Destroying Islamic State, Defeating Assad: A Strategy for Syria

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Key Recommendations

The paper at hand examines the current realities in the fight against Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, from which a number of key recommendations result for Western policymakers. The US-led Coalition should thus:

- Ignore the Iraq–Syria border. For the anti-IS Coalition to accomplish its mission of degrading and ultimately destroying IS, it has to attack IS in Syria, where it has its most valued territory and much of its command structure.

- Emphasise regime change in Syria. The formal policy of the Western governments in the anti-IS Coalition is the ouster of Bashar al-Assad. But the nuclear deal and other actions on the ground have moved the West into closer and closer alignment with Iran's regional ambitions, which is leading to Allied States deprioritising the anti-IS campaign in order to take their own steps to counter Iran. Inside Syria these policy errors have allowed IS to claim vindication for its assertion of an Iranian–American conspiracy against Sunnis, from which only IS can defend them. By publicly stressing that Assad must be removed to allow a political transition to begin, the Coalition can mitigate some of the harm that has already been done.

- To fight IS effectively it is therefore vital that the Coalition restrain and where possible reverse Iranian power. Iran is projecting power in Syria and Iraq through radical sectarian Shi'a militias that are US- and European-registered terrorist organisations. In Tikrit, these groups received US air support to push IS out of the city. Iran's proxies committed atrocities during the Tikrit campaign and afterwards, convincing many Sunnis that IS rule is the lesser evil if the alternative is domination by sectarian forces beholden to Iran. That the US acted against the Khorasan Group and does not act against tens of thousands of Shi'ite jihadists in Syria offers IS further fuel for its propaganda. Iran is also a threat in its own right, one that is more sophisticated and global in its reach than IS.

- Despite a delay in recognising the importance of Kurdish forces as key Coalition allies, the Coalition should not overly rely on these forces outside Kurdish areas. The dynamics that make the expansion of Iran's power helpful to IS also apply to Kurdish forces. If Kurds end up in control of Arab zones, there may be a reaction that will see Arab Sunnis move into the IS camp. More importantly, encouraging the PYD to move into Arab areas may overstretch them and open up opportunities for IS militarily. Helping the PYD to protect the Kurdish areas is desirable, but must be accompanied by an effort to build democratic institutions that reflect the aspirations of the Kurds over the PYD's authoritarian tendencies.

- The Coalition must continue to increase support to vetted rebel groups, including testing the proposition that certain groups can be separated from Jabhat an-Nusra, and it must engage the tribes. The only sustainable solution to the IS crisis is for Sunni Arabs to take control of their local security and be able to defend themselves against IS and Iran's assets.

Summary

- The Islamic State (IS) originates in Iraq but currently holds its most valued territory in Syria. IS' expansion into Syria was planned and executed by former military-intelligence officials of the Saddam Hussein regime, who set up a statelet in Syria modelled in part on Saddam's authoritarian regime.

- Among the reasons IS was able to set up its State in Syria so quickly was that the Assad regime had cooperated with IS for a decade, beginning before the invasion of Iraq, to provide IS a hinterland and to smuggle foreign fighters into Iraq. IS therefore had an infrastructure inside Syria when the uprising began in 2011, which included its most important operative, Samir al-Khlifawi, better known as Haji Bakr.

- IS' propaganda relies heavily on apocalypticism, which helps it to attract a significant contingent of foreign fighters. It emphasises State-building as the means to usher in "End Times," and the regular replenishment of fighters from outside its territory is a key enabler of its project. Since the headquarters of IS is in Syria but its leadership is Iraqi, coupled to the prevalence of foreign fighters in the IS ranks in Syria, the IS statelet essentially now resembles a settler-colonial system.

- IS' main source of revenue is taxation—extortion—of the populations over which it rules. Oil is also important, in particular the oil fields in eastern Syria which IS controls. The airstrikes of the US-led anti-IS Coalition did degrade IS' oil income for a time by destroying the public refineries, but IS appears to have adapted, moving its refineries underground. IS' oil income now appears to be rising again, not least because the Assad regime continues to pay IS in both cash and services such as electricity.

- The current US-led Coalition's policy has an inherent Iraq-first bias, which has enabled IS use of its territory in Syria for strategic depth. IS' main revenue streams, weapons stores, supply lines and command structure are largely based in Syria.

- Airstrikes alone cannot defeat IS; a ground component is needed. There are three principal options for local ground forces: the Assad regime (and its Iranian and Russian supporters), the Syrian Kurds, or the Sunni rebels and tribes.

- The Assad regime's security sector is now wholly controlled by Iran. The regular army has largely devolved into local militias, leaving the main pro-regime armed force, the National Defence Force (NDF), as a sectarian militia built by Iran. Even with the NDF, the Assad regime has still struggled, necessitating the deployment of Iran's own Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp, and the instigation of a multinational Shi'a *jihad*, by which Iran brought tens of thousands of Shi'ite jihadists into Syria. Many of these Shi'ite fighters were members of pre-existing Iranian assets, notably Lebanese Hizballah and Iraqi "Special Groups," such as the Badr Corps, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hizballah. These groups killed Western soldiers during the Iraq war and are tied into Iran's global terrorist network. Lebanese Hizballah, Kataib Hizballah and the Quds Force are US- and/or European-registered terrorist organisations.

- Assad has worked, with Iranian and Russian help, to make the conflict a binary choice between his regime and Islamist terrorists. He released violent Salafist prisoners early in the uprising when he was still arresting and killing peaceful, secular activists; he deliberately sought to provoke a sectarian war to change the narrative away from reform; and once the insurgency

began, Assad not only funded IS through oil sales but militarily avoided IS and focused his firepower on the nationalist rebels.

- IS' key narrative for recruitment is that it is the protector of Sunnis against sectarian attacks led by Iran and supported by the West. The US nuclear deal and the US-led Coalition's policy in Syria, which has included airstrikes against non-transnationalist rebel groups, has been presented as plausible ratification of this propaganda.

- Russia's intervention in Syria at the end of September 2015 has supported the regime's attempt to make the conflict a binary choice, with Russian airstrikes directed overwhelmingly at non-IS insurgent groups.

- Russia cannot politically deploy the necessary ground forces to defeat IS, even if the Russian government was keen to do so. The Assad regime is unable to control even the so-called western corridor in Syria and could not move resources east to fight IS.

- Iran could theoretically marshal the required force against IS, but does not have the will to do so, since Iran's interests largely overlap with those of IS. IS' presence makes the governments in Damascus and Baghdad more reliant on Iran, and Iran has little interest in expending the blood and treasure needed to capture, let alone govern, the Sunni Arab areas of central and western Iraq and northern and eastern Syria that IS currently holds.

- The Assad regime's counter-insurgency strategy has deliberately been focused on mass displacement, which is the principal cause of the current refugee crisis that is now affecting internal European politics.

- In the course of the conflict, the US – essentially by accident - formed a military template for working with the Syrian Kurds against IS. But the attempt to generalise the template outside Kurdish-majority areas has failed. Kurdish forces in Arab areas provoke a reaction that threatens the cohesion of anti-IS forces and may also stretch the Kurds' fighting ability dangerously thin.

