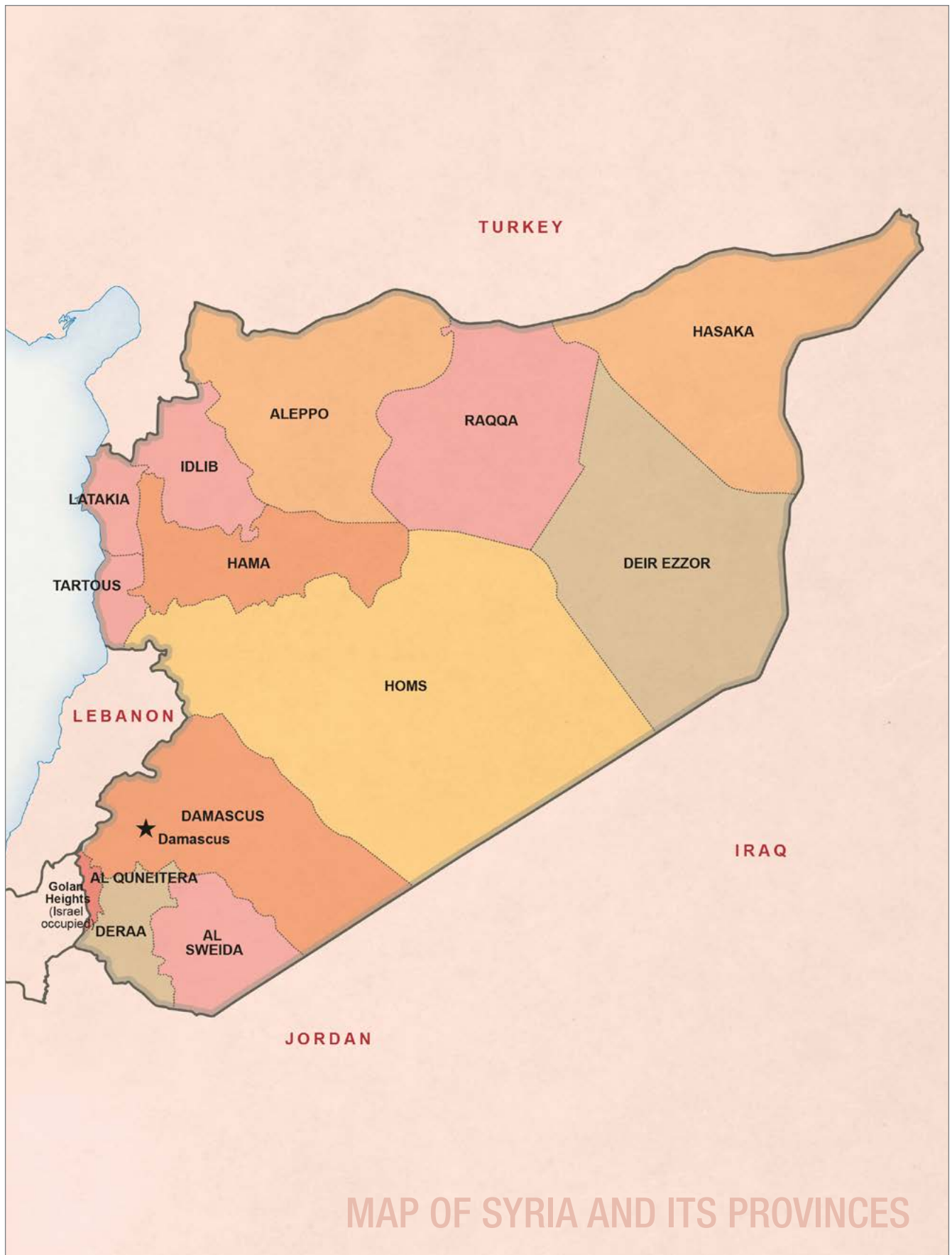
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## FOREWORD

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Four years ago, Syria began its descent into a modern-day hell when President Bashar al-Assad decided to respond to peaceful protest with deadly violence. The descent gathered momentum as Assad, with the support of Iran and Russia, militarized to crush a broad-based uprising against his corrupt, capricious, and incompetent rule. Assad designated all of his opponents as terrorists in the employ of the United States, Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, and instigated a sectarian campaign of war crimes and crimes against humanity. This campaign drew to Syria Assad's opponents of choice: remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq and foreign fighters from around the globe who are just as interested as Assad in destroying those fighting for a Syria of citizenship and inclusion. In June 2014, the survival strategy of the Assad regime paid a major dividend: the eruption of the self-styled Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from secure bases in eastern Syria into Iraq. Today, Assad cynically seeks to offer himself as the solution to the problem he created.

As the United States and the anti-ISIL coalition it has assembled struggle, one thing is clear: ISIL will not be destroyed until legitimate governance takes hold in Syria and Iraq. ISIL fills vacuums created by illegitimacy. Political legitimacy requires consensus on the rules of the political game. In Iraq, the ouster of Nouri al-Maliki, a divisive proponent of crude sectarian majoritarianism, was an essential first step in the search for political legitimacy in a country of multiple sects and ethnicities. In Syria, neither the rapacious rule of a clan addicted to barrel bombing civilians nor governance by savages engaged in beheadings and live burnings offers a pathway to legitimacy. Assad and ISIL jointly obstruct legitimacy in Syria. So long as they are in place, Syrians will be the victims of a humanitarian abomination, and Syria's neighbors will be in peril. So long as Assad and ISIL are not replaced by legitimate governance, they will be politically un-dead, even if they are punished militarily.

ISIL has drawn the Obama administration's attention back to Syria. Unlike in Iraq, the American-led coalition had little in Syria resembling a ground combat component to complement anti-ISIL airstrikes. Given that Assad and ISIL have largely avoided fighting each other, each hoping to be one of the last two parties standing in Syria, the administration decided that an anti-ISIL ground force

might be raised from nationalist opponents of the Assad regime. Indeed, armed nationalists have found themselves fighting both ISIL and the regime. The President called for and Congress endorsed a train-and-equip initiative that would, over three years, produce some sixteen thousand nationalist fighters to carry the battle to ISIL on the ground while presumably holding their own against Assad regime forces and foreign fighter allies drawn from Lebanon and Iraq by Iran. Unfortunately, such a Syrian force is unlikely to survive the onslaught of the Assad regime, much less help defeat ISIL.

In *Setting the Stage for Peace in Syria: The Case for a Syrian National Stabilization Force*, three prominent observers of the political-military situation in Syria—Ambassador Frederic C. Hof of the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Dr. Bassma Kodmani of the Arab Reform Initiative, and Mr. Jeffrey White of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy—join forces to produce a credible and attractive alternative to “train and equip.” The authors propose that a large and capable Syrian National Stabilization Force (SNSF) be built to defeat any combination of enemies obstructing the stabilization of Syria and the imposition of law and order: the absolute precondition for a transition process leading to legitimate governance. They envision a three-division (fifty thousand personnel) force with impressive combat and civil military capabilities; a force ultimately reporting to a Syrian national command authority, and open to patriotic officers and soldiers seeking an alternative to serving the Assad extended family. Indeed, the building and manifestation of this force could provide the basis for genuine political transition negotiations.

Whether the United States sticks with “train and equip” in its current form or elects to do something meaningful along the lines of the SNSF, Syrian guidance and input will be essential. Anything resembling a colonial levee will lack both legitimacy and properly motivated recruits. As the Syrian opposition (recognized by Washington and others as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people) prepares itself to govern in liberated parts of Syria, an informal advisory task force of Syrians might be assembled now by the United States to help with vetting, strategic messaging, and other matters of essential guidance. Once areas inside Syria are liberated and protected a Free Syrian government can be established

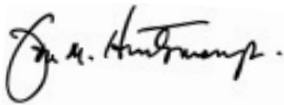


## FOREWORD

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and recognized, providing a solid base for recruiting, training, and equipping the requisite SNSF.

The ideas offered in this report are worth careful consideration and systematic implementation. The antidote to utter state failure in Syria is legitimate governance. ISIL must be crushed militarily, and the Assad regime must be obliged to give way to the transitional governing body called for in June 2012 at Geneva. There may be no “military solution” for Syria. But neither will there be a political-diplomatic solution opening a pathway to legitimate governance without military facts that make diplomacy feasible and productive. This excellent report illuminates a clear way forward.



**Jon M. Huntsman, Jr.**

*Chairman*

Atlantic Council

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Building on President Barack Obama's train-and-equip program to mold nationalist Syrian rebels into a Syrian ground force to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), this report recommends aiming higher: recruiting, training, equipping, and deploying a Syrian National Stabilization Force (SNSF) consisting exclusively of Syrians.<sup>1</sup> This force, which could constitute the core of the future Syrian Army, would have the military mission of defeating any combination of enemies obstructing the stabilization of the country and the establishment of legitimate, inclusive governance in all of Syria. Ideally, the creation of a robust SNSF, one supported militarily by allies and responding ultimately to a Syrian national command authority, would help set the conditions for meaningful political transition negotiations. Thus, the SNSF has the potential to obviate the need for a countrywide military campaign. For it to have such a salubrious impact, however, it will be necessary to configure and support the SNSF to win militarily under Syrian political direction.

This report envisions and recommends building a three-division motorized infantry-type force of some fifty thousand personnel. This is not to imply that there exists today a readily available recruiting base to construct a force of this size. Neither does it imply that a fifty thousand-man force—even one with combat air support by allies—would be able to run roughshod over the current alignment of Syrian state destroyers, led by ISIL and the Bashar al-Assad regime. To set a planning objective of fifty thousand requires that serious consideration be given to the establishment of protected zones inside Syria, where existing nationalist units and a population of males who have already undergone military training through universal conscription can be directly accessed. To reach and even surpass fifty thousand requires that the political agenda associated with the SNSF—nationalism, peace, stability, inclusiveness, rule of law, reconciliation, and reconstruction—exert a magnetic effect on officers and soldiers currently serving in the regime's Syrian Arab Army and on young Syrian fighters who have been attracted to jihadist organizations not by ideology but the promise of material support.

The force described in this report would have significant civil-military capabilities as well as robust firepower.

Indeed, civilian protection, something notably absent from the barbaric tactics of the Assad regime and ISIL, would be a major SNSF mission requiring training at all echelons of the proposed force. In the end, however, this would be a force configured to prevail militarily.

Ultimately, the SNSF would have to be more than just Syrian in composition. It would have to respond to a Syrian national command authority, which would provide political and strategic direction. This is problematic. In December 2012, the United States and others recognized the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. But an American arm's-length approach to the SNC permitted regional actors to rend it into dysfunctional, competing factions. Washington's half-hearted support of the Syrian opposition and its failure to back the establishment of moderate Syrian governance in protected zones have helped to leave the SNC and its affiliated Syrian Interim Government high and dry in exile, where they are subject to the machinations of regional actors.

The Syrian opposition is in no position now to constitute a national command authority. Yet those who would build the SNSF—or even something less, consistent with the current train-and-equip concept—need sober, rational Syrian input. The force to be created, whether the proposed SNSF or something much smaller, needs Syrian identity and Syrian guidance to pass the baseline test of legitimacy. Although Syrian recruits no doubt can be found to man a foreign militia serving foreign interests, basic questions related to motivation, morale, loyalty, and reliability would haunt the enterprise.

Pending the creation of a Syrian national command authority, perhaps in the form of a government established inside a Syrian protected zone, this report strongly recommends that an informal, unofficial, and temporary Syrian Advisory Task Force (SATF) be created to advise the train-and-equip implementers and facilitate communication between the implementers and Syrians at multiple levels. Thanks to four years of experience, US government officials can easily identify up to a dozen Syrians capable of acting collegially and intelligently to fill the gap between today's troubled opposition and a national command authority that could emerge through active, engaged, and effective American diplomacy before the SNSF is fully formed.

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<sup>1</sup> ISIL is also known as ISIS—Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This study strongly recommends that the United States organize itself diplomatically for a long and difficult struggle in Syria. An American invasion and occupation is out of the question: it always has been, straw-man arguments notwithstanding.

But wishing and hoping for a diplomatic *deus ex machina* delivered by Russia or a United Nations special envoy is also unrealistic. The combined effects of the Assad regime and ISIL have included a humanitarian abomination, regional destabilization, and a global terror threat. Replacing these two sides of the terror-criminal coin with legitimate, inclusive governance is overwhelmingly a job for Syrians. The United States, its allies, and its partners can help.

Building, deploying, and supporting the SNSF would, in the view of this study, be essential to creating the conditions that will defeat ISIL, remove a clan-based regime whose tactics have made Syria safe for the pseudo-caliphate, and give Syrians an opportunity for genuine self-government featuring rule of law. Unlike the train-and-equip program as currently conceived, the SNSF could make a significant difference on the ground and perhaps persuade key parties such as Iran, Russia, and the Assad regime that meaningful political transition negotiations are an attractive option after all.



## SECTION 1. POLITICAL OBJECTIVE AND MILITARY MISSION

### THE NECESSITY OF LEGITIMATE GOVERNANCE FOR SYRIA

Syria is failing as a state. Since March 2011, the regime—the ruling Assad clan and its enablers, in and out of government—has executed a violent sectarian survival strategy, one that has traded the unitary nature of Syrian statehood for an Iranian-sustained regime fiefdom in western Syria precariously maintained by brute force. By attacking peaceful protesters with lethal force, applied in large measure by politically reliable and predominantly Alawite armed elements (official and not), the regime deliberately provoked sectarian responses (both local and regional) and ultimately converted unarmed protest into armed resistance. By releasing political Islamist prisoners from jail at the outset of the uprising, the regime planted the seeds for al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which it had supported during the American occupation of Iraq, to rise from the ashes. AQI then moved to Syria in the form of the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which were nurtured through private money from Gulf Arab donors and attracted foreign jihadists from around the globe. As of early 2015, what was once Syria is divided among a criminal family enterprise in the west; a criminal, self-proclaimed caliphate in the east; and a crazy quilt of areas held by an array of armed rebels spread across northern, central, and southern Syria. Syria as a unitary state has ceased to exist. It will have to be rebuilt from the ground up.

ISIL cannot be destroyed unless there is legitimate governance for all of Syria. Governance reflecting the consent of the governed—the ultimate test of legitimacy—cannot take hold in Syria so long as the forces of lawlessness and illegitimacy led by the Assad regime and ISIL are able to project military power. Although the West, led by Washington, holds out hope for a political transition proceeding from negotiations between the regime and the nationalist opposition, the military support provided to the Assad regime by Iran and Russia renders the regime indisposed to negotiating a transition. In the absence of countervailing military coercion, it is difficult to envision a meaningful and productive political process that could unite Syrians against ISIL and chart a path to political legitimacy in Syria.

One possible pathway to neutralizing lawlessness, beginning negotiations, and ultimately building a unified, pluralistic Syria of citizenship and rule of law is for the United States to take the lead in creating a Syrian National Stabilization Force (SNSF). The SNSF would be an armed force composed entirely of Syrians. Congress's December 2014 authorization for "the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Secretary of State, to provide assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, stipends, construction of training and associated facilities, and sustainment, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition..." could provide seed money (to be multiplied by partners) for such an enterprise.<sup>1</sup> Yet that which is proposed here, in terms of political objective and military mission, goes well beyond the ISIL-centric rationale of the administration's train-and-equip program.

