



One-pager: Competing visions for Syria and Iraq: The myth of an Anti-ISIS grand coalition

Negotiations between the Syrian regime and elements of the Syrian armed opposition are scheduled to begin on January 25, 2016, in Geneva to lay the groundwork for a ceasefire and political transition. But can they accomplish anything? Competing objectives among the international community will likely undermine the success of any proposed long-term solution.

AEI's [Critical Threats Project](#) and the [Institute for the Study of War](#) engaged in a planning effort to develop and evaluate possible courses of action that the United States could pursue to defeat the threat from ISIS and al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. The findings are part of a series of reports; the second report, "Competing Visions for Syria and Iraq: The Myth of an Anti-ISIS Grand Coalition" identifies the minimum necessary conditions for ending the conflicts there and compares US strategic objectives to the objectives of other regional players.

1. The US must accomplish four overarching strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria to safeguard vital national interests and secure the homeland: (1) destroy enemy groups; (2) end the communal, sectarian civil wars; (3) set conditions to prevent the reconstitution of enemy groups; and (4) extricate Iraq and Syria from regional and global conflicts.

2. The US must take urgent measures to strengthen Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi and prepare contingency efforts for his fall. The current Iraqi government is extremely fragile and under intense pressure from Iranian-backed militias and political groups, as well as former Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki. The collapse of this government and Maliki's return would be disastrous for the fight against ISIS. Facilitating Maliki's departure from power was an important achievement of the US administration in 2014, because his policies helped create conditions for the regrowth of ISIS. If Maliki were to regain power, his campaign against ISIS would likely make the problem much worse.

3. To secure America's vital national interests in Syria specifically, the US and its partners must: (1) destroy ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and foreign Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria; (2) identify and strengthen interlocutors representing the Syrian opposition; (3) facilitate a negotiated settlement between the Syrian regime and opposition; (4) obtain regional acceptance of that settlement; (5) establish peace-enforcement mechanisms; and (6) reconstruct state institutions.

4. To participate in a post-Assad government, Salafi-jihadi groups must meet the following conditions essential to achieving core US security objectives: (1) break with Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS; (2) accept the principle of a future pluralistic and unitary Syrian state; (3) reject violent jihad; (4) disarm to a policing and defensive level; and (5) commit to the elimination of the current shari'a court system and the establishment of political institution-based governance.

5. The superficial convergence of Iranian, Russian, Turkish, and Saudi strategic objectives with those of the US on ISIS as a threat masks significant divergences that will undermine US security requirements. Iran and Russia, for example, both seek to reduce and eliminate US influence in the Middle East and are not pursuing strategies that will ultimately defeat al Qaeda and ISIS in Syria or Iraq. These key divergences underscore that the US must lead efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria and cannot outsource them to partners.

"Situations in which all major players agree on goals and means are extraordinarily rare. This fact makes a hard problem harder, but it does not make finding a solution impossible."

To learn more, read "Competing Visions for Syria and Iraq: The Myth of an Anti-ISIS Grand Coalition."