

SUBJECT: (U) Dissent Channel: Syria Policy

1. (U) The following is a Dissent Channel message from the abovementioned Department officers to the Director of Policy Planning (S/P).

2. (SBU) We are State Department officers who have been involved in the U.S. government's response to the Syria crisis in varying capacities over the past five years. Despite the Secretary's efforts to deescalate the violence and forge ahead with the political track, we believe that **achieving our objectives will continue to elude us if we do not include the use of military force as an option to enforce the Cessation of Hostilities (CoH) and compel the Syrian regime to abide by its terms as well as to negotiate a political solution in good faith.** Asad's systematic violations against the Syrian people are the root cause of the instability that continues to grip Syria and the broader region. None of us sees, or has seen, merit in a large-scale U.S. invasion of Syria or the sudden collapse of existing Syrian institutions. But we do see merit in a **more militarily assertive U.S. role in Syria, based on the judicious use of stand-off and air weapons, which would undergird and drive a more focused and hardnosed U.S.-led diplomatic process,** leveraging the International Syrian Support Group (ISSG), to: end the daily mass killing of civilians and egregious violations of human rights, cajole the warring parties to make necessary compromises at the negotiating table, bolster

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moderate rebel groups' role in defeating Da'esh, and help bring an end to the broader instability the conflict generates.

3. (SBU) Initiating targeted military strikes in response to egregious regime violations of the CoH would raise the cost for the regime and bolster the prospects for a real ceasefire -- without cities being bombed and humanitarian convoys blocked -- and lead to a more serious diplomatic process, led by the United States. A reinvigorated CoH would help the political process to mature as we press for the formation of a transitional government body with full executive powers that can start to rebuild Syria and Syrian society, with significant assistance from the international community. With the repeated diplomatic setbacks of the past five years, together with the Russian and Iranian governments' cynical and destabilizing deployment of significant military power to bolster the Asad regime, we believe that **the foundations are not currently in place for an enduring ceasefire and consequential negotiations.**

4. (SBU) With over 400,000 people dead, hundreds of thousands still at risk from regime sieges, and 12 million people from a population of 23 million displaced from their homes, we believe the moral rationale for taking steps to end the deaths and suffering in Syria, after five years of brutal war, is evident and unquestionable. The regime's actions directly result in broader instability and undermine the international system responsible for protection of civilians, prevention of mass atrocities, and accountability for grave violations. The strategic imperatives for taking steps to end the bloodshed are numerous and equally compelling.

5. (SBU) First, with the regime deploying tactics that overwhelmingly target civilians (barrel bombs and air strikes in cities) to achieve battlefield objectives and undermine support for the moderate opposition, impeding or ending such atrocities will not only save lives but further our political objectives. While the regime maintains the advantage, an undeterred Asad will resist compromises sought by almost all opposition factions and regional actors. Shifting the tide of the conflict against the regime will increase the chances for peace by sending a clear signal to the regime and its backers that there will not be a military solution to the conflict.

6. (SBU) Secondly, a more assertive U.S. role to protect and preserve opposition-held communities, by defending them from Asad's air force and artillery, presents the best chance for defeating Da'esh in Syria. The prospects for rolling back Da'esh's hold on territory are bleak without the Sunni Arabs, who the regime continues to bomb and starve. A de facto alliance with the regime against Da'esh

would not guarantee success: Asad's military is undermanned and exhausted. Kurdish YPG fighters cannot -- and should not -- be expected to project power and hold terrain deep into non-Kurdish areas. And, crucially, Syria's Sunni population continues to view the Asad regime as the primary enemy in the conflict. If we are to remain committed to countering Da'esh in the Levant without committing ground forces, the best option is to protect and empower the moderate Syrian opposition. Tolerating the Asad regime's continued gross human rights violations against the Syrian people undermines, both morally and materially, the unity of the anti-Da'esh coalition, particularly among Sunni Arab partners. Failure to stem Asad's flagrant abuses will only bolster the ideological appeal of groups such as Da'esh, even as they endure tactical setbacks on the battlefield. As brutal as Da'esh is, it is the Asad regime that is responsible for the vast majority of the hundreds of thousands of victims in this conflict.

7. (SBU) Third, putting additional constraints on the regime's ability to bomb and shell both fighting forces and unambiguously civilian targets would have a direct, mitigating impact on the refugee and IDP crisis. This crisis has deeply affected Syria's neighbors for years and is now impacting our European partners in far-reaching ways that may ultimately jeopardize their very character as open, unified, and democratic societies. Even in the United States, the crisis in Syria has lent credence to prejudiced ideologies that we thought had been discredited years ago. Furthermore, the calm that would ensue after the regime's warplanes are grounded would lessen the importance of armed actors, strengthen civil society throughout the country, and open the space for increased dialogue among communities.

8. (SBU) Perhaps most critically, **a more muscular military posture under U.S. leadership would underpin and propel a new and reinvigorated diplomatic initiative.** Despite the dedication and best efforts of those involved, current CoH and related diplomatic processes are disjointed and largely tactical in nature. Instead, a singularly focused and disciplined diplomatic effort -- modeled on the process established for the Iran negotiations strategy led by the Secretary and former Under Secretary Sherman and with full White House backing -- should be adopted to (i) ensure regime compliance with the CoH (or a similar ceasefire mechanism) and prevent civilian casualties, and (ii) advance talks involving internal and external actors, to include the Iranians and the Saudis, to produce a transitional government.

9. (SBU) U.S. military power would serve to promote regime compliance with the CoH, and in so doing save lives and alter battlefield dynamics. The May 17 ISSG declaration states, "Where the co-chairs believe that a party to the cessation of

hostilities has engaged in a pattern of persistent non-compliance, the Task Force could refer such behavior to the ISSG Ministers or those designated by the Ministers **to determine appropriate action, including the exclusion of such parties from the arrangements of the cessation and the protection it affords them.**” Making clear our willingness to impose consequences on the Asad regime would increase U.S. negotiating leverage with regard to all parties, rally partners around U.S. leadership, and raise the costs for others to continue obstructing a sustainable end to the conflict. We are not advocating for a slippery slope that ends in a military confrontation with Russia; rather, we are calling for the credible threat of targeted U.S. military responses to regime violations to preserve the CoH and the political track, which we worked so hard to build.

10. (SBU) We recognize that military action is not a panacea, and that the Asad regime might prove resilient even in the face of U.S. strikes. We further recognize that the risk of further deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations is significant and that military steps to stop the Asad regime’s relentless bombardment of the Syrian people may yield a number of second-order effects. Nonetheless, it is also clear that **the status quo in Syria will continue to present increasingly dire, if not disastrous, humanitarian, diplomatic, and terrorism-related challenges.** For five years, the scale of these consequences has overwhelmed our efforts to deal with this conflict; the United States cannot contain the conflict with the current policy. In this regard, we firmly believe **it is time the United States, guided by our strategic interests and moral convictions, lead a global effort to put an end to this conflict once and for all.**