- The Kurdish armed units, the People's Protection Forces (YPG), are dominated by a political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the Syrian branch of the militant Marxist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK has historical ties to the Syrian regime, and when the uprising began the PYD attacked anti-regime demonstrations and aligned with the "internal opposition" that most believe is a front for Syrian intelligence. The PYD's war-making policy has involved ethnic cleansing of Sunni Arabs, and its ideology and governance method is authoritarian.

- Whether the PYD has now broken its links with the regime is unclear, but it has made overtures to Russia, legitimising Russia's intervention in Syria, the primary purpose of which is to ensure the survival of the Assad regime.

- Just as IS recruits by claiming that the US supports Iranian and Shi'a atrocities against Sunnis, from which only it can defend Sunnis, the conduct of the PYD, and the fact that the PYD is the only force that can call in US airstrikes in Syria, has assisted in IS' efforts to strengthen itself using the PYD as a foil.

- The rebels have coalesced into six major groupings. All are at war with IS and all have kept IS from expanding into their areas. The rebels have local legitimacy since most of them *are* locals in the zones in which they operate. Properly resourced, the rebels could provide sustainable security that keeps IS out. The problem is the cooperation of these groups with Jabhat an-

Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syrian branch. For some groups this is ideological and for many others it is tactical, because they cannot obtain resources elsewhere. Some groups are powerful enough to operate totally independently of Nusra.

- The tribes in eastern Syria and western Iraq are the heartland of IS' statelet, but they are also its greatest vulnerability, as was shown during the US surge and Awakening in Iraq, when they became key allies to the US-led coalition there. Some tribes have already rebelled against IS and have been brutally suppressed because they lacked outside help. The tribes have accommodated IS as a ruling authority but see it as transient. To this point, the tribes remain almost wholly unengaged by the Coalition.

Introduction

The Islamic State (IS) has its origins in Iraq,[1] but today its most valuable territorial holdings—ideologically, politically, economically and militarily—are in Syria.

IS has long established networks in Syria because during the Iraq War the government of Bashar al-Assad funnelled foreign Salafi-jihadists into Iraq to join IS' predecessors, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI, 2004-06) and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, 2006-13) in their fight against American and British troops and the elected Iraqi government.[2]

In March 2011, an uprising began in Syria. In the summer of 2011, then-ISI, possibly in coordination with al-Qaeda, to which ISI was widely believed to be subordinate at the time, dispatched agents into Syria to set up a Syrian branch of ISI, which would be announced in January 2012 under the banner of Jabhat an-Nusra. Nusra was formed from the ISI cells that remained in Syria, the advance party sent by ISI, and from Salafi-jihadists released by Assad in May and June 2011—at a time when the Assad regime continued to crack down on peaceful, secular activists.[3]

In April 2013, ISI publicly declared that Nusra was its Levantine subsidiary and thus under the command of ISI's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Al-Baghdadi called this merged group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Nusra resisted and swore its allegiance (*baya*) directly to al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda ordered al-Baghdadi take his men back to Iraq and leave Nusra in Syria as al-Qaeda's branch in that country. Al-Baghdadi refused al-Qaeda's order, and after nearly a year of verbal and physical fighting, in February 2014 al-Qaeda disowned ISIS.

One of the main disagreements between IS and al-Qaeda is over the timetable for building an Islamic State. ISIS, which rebranded itself the Islamic State after its formal declaration of a caliphate in June 2014, already conceived of itself as a State—and had done so since ISI was announced in October 2006. In practice this meant IS would not share power with other insurgent groups or submit to independent courts to mediate disputes. Instead, from mid-2013 onward, IS was engaged in State-building, trying to monopolise control of liberated areas in Syria—to build its own government rather than trying to overthrow the government in Damascus.[4] This programme was directed by former intelligence officials of the Saddam regime[5], notably Samir al-Khlifawi (a.k.a. Haji Bakr), who had had experience in running an authoritarian government and who was likely already in Syria when the uprising began.[6] This caused disputes with the rebels, but posed no military challenge to the Assad regime, and the ostentatious cruelty of IS could be used by the Assad regime to tar the whole insurgency and make itself look reasonable.[7] Consequently, the Assad regime left IS alone—training its firepower on the nationalist and moderate rebels.[8]

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[1] Kyle, Orton, "The learning curve", *NOW Lebanon*, 28 September 2015, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565975-the-learning-curve
[2] Gordon, R, M and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2012). Page 577.
[3] Ammar Abdulhamid, "Al-Qaeda Resurgent! As the world watches on, Al-Qaeda is gradually building a state for herself in Syria and Iraq", *Amarji*, 10 November 2013, www.ammarabdulhamid.com/2013/11/11/al-qaeda-resurgent/
[4] William, McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015). Kindle Locations 2191-2192.
[5] Kyle, Orton, "Saddam's Former Loyalists Are Leading ISIS — as True Believers", *National Review*, 20 July 2015, www.nationalreview.com/article/421370/saddam-loyalists-running-isis-are-true-believers-not-secularists
[6] Kyle, Orton, "The Riddle of Haji Bakr", *The Syrian Intifada*, 10 November 2015, https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/11/10/the-riddle-of-haji-bakr/
[7] Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, (New York: Regan Arts, 2015). Page 198.
[8] Matthew Henman, "Syrian military and ISIS have been 'ignoring' each other on the battlefield", *IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre*, 10 December 2014, http://www.janes.com/article/46898/syrian-military-and-isis-have-been-ignoring-each-other-on-the-battlefield

In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the Iraqi civil war had restarted in December 2013 and IS had engaged in a long process of social building, reversing much of the success of the US surge. By the time IS grew powerful enough in northern Syria to invade Iraq, taking over Mosul and much of western and central Iraq in June 2014, IS was already in de facto control of large areas of Iraq.[9] But without the beachhead in Syria, IS could never have become so powerful so quickly in Iraq. And it is Syria that to this day helps IS sustain itself.

IS always had the advantage over its rivals of a large and regular resupply of troops—a flow of foreign fighters now exceeding 30,000 from places as far flung as Europe and Australia.[10] This flow largely comes through Turkey into Syria. While the early propaganda of Nusra/ISI stressed the need for foreign fighters to come to Syria to help fellow Muslims against a ruthless and impious regime, after IS' State-building began in earnest the propaganda changed to stress that god's kingdom on earth had been erected and foreign fighters should move to it. In the latter incarnation, Syrians have no more claim on their country than foreigners—and less if they are non-Muslims or deviant Muslims. This is an important dynamic: IS' statelet in Syria, unlike Iraq where IS is more deeply rooted in Sunni society, has striking resemblances to a settler-colonial system.[11]

IS' propaganda appeal to the foreign fighters includes a great deal of apocalypticism, but it is more millenarian than strictly apocalyptic.[12] Apocalyptic groups, such as Juhayman al-Utaybi's which seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, believe the apocalypse is imminent and so make no plans for a protracted presence on earth—al-Utaybi's group took over the mosque with only a week's supply of food[13]. IS stresses much more its construction of utopia as a prelude to the apocalypse at some unspecified future time. Concretely, IS is making calls on professionals, such as doctors and engineers, to make *hijra* (emigration) to the Islamic State to help in its functioning.[14] (It is IS' belief that it has created utopia for Muslims that makes it so opposed to refugees leaving: it is very damaging for their brand.) Whether or not IS' leaders are true eschatologists, the apocalyptic pitch "always works" to attract foreign fighters[15]. Syria is crucial to this, especially the town of Dabiq, which IS holds and where prophecy says the Final Battle will be waged between Islam and Christendom.[16]

The effective capital of IS, Raqqa City in north-eastern Syria, is a testing ground for new policies, as well as one of IS' most lucrative sources of revenue from taxing the population, and a vital, well-defended hub of weapons and fighters—some of them crucial parts of IS' command structure. Raqqa's loss would be devastating for IS, symbolically as well as economically and militarily.