**ISIL CANNOT BE DESTROYED UNLESS THERE IS LEGITIMATE GOVERNANCE FOR ALL OF SYRIA.**

### POLITICAL OBJECTIVE, MILITARY MISSION

The political objective underlying the SNSF would be the restoration of state authority in all of Syria. Achievement of this objective would be guided by Syrian civilian-political leadership providing the requisite national command authority, most likely in the form of a governmental alternative to Assad clan rule in western Syria and the self-styled caliphate in the east. This national command authority would incorporate the various armed nationalist opposition groups that are willing to fight for a pluralistic Syria of citizenship.

Although the United States and its partners would drive the organizing and equipping of the requisite force, the

<sup>1</sup> Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, Section 1209, [http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File\\_id=926D63B6-5E50-49FC-99EF-A59B98825265](http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=926D63B6-5E50-49FC-99EF-A59B98825265).



Civilians sift through the rubble in Aleppo in March 2014. According to Syrian opposition sources, the destruction was caused by barrel bombs dropped by forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. *Photo credit: Reuters/Mahmoud Hebbo.*

SNSF recommended in this report would respond ultimately to Syrian civilian-political direction. And while this study does not rule out foreign military intervention aimed at neutralizing both sides of Syria's terror coin—ISIL and the Assad regime—the report most definitely assumes that a Syrian-led effort will be essential to the eventual establishment of legitimate governance in Syria. The alternative to a force ultimately directed by a Syrian national command authority would be an armed force created and deployed by foreigners for foreign purposes. Syrians would consider any such force illegitimate, and is not likely to get far off the ground in terms of recruitment.

The military mission of the SNSF would be to defeat all armed forces obstructing the restoration of state authority in the entirety of the country. A key facet of SNSF operations would include civilian-military operations centering on humanitarian relief, restoring law and order, and protecting vulnerable civilians.

Although the SNSF would be configured to prevail militarily over any combination of foes, it would also be a political-diplomatic lever. Its deployment could spur meaningful political transition negotiations between the regime and the Syrian political authority that would ultimately govern the SNSF. Its ranks could be open to patriotic military officers and enlisted personnel currently serving under regime direction. These personnel would

be vetted so as to include only those with hands unbloodied by criminal acts. Indeed, personnel currently serving in regime intelligence and security services could be similarly vetted and folded into the SNSF. The SNSF should, in sum, be seen in the positive context of Syrian nationalism and unity, not as a force whose existence is defined by “opposition” to something.

### WHY A SYRIAN NATIONAL STABILIZATION FORCE?

The prospect of total state failure in Syria has had significant implications for the Levantine-Mesopotamian region; all of them are bad. Even before the eruption of the violent, vacuum-filling ISIL out of Syria into Iraq in June 2014, Syria's neighbors were awash with Syrian refugees and associated security and economic challenges. The humanitarian abomination brought about mainly (according to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic) by the Assad regime's war crimes and crimes against humanity have produced over 3.9 million refugees and some 7.6 million internally displaced.<sup>2</sup> More than 220,000 Syrians have died in the conflict and two-thirds of Syria's population requires humanitarian assistance.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> USAID, “Syria—Complex Emergency,” Fact Sheet #5, Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, March 31, 2015, [http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/syria\\_ce\\_fs05\\_03-31-2015.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/syria_ce_fs05_03-31-2015.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

regime's criminality is supplemented by that of ISIL, which is now under military air assault by a US-led coalition. With what was once Syria—effectively but uneasily partitioned between two criminal entities and with an assortment of armed opposition groups in-between—prospects for reconstruction, reconciliation, and peace are currently nil. Prospects for continued rampant criminality, refugee flows, and widespread terror are strong.

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REQUIRES HUMANITARIAN  
ASSISTANCE.**

The United States and the broad partnership of nations known as the “London 11” remain committed to the goal of political transition in Syria, one ideally produced by a diplomatic process based on the June 30, 2012 Final Communiqué of the Action Group on Syria, which met in Geneva under the chairmanship of former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.<sup>5</sup> Yet two rounds of UN-sponsored talks in Geneva in late 2013 and early 2014 witnessed the refusal of the Assad regime to engage meaningfully in discussions aimed at reaching a political settlement. Indeed, the regime rejected the terms of the Final Communiqué. After more than a year of military campaigning largely conducted by pro-regime Shia foreign fighters assembled by Iran, the Assad regime felt secure enough in western Syria to conduct an election in June 2014 purporting to give Assad a new seven-year term as Syria's President. It is no exaggeration to say that the Assad regime has never had any interest in a negotiated transition of power and no intention of negotiating seriously to achieve one.

Beyond peaceful, negotiated political transition, another tenet of the Western approach to Syria has been the inadmissibility of war as the “answer” to Syria's prob-

lems.<sup>6</sup> Yet while the West has insisted on negotiated conflict resolution as the proper answer to Syria's woes, the Assad regime, with the full support of Iran and Russia, has sought and substantially achieved military superiority in western Syria. The regime, Iran, and Russia have calculated that salient military facts on the ground can produce the diplomatic outcome they seek: the political irrelevance of the nationalist, non-jihadist opposition to the Assad regime. The West, through grudging support of the opposition and belief that the terms and associated processes of the Geneva Final Communiqué would somehow prevail, has downplayed the importance and relevance of military developments in the Syrian political-diplomatic context. Before and during the 2013-14 Geneva II talks, the West (led by the United States) took the position that the Assad regime was *obliged* to give way to a transitional governing body *irrespective* of the military situation in Syria.

Indeed, it appears likely that combat operations will continue to shape diplomatic and political outcomes in Syria, as they have in virtually all of the inhabited globe since time immemorial. A policy rooted in the inadmissibility of war as the “answer” is well intentioned. It may also reflect a disinclination on the part of its adherents to engage militarily in the problem at hand, or the considered view that no one actor has the ability to conquer and stabilize all of Syria through purely kinetic means. It may further reflect the hope that the sheer size of Syria's humanitarian catastrophe will inspire actors currently pleased to use violence—military operations, paramilitary massacres, mass terror tactics, torture, sexual abuse, and the like—to instead behave humanely and sensibly by negotiating and giving peace a chance. But such a policy will not work.

The SNSF represents a potential approach to deal with this grim but inescapable reality. The narrow product of the train-and-equip authorization delivered by Congress focuses mainly on the putative, potential ground combat component for anti-ISIL air operations currently being mounted in Syria by an American-led multinational coalition. In reality, however, both time and the desires of those to be recruited work against such a one-dimensional characterization. Indeed, a one-dimensional anti-ISIL mission would also alienate the nationalist, non-jihadist opposition that the Washington-led coalition seeks to cultivate. It would do so by downplaying the military operations and terrorist depredations of a regime whose portfolio of war crimes and crimes against humanity is rich and diversified: a regime that has killed far more Syrians than has ISIL.

4 In addition to the United States, the London 11 consists of Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.

5 Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué, June 30, 2012, [www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf).

6 See, for example, “White House Joint Statement on Syria,” September 6, 2013, which reads “Recognizing that Syria's conflict has no military solution, we reaffirm our commitment to seek a peaceful political settlement through full implementation of the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.” See [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/06/joint-statement-syria](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/06/joint-statement-syria).



Furthermore, an anti-ISIL ground component capable of operating in 2015 would require the survival and cooperation of existing nationalist, non-jihadist, opposition military elements inside Syria. This is because it could take the better part of three years (or more) to organize, arm, equip, and train much of this component *outside* of Syria before major elements of its structure could be deployed *inside* Syria. Meanwhile, armed nationalist units are under attack by the regime, ISIL, and the Nusra Front, and are in danger of losing their foothold in Aleppo and other parts of northern Syria. South of Damascus Iranian-mustered foreign fighters are similarly pressing nationalist units. Such setbacks would deny the anti-ISIL coalition an existing ground combat component option and would deeply demoralize the nationalist opposition to Assad and al-Qaeda descendants. To consider the train-and-equip initiative solely or even predominantly as an anti-ISIL ground combat component would be to defer for a painfully long period of time the existence of such a component.

This is the mission that instructs all which follows in terms of organizing, arming, equipping, training, and deploying the SNSF. It is a mission that does not preclude a prior negotiated political settlement that could preserve governmental ministries and social welfare institutions currently dominated by, reporting to, and at the full disposal of the ruling clan. Indeed, the SNSF might provide the missing element to change regime calculations about the value and utility of a complete, negotiated political transition. Yet the military mission and the political objective sought must guide the creation of combat capabilities designed to deal with a reality the West has tried to avoid: that restoration of non-Assad, non-ISIL state authority in Syria will undoubtedly require a major coercive, peace-enforcement military force capable of overcoming all military and related security obstacles as it works to defeat opponents, restore the Syrian state, promote humanitarian relief, and protect vulnerable civilians.

**THE TRAIN-AND-EQUIP INITIATIVE  
OF THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION  
MUST GO FAR BEYOND ITS CURRENT  
SCOPE IF IT IS TO DO ANYTHING AT  
ALL USEFUL WITH RESPECT TO ISIL  
AND SYRIA.**

This report seeks to make the case that the train-and-equip initiative of the Obama administration must go far beyond its current scope if it is to do anything at all useful with respect to ISIL and Syria. ISIL will not be defeated so long as Syria remains on the fast lane to state failure. Syria will remain in that lane so long as the Assad regime is in power. A real Syrian stabilization force would spearhead the restoration of state authority in all of Syria under civilian guidance and leadership. This political objective would dictate its military mission: the defeat of all armed forces and elements obstructing the restoration of state authority in the entirety of the country.

## SECTION 2. POLICY AND DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGES FOR THE UNITED STATES

### CONGRESS'S TRAIN-AND-EQUIP AUTHORIZATION

On June 26, 2014, President Barack Obama, in response to the invasion of Iraq by Syria-based Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) forces, asked Congress to authorize the US Department of Defense to allocate \$500 million “to train and equip appropriately vetted elements of the moderate Syrian armed opposition. These funds would help defend the Syrian people, stabilize areas under opposition control, facilitate the provision of essential services, counter terrorist threats, and promote conditions for a negotiated settlement.”<sup>1</sup> By September 19, 2014, the request had been approved by both houses of Congress (in a fiscal year 2015 continuing resolution) and signed into law by the President.<sup>2</sup>

The President stated his pleasure that a majority of Democrats and a majority of Republicans, in both the House and the Senate, “voted to support a key element of our strategy: our plan to train and equip the opposition in Syria so they can help push back these terrorists.”<sup>3</sup> One week later the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey indicated that the Syrian “moderate opposition” could be developed into the ground combat force component for an anti-ISIL, American-led coalition conducting airstrikes in Syria. Dempsey estimated that a force of twelve to fifteen thousand could suffice to retake territory from ISIL.<sup>4</sup> Other reporting suggested that the US Department of Defense would seek to train and equip five thousand personnel per year beginning in 2015. Clearly, the administration saw the building of a coherent, well-trained, and equipped Syrian opposition force very much in the context of fighting ISIL.

In December 2014, Congress extended the train-and-equip authority through December 2016 by passage of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).<sup>5</sup> According to Section 1209 of the NDAA (Authority to Provide Assistance to the Vetted Syrian Opposition), “The Secretary of Defense is authorized, in coordination with the Secretary of State, to provide assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, stipends, construction of training and associated facilities, and sustainment to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals, through December 31, 2016, for the following purposes:

- (1) Defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and securing territory controlled by the Syrian opposition.
- (2) Protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from threats posed by terrorists in Syria.
- (3) Promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.”<sup>6</sup>

This study takes a broader view of the potential military mission of a force to be trained and equipped than the one articulated by the President, the Chairman, and (in terms of explicit language) the NDAA. Fighting ISIL and other al-Qaeda-derived armed elements would certainly be an important part of the mission. Jihadists have, after all, exerted more combat effort against the Syrian nationalist opponents of the Assad regime than they have against the regime itself. So fighting ISIL and like-minded organizations will come naturally and inevitably to any force trained and equipped by the United States and its partners. But jihadists are the occupants of a vacuum created by a regime whose continued existence is the central challenge to legitimate governance in Syria.

Although Congress’s authorization of the train-and-equip mission does not explicitly cite fighting the Assad regime, it does not *forbid* trained and equipped elements of the

1 “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Caitlin Hayden,” White House, June 26, 2014, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/26/statement-nsc-spokesperson-caitlin-hayden](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/26/statement-nsc-spokesperson-caitlin-hayden).

2 Public Law 113–164, 113th Congress, September 19, 2014, [www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ164/PLAW-113publ164.pdf](http://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ164/PLAW-113publ164.pdf).

3 “Statement by the President on Congressional Authorization to Train Syrian Opposition,” White House, September 18, 2014, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/18/statement-president-congressional-authorization-train-syrian-opposition](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/18/statement-president-congressional-authorization-train-syrian-opposition).

4 “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Secretary Hagel and Gen. Dempsey in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” September 26, 2014, [www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5508](http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5508); Phil Stewart and Missy Ryan, “Up to 15,000 Syrian Rebels Needed to Retake Eastern Syria—U.S. Military,” Reuters, September 26, 2014, [www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/26/us-mideast-crisis-usa-rebels-idUSKCN0HL24E20140926](http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/26/us-mideast-crisis-usa-rebels-idUSKCN0HL24E20140926).

5 Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, Section 1209, [http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File\\_id=926D63B6-5E50-49FC-99EF-A59B98825265](http://armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=926D63B6-5E50-49FC-99EF-A59B98825265).

6 Ibid.

Syrian opposition from doing so. Nor does it explicitly limit the train-and-equip effort to prospective operations against ISIL. Indeed, to exclude the regime would be to narrow to the vanishing point any Syrian recruiting base rooted in opposition to it. Syrians have, after all, suffered incalculably more at the hands of the regime than they have from ISIL.<sup>7</sup> And the highly sectarian, clan-based Assad regime has been a major catalyst in the rise of ISIL and Syria's looming state failure.

## CHANGING THE MILITARY SITUATION TO ASSAD'S DISADVANTAGE IS THE KEY TO CHANGING HIS CALCULATIONS WITH RESPECT TO A NEGOTIATED POLITICAL SETTLEMENT.

In fact, *securing territory controlled by the opposition* would require a mix of defensive, counterattack, and even offensive capabilities and operations against Assad regime forces. *Protecting against threats posed by terrorists* surely encompasses threats posed by Hezbollah and two very prominent state sponsors of terrorism designated by the US Department of State—Assad's Syria and Iran. And *promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement* surely requires the United States, as Secretary of State John Kerry put it in February 2013, “to address the question of President Assad's calculation” and “to see us change his calculation.”<sup>8</sup> Inasmuch as Assad's calculation is rooted in his understanding of military reality, changing the military situation to his disadvantage is the key to changing his calculation with respect to a negotiated political settlement.

Indeed, the existence of the Assad regime “only fuels extremism and inflames tensions throughout the region” according to a September 29, 2014 Department of State fact sheet, “Syrian Crisis: US Assistance and Support for the Transition.”<sup>9</sup> In his October 14, 2014 remarks to assembled Chiefs of Defense at Joint Base Andrews, President Obama went even further, saying that the fight against ISIL will “require us developing and strength-

ening a moderate opposition inside of Syria that is in a position then to bring about the kind of legitimacy and sound governance for all people inside of Syria.”<sup>10</sup> For this opposition to bring sound governance to all Syrians, it will obviously require a military force capable of protecting it and stabilizing the entire country. This is the force envisioned and defined by this report.

