# Testimony of Dr. David J Kilcullen before the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 26th March 2014

# Syria after Geneva: Next Steps for U.S. Policy

Mr Chairman (Senator Menendez), Ranking Member (Senator Corker), Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on options for future U.S. policy on Syria. I'd like to offer an assessment of the conflict, and of actions the United States might take—alone or with allies—to improve the prospects for a peaceful and strategically acceptable solution. With your permission I plan to limit my initial remarks to three issues: an overview of the current situation in and around Syria; a discussion of realistic goals; and an outline of policy options.

**Current Situation: An Escalating Stalemate**

The civil war in Syria entered its fourth year this month. Since March 2011, the conflict has escalated from initial mass uprisings by an unarmed, diverse collection of nationalist, pro-democracy and dissident groups, into a fragmented, complex, and increasingly violent sectarian insurgency against an entrenched regime.

The regime doesn't entirely control any major city except downtown Damascus. In every other major population center it has either been replaced by rebel governance structures, or rural guerrillas and urban resisters are contesting its control. The Syrian countryside, outlying districts, and smaller towns are heavily contested, and even in formally regime-controlled areas there are active resistance groups and asymmetric attacks against the government.

Even as the regime has lost control of roughly 75% of Syria's territory, rebel groups have fractured along sectarian, ideological, regional or ethnic lines. This fragmentation has begun to reverse itself in recent months, with the emergence of the Islamic Front (composed of seven Islamist factions), the Southern Front comprising a loose alliance of almost fifty local groups in the south, and the reinvigoration of the Syrian Military Council with new leadership in recent weeks.

In general terms, the conflict is in what we might call an "escalating stalemate."

Neither the regime nor the rebels can achieve outright military victory, yet both sides still *believe* they can win, and are escalating violence to improve their position. This has resulted in spring offensives by both the regime and the rebels, a surge of violence against civilians, and increased flows of refugees and internally displaced persons. Neither side can win under present circumstances, but that doesn't mean the conflict is static or winding down—on the contrary, all sides are ratcheting up the violence.

The regime's Qalamoun offensive is focused on cementing control of a triangle of territory from Aleppo in the north, to Damascus, and west to the Lebanese border and the Mediterranean coast. Since January, government forces have captured the town of Yabroud near the Lebanese border, advanced west of Homs to seize three towns and clear a rebel stronghold in the Crusader castle of Krak des Chevaliers, and killed a large number of rebels in Ghouta, on the eastern edge of Damascus (where the regime used chemical weapons to kill up to 1400 people in August 2013).

Over the past year the government has also consolidated and professionalized dozens of irregular groups (including the *shabiha* gangs active early in the fighting, and numerous local sectarian and militia groups), unifying them into the National Defense Forces, a force of 60,000 fighters which has become an important regime tool in holding ground, providing local security garrisons, and guarding supply lines and installations, freeing up the Syrian Arab Army for major combat operations.

But, in my view, recent media reports that "the regime is winning" significantly overstate the case. In the same timeframe as the government offensive, the rebels have mounted three successful major offensives of their own.

Just in the last month, insurgents seized districts on the outskirts of Aleppo city, while increasing their control in the wider Aleppo and Idlib provinces, allowing them to cut off regime outposts in the north. In the northeast, a separate rebel offensive has cleared regime positions in Deir es Zor and along the Euphrates River, while in the south, the Southern Front has expelled the regime from most towns and villages in the Quneitra area near the Israeli border. The rebels seized the central prison in Daraa, freed hundreds of prisoners, and cleared regime checkpoints in the city.

Perhaps most strategically threatening to the regime, the Islamic Front, Jabhat an Nusra and Ahrar al Sham launched a joint offensive last week in the northwest, in the mainly Alawite pro-regime Latakia province. They quickly seized the Kasab border crossing and are fighting for control of Kasab town, potentially opening up a new rebel supply line from Turkey, threatening regime control of a key coastal province that includes the Russian naval base at Tartus, and (in fierce fighting this past Sunday) killing Hilal Assad, head of the Syrian National Defense Forces—the regime's paramilitary forces—who is also President Bashar al-Assad's cousin.

So, despite regime successes, and a surge of violence that has seen almost 2500 civilians killed in barrel bombings of residential areas since last November, and has pushed total deaths in the conflict to more than 146,000, neither the regime nor the rebels have the upper hand, both are still in the fight, and the war is—if anything—ramping up into an increasingly bloody guerrilla conflict.