Of IS' various revenue streams, the most important is what it calls "taxes"—the Mafia-style extortion of the populations over which it rules. This has been critical since at least 2005, when IS was so powerfully self-sustaining that al-Qaeda's leadership asked IS for a loan of $100,000,[17] and it helped

[9] Charles Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, December 2014. Page 18.

[10] Eric Schmitt and Somini Sengupta, "Thousands Enter Syria to Join ISIS Despite Global Efforts", *The New York Times*, 26 September 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/world/middleeast/thousands-enter-syria-to-join-isis-despite-global-efforts.html

[11] Felix Legrand, *The Colonial Strategy of ISIS in Syria*, The Arab Reform Initiative "Policy Alternatives" paper, June 2014.

[12] J.M. Berger, "Enough about Islam: Why religion is not the most useful way to understand ISIS", Brookings Institute, 18 February 2015, www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/02/18-enough-about-islam-berger

[13] Thomas Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-'Utaybi Revisited*", International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2007.

[14] A. Agron, "Wanted: Western Professionals To Join The Islamic State (ISIS)", *MEMRI*, 15 May 2015, www.memrijttm.org/wanted-western-professionals-to-join-the-islamic-state-isis.html

[15] Nour Malas, "Ancient Prophecies Motivate Islamic State Militants," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2014, www.wsj.com/articles/ancient-prophecies-motivate-islamic-state-militants-1416357441

[16] William, McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015). Kindle Location 1778.

[17] "Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi", dated 9 July 2005. www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm

IS become a "shadow authority" in Mosul long before it openly took the city in 2014.[18] The longer IS is allowed to rule over populations, the more money it takes in and the more difficult it becomes to uproot. The money funds IS' military expansion, the bribery and recruitment of spies who prepare the ground for its conquests, and also entrenchment: IS can recruit the populations it rules to its cause, both by proselytisation and by the provision of social services and public order, which can make IS look like the least-bad alternative, even to those opposed to its ideology.

Oil is the other major revenue source for IS, and the crucial oil income is in eastern Syria. IS had control of little oil-producing territory in Iraq and lost most of it in the spring of 2015.[19] Estimates that IS was making $3 million per day in the summer of 2014 were likely overstated. Since the American-led Coalition started airstrikes against IS, in Iraq in August 2014 and in Syria in September 2014, that income has certainly decreased. One of the key Coalition targets has been oil refineries, and by early 2015 IS' oil income was down to tens of thousands of dollars per day.[20] Most of the visible refineries were disabled in the first weeks of the air campaign, but this did not stop IS, which shifted its refining operations underground. IS' income from oil has been creeping back up through 2015, and a recent study concluded that it was possible IS was taking in about $1.5 million per day.[21] With IS still maintaining its income and the public refineries damaged, forcing locals out of work, the airstrikes against the refineries have actually pushed some Syrians into joining IS so they can earn a wage.[22]

Moreover, IS' oil income is not confined strictly to the substance itself:

ISIS makes money from the oil trade after money changes hands at the fields. Trucks loaded with ISIS oil later pay ISIS tolls, often at multiple checkpoints, and local refiners pay ISIS taxes and license fees to do business. Beyond that, it's an open secret that ISIS trades crude for imported refined fuel and natural gas for utilities supplied by the [Assad] regime.[23]

IS' oil trade with the regime is a long-standing fact, part of the regime's effort to strengthen the most extreme forces in the insurgency, against which it could claim—to Syria's minorities and the international community—it was a bulwark. The airstrikes have limited IS' external trade, specifically through Turkey, which means the regime now provides an even greater share of IS' income from oil.

Rolling back IS' physical control of territory would deprive it of its main income—from taxes and oil—and would also assault its ideological legitimacy. IS' famous slogan is "remaining and expanding"; if that can be disproven by events, it would severely dampen IS' appeal to foreign fighters and embolden those living under its rule, thus weakening IS. Evidence of weakness would further diminish IS' appeal and strengthen its opponents—a positive feedback loop with positive implications for unravelling the Islamic State. But the current campaign is not enough.

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[18] Charles Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, December 2014. Page 18-19.

[19] "Islamic State revenues hit by lost Iraqi oil fields: report", *AFP*, 8 April 2015, news.yahoo.com/islamic-state-revenues-hit-lost-iraqi-oil-fields-234333847.html

[20] Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: Unseen Islamic State Financial Accounts for Deir az-Zor Province", *Jihadology*, 5 October 2015, jihadology.net/2015/10/05/the-archivist-unseen-islamic-state-financial-accounts-for-deir-az-zor-province/

[21] Matthew M. Reed, "Taking Stock Of ISIS Oil: Part 1", *The Fuse*, 23 October 2015, http://www.energyfuse.org/taking-stock-of-isis-oil-part-1/; Matthew M. Reed, "Taking Stock Of ISIS Oil: Part 2", *The Fuse*, 29 October 2015, http://www.energyfuse.org/taking-stock-of-isis-oil-part-2/

[22] Hassan Hassan, "In Syria, many families face a terrible dilemma", *The National* (U.A.E.), 20 September 2015, www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/in-syria-many-families-face-a-terrible-dilemma

[23] Matthew M. Reed, "Taking Stock Of ISIS Oil: Part 1", *The Fuse*, October 23, 2015, http://www.energyfuse.org/taking-stock-of-isis-oil-part-1/

The US-led Coalition has recently focussed more on degrading IS in Syria, though only in the limited form of working with the Syrian Kurds in the north-east of the country. There remains a distinctly uneven concentration of Coalition resources in Iraq, which is problematic since IS treats "its Syrian territory as the most valuable and sustainable".[24] Any losses IS suffers in Iraq are at present easily recovered because IS can retreat to Syria where it is reasonably free from attack. This is why IS moved the weapons it captured after the invasion of Iraq in 2014 into Syria within hours (weapons it then used to conquer new territories in Syria within weeks[25]). Rolling back IS in Iraq but not Syria means IS retains its most lucrative territory, its supply lines and the bulk of its command structure, so it can strike on another front and prevent the appearance of territorial loss, which is so ideologically dangerous. IS has, both symbolically and practically, abolished the Iraq–Syria border. The Coalition's continued differentiation in the intensity of its attacks between Iraq and Syria makes little sense, and even less since IS in Syria is being attacked with less intensity than in Iraq.