## TRAIN AND EQUIP: POLICY OR PLACEHOLDER?

This study is undertaken with the assumption that the train-and-equip initiative is real and can benefit from some critical thinking and creative shaping. Whether the guiding assumption of this report is true or not is known to only one person—President Obama.

Wanting to build a Syrian force willing and able to fight ISIL while somehow serving as a potential negotiating interlocutor for the Assad regime is understandable in terms of administration desires; it serves an administration predisposition to focus on ISIL—indeed, to focus on ISIL *in Iraq*—while putting Syria on a policy back burner. The near-term challenge, however, will be to find sizeable numbers of anti-regime Syrians willing to sign onto something geared toward servicing a nuanced American policy preference rather than their own life-or-death situation. That is, it will be a challenge if the initiative itself is real.

One test of the administration's intent centers on time and space. As noted above, armed nationalist forces inside Syria are under increasingly deadly military pressure from the Assad regime and jihadists, mainly ISIL. If anti-regime Syrians in Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and elsewhere perceive an eventual defeat of nationalist forces as being attributable to the failure of the United States and its partners to provide adequate resupply or other forms of timely intervention, how would this affect the United States' ability to raise recruits outside of Syria? Might it not compound the inherent difficulty of recruiting Syrians to what many may see as an ISIL-centric mission? The willingness of the United States and partners to resupply nationalist forces robustly and at the very least conduct air assaults against ISIL positions in western Syria is a test of policy intent.

Likewise, the willingness of the administration to engage Turkey and perhaps Jordan to establish a protected zone or zones in Syrian territory for humanitarian and political ends will be a test of substantive seriousness. Obviously, it will not be possible to implement President Obama's stated desire to develop and strengthen Syrian moderate

7 Syrian Network for Human Rights, “1851 People Were Killed in December,” January 2015, [http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/1851\\_people\\_were\\_killed\\_in\\_December.pdf](http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/1851_people_were_killed_in_December.pdf).

8 John Kerry and Nasser Judeh, “Remarks with Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh After Their Meeting,” US Department of State, February 13, 2013, [www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/02/204560.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/02/204560.htm).

9 US Department of State, “Syrian Crisis: U.S. Assistance and Support for the Transition,” September 29, 2014, [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/09/232266.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/09/232266.htm).

10 “Remarks by the President After Meeting with Chiefs of Defense,” Joint Base Andrews, White House, October 14, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/14/remarks-president-after-meeting-chiefs-defense>.





President Barack Obama bids farewell to Iraqi Army General Babakir Zebari after an October 2014 meeting at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland. More than twenty foreign chiefs of defense gathered to discuss the coalition efforts in the ongoing campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). *Photo credit: White House/Pete Souza.*

governance inside Syria without first establishing a place where such governance can take root and spread. The mainstream Syrian opposition, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), drafted a “Back to Syria” plan that would move the organization and the affiliated Syrian Interim Government (SIG) out of Turkey and back to Syria. Understandably, however, the opposition is not eager to be on the losing end of a Levantine Bay of Pigs. The opposition would, for a period of time, require protection from regime and jihadist ground operations and regime air attacks. Turkish-American talks aimed at determining what specifically it would take to defend the opposition appear to be desultory at best. Jordanian-American talks may not be more urgent in nature. Perhaps all parties are content in the end to say that the idea is an interesting one worth discussing at length.

In terms of the Syrian National Stabilization Force (SNSF), however, a protected zone or zones could provide a jump start. Existing nationalist forces that have already received assistance from the United States—lethal and nonlethal—could be reorganized under a coherent command structure and form the initial component of the SNSF: a rapid reaction force of brigade size or larger capable of taking the lead in ground combat

operations against ISIL, the regime, and assorted other jihadists and armed criminals.

Still, the key challenge for the Obama administration will be to decide whether the anti-ISIL battle is essentially all about Iraq, with Syria to be addressed only in terms of its ISIL-related impact on Iraq, or if there is substantive policy content associated with the President’s words about promoting moderate governance for all Syrians inside Syria.

ISIL cannot be destroyed absent decent, inclusive, and legitimate governance in both Iraq and Syria. The administration’s choice is to move quickly to implement the President’s October 14, 2014 Joint Base Andrews guidance—likely involving the establishment of a protected zone or zones in conjunction with partners—or to continue with a rhetoric-rich policy asserting that the Assad regime must go, while doing little or nothing to achieve the desired result.<sup>11</sup> The former would entail risks

11 “Remarks by the President After Meeting with Chiefs of Defense,” White House, October 14, 2014, [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/14/remarks-president-after-meeting-chiefs-defense](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/10/14/remarks-president-after-meeting-chiefs-defense).

associated with the necessity to ground the regime's air force so that moderate governance could take place in protected areas free of barrel bomb terrorism. The latter would entail the risk of ISIL and the regime consolidating their respective positions, extending and expanding the jeopardy to American allies and friends in the region.

### DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE: ORGANIZING FOR A HEAVY LIFT

Building an all-Syrian force large and capable enough to stabilize Syria either by defeating militarily any combination of enemies or by setting the conditions for a negotiated political transition will require diplomatic heavy lifting of Olympian proportions. This will not be accomplished by White House micromanagement or by the solo efforts of others: a hyperactive Secretary of State, a Presidential Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, or a General Officer and his staff from the US Central Command. The American diplomatic effort will require making full use of multiple layers of expertise in key departments and agencies of government as well as Chiefs of Mission (Ambassadors) assigned to key countries.

The first diplomatic challenge for the Obama administration, therefore, would be to organize itself for a major effort. Once the train-and-equip request received initial Congressional approval, a very capable US Army officer, Major General Michael Nagata of the US Central Command, was given the task of establishing the military parameters for the Syrian force to be built. Assuming, however, that there is serious presidential intent behind the train-and-equip initiative, the effort to set the requisite diplomatic conditions for success requires that interagency leadership and coordination be exercised at a level higher than an army major general and a Department of Defense Unified Combatant Command. The Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL General (retired) John Allen would seem to be the appropriate person to lead the effort. He will need the full confidence of the President and the authority to execute the diplomatic mission without having to deal with harassing micromanagement by White House staffers.

### DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE: GETTING SYRIAN OPPOSITION AND REGIONAL PARTNERS ON BOARD

The second SNSF-related diplomatic challenge will be to convince the Syrian opposition and key partners that the initiative is genuine, and that the United States is irrevocably committed to the replacement of the Assad regime by Syrian governance reflecting inclusiveness, the primacy of citizenship, and rule of law. This will require some personal involvement by the President.

The history of American diplomatic involvement in the Syrian crisis has not inspired confidence in Washington among the Syrian opposition or the region's leaders. The fact that the opposition has suffered from disorganization and dysfunction does not reduce its salience; an all-Syrian force must report to a Syrian political authority, not anything even remotely viewed as a colonial entity. Some (if not all) of the regional leaders who would be asked to provide training facilities, offer financial support, maintain and garrison protected zones with ground troops, or participate in air operations that might include the suppression of regime aircraft and air defense assets see the ultimate removal of the Assad regime as an essential part of destroying ISIL. The Syrian opposition and regional leaders will want to be assured that the United States is fully committed to the undertaking for the mission's duration and that the United States will respond with deadly, decisive force if the regime, its supporters, ISIL, or any other jihadists act militarily or employ terrorism against them.

**THE AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC EFFORT WILL REQUIRE MAKING FULL USE OF MULTIPLE LAYERS OF EXPERTISE IN KEY DEPARTMENTS AND AGENCIES OF GOVERNMENT.**

Washington should not assume that key actors will take for granted the genuineness of this effort. Those actors will have to be persuaded that this endeavor is real. Words will be important. Actions, however, will be critical. Grounding the regime air force in conjunction with the establishment of a protected zone or zones would constitute evidence of seriousness. Recognition of a government established within that zone or zones would likewise be seen as the definitive break with the Assad regime. To the extent that recruiting, training, and equipping will take place entirely outside of Syria, however, it will be more difficult for Washington to persuade potential partners of its commitment.

Convincing the Syrian opposition of Washington's seriousness and bringing it into the SNSF planning process is important for several practical reasons:

- For purposes of legitimacy, it will be mandatory to tie the SNSF ultimately to a credible Syrian political authority—a Syrian national command authority.

- The credibility of that political authority will facilitate recruitment and the dedication of a significant effort by the SNSF to the anti-ISIL campaign.
- To the extent that the SNC—recognized by the United States in December 2012 as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people<sup>12</sup>—and its affiliated SIG are convinced that something real is being undertaken, their own struggles with disorganization, disunity, and dysfunction may be mitigated.
- President Obama's October 14, 2014 call for the growth of legitimate, modern governance inside Syria and its extension to all Syrians implies the eventual recognition of a governmental alternative to the Syrian Arab Republic Government. This would also presumably overcome whatever legal reservations and obstacles might exist with respect to raising, deploying, and supporting the SNSF.

## REGIONAL STATES HAVE BEEN CALLING FOR AMERICAN LEADERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS.

The specific, near-term diplomatic challenge is to convince the SNC and the SIG to heal a schism largely reflecting regional (Saudi, Qatari, Turkish, and Emirati) rivalries and to create an entity with which American planners can act intensively. To this end, it would be desirable for Washington to designate an envoy to the Turkey-based opposition and to post that person to Turkey indefinitely. As noted in the next section of this report, an informal Syrian Advisory Task Force could provide timely interim advice and assistance to the organizers of the SNSF until formal Syrian governing institutions are able to serve as effective and credible interlocutors.

Convincing regional partners of American seriousness is important for several practical reasons:

- Two states bordering Syria, Turkey and Jordan, are potentially vital in two respects: providing ground force assets to protected zones in which nationalist forces

could be organized into the initial SNSF formations, and providing training facilities for the SNSF in their respective countries. Jordan might well play a specialized role in organizing a Syrian tribal element of the SNSF. Yet the stability of southwestern Syria—perhaps in the form of a protected zone—will be vital to the prevention of further mass refugee flows from Syria into Jordan.

- Other states in the region, in particular Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, bring a variety of potentially useful assets to the table. Some might provide training sites. Others might provide air and ground assets to help secure protected zones. All could and should provide significant financial underpinning for the SNSF initiative. Their willingness to do the maximum will depend on their appraisal of Washington's commitment level.
- Regional states have been calling for American leadership in the context of the Syrian crisis. As noted above, factionalism within the ranks of the Syrian opposition reflects to a significant degree rivalries and differences of approach by regional states. A major US diplomatic effort to get all relevant parties on the same page in terms of supporting the opposition and the SNSF would be a sign of American seriousness. Washington's challenge is to oblige them to accept that American leadership will require the submersion of parochial interests for the sake of ultimate success. The United States alone can play this role.

## DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE: BRINGING EUROPEAN ALLIES INTO THE EFFORT

The third diplomatic challenge will be to bring European allies into the effort, either under the rubric of NATO or more likely as individual states making tailored contributions.

The starting point for any involvement of NATO as a collective defense and power projection organization in helping to raise the SNSF and aiding in the accomplishment of its mission would be the strong and irreversible commitment of the United States to the proposition that destroying ISIL requires (among other things) effective, legitimate governance in Syria; the Assad regime is antithetical to that requirement. Therefore, a powerful SNSF reporting ultimately to a duly constituted Syrian political authority and operating as part of the anti-ISIL coalition is essential.

Even with that level of American commitment, and notwithstanding the full involvement of Turkey in the endeavor, it will be difficult for Washington to rally a formal NATO initiative in support of the SNSF. Indeed, the Obama administration has not sought to include NATO per se in its anti-ISIL coalition-building effort. And

<sup>12</sup> Devin Dwyer and Dana Hughes, "Obama Recognizes Syrian Opposition Group," ABC News, December 11, 2012, [abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/exclusive-president-obama-recognizes-syrian-opposition-group/story?id=17936599](http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/exclusive-president-obama-recognizes-syrian-opposition-group/story?id=17936599).



NATO institutionally tends to regard the problem of Syria in the context of ISIL violence and the defense of Turkey.

There is a predisposition among NATO and European Union (EU) members to believe, as a matter of dogma, that there is no military solution to the Syrian crisis and that only political compromise produced by a sustained, good faith negotiation process can resolve matters. Furthermore, the belief still prevails in many (if not nearly all) European capitals that any kind of outside military intervention in Syria would only lengthen the war and increase the vulnerability of Syrian civilians—a belief and a concern apparently foreign to Iran and Russia. Yet some European states—France stands out in this regard—recognize that political-diplomatic outcomes often reflect, and never contradict, military realities.

## TEHRAN SEES BASHAR AL-ASSAD AS A VITAL LINK TO ITS LEBANESE FRANCHISE—HEZBOLLAH.

Therefore, if Washington elects to drop, at least in a practical sense, its own use of the “no military solution” mantra and embark on building a Syrian military force possessing decisive military capabilities, it will likely have to pursue a “coalition of the willing” approach similar to the one employed for the anti-ISIL coalition. The administration would have to convince potential partners that the ultimate destruction of ISIL will require supporting effective governance not only in Iraq—a staple of White House strategy statements—but in Syria as well, and that the stabilization of Syria will require not only the military defeat of ISIL, but the replacement of the Assad regime. Again, success in attracting partners means not only that Washington will have to convince others of the nature of the task at hand, but that it will have to convince itself.

### DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE: IRAN AND RUSSIA

The fourth diplomatic challenge will be to persuade the Assad regime’s major external supporters (Iran and Russia) that an Assad-free Syrian political transition is, one way or the other, inevitable. If Tehran and Moscow wish to enjoy anything resembling a positive relationship with the Syria of the future, they will join in a multilateral effort to end clan rule in Syria in accordance with the

June 30, 2012 Action Group on Syria (Geneva) Final Communiqué or some other mutually agreed framework. A closely related challenge is to persuade the Assad regime’s internal supporters that the SNSF and the Syrian political authority to which it will report will stabilize the country for the sake of inclusive, legitimate, and citizenship-based governance that will uphold the standard of equal protection under rule of law for all Syrians irrespective of religious belief, ethnicity, or any other artificial, discriminatory standards.

It is not likely that this challenge as it applies to Tehran and Moscow will be crowned with success. Iran has plenty of leverage with Damascus but no interest in seeing the Assad regime gone. Russia has little leverage, and its leader appears to be wedded to Assad’s political survival.

Tehran sees Bashar al-Assad as a vital link to its Lebanese franchise—Hezbollah. It has invested heavily in the regime’s survival, devoting Qods Force personnel to advisory and organizational services and drawing Shia militias from Lebanon and Iraq into Syria to save the regime from military defeat. During the reign of Bashar al-Assad’s father, Hafez al-Assad, Syria was the senior partner to Iran and a harsh supervisor of its relationship with Hezbollah. Currently, the Syrian regime is subordinate to Iran and Bashar al-Assad is at most a peer of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. This suits Tehran perfectly: Hezbollah is the tool through which it threatens Israel with missiles and rockets and dominates the politics of Lebanon. It does so even to the extent of pulling Lebanon into Syria’s war by virtue of Hezbollah’s military intervention. Iran has found Assad to be totally compliant with its wishes in terms of supporting Hezbollah materially. It sees any replacement as far less desirable than its current servant.