The inability of each side to prevail outright in military terms is reflected in the numbers, particularly the correlation of forces. Syrian regime forces of all kinds, including foreign allies, number between 190,000 and 341,000, while opposition forces (both Arab and Kurdish, and including foreign fighters) number between 135,000 and 211,000. Based on these ranges, the best-case force ratio for the regime is roughly 2.5 to 1, and the best case for the rebels is about 1.1. Given Syria's overall population size of 22 million, this leaves the government far short of the traditional 3:1 superiority for victory in a conventional conflict, and with only about half the ratio of 20 counterinsurgents per 1000 population that is traditionally expected for success in a counterinsurgency campaign. The rebels have even less ability to prevail in a conventional conflict, though they are somewhat more likely to achieve success via a protracted insurgent strategy. Clearly, numbers are not everything and do not predict a particular outcome—in this case, however, they suggest that the regime's confidence in a military victory is sorely misplaced.

Further afield, the conflict is de-stabilizing Syria's neighbors. Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan have been swamped by more than 4 million refugees, an influx that has created stresses on public health, water, public safety, electricity, and food and medical supplies. Syria is now the largest source of refugees on the planet, with 2.5 million refugees overseas, on top of another 6.5 million internally displaced persons. I should point out that 1.2 million of these refugees and IDPs are children, 425,000 of them under five years old, while boys as young as 12 have been forced to fight as child

soldiers or deliberately targeted for torture and execution in order to punish and coerce their communities.

The water shortage created by the refugee crisis has made Jordan the third most water-insecure country in the world, and has posed severe humanitarian challenges for Turkey and Lebanon. Lebanon has experienced internal conflict, as Hezbollah has sent 3,000-5,000 fighters to support the Assad regime, undermining its claim to put Lebanon first and to act as protector of Sunni as well as Shi'a communities. In Iraq, we've seen a re-emergence of AQI, in part because of a spillover of conflict from Syria, and the movement of both pro-regime and pro-rebel fighters and supplies through Iraq into and out of Syria.

The fighting threatens to draw in Syria's neighbors more directly: Syrian aircraft have recently been shot down by Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey; there's been an Israeli strike on Syrian territory near Quneitra, and Syria's relations with its neighbors (excluding Iraq) are at an all-time low.

At the same time, the regime's loss of control in Kurdish regions has contributed to the appearance of a *de facto* autonomous region of Syrian Kurdistan, centered on Hassakeh and linked both to the PKK in southern turkey via the PYD, and to Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government via the Kurdish National Council. We're seeing PYD begin to come out on top in an internal struggle for control in Kurdish regions of Syria, establishing its own local governance structures, and excluding the regime from large parts of the country. PYD's control is contested (both by other Kurdish groups and Islamist groups such as ISIL) but it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that one outcome of the Syrian conflict may be the emergence of an independent Kurdistan, which—while it might be welcomed both by Kurds and by some countries in the region—would fundamentally affect the geostrategic balance in this part of the middle east.

Inside Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has been pushed back by the Islamic Front and other rebel groups from its high-water mark of late 2013, so that it is now concentrated in Raqqa city in the northeast, where its support is steadily eroding due to its policy of beheadings, kidnappings, public torture and the imposition of extremely strict Islamic codes. But the group still fields 6,000-7,000 fighters, many of them foreigners from Iraq and the wider region.

Further afield, we're seeing vast numbers of foreign fighters coming from as far away as Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, the Gulf States, the Caucasus, Western Europe and Southeast Asia. The scale of foreign fighter flows into Syria is now approximately 10 to 12 times the size of what we

saw in Iraq, and involves fighters coming into the country to support both the regime and rebel groups. As Matthew Levitt recently testified before this committee, many of these fighters can eventually be expected to return to their home countries, with a significant regional destabilizing effect.

For its part, the regime is increasingly dependent on foreign fighters from Hezbollah, on advisers and technical support from Iran (including the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Quds Force) and on technical support, financial assistance, logistics and maintenance from Russia—especially for its air force. Russia also continues to provide armored vehicles, precision munitions (in limited numbers) and remotely piloted aircraft to the regime. Iran provides subsidized fuel, ammunition and weapons, and has sent military advisers to train the paramilitary National Defense Forces, collect intelligence, and assist in command and control. Hezbollah special troops have been advising and leading Syrian military units, and showed their familiarity with urban guerrilla operations during the regime's Qusayr offensive last summer.