While it is clear that the Coalition must increase its kinetic engagement from the air with IS in Syria to achieve its stated goal—to "degrade and ultimately destroy" IS[26]—it is also clear that airstrikes alone cannot accomplish this, and risk diminishing returns. A ground force will be needed. In Syria, there are three broad possibilities for an anti-IS ground force: the Assad regime, the Kurds and the Sunni Arab rebels.

1. The Assad Regime (Iran and Russia)

By late 2012, after defections and attrition in the struggle to suppress the armed insurgency, the regular Syrian military, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), was in disarray and much of the regime's resilience lay in highly sectarian paramilitary formations—the loosely-defined *Shabiha*, the Popular Committees and the Ba'ath Party militia. In the summer of 2012, the security sector of the Assad regime was effectively taken over by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which organised the militias into a unified National Defence Force (NDF) and orchestrated a multi-national *jihad* that brought thousands of Shi'a fighters into Syria, the majority from Lebanon and Iraq but also from Afghanistan, Pakistan and as far away as the Ivory Coast.[27] Since September 2015, the Iranian-led pro-regime militias have been backed by Russian airstrikes. The Assad regime's strategy from the start of the uprising was to change the narrative away from reform and toward sectarianism, to strengthen the most extreme forces within the insurgency so that a binary choice of the regime or Islamist terrorists could be presented to the Syrian population and the international community, and then to present itself as a counter-terrorism partner.[28] This was accompanied by a highly organised media strategy.[29] At every stage Russia and Iran have assisted in this policy.

The Assad regime now presents itself as a partner in the fight against the Islamic State (IS). In reality, the Assad regime is more responsible than any other government in the world for the power IS currently enjoys. Nearly all of the foreign fighters sent to IS' predecessor in Iraq after 2003 came

[24] Charles Lister, "Assessing Syria's Jihad", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 2014.
[25] "Islamic State seizes oil field and towns in Syria's east", *Reuters*, 3 July 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/03/us-syria-crisis-islamicstate-idUSKBN0F80SO20140703?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews
[26] "Transcript: President Obama's speech outlining strategy to defeat Islamic State", *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/full-text-of-president-obamas-speech-outlining-strategy-to-defeat-islamic-state/2014/09/10/af69dec8-3943-11e4-9c9f-ebb47272e40e_story.html
[27] Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Report, February 2015. Page 44.
[28] Bassam Barabandi and Tyler Jess Thompson, "Inside Assad's Playbook: Time and Terror", *The Atlantic Council*, 23 July 2014, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/inside-assad-s-playbook-time-and-terror
[29] Orton, K., "From Kessab to Cannibals: Syria's Media War", *The Syrian Intifada*, 5 January 2015, https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/01/05/from-kessab-to-cannibals-syrias-media-war/

through Syria with the complicity of the Assad regime.[30] Many of these foreign fighters landed at Damascus International Airport before being moved to safe-houses run by Syrian intelligence.[31] Assad's aims were to frustrate the US-led Coalition's project in Iraq—if the Coalition was tied down in Iraq, it would not be able to march on Damascus; to use the chaos as Iraq struggled for democracy to dissuade the Syrian population from trying to remove Assad's authoritarian government; and to place Assad at the centre of regional events by allowing him to offer himself as a counter-terrorism partner, turning off the supply line of terrorists in exchange for American concessions.[32]

In October 2008, with Damascus unresponsive and IS' predecessor in the final planning stages for a major attack on US forces in Iraq, the US mounted a raid into eastern Syria to kill Badran al-Mazidi (a.k.a. Abu Ghadiya), IS' chief facilitator, who was in a safe-house run by Assad's brother-in-law and security chief, Assef Shawkat.[33] A US Federal Civil Court ruling the previous month found the Assad regime liable for the murders of Eugene Armstrong and Jack Hensley, who had been beheaded on video in September 2004 by Abu Musab az-Zarqawi, IS' founder.[34] The court documents also provided details of something American officials had long suspected: Assad's cooperation with Zarqawi in the assassination of an American diplomat in Jordan *before* the Iraq invasion, in October 2002.[35] As late as August 2009, the Assad regime coordinated with IS and elements of the fallen Iraqi regime, who met directly in Zabadani, to bomb Iraqi government targets in Baghdad in explosions that killed more than 100 people.[36] It is this terrorist infrastructure, overseen by Syrian intelligence, that explains why IS was able to gain such a large foothold so quickly in Syria once the uprising began.[37] But Assad's assistance to IS did not end once the uprising began.

In May and June 2011, Assad released the most violent *jihadi* prisoners, some of them members of IS when arrested, at a time when the regime continued to arrest and kill peaceful, secular activists.[38] "The regime did not just open the door to the prisons and let these extremists out, it facilitated them in their work, in their creation of armed brigades," said an Alawi defector from the Military Intelligence Directorate.[39] The leaders of all the most powerful Syrian Salafist groups, who were prisoners in the same cell-block at the maximum-security Sednaya prison, were released at this time,[40] as was Awwad al-Makhlaf, a local emir in Raqqa,[41] and Amr al-Absi (a.k.a. Abu Atheer al-Absi), now one of the most senior IS officials and a potential replacement for the "caliph".[42]

The regime is by nature sectarian, with the ruling family hailing from an esoteric sect, the Alawis, which is overrepresented in the military and economic elite.[43] The regime, however, rather than seeking to downplay this sectarian schism, sought to inflame it, inflicting a series of sectarian massacres against Syria's Sunni majority that was intended to heighten the sectarian polarisation and

[30] Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records*, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, January 2007.
[31] Michael Gordon and Wesley Morgan, "The General's Gambit", *Foreign Policy*, 1 October 2012, foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/01/the-generals-gambit/
[32] Hassan, H. and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. Page 103-104.
[33] Michael Gordon and Wesley Morgan, "The General's Gambit", *Foreign Policy*, 1 October 2012, foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/01/the-generals-gambit/
[34] "Francis GATES, et al., Plaintiffs, v. SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC, et al., Defendants", United States District Court, District of Columbia, September 26, 2008, www.leagle.com/decision/In%20FDCO%2020080929581/GATES%20v.%20SYRIAN%20ARAB%20REPUBLIC
[35] Hassan, H. and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. Page 106.
[36] Martin Chulov, "Isis: the inside story", *The Guardian*, December 11, 2014, www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story
[37] Elizabeth O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War Security Report, September 2012. Page 16.
[38] "Assad Orders New Syrian Amnesty", *Al-Jazeera*, June 21, 2011, www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/06/2011621944198405.html
[39] Phil Sands , Justin Vela and Suha Maayeh, "Assad regime set free extremists from prison to fire up trouble during peaceful uprising", *The National* (U.A.E.), 21 January 2014, www.thenational.ae/world/syria/assad-regime-set-free-extremists-from-prison-to-fire-up-trouble-during-peaceful-uprising
[40] Joshua Landis, "Syria's Top Five Insurgent Leaders", *Syria Comment*, 1 October 2013, http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/biggest-powerful-militia-leaders-syria/.
[41] Ahmad al-Bahri, "ISIS Restructures Raqqa Under its New Ruling System", *Syria Deeply*, 17 November 2014, www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/11/6388/isis-restructures-raqqa-ruling-system
[42] Hassan, H. and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, (New York: Regan Arts, 2015). Page 145.
[43] Nibras Kazimi, *Syria through Jihadist Eyes: A Perfect Enemy*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2010). Kindle Location 143.