As for Moscow, its leverage with the Syrian regime is limited and Russian President Vladimir Putin seems to regard Assad’s political survival as a trophy signifying Russia’s return as a power to be reckoned with on the world stage. Recent Russian offers to host regime-opposition negotiations in Moscow may, if past is prologue, represent little more than Moscow encouraging Washington to go slow on the train-and-equip program and avoid altogether the creation of protected zones. Russia may well be concerned about Iran’s efforts to create sectarian militias that may eventually supersede the Syrian state structures with which Moscow has traditionally enjoyed strong relationships. To date, however, Russia has acted as an adjunct to Tehran’s regime preservation efforts.

Washington should assume, therefore, that Tehran and Moscow will vigorously oppose the formation and deployment of the SNSF. Should the SNSF ultimately be required to suppress regime forces, it is quite possible

that foreign fighters summoned by Iran will assist the regime in resisting stabilization efforts. Likewise Moscow would likely continue to resupply the regime with arms and ammunition while spearheading a diplomatic campaign against the SNSF initiative.

**IDEALLY, THE SNSF WOULD BE THE FACTOR THAT CHANGES THE CALCULATION OF THE ASSAD REGIME AND ITS FOREIGN SUPPORTERS IN FAVOR OF A PEACEFUL, NEGOTIATED POLITICAL TRANSITION.**

No doubt Washington will take Iranian and Russian opposition quite seriously and will plan carefully to manage that opposition. Still, the destruction of ISIL mandates the ouster of the Assad regime, the stabilization of Syria, and the onset of legitimate governance. Ideally, the SNSF would be the factor that changes the calculation of the Assad regime and its foreign supporters in favor of a peaceful, negotiated political transition. For it to play such a role, however, it must be configured to accomplish a military mission.

### DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE: OUTREACH TO SYRIANS

An important diplomatic and strategic communications challenge of the SNSF initiative will be US outreach to Syrians who still support the Assad regime. The central concern of those who remain committed to arbitrary rule by the extended Assad family is the alternative, which for many is lodged somewhere between the unknown and the unacceptable. The regime's corruption, incompetence, and brutality are not state secrets: they are obvious to all Syrians. But Syria's sectarian minorities—in articular, Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Shia—have been receptive to the regime's characterization of the opposition as terroristic and jihadist from the beginning of the conflict. This has acted in ways to give substance to what was once an utterly empty and mendacious characterization and has been an important part of Assad's survival strategy. Indeed, a noticeable minority of Syria's majority—Arab Sunni Muslims—remains attached to the regime for the same reason as the country's minorities: fear that the ultimate alternative is much worse than the regime itself.

If the ideal outcome of the SNSF endeavor is a peaceful, negotiated political compromise that removes a rapa-

ciously violent and corrupt clan, ends the fighting, and establishes a transitional government that protects all Syrian citizens and initiates both reconstruction and reconciliation, then it will be important that the principal sponsor of the endeavor reach out both privately and publicly to regime supporters. President Obama should address the people of Syria and make clear the kind of Syria the United States will support and the kind of Syria it would continue to oppose. Obviously, the Syrian opposition would also have to reiterate conciliatory positions it has consistently articulated since the first Friends of the Syrian People Conference in Tunisia in February 2012. Ideally, the composition of the SNSF would eventually reflect the broad sectarian and ethnic mosaic of Syrian society. From the outset, however, Washington will have to keep in mind that the Assad clan has been borne aloft not just by Iran, Russia, and foreign fighters, but by Syrians who would welcome a civilized alternative to the regime if only they could see one.

### ARE THE CHALLENGES SURMOUNTABLE?

The Obama administration requested and Congress approved authorization to train and equip vetted members of the Syrian opposition essentially to provide a ground combat component for the anti-ISIL air campaign in Syria being waged by the United States and its partners. This study is proposing something much more significant—a large Syrian military force able to stabilize the entire country; a force ultimately answerable to a Syrian national command authority; a force menacing enough to convince elements of the Assad regime to negotiate in good faith a genuine political transition from clan to legitimate rule in Syria.

In early 2015 there is little evidence—beyond diligent planning in the US Central Command and within the Pentagon's Joint Staff—of the Obama administration's commitment to implementing its own modest proposal urgently. Senior administration officials appear to remain committed to an Iraq-centric strategy in the battle against ISIL and a fuzzy, ill-defined notion of a diplomatic *deus ex machina* somehow appearing on the Syrian stage.

Shortly before asking Congress for the train-and-equip authorization President Obama shared with Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* his sense that effectively arming, equipping, and training the Syrian opposition was "fantasy."<sup>13</sup> Whether that which has been authorized by Congress via the NDAA will be pursued doggedly or permitted to languish depends entirely on what the American commander-in-chief believes now

13 Thomas Friedman, "Obama on the World: President Obama Talks to Thomas L. Friedman About Iraq, Putin and Israel," *New York Times*, August 8, 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-l-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html?_r=0).

**IF PRESIDENT OBAMA INTENDS TO  
BEAT ISIL ON HIS WATCH, THEN HE  
WILL MOVE TO IMPLEMENT AND  
EXPAND UPON THAT WHICH  
CONGRESS HAS AUTHORIZED.**

about the efficacy of helping Syrian nationalists save their country. Whether a modest, ISIL-centric initiative can be converted into something more relevant to the actual role of Syria and Syrians in the defeat and ultimate destruction of ISIL likewise rests entirely on the thinking of President Barack Obama. If he intends to beat ISIL on his watch, if he sees it cannot be done absent legitimate governance for Syria, and if he accepts the premise that diplomatic outcomes will reflect military realities, then he will move to implement and expand upon that which Congress has authorized. The challenges are daunting. Overcoming them requires, in the first instance, belief that they are worth surmounting.



## SECTION 3. THE SYRIAN BASIS FOR THE SYRIAN NATIONAL STABILIZATION FORCE

The Syrian National Stabilization Force (SNSF) should be conceived from the outset as an integral part of a political-military solution to the Syrian crisis, not as a foreign-commanded collection of Syrian auxiliaries committed to battle the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on Syrian territory. Through military and diplomatic means, the SNSF must prompt a complete political transition and establish the basis for post-Assad army and security forces, reflecting the full participation of all Syrian communities. Notwithstanding the central role of the United States and its partners in building the SNSF, the entity itself must ultimately be Syrian; it must report to a duly constituted Syrian political authority. A key near-term challenge for Americans and others involved in creating the SNSF would be to ensure Syrian identity and Syrian political direction, in spite of the present reality that the Syrian opposition is fragmented, dysfunctional, and practically leaderless. This task requires great delicacy and sensitivity. Indeed, Syrian ownership is mandatory, even if the train-and-equip initiative falls well short of the SNSF concept. This section focuses on how best to accomplish this difficult but essential task.

### STABILIZING THE CURRENT SITUATION

Absent a concentrated effort to stabilize the tactical situation in Syria and reverse the military momentum that currently favors the regime and ISIL, it will be difficult for the United States to gain traction with a modest train-and-equip program, to say nothing of building a SNSF. Stabilizing the tactical situation is essential for building such a force.

The challenge of endowing the SNSF with a Syrian character and political direction is daunting because the situation inside Syria is fluid, and (at the time of this writing) the military momentum does not favor the nationalist opposition to the Bashar al-Assad regime. For those who would build the SNSF, the first priority would be to stabilize the tactical situation in Syria, stopping any further deterioration in the positions of nationalist units in the vicinities of Aleppo in the north and Deraa in the south. A reversal of momentum will surely require robust resupply and accelerated training of beleaguered nationalist units. Indeed, it may require the establishment of a protected zone or zones on Syrian territory. What is

clear is that if the Assad regime and ISIL succeed militarily against the nationalists inside Syria, the United States and its partners will be viewed as having contributed to the defeat. The United States has offered only half-hearted support to nationalists over the last three years and its anti-ISIL air strikes in recent months have inadvertently permitted the regime to redouble its efforts against the nationalist opposition groups, which are Assad's real opponents. This sentiment would, fairly or not, make recruiting for the SNSF (or even something more modest) all the more difficult.

**THE SNSF MUST PROMPT A COMPLETE POLITICAL TRANSITION AND ESTABLISH THE BASIS FOR POST-ASSAD ARMY AND SECURITY FORCES, REFLECTING THE FULL PARTICIPATION OF ALL SYRIAN COMMUNITIES.**

A second near-term, momentum-reversing goal would be to enable nationalist units already receiving American assistance to score some tactical victories, thereby boosting their morale, their credibility, and their popularity. Presumably, the creation of a protected zone would entail those establishing the zone also neutralizing the effects of regime air and ground assets, including artillery. This could enable nationalist forces to advance against ISIL—with robust air support—while vigorously defending themselves and counterattacking the regime.

A third near-term goal—again, one likely requiring the establishment of a protected zone—would be to move the physical location of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and its associated Syrian Interim Government (SIG) to Syria. Among other things, this would enable nationalist units to be reorganized under a rational chain of command and to participate in civil-military operations featuring local policing, the facilitation of humanitarian assistance, and the protection of civilians.

## FINDING A SYRIAN PARTNER

The United States must take direct responsibility for organizing the SNSF; there can be no ambiguity on this point. This effort must be based on clear objectives and a coherent strategy. Inspiring discipline among regional parties to ensure that all financial and lethal-material support is henceforth directed through one American-supervised channel is essential.

Yet whether the American objective is (as this report strongly recommends) the building of an SNSF capable of militarily defeating any combination of enemies inside Syria, or the implementation of a modest train-and-equip program, the Syrian connection will be vital. That connection will make the difference between the effort being seen by Syrians as a foreign undertaking—seeking Syrian personnel to fight a military campaign designed by foreigners to achieve foreign objectives—or a Syrian project aimed at pacifying and unifying Syria under a government of citizenship that features pluralism, reconciliation, reconstruction, and the rule of law.

Those Americans charged with building a Syrian force will need sober, thoughtful Syrian guidance and partnership, because the United States does not have the requisite knowledge of the terrain—physical and political—to identify which Syrians should be recruited for duty, as officers and soldiers, in the SNSF. Neither does Washington have, on its own, the capacity to engage with Syrian fighters to gain their support for, and adherence to, the force being built. Without Syrian guidance and input, vetting will be, at best, a deeply flawed process. At worst, it will be a meaningless one.

Ultimately, the SNC and its affiliated SIG should be the bases of a Syrian political authority working in concert with the United States and others to stabilize Syria and promote national unity. In the near term, however, the reality is that the Syrian nationalist opposition to the Assad regime is fractured and incapable of providing political leadership, much less military command. Ideally the SNSF would, from the outset, be placed under the leadership of a Syrian national command authority. Yet, there is no existing capacity among Syrian opposition institutions, such as they are, to provide political or military leadership to the SNSF. A provisional body will need to be created to provide this guidance and legitimacy.

Although the SNC may be considered as representing the broadest range of Syrian nationalist political and military groups engaged in the uprising against the Assad regime, it continues to suffer from structural weaknesses, factionalism, and the effects of regional rivalries. Opposition factionalism and disunity are largely the products of the competing agendas of regional powers, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey—

parties that have pursued narrow self-interest and the control of surrogates, rather than the promotion of a unified, civilized political alternative to the Assad regime. The diplomatic absence of the United States has enabled this destructive competitiveness. Indeed, the December 2012 recognition of the SNC as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the United States and others was not followed up with systematic capacity-building or the neutralization of regional rivalries that have had deleterious effects on the opposition. However, this is history. What is needed now is Syrian guidance for the construction of the SNSF.

**THE UNITED STATES MUST TAKE DIRECT RESPONSIBILITY FOR ORGANIZING THE SNSF; THERE CAN BE NO AMBIGUITY ON THIS POINT.**

As for the SIG affiliated with the SNC, its relationship to the SNC is the subject of dispute and protracted negotiation. The Prime Minister is elected by the SNC, but that election is heavily influenced by the aforementioned regional rivalries. The result is that the SIG and the SNC are often at odds. Although there is a titular Minister of Defense in the SIG cabinet, the current organizational dynamics of the Syrian opposition render that person—along with the Prime Minister and the President of the SNC—unsuitable building blocks for a Syrian national command authority. The United States simply cannot afford to wait for these entities to perform effectively, or to rely on uncertain, unsteady, or dysfunctional interlocutors. It needs a partner *now*.

A third element of the Syrian opposition—the Supreme Military Council (SMC)—is similarly unsuited to provide near-term leadership. Formed in 2012, the SMC was intended to be the single channel through which external military assistance would be funneled to opposition military units inside Syria.<sup>1</sup> However, regional arms donors never endowed the SMC with the power and authority cohesively to mold Syrian fighters. Instead, more often than not, these donors instructed the SMC to

<sup>1</sup> Syrian Arab Republic Supreme Military Council Command, “Statement on the Formation of the Supreme Military Council Command of Syria,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=50445&reloadFlag=1](http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=50445&reloadFlag=1); Neil MacFarquhar and Hwaida Saad, “Rebel Groups in Syria Make Framework for Military,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/12/08/world/middleeast/rebel-groups-in-syria-make-framework-for-military.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/08/world/middleeast/rebel-groups-in-syria-make-framework-for-military.html).

whom arms and equipment should be delivered, and favored their respective surrogates. Consequently, the SMC never succeeded in bringing nationalist armed groups under its control. Then, with the creation of the SIG and its Minister of Defense, things became even more confused in terms of the chain of command.

In an effort to overcome dysfunction within the Syrian opposition, the United States and its partners established Military Operations Commands (MOCs) in Jordan and Turkey. Their purpose was to inject a degree of discipline and focus into the training, equipping, and funding of selected groups of Syrian fighters. Military officers representing some fourteen countries (including the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) helped selected rebel forces plan military operations, with those operations subject to donor approval on a case-by-case basis. Indeed, armed opposition elements were kept on a very short leash, with funding disbursed on a month-to-month basis—a procedure not compatible with long-term opposition military planning.

Although the MOC approach injected some discipline and unity of approach into the arming, training, equipping, and funding of selected Syrian opposition elements, it has not been without serious flaws. The MOCs have not been able to match robust Iranian and Russian assistance to the Assad regime nor to enable nationalist units to decisively repulse ISIL forces. Moreover, this support for a few vetted groups has inspired resentment from other groups fighting the regime. For example, in the form of Nusra Front attacks against supported units, following American air attacks on a terrorist entity (Khorasan) embedded with the Nusra Front. Regrettably, the modest MOC initiative ended up painting bull's-eyes on the backs of units supported by the United States and its partners.

Although lessons learned from the MOCs might be applicable to building up the SNSF, there is no Syrian political partner to be found in the MOC experience. Indeed, no existing opposition structure can represent the needed reliable partner, at least for now.

## A SYRIAN ADVISORY TASK FORCE

It will take time for a credible and effective Syrian national command authority to emerge, and this will be an arduous process. However, this process can be accelerated if the United States and its partners offer—via a protected zone or zones—the opportunity for moderate, nationalist Syrian governance to take root inside Syria. Actual governing of real people will concentrate minds in ways exile politics cannot. In the meantime, however, the United States will need a reliable Syrian partner to provide advice and assistance to those charged with building up the SNSF.

American officials now steeped in the Syrian crisis and former officials who have worked closely with the various manifestations of the Syrian opposition know Syrians who are patriotic, practical, principled, and capable of working together collegially and discreetly. An informal Syrian Advisory Task Force (SATF) can be configured, with American input and funding, to consist of eight to twelve prominent Syrians who possess the requisite political and military skills. This SATF would be a temporary organization created for a specific advisory purpose; it would not be a permanent fixture in Syrian opposition affairs. Although figures currently active in opposition political and military affairs would no doubt comprise most (if not all) of the SATF, neither the SOC nor the SIG would be asked to approve the task force's composition. The objective of the task force is to provide sane and pertinent Syrian advice to Americans creating the SNSF (or even a lesser entity) while the opposition works to create a rational national command authority, a process that can be accelerated by safe zones and with Western technical assistance.