One group of foreign fighters is especially worth noting—Chechens from the Caucasus, Uzbeks from Central Asia, and Tatars from the Crimea have traveled to Syria in recent years to fight a key Russian ally, learn military skills and participate in the jihad at a time when Russian operations, and those of Russia's local allies, have made it harder to operate in the Caucasus. The Chechen military commander Muhammad al Shishani, killed earlier this year, commanded roughly 400 Chechen fighters of the Jaish al Muhajirin wal Ansar (the Army of Emigrants and Supporters), a group owing allegiance to the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus, which fights under Jabhat an Nusrah within the Islamic Front. Other well-known fighters include Omar al Shishani, a commander within ISIL, and Abdul Karim Krymsky, a Crimean Tatar from Ukraine, who is deputy emir of the Army of Emigrants and Supporters. Given recent developments in Crimea, it's an open question as to whether these fighters may now see an opportunity to return to Russian-controlled territory in the Caucasus and Ukraine.

**Why should the United States care, and what can we do?**

It's worth pausing to ask why any of this matters to the United States, why we ought to consider doing anything about it, and if so what we *can* do.

I think there are three main reasons why the situation in Syria matters to us:

First and most importantly, the conflict is a massive humanitarian tragedy, and one that is escalating—the violence is ratcheting up, and it can go up a lot further before the parties to the conflict accept the need for a negotiated settlement, if they ever do. Genocidal sectarian and ethnic rhetoric is coming from several rebel groups, backing Syria's large Alawite community into a corner and leaving them little current option but to support the regime, despite feelings of resentment and disillusionment against the government among many. The regime has killed thousands of innocent civilians with chemical weapons and barrel bombs, and through denial of basic services like food, water and medical assistance to civilians in rebel-controlled areas. It has also tortured something like eleven thousand detainees to death over the course of the conflict. Things could still get much, much worse, with enormous humanitarian impact, but also with the potential to create a long-standing, violent, ethno-sectarian conflict across the whole region for decades to come.

Secondly, the conflict in Syria is destroying stability in Iraq. Syria is not the only cause of instability in Iraq, but the conflict has revived AQI, has contributed to a collapse in relations between the KRG and Baghdad, and has launched several new Sunni Arab rebel groups who are now holding territory in areas that were cleared of the insurgency back in 2007-2008. Violence in Iraq is now at levels not seen since the worst days of the war in 2006. There's a very real risk that a continued escalation in Syria could fatally undermine everything that we worked for: the relative stability and safety that 1.5 million Americans fought for in Iraq over the last decade (and for which 4,500 Americans died and 30,000 were wounded) rendering the whole massive Iraq effort for naught.

Finally, the conflict threatens key allies—Jordan, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, and countries further afield are all experiencing the spillover of violence, refugee movement and overstress that the war has created, and they could either be drawn into the conflict or have their stability and security significantly undermined by it. The conflict in Syria not only harms millions of innocents, but it also undermines our whole strategic position in the broader region.

I think these facts suggest that we *should* do something, but it's worth asking if there's anything that we *can* do, beyond what we are already doing. The national mood is clearly against another war, but the American people have often been offered a false choice between doing nothing, and committing ground combat forces to a full-scale invasion ("boots on the ground"). I don't believe such an all-or-nothing approach is helpful, and indeed there are several options short of major conflict that

are worth considering. Before looking at policy options, however, we need to consider what our goals should be.

**Policy goals**

Current U.S. policy goals, to the extent that they've been clearly articulated, seem to be to offer humanitarian assistance inside Syria; to contain regional conflict; and to disrupt foreign fighter flows further afield. Our actions to date have sought to ameliorate conditions on the ground, contain regional destabilization by reassuring partners and friends, and disrupt flows of foreign fighters, military material, illicit goods and finances into and out of the conflict.

U.S. policymakers have previously suggested that President Assad needs to step down, but with a fragmented and increasingly radicalized opposition our leaders have often seemed to shy away from that goal, for fear of what a successor regime might look like. And, perhaps sensing our ambivalence, in the Geneva talks the Syrian negotiators rejected even the notion of a transitional government: the regime instead is planning to hold national elections in June to cement President Assad in power for another term.