which would eclipse demands for reform and play "upon the fears of minority groups to rally support", binding the Alawi community and other minorities to the political fortunes of the regime.[44] The regime's deliberate use of mass-displacement was also designed to heighten sectarian tensions and to prevent rebels forming a viable, attractive alternative administration—something the regime notably did not do to IS.[45]

As IS began to consolidate control of territory in late 2013, the Assad regime left it alone—just six per cent of regime airstrikes hit IS-held territory between November 2013 and November 2014 (and only 13 per cent of IS armed attacks were directed at the regime in the same period).[46] When the rebels went on the offensive against IS in January 2014, the regime attacked rebel positions, effectively giving IS air support.[47] The regime again targeted the rebels as they were under IS attack in Aleppo this summer.[48] Meanwhile, the regime was buying oil from extremist groups, mostly from Jabhat an-Nusra initially, but more and more from IS over time, allowing them to fund proselytising and governance, while the moderates had to resort to banditry to survive. A senior regime official, George Haswani (ironically, a Christian), has been placed under international sanctions for providing "support and benefits" for terrorism because he is the middleman in transferring Assad regime funds to IS in exchange for oil products.[49]

The regime does not always pay IS directly in cash for oil; sometimes it pays in electricity from the eight power stations Assad and IS jointly administer—IS controls the terrain; the regime supplies the technicians. This helps IS maintain at least passive support for its governance. One of the few areas in Syria where Assad's regime and IS actually fight is around these refineries and power plants, allowing the regime to claim that it does not cooperate with terrorists, but as a Syrian oil executive explained, "This is 1920s Chicago mafia-style negotiation. You kill and fight to influence the deal, but the deal doesn't end."[50]

From the earliest days of the uprising, Iran was involved on the regime side. In mid-2011, Lebanese Hizballah was providing riot control gear and even snipers to the Assad regime against peaceful demonstrators.[51] Hizballah is a direct proxy of Iran's Quds Force, the expeditionary wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), and a US- and European-registered terrorist organisation.[52] The IRGC is charged with defending the Islamic revolution and the Quds Force is charged with exporting it; Hizballah has taken part in terrorism from Argentina to India at Iran's behest.[53] By the summer of 2012, the SAA had degraded "into an entity more akin to a militia ... in both make-up and ethos",[54] and after a bombing killed several of the regime's senior officials in July 2012, Iran intervened on a massive scale to shore up the regime by forming the NDF as a unified

[44] Aaron Reese, Sectarian and Regional Conflict in the Middle East, Institute for the Study of War Security Report, July 2013. Page 7; 14.
[45] Joseph Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, The Institute for the Study of War, March 2013. Page 20.
[46] Matthew Henman, "Syrian military and ISIS have been 'ignoring' each other on the battlefield", *IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre*, 10 December 2014, www.janes.com/article/46898/syrian-military-and-isis-have-been-ignoring-each-other-on-the-battlefield
[47] Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. Page 194.
[48] "U.S. accuses Syria of backing Islamic State's Aleppo advance", *Reuters*, 2 June 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/02/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKBN0OI13D20150602
[49] "Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2015/375 of 6 March 2015 implementing Regulation (EU) No 36/2012 concerning restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria", *Official Journal of the European Union*, March 6, 2015, number 203, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32015R0375
[50] Erika Solomon, "Isis Inc: Syria's 'mafia-style' gas deals with jihadis", *Financial Times*, 15 October 2015, https://next.ft.com/content/92f4e036-6b69-11e5-aca9-d87542bf8673
[51] Nate Wright and James Hider, "Syrian regime 'importing snipers' for protests", *The Times of London*, 26 January 2011, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/syrian-regime-importing-snipersfor-protests/story-e6frg6so-1226254330519
[52] "Foreign Terrorist Organizations", U.S. Department of State, www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm
[53] Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2013). Page 75-117.
[54] "Syria's Mutating Conflict", *International Crisis Group*, 1 August 2012. Page 2.

counter-insurgency force. Later evidence suggests that this bombing was orchestrated by Iran to remove regime officials who favoured negotiating with the rebellion.[55]

The NDF is trained, armed and commanded by the IRGC.[56] Without the NDF the regime would likely have collapsed: by November 2012, with a revolt comprising more than 50,000 men,[57] the regime had 38,000 reliable troops.[58] By the summer of 2013, the NDF had reached 100,000 men.[59] The NDF is heavily Alawite, although it contains some other minorities. Alawi commanders said the mission of the NDF was to "kill the Sunnis and rape their women".[60] The regime's strategy of sectarian polarisation, to provoke a counter-response and strengthen the most extreme Sunni forces, which can be used to rally the minorities as effective human shields around the regime, was being continued. The regime had already been using Alawi-dominated military units and largely confining Sunni conscripts to barracks because of a (well-founded) fear of defections;[61] that dynamic was now intensified, increasing the problem of reliable manpower since the Alawis make up a little more than ten per cent of the population.[62] Iran, therefore, brought in foreign reinforcements.

The most readily available foreign forces for Iran were Hizballah and the Iraqi "Special Groups". Hizballah's fighters were deployed in ever-greater numbers in Syria throughout 2012 until their open intrusion in the battle of Qusayr in May 2013—locking in a sectarian dynamic that triggered a major increase in the number of foreign Sunni jihadists journeying to Syria. "Special Groups" is the term the US military gave to the Shi'a militias in Iraq that were proxies of the IRGC, some of them formed as far back as the 1980s to fight with Iran against Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War.[63] The "Special Groups" killed and wounded more than 1,000 American soldiers during the American regency in Iraq.[64] Among the most important of Iran's Iraqi militias deployed in Syria is Kataib Hizballah, which is, like Lebanese Hizballah, a US-registered terrorist organisation.[65] There are an estimated 20,000 Shi'ite jihadists in Syria under Iranian control[66]. Iran has used the crisis in Syria and Iraq to make its regional proxy network "more integrated and capable", in turn strengthening its global terrorist network.[67]

Russia's purported aim in intervening in Syria was to fight IS. But Russia directed 90 per cent of its airstrikes against nationalist rebel groups in the first few weeks of its campaign,[68] and systematically targeted CIA-supported rebel groups,[69] Russia killed hundreds of rebels in Aleppo who had been

