The Role of Intelligence on Proxy Wars in Syria: The Future Impact of Analysis

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The ongoing war in Syria has been devastating for its citizens and surrounding nation states. Peaceful protests in March, 2011 were met with decisive brutal responses from the regime. What started as non-violent protests against the Assad regime escalated rapidly to a war between those who would keep Assad in power, and a variety of rebel and terrorist groups backed by the United States and various other allies and enemies, most notably Iran.

Iran has also provided support to Assad's regime in the form of financing and forces. Iran's "Special Groups", similar to Lebanon's Hizbollah (and often along with Hizbollah fighters), make up many of the pro-Assad militia in Syria.

Conversely, Syria has a great many anti-Assad rebel/terrorist groups who currently make up its landscape. Two main al-Qaeda splinter groups, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria ("ISIS") and Jabhat al-Nusra ("JN") also known as the al-Nusra Front, fight against Assad's forces (and sometimes against each other). A wide variety of other anti-Assad Sunni salafi-jihadist militia exist, although many smaller militias have been absorbed by larger ones.

In addition to the interest the United States has and should have regarding the safety and security of its allies, it should also count among its concerns "counterterrorism, energy security, ... and humanitarian/health concern" (United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on Terrorism, 2014). Further, the expansionist attitudes and behaviors of Iran are certainly an issue to consider.

Formation of foreign policy regarding this issue has been hotly debated and difficult, as the situation in Syria changes rapidly. There are state and non-state actors, allies and enemies, funding being directed by enemies to proxy allies, defection a rampant problem amid the

salafi-jihadists, and diplomatic relations that could suffer based on the wrong action or inaction.

In the past the United States has failed to form a cohesive policy regarding Syria. Much of the

damage and many of the casualties in the Syrian war can be attributed to a failure of outside

actors to more robustly support anti-Assad Syrian citizens.

The U.S. Intelligence Community ("IC") plays a critical role in developing and forming

foreign policy. It is with the use of intelligence operatives and analysts that the United States

was able to obtain information regarding Assad's use of sarin gas. The IC has the ability to

remain in Syria and surrounding countries and gather information that journalists have been

barred from gathering and reporting on. The IC can provide a more objective look at what is

happening, as opposed to relying on propaganda or disinformation provided by state and

non-state actors within the Syrian borders.

Operatives and analysts can provide a more accurate picture of the weapons available to

forces, the plans of specific militia, and intentions of other state-actors. Although it is impossible

for the Intelligence Community to predict the future, the information gathered and provided by

operatives and analysts can illuminate a rapidly changing map that contains all kinds of

contrasting militias and forces.

The information provided by the Intelligence Community can inform policy-makers

about all kinds of decisions. These include which militias to back (if any), which militias Iran is

sponsoring with its $1.96 billion budget, what weapons militias on both sides are using, the flow

of terrorist activities across borders including which countries are providing foreign fighters and

how to mitigate that if possible, and how to best propose solutions to these issues with our allies.

The Intelligence Community also has the unique ability to provide information on specific targets, both in terms of people and individual buildings or land areas. There are few impartial journalists left in Syria, especially a number of the more decimated areas such as Raqqa. The Intelligence Community has advantage over what one would see on the news for this reason in addition to many others.

Of course, this rarely stops policy-makers from consulting the news media as a source of information. Although the media in the United States has mostly turned its focus away from Syria and the surrounding area, there are a number of newspapers and journalists who are still working to cover the goings-on. These, depending on the origin, can be decent sources of information.

Additionally, there are still reports coming out of Syria itself and surrounding countries. One must be careful, however, when relying on any information provided by these reports, as propaganda from both the Sunni backed anti-Assad militia and the Shia pro-Assad forces tend to skew information wildly. The chaos in Syria also makes it difficult for journalists to obtain accurate information, to check facts, and to provide readers (including policy-makers) with precise facts and figures.

Policy-makers have also been known to receive information from non-Intelligence Community sources within the government. For example, they may acquire information from persons who have experience living or fighting in Syria. The problem with this is that those sources may not have up-to-date information, accurate information, and may not be conscious of their own biases when discussing or relaying information. These sources may not realize that they are providing opinion, not actionable intelligence.

The obstacles to obtaining reliable information for intelligence analysts are similar to those facing journalists. The vast majority of information provided by Syrian militias is heavily biased at best and outright propaganda at worst. Thus, other information sources must be relied upon. Covert operations to infiltrate the salafi-jihadist militia are often only partly successful because the more organized groups (and thus the ones who would provide the most useful information) are structured in a way that a) prevents anyone who is not pre-vetted from joining, and b) prevents anyone but the top officials in the group from knowing exactly what is happening. As these groups are multitudinous and rapidly changing, it is difficult to obtain information that will be actionable.

There have been numerous instances of fighters from one salafi-jihadist group splintering off and defecting to another. This makes it difficult to predict which militias, if any, to arm and fund. Providing weapons, money, and aid to a group that will then defect and bring those goods to ISIS, JN or another salafi-jihadist militia is counterproductive and embarrassing.

Additionally, much of Syria lies in ruins. The government no longer exists in any powerful way. Infrastructure is gone or crumbling in much of the country. This makes getting information in and out more difficult. It also makes obtaining records, sources, and other information vastly more challenging.

> While the United States does not have historic interests in Syria … almost all of Syria's neighbors are strategic U.S. allies - Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon, which is not allied with the United States, but where Washington has considerable interests and challenges. - Andrew Tabler (United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on Terrorism, 2014)

The best course of action in Syria has been a hotly debated issue since March, 2011 (and even before, when it was clear that Bashar al-Assad was likely going to be the target of a political revolution). The result of this debate, however, has been half-measures and inaction.

One course of action might be to not get involved at all, to "stay out of it". As Andrew Tabler stated above, the United States does not traditionally have interests in Syria. If the United States were to back Bashar al-Assad, it would be aiding in keeping a brutal, human rights violating dictator in power (or restoring him to power, as the case may be). Propping up Assad is not an ideal solution.

Conversely, backing any one (or multiple) salafi-jihadist militias in the overthrow of Assad is also problematic. For one, the United States would be supporting (directly or indirectly) the spread of extremist Islam and terrorism. Many of the salafi-jihadist militias are as brutal as Assad. They commit vicious acts of atrocity upon many of the civilians who remain in the towns they conquer.

The general feeling is that Syria is a lose-lose situation. However, there is more at risk than just who is in charge in Syria. If the United States withdraws from Syria, Iran (who has immeasurable interest in Syria and Northern Iraq) would face no opposition to its expansionist goals. Tehran is backing many militias in order to create an aura of deniability, but the fact remains that they have every intention of propping Assad and expanding into his territory.

As it stands, the best course of action then is to stop doing things in half-measures. If the United States is to aid its Middle Eastern allies and stop further destabilization in that area, it must "put someone in charge of containing and rolling back Iranian-backed militias" (United States. Congress. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs. Subcommittee on Terrorism, 2017).

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