**AN INFORMAL SYRIAN ADVISORY TASK FORCE CAN BE CONFIGURED, WITH AMERICAN INPUT AND FUNDING, TO CONSIST OF EIGHT TO TWELVE PROMINENT SYRIANS WHO POSSESS THE REQUISITE POLITICAL AND MILITARY SKILLS.**

The exclusively Syrian SATF could be chaired by a civilian, with a military officer serving as his or her deputy. It would be composed of independent Syrian figures who trust one another, and work well together in a nonpartisan, nonideological manner. The SATF membership should combine a broad range of skills: knowledge of the ground truth of current military operations, expertise on the internal politics of Syria, intimate knowledge of the Assad regime, familiarity with ISIL, and sound understanding of international affairs. A key mission of the SATF would be to explain to commanders inside Syria the decisions made and actions envisaged by the United States in relation to the SNSF so as to ensure buy-in from the ground. SATF members would also have the moral, ethical, and religious and sectarian credibility needed to facilitate communication with key opposition elements on the ground inside Syria and, above all, an ability to communicate clearly and frankly with those American officials and military officers charged with

building the SNSF. The military members of the SATF would be officers closely connected to developments on the ground inside Syria, ready to work under civilian leadership and capable of bringing a sense of coherence to the northern and southern fronts and between eastern and western Syria.

The SATF would coordinate with the SNC and the SIG, but would not be housed within either. Nor would it depend upon the overall efficacy of established opposition structures, though its informal character would facilitate relations with existing institutions. As an instrumental part of the SNSF (or smaller scale initiative) and supported by the United States, the SATF would be highly resistant to disruptive influences. Ideally, the SATF would work its way out of its job. As the SNSF begins to stabilize the country, a duly constituted Syrian government—whether an opposition-based or a transitional unity government—would absorb its functions. In the meantime, the SATF would coordinate with the SNC to promote consistency of political messaging, and with the SIG on logistical and administrative aspects of the SNSF.

## THE SATF WOULD, IN SHORT, AIM TO PROVIDE THE ARCHITECTS OF THE SNSF WITH “SYRIA-SMART” ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE.

Beyond advising the architects of the SNSF, the SATF would play a multifaceted role, including the following functions:

- *Defining and propagating SNSF-related Syrian political objectives.* The task force would seek to operationalize the political objectives shared by the overwhelming majority of the Syrian opposition, both armed and unarmed. In doing so, it would build the SNSF on a nationalist, nonideological basis, one capable of articulating the link between the force and a future, reformed Syrian Army. It would formulate a clear political vision, articulate a national discourse that is unifying and inclusive, and ensure that American military planning for the SNSF is consistent with the political objectives of a unitary, inclusive, and democratic Syria. It would also make certain that the formation of the force proceeds in accordance with the agreed criteria and is free of interference by regional powers or Syrian opposition factions. One of the SATF’s key tasks will be to persuade anti-regime
- fighters that a political ideology based on religion or sect is inconsistent with the integrity of Syria.
- *Facilitating recruitment.* The SATF would use its intimate understanding of the situation on the ground in Syria’s various regions to define the criteria by which the architects of the SNSF can reach suitable numbers of reliable recruits. This effort would exponentially transcend the fuzzy notion of “Syrian moderates” and would provide the political guidance for which armed groups inside Syria have long yearned. The SATF would play a direct role in the recruitment process by collecting, analyzing, and providing accurate information about armed groups and their commanders. It would engage those elements directly to obtain their commitment to clear rules and principles. The SATF would, in coordination with the United States, set the criteria for the recruitment of fighters to the SNSF, develop the requisite written guidelines for recruitment, and compose a code of conduct by which everyone associated with the SNSF would be required to abide. The SATF would also screen senior officers, including colonels and higher ranks, and would establish and oversee a board to do the same for field-grade and junior officers and soldiers. The SATF would, in short, aim to provide the architects of the SNSF with “Syria-smart” advice and assistance.
  - As of spring 2015, the area of northern Syria was controlled by forces other than the regime, many of which are composed of small, localized groups whose loyalties shift in accordance with the overall tactical situation.<sup>2</sup> These are fragmented, but they are nonideological and comfortably embedded in their social environment. One group named the Syria Revolutionaries’ Front was picked by the United States to be given support so as to rapidly boost its size and turn it into a key fighting force in the north. But within a few months, the group’s fighters’ increasing misbehaviors alienated the population so deeply that the Nusra Front found it easy to dislodge the Front altogether and replace it. This is a perfect example of why the United States cannot select and deal directly with groups on the ground. Even when a group enjoys a good reputation, it can turn into a nasty mob of warlords, something that only a Syrian advisory task force could detect on time to alert the United States and allow a shift in the strategy.

2 “Control of Terrain in Syria: March 31, 2015,” *Syria Update Blog*, Institute for the Study of War, March 31, 2015, <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2015/03/control-of-terrain-in-syria-march-31.html>; Jennifer Cafarella, Christopher Kozak, and the ISW Syria team, “Syria Situation Report: March 17-24, 2015,” *Syria Update Blog*, March 24 2015, <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2015/03/syria-situation-report-march-17-24-2015.html>; Carter Center, *Syria: Countrywide Conflict Report #4* (September 11, 2014), [www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict\\_resolution/syria-conflict/NationwideUpdate-Sept-18-2014.pdf](http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/NationwideUpdate-Sept-18-2014.pdf).





New recruits to the Free Syrian Army attend a military training exercise in eastern al-Ghouta, near Damascus, in February 2014. *Photo credit: Reuters/Ammar al-Bushy.*

- If at all possible, the architects of the SNSF should avoid “starting from scratch” in the recruitment process. The starting-over notion is based on the mistaken belief that reliable recruits are not to be found within existing organizations—that all such organizations have been subject to desertions, and have periodically engaged in tactical alliances with jihadists. First, this is more true of individuals than of organizations. Second, even the strongest and most able of Syrian nationalist fighters—people with strong community attachments and nonsectarian outlooks—have been tempted to work with jihadists endowed with arms, ammunition, and money. Sometimes, that temptation has proven too strong to resist. The solution to the challenge of reliability is a Syrian nationalist alternative with a clear political direction and ample resources. Syrian nationalist rebels have gained considerable combat skills during nearly four years of fighting. What they have lacked is a robust, focused program to inculcate discipline, inject organization and leadership (political and military), and provide training on newly received weaponry. Indeed, they have often lacked ammunition, weaponry, medical care, and even

food. They have gravitated toward resources, and this gravitational pull must be reversed. In their current tactical straits, nationalist units are attempting to reorganize. In the north, a large heterogeneous coalition was announced in summer 2014, although it does not seem to have succeeded in aggregating groups into any effective structure. There is a desire among nationalists for greater unity. In the south, some fifty nationalist groups—many with more than one thousand fighters each—are semi-organized within the Unified Command of the Southern Front, with former Brigadier General Bashar al-Zoubi as the leading figure and the main interlocutor of the MOC in Jordan.<sup>3</sup> Discrepancies in organization of nationalist forces between the north and south are widening; this is something to be bridged by the architects of the SNSF and the SATF.

- The United States would be able to rely on the SATF to map existing groups and engage their

<sup>3</sup> Aron Lund, “Does the ‘Southern Front’ Exist?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 21, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55054>; <http://www.alquds.co.uk/> (in Arabic).

leaders. Several field studies have identified the main armed groups that have a solid nationalist orientation. Identification criteria include statements on democratic institutions, rule of law, respect for all Syrian communities, the degree to which groups are embedded in the community and enjoy the support of the civilian population, and their commitment to abide by the terms of a political settlement. These groups reportedly command thousands of fighters, but numerical estimates are often not reliable. Some nationalists have stopped fighting due to a lack of ammunition and other resources; others have gone to where the resources are more reliably provided.

- Groups with an Islamist bent—such as the Islamic Army of Zahrán Alloush, Suqour el Sham, and Liwa’ el Haq—present a real challenge. Here the SATF could provide invaluable advice and assistance to the organizers of the SNSF. There is nothing inherently evil about an Islamist discourse, provided it is hostile to the kind of ideological jihadism associated with al-Qaeda derivatives such as ISIL and the Nusra Front. Most of these groups have been fighting ISIL, though there will clearly be issues to be overcome in terms of an inclusive, pluralistic, and nationalistic political objective.
- Kurdish forces should be integrated into the SNSF from the start. The assistance being rendered to the defense of Kobani by Syrian nationalist opposition forces is a positive development in this regard. The recruitment of Kurds will nevertheless be a very sensitive task, requiring the political guidance of the SATF. Turkey, for example, is not likely to oppose the recruitment by the SNSF of individual Syrian Kurds or of groups affiliated with Masoud Barzani and Iraq’s Kurdish Regional Government. However, it would balk at the integration of Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) units. Indeed, those units—given their separatist tendencies—might not respond favorably to integration into the SNSF. It might be possible to attract some Kurds from more moderate, nonseparatist groups to join the SNSF if it demonstrates that it has a strategy, can provide adequate weapons, and is backed with sufficient external support.
- Few Christians can be expected to join the SNSF at the outset, as is the case with Alawites and Druze. The SNSF will have to prove itself as the spearhead of a credible alternative to the Assad clan rule before minorities will be attracted to its officer corps and ranks in large numbers. Once that alternative is clearly established, the number of adherents to clan rule will rapidly decrease, leaving only those who benefit directly from the wealth that the Assad regime has expropriated.
- Tribes do not play as prominent a role in Syrian society as tribes in Iraq. Nevertheless, they constitute a deep pool of potential recruits to the SNSF. They form close-knit and cohesive communities, with influential leadership. They are, in the main, nonideological and pragmatic when it comes to sectarianism. Agreements with tribal leaders can produce tens of thousands of recruits for the SNSF. Jordan might be interested in taking the lead in this process.
- The architects of the SNSF will wish to focus attention on the recruitment of officers and soldiers who have voluntarily left the Syrian armed forces because of the Assad regime’s use of those forces against Syrian civilians. There are an estimated 1,000 officers in Turkey, between 800 and 1,500 engaged in combat operations inside Syria, 300 to 750 in Jordan, and an estimated 150 in Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> Most of those abroad have been underutilized or not drawn upon by existing opposition structures. This act of negligence had serious consequences. How, after all, does one appeal to officers under regime control to defect, when the prevailing practice is to allow qualified, proficient officers to rot in refugee camps? Still, one of the sensitive tasks of the SATF will be to identify senior officers who can contribute positively to the force-building task at hand. Having served as a general officer in Assad’s army is not necessarily a guarantee of military leadership skills that focus on mission accomplishment and the welfare of soldiers.
- *Setting salaries and benefits.* The SATF would work with a variety of sources—military commanders, exiled Syrian officers, and the Defense Minister of the SIG—to set salary scales for soldiers and officers, define medical care for dependents, and establish active-duty death benefits. It would also plan the modalities of salary disbursement and benefit delivery, so as to

4 Estimates provided by confidential sources from the opposition. Some coincide with public sources, others vary substantially depending on whether officers are temporarily or permanently based inside or outside Syria. For example, the number of officers in Jordan can be double or triple the estimated figure if officers are participating in a battle for several weeks or months inside Syria launched from Jordanian territory. Public sources are Lale Kemal, “Inside Free Syrian Army’s Headquarters in Turkey,” *Al-Monitor*, August 2012, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/politics/2012/08/inside-the-free-syrian-armys-turkish-hq.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/politics/2012/08/inside-the-free-syrian-armys-turkish-hq.html); Jordan (240): Osama Al Sharif, “Jordan Shifts to Neutral on Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, July 18, 2014, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/jordan-syria-islamic-state-iraq-war-rebels-neutral.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/jordan-syria-islamic-state-iraq-war-rebels-neutral.html); (Lebanon (around 100—estimated in 2012): Radwan Mortada, “Wadi Khaled: The Free Syria Army Base in Lebanon (II),” *Al-Akhbar*, February 8, 2012, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/4011>;



strengthen the institutional attachment of officers and soldiers to the SNSF.

- *Developing an intelligence capacity.* The SATF would aim to develop a small, indigenous intelligence apparatus, and designate a director. This structure would play an important role in supporting the SATF during the recruitment process, and would provide the United States and its partners with timely information about ISIL and other military and terrorist threats. Currently, various Syrian opposition groups and military entities have the capacity to gather relevant, actionable intelligence. However, the nationalist opposition's intelligence capacity is weak due to a lack of coordination between collectors and the absence of a central command center to report to, which would be capable of making good use of the information. Many of these collectors are eager to provide information to the United States, if for no other reason than the information collected often pertains to ISIL elements pressing the collectors militarily. Streamlining this process would be of great value. Moreover, it is important that Syrians lead the effort to build new, professional, and accountable intelligence structures not only for reasons of sovereign legitimacy but popular legitimacy as well.
- *Establishing a media arm.* The SATF would develop a skilled media team whose messages would target the Syrian population, the regime-directed Syrian Army, and the regime's security apparatus. The aim would be to build a strong support base for the SNSF by adhering to disciplined messaging about the nature of the undertaking and the character of the newly envisioned Syria.

## INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS: SYRIAN IDENTITY, LEADERSHIP, AND ADVICE

Absent an overall political-military strategy that addresses the desires of those to be recruited, recruiting and vetting will be problematic. Resources for those recruited will be essential as well. Young Syrians have been drawn to jihadist military entities because jihadist organizations have been able to provide arms, ammunition, and money for those chronically lacking in all three—not because there is an existing constituency for jihadism in Syria. Yet even a well-resourced vetting process will prove unreliable, and perhaps useless, if it attempts to evaluate recruits without providing those recruits a sense of purpose in terms understandable and attractive to Syrians. This is especially true if military trends favorable to the regime and ISIL continue. Syrian fighters can best be employed, both as groups and as individuals, for purposes deemed by the West to be “moderate” if they have a source of leadership (*marji'iyya*) that they respect and whose guidance they accept. This

leadership would likely be composed of political, religious, social, and intellectual figures.

Unfortunately, existing Syrian opposition structures are simply too fragmented and dysfunctional to play a useful advisory and organizational role with regard to the SNSF. This makes the creation of the SATF an essential component, and American leadership is vital to this end. Yet Americans, despite the best of intentions, are ill equipped to build a politically sensible and reliable force without the advice and assistance of capable, mature, and team-oriented Syrians.

**ABSENT AN OVERALL POLITICAL-MILITARY STRATEGY THAT ADDRESSES THE DESIRES OF THOSE TO BE RECRUITED, RECRUITING AND VETTING WILL BE PROBLEMATIC.**

The SATF should be formed and then set free by the United States to do its work. That work will end when duly constituted Syrian governmental institutions—either those reflecting a functional Syrian opposition or a transitional national unity governing body—are able to take over. Without such an advisory and organizational body in place, the United States will be flying blind as it tries to navigate Syrian political realities and peculiarities in the building of a military force.

On a practical level, the SATF can cut through much of the complexity and self-defeating process associated with the recruiting and vetting of Syrian officers and soldiers for the SNSF. An uninformed search for “Syrian moderates” will take the risk-aversion of force organizers to new depths, stunting and perhaps killing the project at the outset. With sound, informed advice and adequate resources, this challenge can be short-circuited, as long as it is clearly understood that perfection is unobtainable. Inevitably, there will be a front-page story featuring a well-armed defector. If perfection is the aim, the United States should retire from the business of foreign policy.