[55] Sam Dagher, "Syrian Bomb Plot Marked Deadly Turn in Civil War", *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 2014, www.wsj.com/articles/syrian-bomb-plot-marked-deadly-turn-in-civil-war-1419015331
[56] Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War Report, May 2013.
[57] Elizabeth O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War Security Report, September 2012. Page 26.
[58] Joseph Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, Institute for the Study of War, March 2013. Page 26.
[59] Sam Dagher, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad", *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013, www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708
[60] "Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training", *Reuters*, 4 April 2013, uk.reuters.com/article/2013/04/04/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404
[61] Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Ex-Syrian army commander calls for air strikes on Assad troops", *Reuters*, 9 April 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/09/us-syria-defector-idUSBRE8380UO20120409
[62] Orton, K., "How Many Alawis Have Been Killed In Syria?" *The Syrian Intifada*, 20 May 2015, https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/05/20/how-many-alawis-have-been-killed-in-syria/
[63] Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy Report, February 2015.
[64] Marcus Weisgerber, "How Many US Troops Were Killed By Iranian IEDs in Iraq?" *Defense One*, 8 September 2015, www.defenseone.com/news/2015/09/how-many-us-troops-were-killed-iranian-ieds-iraq/120524/
[65] "Designation of Kata'ib Hizballah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization", U.S. Department of State, 2 July 2009, www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/july/125582.htm
[66] Orton, K., "Shi'a Holy War and Iran's Jihadist Empire," *The Syrian Intifada*, February 12, 2015, https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/02/12/shia-holy-war-and-irans-jihadist-empire/
[67] Marisa Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War Security Report, April 2014. Page 26.
[68] "'More than 90%' of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted Isis, US says", *AFP*, 7 October 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targetting-isis
[69] Adam Entous, "U.S. Sees Russian Drive Against CIA-Backed Rebels in Syria", *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 October 2015, www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-concludes-russia-targeting-cia-backed-rebels-in-syria-1444088319

holding IS out of areas around the Industrial District.[70] IS duly advanced.[71] Eventually some Russian airstrikes hit al-Qaeda-linked insurgents, and some token airstrikes were also launched into IS-held areas—though in both Raqqa and al-Bukamal this has come with devastating consequences for Syrian civilians.[72] Russia's actions were consistent with its long-standing effort to bolster the Assad regime. Russia had previously confined its role to supplying weaponry and political support at the United Nations to the Assad regime, now Russia intervened directly to buttress the regime's strategy to "make the conflict binary by giving Syrians only two choices: Assad or ISIS".[73] In the short term, this means Russia is intent on destroying all insurgent groups *except* IS.

IS' most effective recruitment strategy is to present itself as the protector of the Sunnis. The more threat Sunnis appear to be under, the more successfully IS can pose as their vanguard. Thus, IS presents a narrative in which Iran's sectarian repression against Sunnis in Syria and Iraq is supported by the US, and the current US policy is ratifying IS' propaganda. The US airstrikes in Syria have hit only Sunni groups. Many Sunnis could understand why the US would strike IS and al-Qaeda; most struggled to find any explanation beyond the US siding with the regime for US attacks on non-transnationalist Syrian insurgents.[74] The US has made clear that anything which brings it into a confrontation with Assad, such as a no-fly zone, is a "nonstarter for the Obama administration", which considers such things "an act of war against the Assad regime"—whose ouster is formal US policy.[75] Among the reasons for this is that "if the U.S. begins attacking Assad's forces ... Iranian-backed militias could begin targeting U.S. forces [in Iraq]."[76] In Iraq, the US provided direct air support for the Quds Force and its Shi'ite militias to expel IS from Tikrit.[77] And the nuclear deal with Iran will release up to $150 billion, at least some of which will go toward military operations in Syria.[78] It is not only Sunni Arabs in the region who see this as amounting to a comprehensive pro-Iran tilt by the US in the region,[79] and whether intentional or not, the perception helps IS.

While the regime, Iran and Russia have a clear interest in the short term in strengthening IS and have, by commission and omission, worked toward that end, even in the long term these actors are either incapable or unwilling to be partners against IS. The regime's ability to project power even in the western corridor of Syria is very limited, and non-existent outside that—it could not launch an offensive against Raqqa even if it had the will. Russia's interest is in maintaining its bases on the Syrian coast and maintaining enough regime control to claim it is the legitimate government; it is an investment beyond Russia's political capacity to help Assad reconquer all of Syria. Iran could theoretically mobilise sufficient manpower to secure eastern Syria, but it has little interest in doing so.

[70] "Russian air force 'hits 60 terror targets' in new Syria strikes", *AFP*, 9 October 2015, news.yahoo.com/russian-air-force-hits-60-terror-targets-syria-150719060.html

[71] Erin Cunningham, "Islamic State advances over wide swaths of Aleppo, activists report", *The Washington Post*, 9 October 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/islamic-state-advances-over-wide-swathes-of-aleppo-activists-report/2015/10/09/4ed462d2-6de9-11e5-91eb-27ad15c2b723_story.html?postshare=4561444402551260

[72] "Death toll of Russian air strikes on Al Bukamal town rises to 50, including 13 children", *Zaman al-Wasl*, 6 November 2015, https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/12306.html

[73] Michael Weiss, "Russia's Giving ISIS An Air Force", *The Daily Beast*, 8 October 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/08/russia-s-giving-isis-an-air-force.html

[74] Nick Paton Walsh and Laura Smith-Spark, "Report: Airstrikes target another Islamist group in Syria", *CNN*, 6 November 2014, http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/06/world/meast/syria-crisis/; Michael Weiss, "Did the U.S. Just Kill 5 Kids in Syria?" *The Daily Beast*, 12 August 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/12/did-the-u-s-just-bomb-civilians-in-syria.html

[75] Adam Entous, "U.S., Turkey Narrow Differences on Islamic State Fight", *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 December 2014, www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-turkey-move-closer-in-talks-involving-bases-air-zones-1417414812

[76] Julian Barnes and Adam Entous, "U.S. to Give Some Syria Rebels Ability to Call Airstrikes", *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 February 2015, www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-give-some-syria-rebels-ability-to-call-airstrikes-1424208053

[77] Rod Nordland and Peter Baker, "Opening New Iraq Front, U.S. Strikes ISIS in Tikrit", *The New York Times*, 25 March 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/world/middleeast/iraq-islamic-state-tikrit-united-states-airstrikes.html

[78] Oren Dorell, "Lawmakers alarmed over Iranian nuclear windfall", *USA Today*, 5 July 2015, www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/07/05/lawmakers-alarmed-iran-nuclear-windfall/29652429/

[79] Michael Doran, "Obama's Secret Iran Strategy", *Mosaic* Magazine, 2 February 2015, mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2015/02/obamas-secret-iran-strategy/

Iran's interests largely coincide with those of IS. Iran's interest is in weak, decentralised neighbours that cannot threaten it as Saddam Hussein's Iraq once did,[80] and IS keeps both the Iraqi government and the Assad regime off balance and makes those political elites dependent on Iran. Iran has secured military control of the government-held areas of Iraq through the Shi'a militias,[81] and formed good working relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which gives Iran a buffer zone along its border. Iran's forces are then deployed around Damascus, the Lebanese border and some areas of southern Syria, keeping the Assad regime in control of most of the densely-populated areas of Syria, creating a land-bridge to Hizballah in southern Lebanon to be used as a deterrent against Israel, and potentially opening a new front against Israel in the Golan.[82] Iran has no strategic interest in expending the necessary blood and treasure to secure control of the Sunni zones in north-eastern Syria and western and central Iraq on which IS' statelet is built, and its force deployment reflects that fact.[83] To the contrary, as mentioned above, the instability and threat of IS helps foster dependency on Iran in Baghdad and Damascus.