The United States also backed away from our own announced red line in September 2013, when we failed to follow through on previous threats to act against regime targets in the wake of the Ghouta chemical attack, and instead allowed the regime to negotiate for a gradual dismantling of its weapons stocks. To date only about 50% of Syrian chemical weapons have been transported to Latakia for destruction, the Syrian government has missed several deadlines set by OPCW, and it is currently negotiating for a further extension of the handover deadline. The weapons destruction process is on hold because of the breakdown in cooperation between the U.S. and Russia after Russia's annexation of Crimea, and the regime seems in no hurry to complete the dismantling of its weapons, since once the weapons are no longer there, and the regime is no longer needed to safeguard them, the Syrian government's leverage with the international community will be dramatically eroded. Meanwhile our own diplomatic leverage is negligible, in part because of our demonstrated lack of willingness to back diplomacy with action. In effect, in 2013, we called our own bluff, and our interlocutors—Iran, Russia and the Syrian government—are treating us accordingly.

**Future Policy Options**

I want to suggest that the goals that have animated U.S. policy to date, far from being overly ambitious, have actually been too minimalist. We've sought to contain and manage the conflict, but not to end it. Unsurprisingly, we've found it extraordinarily difficult to rally allies or the American people around such a minimal goal, which offers little positive result to offset its undeniable costs.

I would argue that our approach should instead be to seek an end to the conflict via a negotiated settlement, and to increasingly telegraph our willingness to use military means to force that outcome. Our use of force in this case would serve the strategic purpose of convincing the regime that it can't win militarily and needs to seek a peaceful solution. Our preference would be for indirect means where possible, but our policy would contemplate direct military action if needed. If the problem is that both sides still think they can win militarily, and thus don't feel that they need to negotiate, then the solution is to convince one or both sides that it cannot win and that its best option is to talk. Without that willingness to negotiate, founded on a realization that there's no chance of military victory, the conflict is likely to just keep ratcheting up, with all the negative consequences discussed already.

Some specific policy recommendations, then:

1. **Ignore the June elections**. We should ignore the regime's planned elections scheduled for this summer, which will certainly result in a manipulated landslide vote in President Assad's favor. The regime's strategy at present seems to be to use the Geneva II process to buy time, while it ramps up military operations in Syria to expand the territory and population it controls, using its military success to set the conditions for the presidential elections, which are the key to President Assad's medium-term strategy to stay in office. We need to let it be known now that any election result achieved under these conditions would be illegitimate and invalid. And when the elections do inevitably take place, we should treat the result as null and void.

2. **Exploit linkages with other issues**. We should exploit linkages between Syria and other issues: particularly, Russia's intervention in the Ukraine and the increasing economic cost and political isolation that Moscow will experience as a result. With several hundred fighters from the Caucasus, including Crimean Tatars, operating in Syria, and the recent rebel offensive in Latakia threatening Russia's naval presence, there's a clear potential for violence in Syria to spread to Russian-controlled territory. Over time, establishing a linkage between Russia's actions in Ukraine and its support for the Assad regime may offer an opening to convince Russia to

cease its active support and perhaps even to help convince the regime that a negotiated solution is in all parties' best interest.

3. **Focus on peace-building at the local level**. As we think about what a negotiated solution might look like, one key element is to build local momentum toward a peaceful settlement of the conflict. A striking aspect of the Geneva II talks (mentioned in the attached research paper prepared by our Syria field research team) was how few Syrians saw either the regime, or the representatives negotiating in Geneva on behalf of the rebels, as legitimate representatives of the Syrian people. In a series of surveys conducted in Aleppo—Syria's largest city and one of the most heavily affected by conflict—the most common response to question "Who is the legitimate representative of the Syrian people?" was "No one". The combined total of support for both the rebel negotiators and the regime across all surveys conducted was never higher than 12 percent, suggesting that almost nine out of ten Syrians had no faith in (and therefore very low expectations of) the Geneva process. If subsequent peace talks are to succeed, Syrians at the local level must develop cross-community interest in a peaceful settlement.