In the end, however, Washington should recognize that its political objectives will, in part, determine the pool of available Syria recruits. The SATF is a potential way forward if what the United States has in mind is building a genuinely Syrian force. If that motive does not exist, then there is not a solid basis for any sort of train-and-equip undertaking, and Washington would be well advised to look elsewhere for a ground component to

employ against ISIL in Syria. Indeed, if Washington is serious about the train-and-equip initiative—whether in the form of the SNSF or something less ambitious—it will not ignore the imperatives of Syrian identity, leadership, and advice.

## SECTION 4. ORGANIZING AND EQUIPPING THE SYRIAN NATIONAL STABILIZATION FORCE

The United States has committed itself to a train-and-equip program aimed at organizing nationalist Syrian rebels, principally to provide a ground combat component for coalition air forces engaging the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria. However, this report envisions something considerably more ambitious: a force that could stabilize all of Syria and form the basis for the kind of legitimate governance that would put both ISIL and the ISIL-enabling Assad regime in history's rearview mirror. It is admittedly difficult, from the vantage point of early 2015, to envision all contingencies and to design a force with the precise capabilities required to defeat all armed forces choosing to obstruct the creation of legitimate state authority in the entirety of the country. The approach taken here envisions a force on the order of fifty thousand personnel: a three-division motorized infantry-type force with broad capabilities to achieve a wide range of missions, but with the expectation of combat dominating all else. Ultimately, as noted in the previous section of this report, the Syrian National Stabilization Force (SNSF) would come under the direction of a Syrian national *command* authority.<sup>1</sup> The SNSF would exercise full command over its subordinate units and would have the services of military advisers and perhaps combat and combat support assistance from supporting countries.

### TRAIN AND EQUIP: NOT ENOUGH

As this report goes to print, it appears that the train-and-equip program announced by President Barack Obama and authorized by Congress is getting underway. It is not, however, clear what this initiative hopes to accomplish or how it is expected to do so. Some very basic questions about this US-envisioned force remain to be answered:

*What will be the mission?* Setting the mission or missions for the force is a critical step, one that should shape its capabilities and operations. According to the Pentagon Press Secretary, the US-envisioned force will have at least three missions: defense of civilians, offensive operations against ISIL, and working with the

Syrian political opposition.<sup>2</sup> This list leaves out any stated mission against regime forces, although that might be implied in the defensive mission. If the US-proposed force is just intended to fight ISIL, is there a reasonable expectation that it can be kept to this limited mission? Or should the expectation be that it will inevitably be drawn into fighting with regime forces, and should it therefore prepare for that? Fighting both ISIL and the regime would be a very large mission—one demanding significant numbers, heavy arms, extensive sustainment, and, in all likelihood, air support.

**THE APPROACH TAKEN HERE  
ENVISIONS A FORCE ON THE ORDER  
OF FIFTY THOUSAND PERSONNEL.**

*For what level of capability will training and equipping aim?* It is unclear if the US-proposed force is to be built as a large maneuver unit(s) or simply as a collection of small (company or battalion) units. It is also unclear if it is to consist of lightly armed infantry or a more heavily armed "combined arms" force with infantry, as well as indirect fire, anti-armor, and anti-air capabilities. Ground force units are more than the sum of their parts, and large maneuver units are more capable (than smaller units) of significant offensive and defensive operations such as holding or taking ground. Size matters, and Syria's battlefields are lethal places, replete with tanks, artillery, and anti-aircraft weapons. Regime ground forces are also supported by the regime air force. US-backed forces will need the means to counter the heavy weapons of adversaries on these battlefields or

<sup>1</sup> Command in this context means the ability to give a subordinate unit an order with the expectation that it will be executed to the fullest possible extent. For Syrian rebels what passes for command is often more like coordination or cooperation.

<sup>2</sup> "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Rear Adm. Kirby in the Pentagon Briefing Room," US Department of Defense, January 16, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5573>.



Election posters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad line a street in Damascus ahead of the June 3, 2014 charade presidential election in which Assad claimed 88.7 percent of the vote. Assad is now into his third seven-year presidential term. Photo credit: Reuters/Khaled Al Hariri.

will require external support (air power and/or ground forces) to do so. This has been demonstrated in the fighting for Kobani in Aleppo province, where Kurdish fighters were at a significant disadvantage against ISIL's heavy weapons until US-led coalition air intervention turned the tide of battle. Offensive operations are generally more demanding, requiring a higher state of training, better command and control, and better logistics capabilities. Offensive operations that are sustained over space and time are especially demanding. How and to what extent will these capabilities be built into the US-proposed force?

*Who will set the strategy and direct its operations?* The US-proposed force will require political direction and operational command. It should not be just another armed group fighting in Syria; it will have to operate within a strategic framework. Its operations will have to be controlled and will perhaps be integrated with other operations in Syria and possibly Iraq. Ideally, this will all unfold in conjunction with US-led coalition interests. Yet

what mechanism will set strategy and direct operations? As noted in the previous section, there is presently no political or military Syrian opposition organization capable of doing this. So will a Syrian "legion" operate under American or coalition control or through some ad hoc arrangement such as the "operations rooms" now used to coordinate rebel operations in some parts of Syria? If Syrians are expected to do the fighting, Syrians will want (and deserve) a central role in answering this critical question. Indeed, the ultimate test of legitimacy for this enterprise will be whether the force is ultimately directed by and reporting to a Syrian national command authority.

*Under what conditions and where would the force be committed?* The US-proposed force must be committed under circumstances and into areas conducive to its survival and success. Committing the force piecemeal, with overly ambitious missions and on heavily contested battlefields, could result in its early failure and perhaps destroy the committed elements. This argues for the



cautious initial commitment, deploying relatively large elements of the force into relatively quiet or less threatened areas. Political pressure and perhaps operational exigency could lead to premature commitment of a force that is not fully prepared—with disastrous results.

*What is the timeline for the force?* It seems that a protracted timeline is envisioned for creation of the US-backed force, with the train-and-equip process producing three annual increments of five thousand troops. Three years is a very long time and, while this might suit a leisurely American timeline, conditions in Syria could change radically, affecting the mission and requirements of the force. Battles and territory will be won and lost by the combatants in Syria over the next three years, which will shape their fortunes and the context in which the US-trained-and-equipped force would operate. This is why it is essential for the United States and regional partners to create protected zones inside Syria, where existing nationalist forces can successfully defend the territory against the regime and jihadists and perhaps gain some offensive momentum.

**THE US-ENVISIONED FORCE WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY REQUIRE COMBAT SUPPORT FROM AMERICAN OR COALITION FORCES TO BE SUCCESSFUL.**

*Is the US-envisioned force big enough?* A force of some fifteen thousand seems small for decisive operations inside Syria. Its potential opponents would number in the tens of thousands. If there are distinct missions pertaining to ISIL and the regime, the force would have to be divided between those missions. Distances in Syria are large, potentially spreading the force thinly. These factors could be mitigated by good strategy and well-conceived operations. Yet the combination of the long gestation period and the size of the creation raises a basic question as to what those who are managing the force's development actually intend.

*How would the force be sustained?* It seems likely that the US-envisioned force will be committed to a long-term struggle inside Syria, and any force committed to combat must be sustained. It will take casualties, expend supplies (ammunition, medicine, food, etc.), and lose equipment to destruction, capture, and breakdown. All of these things must be replenished if the force is to remain effective. For offensive operations, everything must be

deployed to where the force is fighting, and complicated requirements for replacements and resupply must be anticipated. This means that a robust logistics system must be in place to support the combat forces. Will this system be part of the overall force to be built or will it be provided by outside support, at least to the point of crossing the Syrian border? To whatever extent the US-envisioned force is expected to provide its own logistical support, it will need the personnel, organization, and equipment to do so. This means fewer troops in combat units: the “tooth-to-tail” factor.<sup>3</sup>

*How would the force be supported?* The US-envisioned force would almost certainly require combat support from American or coalition forces to be successful. Indeed, in the likely event that its elements get in trouble at some point, it will need to be rescued or at least assisted. The conflict in Syria has demonstrated the need for heavy firepower to counter the enemy's heavy weapons and to break stubborn resistance. The envisioned force could not afford to become involved in protracted siege-type operations, as have many Syrian rebel and regime units. It would need to be able to call on heavy fire support to break resistance quickly or to respond to heavy attacks. This requirement can be reduced by providing the force with robust capabilities, but probably not be eliminated. This means that personnel, organizations, and procedures must be in place to ensure that support is provided in a timely and effective way. In essence, the force would have to be integrated into coalition air operations and perhaps ground operations. Moreover, the possibility of intervention by coalition ground force units to rescue trained and equipped Syrian forces would at least have to be considered. Both ISIL and regime forces would likely seek the rapid destruction of any such units. The United States would not be able to accept the destruction of a force it had created, or even significant elements thereof. Such an event might well be catastrophic for the entire enterprise.

*How would the force relate to other opposition forces inside Syria?* The US-envisioned force will be fighting against ISIL and likely against the regime, but Syrian battlefields are often complex with a wide range of moderate, Islamist extremist, and regime forces present. Will the force be told with which organizations it can cooperate and under what conditions, or will force commanders have the flexibility (and initiative) to work with armed opposition elements as they deem fit? Will the trainers and equippers see the winning of battles against ISIL (and, for that matter, regime forces) as more important than maintaining the “purity” of the forces it has trained? This is not a theoretical question, and its

3 The tooth-to-tail factor refers to the ratio between fighters, or combat troops (tooth), and support troops (tail). In general, there has been a trend for the tooth to decline relative to the tail in modern warfare.

answer will become important from the moment the envisioned force enters Syria.

In sum, building and deploying a trained and equipped force to fight effectively inside Syria goes well beyond the train-and-equip mission per se. Those guiding this enterprise must expect that the force will encounter major difficulties while operating in Syria and will be challenged directly by experienced and well-armed adversaries. Issues of strategy, operations, capabilities, sustainment, and support all must be addressed expeditiously. The United States and its partners cannot afford a Syrian “Bay of Pigs,” in which the created force is destroyed due to bad strategy, a poorly conceived operational concept, weak capabilities, or a lack of support.<sup>4</sup>

### SNSF: AIMING HIGHER

This report recommends an approach that would far surpass the train-and-equip initiative as currently conceived. What is proposed here is a force that would be capable, albeit with significant assistance from allies, of conducting militarily decisive operations in Syria aimed at stabilizing the entire country. Although the SNSF would be designed to fight and win, another of its key facets would be civil-military operations centering on humanitarian relief, restoring law and order, and protecting vulnerable civilians. The goal is to create a force that would stabilize Syria and make it inhospitable terrain for both terrorist organizations (Hezbollah, ISIL, the Nusra Front, and others) and state sponsors of terror (Iran and the Assad regime).

The SNSF would require robust combat capabilities because it would face a variety of very capable enemies on the ground in Syria. These enemies can be grouped into three categories: ISIL, the regime and its allies, and a combination of other jihadist groups (most notably the Nusra Front) and militias led by local chieftains and warlords.

### THE ENEMIES

As of early 2015, ISIL represents a heavily armed, experienced, well-organized, and highly motivated opponent. Currently, it enjoys a wide territorial resource and recruitment base in Syria and Iraq. Thanks in large measure to the mass murder, political survival strategy of the Assad regime, ISIL is also catnip for foreign fighters worldwide. The US intelligence community has estimated that there are as many as thirty-one thousand

ISIL fighters.<sup>5</sup> Given that eastern Syria is ISIL's primary base of operations, it may be assumed that a significant portion of those fighters is in Syria, along with a substantial portion of the group's heavy weapons (tanks, artillery, and armored vehicles). As American-led coalition air forces and Iraqi ground forces press ISIL in Iraq, it is reasonable to assume that the group is capable of increasing its footprint in Syria by drawing down its assets in Iraq.

**AS OF EARLY 2015, ISIL REPRESENTS A HEAVILY ARMED, EXPERIENCED, WELL-ORGANIZED, AND HIGHLY MOTIVATED OPPONENT.**

Were the SNSF ready to deploy to Syria now, it would likely find regime forces representing its main combat challenge. To quote a recent analysis by the Institute for the Study of War, “After three years of grueling warfare against armed opposition fighters, the Syrian regime faces a dire internal crisis not witnessed since the initial months of the conflict. Defections, desertions, and over 44,000 combat fatalities have reduced the Syrian Arab Army from a pre-war high of 325,000 soldiers to an estimated 150,000 battle-tested yet war-weary troops.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, battle tested or not, what remains of the Syrian Arab Army has been heavily reliant on irregular elements mobilized from within Syria, militiamen from Lebanon (Hezbollah), and from Iraq when it comes to actual fire-and-maneuver operations.

The Assad regime's air force also plays an important role in the regime's style of warfare. According to a study published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Syrian Arab Air Force has “become a strategic element in the conflict, allowing the regime to strike anywhere in the country with virtual impunity, contributing to the opposition's failure to consolidate control of territory, and supporting a wide variety of military operations. Along the way, the air force has been

4 Jeffrey White, “Train and Equip Not Enough for U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebels,” PolicyWatch 2357, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 21, 2015, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/train-and-equip-not-enough-for-u.s.-backed-syrian-rebels](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/train-and-equip-not-enough-for-u.s.-backed-syrian-rebels).

5 Jim Sciutto, Jamie Crawford and Chelsea J. Carter, “ISIS Can ‘Muster’ between 20,000 and 31,500 Fighters, CIA Says,” CNN, September 12, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/>.

6 Christopher Kozak, “The Assad Regime Under Stress: Conscription and Protest among Alawite and Minority Populations in Syria,” Institute for the Study of War, December 15, 2014, <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-assad-regime-under-stress.html>.



involved in some of the worst regime attacks on civilians.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, while they are incapable of securing a rapid and decisive victory, regime forces are able to sustain offensive and defensive operations and inflict continuous attrition on opposition forces as well as civilians living in areas beyond the regime's control. It is also worth noting that the overwhelming preponderance of regime military operations—ground and air—have been directed against nationalist rebel forces rather than ISIL. Even as the United States seeks to train and equip forces for use against ISIL, the top priority of the Assad regime remains one of erasing all the other opposition forces.

ISIL and the regime are not the only military opponents the SNSF would likely face. Jihadists (such as the Nusra Front) are not as numerous or capable as ISIL, but have demonstrated that they are among the most formidable armed elements in Syria. Like ISIL, the Nusra Front is a direct descendent of al-Qaeda in Iraq, and has expended considerable effort in marginalizing the Syrian nationalist opposition. Unlike ISIL, the Nusra Front has also fought the regime consistently. In the wake of the train-and-equip announcement and coalition air raids on transnational terrorists embedded within the Nusra Front, Nusra significantly increased its combat pressure against nationalist rebel units. Were the SNSF deployed to Syria now, the Nusra Front could be a significant enemy.

In addition to three very capable military organizations, the SNSF might well be facing a variety of local warlords—typically, criminals who issue political manifestos and raise local militias or gangs. It is likely, for example, that *irregular forces* affiliated with the Assad family and regime would try to survive and continue their racketeering existence, even if the regime's formal military apparatus were to collapse.