The regime's version of counter-insurgency was deliberately designed around mass-displacement, to expel all those who sympathise with the opposition and to terrorise those who remain, which is the primary cause of the refugee crisis now impacting European politics.[84] From mid-2012, the regime had given up on being able to re-establish control in all of Syria and instead sought to ensure that it was replaced by the most extreme forces in northern and eastern Syria that could make it look like the most politically acceptable option to Syria's population and neighbours, and the wider international community. The sectarian tactics of the regime, and of Iran, working through radical Shi'a groups, helps to push Sunnis into the arms of IS for protection. The expansion of Iranian power is not a counter to IS; rather, Iran and IS are symbiotic. Where the regime and Russia lack the capacity to destroy IS, Iran lacks the will, finding IS a useful foil in furthering its hegemonic ambitions. Moreover, even if Iran's Shi'a militias could defeat IS, it would not bring stability since Sunnis would resist Iranian rule, and helping Iran to replace IS and embed its militias in Syria as a part of it regional proxy network and global terrorist infrastructure creates a long-term strategic threat to the West graver than IS.

2. Syrian Kurds

The siege of the Kurdish town of Kobani in northern Syria by the Islamic State (IS) which began in mid-September 2014 had, by early October, become an international media spectacle. The US-led Coalition had begun airstrikes against IS targets in Syria ten days after IS fastened the siege on the town, and the threat of the town's fall seemed like a marker that the campaign was already failing. The US initially indicated that it did not regard preventing IS taking Kobani as a strategic objective,[85] but soon changed policy. By January 2015, IS' siege was broken. The Kurdish militia defending

[80] Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2013). Page 190.
[81] Jonathan Spyer, *Tehran's Servants: Iraq's Shia Militias Emerge as the Key Armed Force Facing Islamic State in Iraq*, Centre for the New Middle East at the Henry Jackson Society Policy Paper No. 6, October 2015.
[82] Phillip Smyth, "Israel Is the New Front in the Syrian War", *Foreign Policy*, 28 January 2015, foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/28/israel-is-the-new-front-in-the-syrian-war/
[83] Armin Rosen, "This map proves that Iran doesn't really want to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria", *Business Insider*, 30 April 2015, uk.businessinsider.com/this-map-proves-that-iran-doesnt-really-want-to-defeat-isis-in-iraq-and-syria-2015-4?r=US&IR=T
[84] Aaron Zelin, "Targeting Europe's Refugees Is Not the Answer", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 16 November 2015, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/targeting-europes-refugees-is-not-the-answer
[85] "U.S.'s Kerry hints Kobani not strategic goal, buffer zone merits study", *Reuters*, 8 October 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/08/us-mideast-crisis-usa-kerry-idUSKCN0HX1TG20141008

Kobani held its ground with the help of more than 700 airstrikes—about three-quarters of the total airstrikes into Syria[86]—and IS had thrown away the lives of at least 2,000 fighters.[87]

Coming just after the Kurdish militia had, with the help of US airstrikes, broken the IS siege of Sinjar mountain in Iraq, where Yazidis were starving on a mountain-top and threatened with extermination, many believed that a model had, accidentally, been found to defeat IS.[88] With the failure of the overt, US Defence Department's train-and-equip (T&E) programme[89] to train a fighting force composed of Syrian rebels to fight IS, the Kurdish option began to look more attractive still. (The T&E programme is separate to the much more successful covert programme run by the Central Intelligence Agency.) However, on inspection, this model had numerous flaws on its own account, and was not replicable outside the Kurdish-majority areas of Syria.

The Kurdish militia that helped rescue the Yazidis in Sinjar and which held Kobani was the People's Protection Force (YPG), which is the unified armed contingent around which the Syrian Kurds have gathered. The YPG was formed as a result of the Erbil Agreement, which was signed in July 2012 between the Kurdish National Council, a coalition of 15 moderate and democratic Syrian Kurdish groups, and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the militant Marxist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged a separatist war against the Turkish State since 1984.[90] The Erbil Agreement, as its name implies, was signed in Iraqi Kurdistan under the auspices of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). But the PYD swiftly monopolised the YPG.

The PYD, as a long-standing armed group—it was set up in 2003 by the PKK—had known advantages over the KNC in terms of power on the ground inside Syria. The Erbil Agreement had sought to neutralise this by having KNC-affiliated militiamen trained in the KRG, who could then enter Syria to join the YPG. But this was overtaken by events: the PYD was able to take control on the ground and prevented several hundred KNC-aligned Kurdish militiamen entering Rojava, as it calls Syrian Kurdistan. By later in the year the KNC's political leadership had to relocate to Iraqi Kurdistan because the PYD made it impossible for them to operate in Syrian Kurdish areas.[91]

The PYD's mother branch, the PKK, was a Syrian State asset from the late 1980s. Its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, sheltered in Syria itself and under the protection of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father and predecessor as Syrian ruler, in Syrian-occupied Lebanon. The PKK was used by Assad Sr. to pressure Ankara by stirring unrest in eastern Turkey. Russia has historically supported the PKK, first ideologically because the PKK was a Communist outfit, albeit in combination with an ultra-nationalism, and later as a useful lever against Turkey, including allegedly supplying weaponry.[92] In 1998, Turkey threatened to invade Syria because of Damascus' support for the PKK in a war against the Turkish State that had at that time killed around 30,000 people (the war continues to the present day and the current casualty estimate is 40,000). Damascus signed the

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[86] Anne Barnard and Karam Shoumali, "Kurd Militia Says ISIS Is Expelled From Kobani", *The New York Times*, 26 January 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/world/middleeast/kurds-isis-syria-kobani.html

[87] Tom Perry, "Syrian Kurds push back Islamic State around Kobani: monitor, Kurds", *Reuters*, 2 February 2015, www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/02/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kobani-idUSKBN0L40U420150202

[88] Nicholas Heras and Wladinir van Wilgenburg, "The Kobani Model: Strengthening Kurdish-Arab Relations in Syria", *Syria Comment*, 19 March 2015, www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-kobani-model-strengthening-kurdish-arab-relations-in-syria/

[89] Michael Shear, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt, "Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS", *The New York Times*, 9 October 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html

[90] Ilhan Tanir, Wladinir van Wilgenburg, and Omar Hossino, *Unity of PYD Power Play?* Henry Jackson Society Report, 15 October 2012.

[91] Cengiz Gunes and Robert Lowe, *The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*, Chatham House Report, July 2015. Page 5.