4. **Expand assistance programs to the opposition**. Ultimately, however, if a peace process is to have any chance, it must begin from a different set of facts on the ground than currently exist and, in particular, the Syrian regime must realize that it has no chance of a military victory. To underline this point, the international community—including the United States—should continue and, if possible, expand assistance to the opposition, across four dimensions: humanitarian assistance; non-lethal technical support; training and advisory support; and lethal technical weapons systems:

- Humanitarian assistance (including food, water, medical support and education) is key to defeating the regime's strategy of denying essential humanitarian supplies and services to opposition areas. We can therefore expect continued regime opposition to the distribution of humanitarian assistance, but this provides an opportunity not only to assist Syria's civilian population but also to break the regime's stranglehold on besieged areas.

- Non-lethal technical support to rebel forces, including communications equipment, medical supplies, clothing and equipment, vehicles and logistics has been a key motivator for rebel groups to join together into more cohesive organizations such as the Southern Front. For most of the conflict, a unifying factor among regime supporters has been the centralization of funding

and assistance through the Syrian government, which has tended to draw groups together. As the formation of the Southern Front shows, it's possible for international assistance to the opposition to have a similar unifying effect. As new rebel offensives along Syria's borders open up more access points, we should expand this assistance—in geographical spread, in volume, and in quality.

- Training and advisory support, whether delivered directly by U.S. personnel or by allies or civilian contractors, has the potential to raise the fighting quality of rebel forces. This is important not only because it helps them combat the regime more effectively, but because one of the key aspects in the attractiveness of extremist jihadi groups is their reputation for greater military competence, skills and effectiveness in the field. To the extent that we can help improve the command and planning skills, tactical quality and operational effectiveness of non-jihadist rebel groups in Syria, we can not only help redress the unfavorable correlation of forces vis-à-vis the regime, but can also strengthen secular, nationalist, pro-civil society groups in relation to more extreme factions of the insurgency.

- Lethal technical weapons support—including small arms and light weapons, heavier artillery/mortars and their associated technical fire control systems, and (most importantly) advanced man-portable and vehicle-mounted air defense systems capable of defeating regime air platforms and helicopter-launched "barrel bomb" attacks on civilians, would make a critical difference in the conflict. As experience in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq and elsewhere has shown, with appropriate safeguards and oversight, and with careful selection of weapon types and management of ammunition availability, the threat of terrorist acquisition of such weapons is relatively manageable.

5. **Plan for limited military strikes**. No option—including military options—should be off the table at this point. The policy options I have suggested here work best when they work together, where the threat of force increases the leverage of our diplomats while diplomatic efforts toward a peaceful settlement help improve the chances of a successful military action. We should initiate planning toward a campaign—focusing on limited air strikes supported by airborne and ground tactical effects controllers, with limited special operations forces advisory support, intelligence support and naval operations offshore—designed to simultaneously guarantee the protection of at-risk civilians via safe zones, no-fly areas and humanitarian corridors, and to target critical regime

capabilities in order to convince the regime that its best option is to negotiate an end to the conflict, most likely via a transitional coalition government under international supervision. Extremist groups undermining such a peaceful outcome would become legitimate targets in a subsequent phase of such a campaign. We may, for example, publish a list of regime targets and capabilities, several of which may be struck in retaliation for attacks on civilians, while simultaneously opening up humanitarian corridors or safe zones and denying the regime the ability to move armored units, mount air strikes or receive resupply via sea and air from its allies.

This would entail planning for the possibility of a coalition military campaign on roughly the scale of the Kosovo or Libya interventions, and would undoubtedly not be without human and financial cost, but it would have the advantage of promoting a clear and achievable political goal, after repeated attempts at negotiations and other peaceful means had failed, and would avoid the scenario of regime collapse and the emergence of a jihadi state in Syria.

I want to emphasize in closing that I'm not suggesting we immediately jump to a military option, nor that such an option would be cost-free or guaranteed to work. My point is merely that we do have a range of options short of a major ground operation, that we need to demonstrate a willingness to consider military action if we are to restore some leverage to our diplomatic efforts in the wake of last year's loss of credibility, and that (given the increasing international isolation and economic strain experienced by Syria's major ally, Russia) this may be an opportunity to push for a peaceful, negotiated outcome to the conflict, rather than the present escalating stalemate. Ultimately, we should continue to seek a peaceful solution through diplomacy, but paradoxically the effectiveness of our diplomatic initiatives (and hence the prospects for peace) may depend on our willingness to plan for, and ultimately use, a measure of military force.