Indeed, the collapsing nature of Syrian statehood is creating conditions that mandate the SNSF being something more than a ground combat force. It will be required to protect civilians wherever it operates, and to see to their welfare. It will have to play a policing role in liberated areas, giving populations a sense of personal security and allowing for the establishment of effective civilian governance. The SNSF would also have to provide security for humanitarian aid convoys and their distribution operations. In addition to obvious humanitarian benefits, aid (food, medical supplies, temporary shelter, etc.) is an important facet of military operations, and its political salience is great. The ultimate objective

of legitimate governance for all of Syria will require the SNSF to be directly involved in protecting all Syrians from the consequences of unrestrained criminality by the Assad regime, ISIL, and others.

## SNSF FORCE STRUCTURE: THE CONCEPT

Taking as a starting point the countrywide stabilization mission of the SNSF—and assuming that this force will receive substantial assistance from international allies committed to helping Syrians defeat terrorism and other forms of political criminality—the view here is that American and allied planners should aim, at least initially, to build a force on the order of fifty thousand personnel. The goal would be to create a three-division motorized infantry-type force with broad capabilities to conduct a wide range of missions, but with the expectation that sustained combat would be the main line of effort. Each division would be configured similarly. As noted in the previous section of this report, the SNSF would ultimately come under the direction of a Syrian national command authority.

**THE GOAL WOULD BE TO CREATE A THREE-DIVISION MOTORIZED INFANTRY-TYPE FORCE WITH BROAD CAPABILITIES TO CONDUCT A WIDE RANGE OF MISSIONS.**

The SNSF would execute missions assigned to it by a Syrian national command authority and would provide it with a field force capable of decisively influencing the military and political situation on the ground in Syria. It would serve as a ground maneuver force that would engage multiple enemies in pursuit of its stabilization mission. It would, in essence, constitute the core of a new Syrian Army. As such, it would be open to incorporating within its ranks patriotic officers and enlisted personnel of the Syrian Arab Army—individuals and even units that have avoided being accomplices in war crimes or crimes against humanity committed by the Assad family and regime.

Indeed, the proposed personnel strength of fifty thousand is offered as a notional planning target. It does not assume that there are, as of early 2015, enough potential recruits readily available from which to select fifty thousand. It does, however, assume that the train-and-equip target of sixteen thousand troops is inadequate for the missions in Syria. It further assumes

7 Jeffrey White, "Syrian Air Force Operations: Strategic, Effective, and Unrestrained," PolicyWatch 2345, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 11, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrian-air-force-operations-strategic-effective-and-unrestrained>.

that a force total of sixteen thousand will persuade no one—not Iran, not Russia, and not the Assad regime—that meaningful political transition negotiations are an option worth pursuing. Furthermore, the force strength suggested here does not rest on the assumption that it would be sufficient to accomplish the military mission in the face of enemies whose forces, on paper, would far outnumber the SNSF. In this sense, the target of fifty thousand SNSF personnel is not an end goal.

**THE SNSF STRUCTURE PROPOSED  
HERE IS ESSENTIALLY TRIANGULAR,  
WITH EACH HIGHER-ECHELON  
FORMATION HAVING THREE BASIC  
COMBAT ELEMENTS.**

Although a well-trained, well-equipped, and well-supported force of this size can and will perform credibly and effectively against ISIL terrorists, loyalist regime elements, Iranian-supported militiamen and mercenaries, and other politicized criminal elements, it will also be a rallying point for millions of Syrians who desire civilized governance. The force itself could be a magnet for patriotic officers and soldiers currently serving in the Syrian Arab Army. Likewise, it could also attract young Syrian fighters who have joined jihadist organizations in search of reliable sources of weapons, ammunition, pay, or other forms of support. If the train-and-equip strategy becomes something truly meaningful in a Syrian context, the end result could be a force far exceeding fifty thousand personnel. If a force of this size is accompanied by a mission attractive to Syrian nationalists, resources appropriate to the task, and guidance provided by respected Syrian leaders, the SNSF could ultimately attract multiples of that fifty-thousand figure.

Ideally, the SNSF would not have to be built from scratch or entirely outside of Syria. There are armed nationalist elements inside Syria that could be organized into a coherent cadre with a recognizable chain of command. This would, however, require the United States to work with Turkey and Jordan to establish protected zones inside Syria where the requisite rearming, retraining, and reorganizing could take place. Turkey-based opposition officials believe that a brigade-size rapid reaction force could be constituted quickly and would be capable of defending against regime depredations while assisting the coalition in fighting ISIL forces. As of this writing, however, it is not clear that the Obama administration's approach to the challenge posed in Syria by ISIL and

by the ISIL-facilitating Assad regime goes beyond a very fuzzy train-and-equip notion, and a hopeful attitude toward the prospect of a political process (backed by Russia).

In terms of force structure, the basic concept is to create a maneuver force that can be employed in a variety of military activities. These would range from major combat operations and the provision of local security to the facilitation and protection of humanitarian assistance and associated convoys, and the protection of Syria's cultural treasures. Although the support of allies would ideally permit the SNSF to have a combat-effective "tooth-to-tail" ratio, the SNSF should have the ability to provide a full range of combat support (engineers, intelligence) and sustainment (logistics, medical) for its combat forces in the field. To the extent possible, the SNSF should be uniformly equipped with the types of weapons customarily used by the Syrian Arab Army. This would simplify logistical and training requirements.

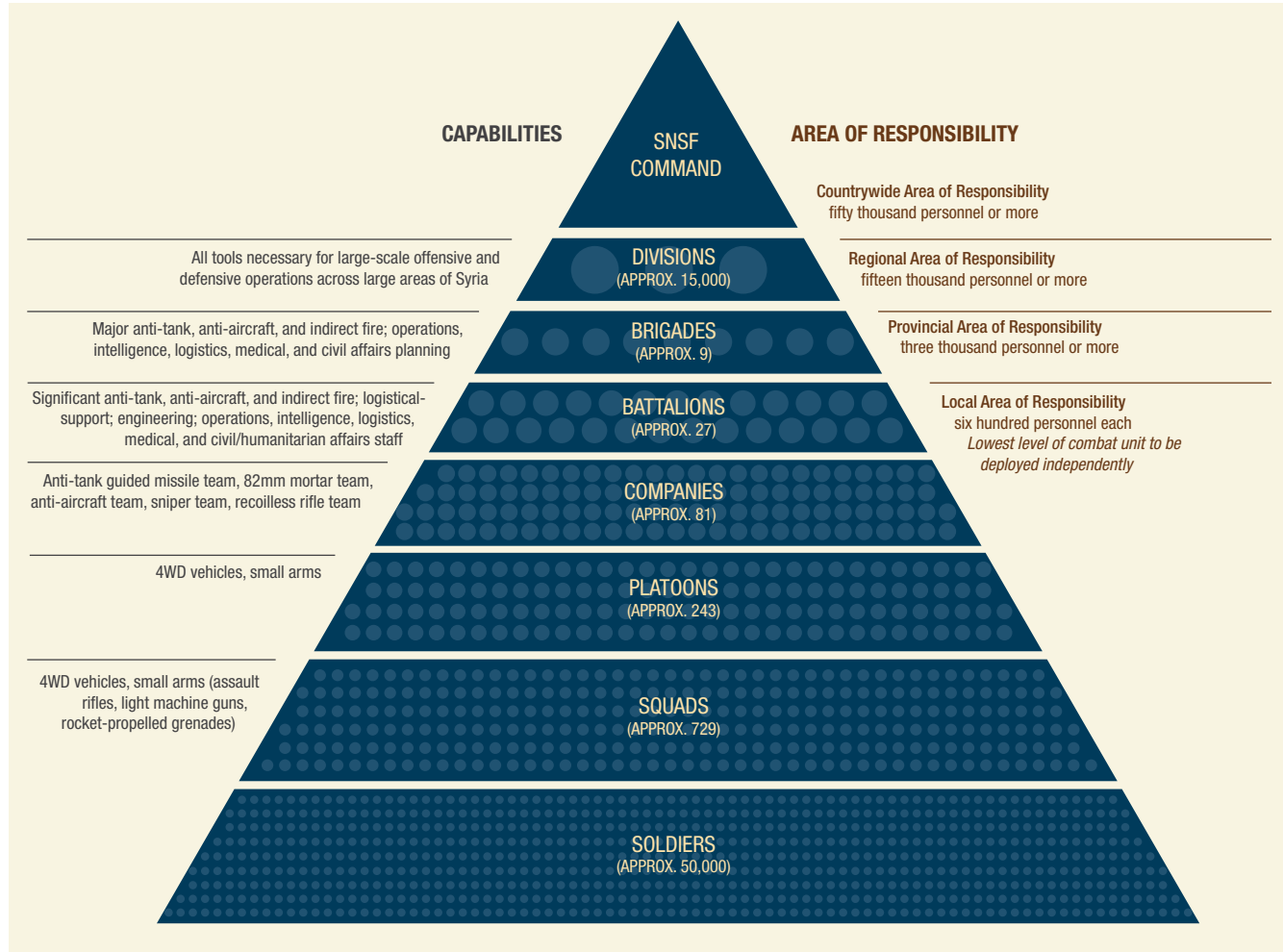
The SNSF structure proposed here is essentially triangular, with each higher-echelon formation having three basic combat elements. Platoons would have three squads, companies three platoons, battalions three companies, brigades three battalions, and divisions three brigades. Each echelon would have a range of capabilities, enabling upper echelons to carry out broader and more complex operations. The aim, of course, is to configure a force that would, by virtue of leadership, motivation, training, weaponry, organization, and external support, punch above its numerical weight against a combination of foes. Indeed, battalion and brigade-level units should have the capability to conduct substantial independent operations as required.

The force design elements and principles of the SNSF can, therefore, be summarized as follows:

- a force of approximately fifty thousand personnel
- an entirely Syrian-led, Syrian-composed force operating inside Syria
- a force ideally incorporating existing nationalist armed elements inside Syria
- a force uniformly equipped, to the extent possible
- a field or maneuver ground force
- full range of ground combat capabilities
- independent operational capabilities for battalions and brigades
- noncombat (including civil-military) capabilities built in

In terms of unit sizes and associated notional areas of responsibility (AORs), the following is envisioned:

GRAPHIC 1. SNSF Force Structure



- battalion: local (town/front sector) AOR, six hundred personnel
- brigade: provincial AOR, three thousand personnel
- division: regional AOR, fifteen thousand personnel
- force: countrywide AOR, fifty thousand personnel (or more)

To be sure, it will take time to build the SNSF. Much will depend on the resources allocated to the task, developments inside and around Syria, and the political commitment and sense of urgency of those who would train, equip, and support such a force. What is envisioned here is a scenario in which it would take two to three years to build the SNSF's three-division force, once the initial cadre of personnel has been identified. Again, this process can be accelerated if protected zones are established inside Syria.

### SNSF FORCE STRUCTURE: UNIT-BUILDING BLOCKS

The lowest echelon of the SNSF would be a motorized infantry squad, consisting of two sections of five personnel each, plus a squad leader. The sections would be equipped with a mix of assault rifles, light machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades. Each section would have a four-wheel drive (4WD) vehicle for mobility. This kind of formation is frequently seen on Syrian battlefields; Syrian fighters are completely familiar with the Soviet/Eastern European weaponry likely to be employed. These squads would be combat capable on any Syrian battlefield, urban or rural, and would have some anti-armor/anti-structure capability (rocket propelled grenades or similar weapons). They would not, however, have heavy weapons.

The next-echelon formation would be a motorized infantry platoon. It would consist of three squads plus a

platoon leader, with his own 4WD vehicle and driver. The platoon would have no organic heavy weapons.

The motorized infantry company would consist of three infantry platoons, a heavy weapons platoon, and company headquarters. The heavy weapons platoon would entail some combination of 4WD-vehicle-mounted heavy machine guns (“Dushkas”), an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) team, an 82-millimeter mortar team, an anti-aircraft team equipped with a ZPU-2/4 or ZU-23 anti-aircraft machine gun/cannon, a sniper team, and a recoilless rifle (RCL) team. This heavy weapons platoon would provide substantial additional firepower for the infantry platoons, giving the company considerable combat capabilities in all Syrian environments.

The motorized infantry battalion would be the first SNSF echelon to incorporate capabilities beyond pure combat. With three infantry companies and a heavy weapons company, it would have substantial firepower—including significant anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and indirect fire capabilities. It would also have its own logistical-support capability, in the form of a supply and transportation company, and an engineer platoon with heavy earth moving equipment—an important asset on Syrian battlefields. The battalion staff would include operations, intelligence, logistics, medical, and civil/humanitarian affairs positions. SNSF battalions would be designed to conduct significant independent and sustained offensive and defensive operations in Syria. As such, they would—except under special circumstances—be the smallest combat units to be deployed to Syria from training bases outside the country.

The SNSF brigade (consisting of three infantry battalions, plus additional units) would be a major combat unit capable of sustained offensive and defensive operations against significant enemy forces. It would be able to defeat enemy forces of some size and hold or take significant territory. It would have major anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and indirect fire capabilities (artillery and mortar). It would also have its own engineer, logistics, medical, and civil affairs capabilities. The brigade staff would include operations, intelligence, logistics, medical, and civil affairs planning capabilities.

The SNSF division would, along with two sister divisions, be the total initial force planned for operations in Syria. With three infantry brigades and artillery, anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and engineer battalions, a division would be capable of large-scale offensive and defensive operations across large areas of Syria. The division would be able to engage with and defeat sizeable and capable enemy formations. Division staff would be responsible for planning and executing operations to achieve the objectives set for it by SNSF headquarters. The division would have significant civil affairs and humanitarian

capabilities. A commando unit could also be included, to give the division a special operations capability.

## THE SNSF BRIGADE WOULD BE A MAJOR COMBAT UNIT CAPABLE OF SUSTAINED OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE OPERATIONS AGAINST SIGNIFICANT ENEMY FORCES.

The SNSF, including its headquarters, would be the equivalent of a corps—consisting of three divisions, corps-level combat elements (artillery, anti-aircraft, anti-tank, combat engineer), and corps-level support elements (logistics and civil/humanitarian affairs). Corps-level forces could be placed under the operational control of divisions when and if required. The SNSF headquarters would be an integral part of the field or maneuver force, rather than an administrative headquarters. It would be responsible for the direction and conduct of SNSF operations throughout Syria.

As noted in the previous section of this report, ultimately there must be a national command authority—Syrian civilian political leadership—to which the SNSF headquarters will report and from which the SNSF will receive overall political and strategic direction. Any arrangement falling short of the gold standard—Syrian political leadership—will fail at the conceptual level of legitimacy and at the practical level of configuring a motivated and capable military force. Ultimately, the SNSF may report to a governmental ministry of defense. If the United States and its allies remain wedded to a train-and-equip initiative that is ISIL-focused, small in size, and slow to develop, they will find a limited appetite among Syrians to be part of what would look like a colonial levee. And those Syrians attracted to such an enterprise will fall short in terms of motivation, dedication, and loyalty. Any initiative of this nature is not worth inaugurating unless Syrian command and control—political and military—is part of the plan.

## EQUIPMENT, NONCOMBAT CAPABILITIES, AND SUSTAINMENT

The structure of the SNSF anticipated by this report and the capabilities of the force would require substantial equipping in terms of weapons, support vehicles, and concomitant needs in terms of ammunition, spare parts, fuel, and so forth. Enemies of the SNSF will have



the same kinds of weaponry and equipment. If and when units and individuals of the Syrian Arab Army abandon the Assad clan and join the SNSF, this materiel compatibility will ease the transition. Key equipment needs will include:

- 4WD vehicles
- heavy machine guns
- recoilless rifles
- mortars
- anti-tank weaponry (ATGM)
- anti-aircraft guns (perhaps MANPADS)
- light artillery
- heavy engineer equipment
- logistical vehicles
- medical equipment and vehicles
- secure communications

Yet the SNSF will require capabilities that transcend purely combat operations; civil/humanitarian affairs, medical, intelligence, and logistical operations rank high in this respect. Although combat will be the principal activity of a force confronting the combined terror and criminal threats of ISIL and the Assad regime, civilian protection, caring for wounded personnel, operational sustainment, and a clear understanding of the force's enemies will be vital to its success.

The SNSF will play a significant role in assisting and protecting Syrian populations that come under its control. Inculcating attitudes that promote civilian protection without respect to sect, gender, and other factors will be an important part of the training program for each SNSF officer and soldier. The force will need the capability to conduct civil affairs and humanitarian missions, including civil infrastructure maintenance and repair, temporary local administration and policing, distribution of aid, security for aid operations, and securing Syrian arts, monuments, and archives from looting and other threats. These capabilities must be built into the SNSF structure, starting at the battalion level.

The SNSF will incur casualties during the course of combat operations. It will also be obliged to meet the emergency medical needs of civilians in its area of operations. It will therefore need a trained medical staff, and medical equipment and facilities.

SNSF units will need combat intelligence about the situation they are facing. The force must be able to collect, analyze, and disseminate intelligence to relevant

users and to incorporate intelligence provided by coalition forces.

A secure and robust logistical system will keep the SNSF operating effectively in the field for extended operations. This system would facilitate the timely replacement of combat losses, provide a reliable supply of the various types of ammunition required, and keep the SNSF provisioned.

## SNSF WILL REQUIRE CIVIL/ HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS, MEDICAL, INTELLIGENCE, AND LOGISTICAL OPERATIONS CAPABILITIES.

Key aspects of the SNSF sustainment process include the following:

- funding (pay for service members and their families)
- recruitment and replacement (to compensate for attrition)
- training (combat, support staff, and specialty skills)
- resupply of arms, ammunition, and spare parts (including integration of captured material)
- personnel issues (promotion, reward, punishment, casualties, and family and dependent matters)

This report anticipates that these sustainment processes would, for an indefinite period of time, be rendered by non-Syrian allies of the SNSF. As a combat-heavy SNSF makes progress in stabilizing Syria, all of these functions could be gradually transferred to the force or to a ministry of defense.

## SNSF PHASING AND OPERATIONS

With the Assad regime and ISIL operating virtually in tandem to try to eliminate nationalist forces, it will very likely prove impossible for the SNSF to come into existence as a fully formed force. Even if the capabilities and structure outlined in this report were to provide a blueprint of sorts, it is not likely that a three-division force would enter Syria to engage ISIL and the Assad regime in combat operations by 2017. Waiting until 2017 to fully configure such forces would be to consign all Syrians to the continuation of criminality and terror.

The SNSF would instead likely come into existence through small units building into larger units. Ideally, it would begin with the reorganization of nationalist units in protected zones within Syrian territory. Yet even if units are organized and trained exclusively outside of Syria, they would likely be committed to fight in Syria in a phased manner consistent with their size and capabilities.

The SNSF would have multiple missions against a variety of opponents, and it would have to face each of them on complex physical and human terrain. Indeed, it might be required to operate across all of Syria, as well as the intricate sub-theaters of the conflict. This situation will, in turn, require the phasing of commitments, ideally in accordance with the following principles:

- commitment decisions based on clear Syrian national command authority and allied direction, and a coherent operational plan
- limited missions for small forces
- expansion of missions as forces grow in size and capability
- deployment priority to key battlefields
- cooperation with other nationalist forces

Operational and political exigencies would probably require the commitment of elements of the SNSF before the force and many of its key components are fully prepared. However, this consideration applies equally to the train-and-equip initiative currently enjoying official favor. Even given an ISIL-centric mission, waiting years to deploy a fully formed and fully prepared force to the Syrian battlefield would be to leave the battlefield initiative fully in the hands of ISIL and the Assad regime.

However, early, reckless, and inappropriate commitment of small units would expose them to defeat by larger, better equipped, and more experienced enemy units. This would place the entire enterprise at risk. As indicated above, no force smaller than a battalion should be sent into Syria from external bases for combat operations except under highly unusual and reasonably controllable circumstances.

As forces grow in size and capability, their missions can expand in scope. Companies should not be given battalion missions, and battalions should not be handed missions more appropriate for a brigade. SNSF units should be deployed to key battlefields where they can significantly affect the tactical situation, and they should be prepared to cooperate with existing nationalist forces. Ideally, these forces would be folded into the SNSF, and this folding would take place within a protected zone or zones.

If required, the commitment of SNSF units could begin with battalions. These could be employed initially for tasks such as protecting “security zones” created within Syria by international or opposition action, assisting in the establishment of a secure political presence, and providing security for humanitarian missions. These missions would provide a “shake down” period for the SNSF. Follow-on operations could include the defense of key areas and positions under SNSF and rebel control.

**WAITING YEARS TO DEPLOY A FULLY FORMED AND FULLY PREPARED FORCE TO THE SYRIAN BATTLEFIELD WOULD BE TO LEAVE THE BATTLEFIELD INITIATIVE FULLY IN THE HANDS OF ISIL AND THE ASSAD REGIME.**

Experienced and effective SNSF battalions could then begin the process of expanding SNSF areas of control and working toward the destruction of enemy forces. They could later be incorporated into brigade-level formations.

Whether the initial combat operations of the SNSF focus on ISIL or the regime will be dictated by tactical circumstances. Were such a force in existence now at full strength, it would probably be moving against both simultaneously and perhaps against the Nusra Front and criminal gangs as well. The following discussion of prospective phased operations notionally assigns an initial SNSF employment priority to ISIL.

Operations against ISIL could involve combat against large ISIL forces over very large geographic spaces. Air support from US and coalition forces would be important to the success and speed of these operations.

When a brigade-sized SNSF force becomes ready for serious combat, it could be committed to initial operations against ISIL forces in Aleppo province. Aleppo is a key battlefield in northern Syria, and success there would have significant implications for the fight against ISIL and for the SNSF. Clearing ISIL elements from Turkish border crossing areas would be important. When a second SNSF brigade becomes ready, the two SNSF brigades could expand operations against ISIL into



Free Syrian Army fighters walk through a field in the town of Mork in Hama province in March 2015. The province has been the site of heavy fighting between Syrian government forces, ISIS, and the nationalist opposition. *Photo credit: Reuters/Khalil Ashawi.*

Raqqa province and, if necessary, continue them in Aleppo province. Raqqa is ISIL's heartland, and heavy fighting would be expected.

Assuming operations in Raqqa were successful and a third brigade or a full division became available, SNSF operations could be further extended in other ISIL-controlled territories in Deir Ezzor and Hasaka provinces. In a final counter-ISIL phase, the SNSF would conduct stabilization and security operations in areas freed of ISIL control. In all phases of counter-ISIL operations, the availability of components of force level anti-tank, artillery, engineer, and support elements would be beneficial.

SNSF operations against regime forces would involve combat against regular and irregular units supported by heavy firepower, including the regime's air force and tactical ballistic missile (TBM) forces. In addition, the SNSF would likely face the regime allies Hezbollah, Iraqi groups, and perhaps the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) forces. This would probably be the most challenging scenario for the SNSF. A force organized by and operating in conjunction with the United

States and its coalition partners would likely require combat air support.

Counter-regime operations could require combat across large spaces of western, central, and southern Syria. Initial operations could require one SNSF brigade, or more if ready, against regime forces in Aleppo and then Idlib. Defeat of regime forces in these provinces would consolidate a territory under SNSF control and would allow for the establishment of political and humanitarian activity largely free from regime threat.

A force of a division or more could then conduct operations against regime forces in Hama and Homs provinces. A second division could then conduct decisive operations against regime forces in Damascus and areas to the south. Follow-up operations by major elements of the SNSF could be conducted against the regime heartland in Tartous and Latakia, if needed. Stabilization operations in areas freed of regime control would likely require a substantial portion of the SNSF, and cooperation with other nationalist forces could be important for success.

Simultaneous SNSF operations against ISIL and regime forces would be an extremely demanding task, one requiring sustained operations across most or even all of Syria. It would likely require significant air support from US and coalition forces as well as cooperation with other nationalist forces. Simultaneous operations would likely ultimately require that the SNSF operate at full personnel strength, with perhaps more than the fifty thousand personnel envisaged by this report. Such operations would require taking more time for mission accomplishments than operations against ISIL or regime forces individually.

Initial operations would again focus on Aleppo province and require at least two brigades or perhaps upward of a division. The main effort would likely be aimed at freeing Aleppo city from the threat of regime and ISIL forces. As more forces became available, operations could be expanded to the south, west, and east. Ultimately, the full force of three divisions would be required, along with assistance from other rebel forces.

Assuming operations against ISIL and regime forces were successful, the SNSF would have to shift to a stabilization mission. Some armed elements, including jihadis, warlords, remnants of ISIL, and regime forces, would likely remain to be dealt with. SNSF would also have to conduct civil affairs and humanitarian missions across Syria in the wake of the collapse of ISIL and regime authorities. Accordingly, SNSF forces could be assigned on a regional basis, with the SNSF headquarters serving as the overall coordinator for stabilization operations throughout Syria.

## **SNSF EXTERNAL SUPPORT REQUIREMENTS**

The SNSF, although multifaceted and flexible in design, would likely not be structured to incorporate some important capabilities. It would therefore require significant external assistance from allies:

- The SNSF would not have an integral air component and would rely on an external force for air support.
- Strategic and operational intelligence on ISIL and regime forces could be provided to SNSF headquarters by foreign intelligence services, but a system for receiving and using this would have to be created within the SNSF.

- The SNSF would have good tactical movement capabilities and some capabilities for operational movement. Yet for strategic movement over significant distances or from border region to border region, it would need external assistance.
- The SNSF would have the capability for tactical and operational planning, but it would need assistance with strategic planning.
- Public affairs and information operations are an important part of the war in Syria. The SNSF would have a limited capability for this, but it would need assistance for major activities.

It would be the responsibility of a Syrian national command authority, in coordination with the SNSF, to negotiate or otherwise see that these external support requirements are met.



## CONCLUSION

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The foregoing analysis suggests several conclusions concerning the prospective creation of the Syrian National Stabilization Force (SNSF). Above all, this will be a politically and militarily complex task, one that transcends exponentially issues of recruitment, vetting, training, and equipping.

**THE SNSF CAN PRODUCE THE REQUISITE MILITARY FORCES THAT CAN STABILIZE SYRIA AND END A HUMANITARIAN ABOMINATION.**

Clearly, the challenges presented by the operational environment in Syria, likely missions, required capabilities, appropriate organization, and the nature and phasing of operations require careful consideration as the force is configured. The following factors are deemed critical:

- A Syrian political structure does not yet exist that can provide the requisite political guidance and national command authority. This report recommends that an informal Syrian Advisory Task Force be assembled by the United States to provide essential Syrian advice and assistance until the political structure emerges.
- Force sustainment will require considerable investment and effort by the United States and its partners. This will be true whether the force to emerge is one capable of stabilizing Syria and thereby defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—the SNSF—or one that provides a limited ground component for an anti-ISIL air campaign while somehow mounting a defense against regime forces.
- A commitment to build and deploy the SNSF would have to entail a commitment to provide it with robust combat support. Yet surely this would have to be the case even with a lesser train-and-equip initiative. After all, in the case of a lesser initiative, would the United States and its partners stand by idly if their anti-ISIL ground component were in danger of being overrun by some combination of regime and regime-allied forces?
- The SNSF can produce the requisite military forces that can stabilize Syria and end a humanitarian abomination. Provided it ultimately reflects Syrian identity, leadership, and advice, it can be an essential tool for the creation of legitimate Syrian governance. Its creation and the message it would convey in terms of American determination might be enough to change the Assad regime's calculation with respect to meaningful political transition negotiations. In the meantime, those who would seriously pursue the training and equipping of Syrian nationalists would set about building a Syrian military force capable of defeating any combination of enemies standing between it and the stabilization of the entire country. This is the way to destroy ISIL. This is the way to set the stage for legitimate governance in all of Syria.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Frederic C. Hof** is a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. He came to the Atlantic Council after a career as a US Army Officer, a private sector CEO, and a US Department of State diplomat. Serving at the Department of State (2009-12), Hof was given the rank of Ambassador in

his capacity as Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for transition in Syria; he also led an effort to mediate Syrian-Israeli peace. He is a Vietnam veteran and as a military officer served on the commission that investigated the 1983 bombing of the US Marine Corps headquarters at Beirut International Airport. While in the private sector Hof took a leave of absence in 2001 to serve as Chief of Staff of the Sharm al-Sheikh Fact-Finding Commission, headed by former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, and was the principal drafter of the Commission's report. Among his military decorations is the Purple Heart.

Hof is the author of *Beyond the Boundary: Lebanon, Israel and the Challenge of Change* (Middle East Insight, 2000); *Line of Battle, Border of Peace? The Line of June 4, 1967* (Middle East Insight, 1999); and *Galilee Divided: The Israel-Lebanon Frontier, 1916-1984* (Westview Press, 1985).



**Bassma Kodmani** is the Executive Director of the Arab Reform Initiative and Associate Professor of International Relations at Paris University. She served as a senior adviser at the French National Research Council, Senior Research Fellow at CERI-Sciences Po, an adviser to the Académie Diplomatique

Internationale, and Senior Visiting Fellow at the Collège de France.

From 1998 to 2005, she served as head of the Governance and International Cooperation program at the Ford Foundation's Middle East office. From 1981 to 1998, she established and directed the Middle East Program at the Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI) in Paris.

In 2011-12, she took a leave of absence to serve as Head of Foreign Relations and spokesperson for the Syrian National Council. She is the cofounder and Treasurer of the Initiative for a New Syria, which specializes in relief and education for Syrians.

She holds a PhD in political science from Sciences-Po in Paris. She has authored and edited books, reports, and articles on conflict, political and security reform, and religious authorities in the Middle East. Kodmani is a board member of several international and Arab institutions. She holds the distinction of Chevalière de la Légion d'Honneur of France.



**Jeffrey White** is a Defense Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant. He has written extensively on military issues involving Syria, Israel, Hezbollah, and the Gaza conflict.

Before joining the Institute, White completed a thirty-four-year career with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). He was a member of the Defense Intelligence Senior Executive Service (DISES) and served in a wide variety of senior analytical and leadership positions. White provided intelligence support during multiple Middle East crises, from the 1968 Arab-Israeli War of Attrition to the developing conflict with Iraq in 2002. He led numerous crisis intelligence response groups within the agency, including those dealing with the Lebanese civil war, the Israeli-Syrian conflict in Lebanon, US operations against Libya, US naval operations in the Persian Gulf, and multiple Iraq crises from 1994 to 2002.

White has received numerous awards for distinguished service as an Intelligence Officer, including the Secretary of Defense Medal for Meritorious Civilian Service, the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, and the DIA Director's Awards for Exceptional and Meritorious Civilian Service.

White holds an MA in international affairs from George Washington University, and a BA in foreign affairs from the University of Virginia.

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1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor, Washington, DC 20005

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