[92] Luke Harding, "WikiLeaks cables: Russian government 'using mafia for its dirty work'", *The Guardian*, 1 December 2010, www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/01/wikileaks-cable-spain-russian-mafia

Adana agreement, expelled Ocalan and designated the PKK as a terrorist organisation. Then came the Syrian uprising.

The Syrian uprising was a peaceful affair for more than six months after it began in March 2011, comprising mostly street demonstrations. At that time the PYD was known as the "Shabiha of the Kurds", in reference to the largely Alawite plain-clothes thugs who had run criminal rackets on the Syrian coast and in Lebanon for decades, and who were now mobilised by the Assad regime to perpetrate some of the worst violence against protesters in Arab areas.[93] The PYD attacked both anti-regime and anti-PKK Kurdish demonstrators in northern Syria.[94] When the leader of the liberal Kurdish Future Movement, the popular Kurdish activist Mishal Tammo, was assassinated in October 2011, it was near-unanimously believed that the regime had ordered the murder and the PYD had carried it out. (Documents captured since show that Assad gave the order to kill Tammo and his intelligence service orchestrated it.[95] Who actually pulled the trigger remains unknown.)

Around this time, in late 2011, it became "clear that some sort of understanding between the Assad regime and the PKK[,] through its Syrian affiliate the PYD, ha[d] been reached", wrote Omar Hossino and Ilhan Tanir in a March 2012 report for the Henry Jackson Society.[96] Politically, the PYD had moved to align with the "internal opposition"—those groups inside Syria, in regime-held territory, that were either opposed in principle to the removal of Assad or were strictly pacifist, even in the face of the widening regime crackdown. There is wide suspicion that the "internal opposition" groups, the National Coordination Body (NCB) specifically, are outright fronts for Syrian intelligence,[97] attempting to delegitimise the actual opposition and unite the international community around a political solution that leaves Assad in place. The PYD was a founding member of the NCB. The PYD's interests in membership of the NCB, a group dominated by Arab nationalists who oppose root-and-branch the whole concept of Kurdish autonomy that is the PYD's central demand, was because the NCB was committed to limiting the influence of the United States and her allies, above all Turkey, inside Syria.[98]

Just days after the Erbil Agreement, the Assad regime made an operational decision to withdraw from most areas of Syrian Kurdistan.[99] When the Turkish Foreign Minister said, "The Syrian regime has handed over the region to the PKK or the PYD,"[100] he expressed the conventional wisdom at the time.[101] That the PYD was effectively an extension of the regime was the common perception among both Syrians and outside analysts. As late as January 2015, the British government said it was "very difficult to provide any support to the PYD while they maintain links to the Assad regime".[102]

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[93] "Kurds see increasing influence in Middle East", *Deutsche Welle*, 16 August 2012, www.dw.com/en/kurds-see-increasing-influence-in-middle-east/a-16170388

[94] "The Kurdish Democratic Union Party", Carnegie Middle East Center, 1 March 2012, carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=48526&reloadFlag=1

[95] "Assad ordered killing of Kurdish activist Mashaal Tammo: Leaked files", *Al-Arabiya*, 10 October 2012, english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/10/10/242928.html

[96] Omar Hossino and Ilhan Tanir, *The Decisive Minority: The Role of Syria's Kurds in the Anti-Assad Revolution*, Henry Jackson Society Report, March 2012.

[97] "Damascus meeting calls for peaceful change in Syria", *Reuters*, 23 September 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/23/us-syria-crisis-meeting-idUSBRE88M06A20120923; Borzou Daragahi and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "Syria opposition groups fail to reach accord", *Financial Times*, 4 January 2012, www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f0d2797e-36ee-11e1-96bf-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3rD1RB6pd

[98] Aron Lund, "A Rift in the National Coordination Body", *Carnegie*, 31 January 2014, carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54381

[99] John Caves, *Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)*, Institute for the Study of War Backgrounder, December 6, 2012.

[100] David Pollock, "Syria's Kurds Unite against Assad, but Not with Opposition", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 31 July 2012, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrias-kurds-unite-against-assad-but-not-with-opposition

[101] Roy Gutman, "Assad hands control of Syria's Kurdish areas to PKK, sparking outrage in Turkey", *McClatchy*, 26 July 2012, www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article24733318.html

[102] Foreign and Commonwealth Office policy paper, *Government response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report: UK government policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, completed 19January 2015 and released 23 March 2015, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-response-to-the-house-of-commons-foreign-affairs-committee-report-uk-government-policy-on-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq

That the PYD has been, in military terms, effectively allied with the Assad regime is not in dispute. It is possible this was an unspoken strategic alliance. The PYD's focus is on building a proto-state in the Kurdish-majority areas of north-eastern Syria, not forcibly removing the government in Damascus. As the Assad regime abandoned its intention to restore control over all of Syria in late 2012,[103] it sought to leave the territory to the most military and politically advantageous forces—the PYD in Rojava, and the most extreme Salafists in Arab areas who would fight with other insurgent groups and would, more importantly, make the Assad regime look like the lesser evil. Thus the regime and the PYD had an alliance of interests that did not require direct coordination. Regime fighter jets stayed away from the Kurdish main cities like Hasaka and Qamishli; the PYD did not attack the regime's remaining outposts, mostly around oil and gas facilities in Qamishli.[104] Undoubtedly there is some truth in this. What it does not explain is PYD leader Saleh Muslim Muhammad blaming the rebels for the chemical weapons attack in Ghouta in August 2013.[105] No Kurdish interest was served by Muhammad's statement, but it did assist with the very elaborate campaign of disinformation from the regime and its supporters about the responsibility for that attack.[106]

The PYD beginning to attack regime outposts in Kurdish-majority territory, in early 2015[107] and then over the summer,[108] suggested that perhaps the PYD has severed the regime link and is now making a bid for statehood on its own account. But since the beginning of the Russian intervention on 30 September, the PYD has been soliciting support from Russia, including coordinated airstrikes,[109] and has made preparations to open a mission in Moscow.[110] At a minimum these actions by the PYD have lent legitimacy to an intervention whose primary intent is to bolster the Assad regime,[111] and if these politico-military actions proceed, the PYD would be actively buttressing the regime—Russian support to the PYD would likely be contingent on the PYD formally renouncing any intention to remove Assad from power, for example.

The PYD's signals to, and the PKK's historic relationship with, Moscow, which intends to leave the Assad regime as the only interlocutor to defeat IS,[112] and the PYD's autonomy project, which confines its interests to monopolising power in Kurdish-majority areas of Syria, pose a great problem for the anti-IS Coalition, which is almost solely dependent on the PYD at this point to defeat IS inside Syria.

After a nine-month crackdown by the Assad regime, which had been assisted from the outset by Iran, the governments of the Gulf States and Turkey began shipping weapons to Syrian rebels in January 2012.[113] From the summer of 2012, the CIA was in eastern Turkey to steer the weapons

[103] Joseph Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, The Institute for the Study of War, March 2013. Page 9.
[104] Joseph Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, The Institute for the Study of War, March 2013. Page 33.
[105] "Syrian Kurdish PYD leader Salih Muslim: I doubt Assad used chemical weapons", *Ekrud Daily*, 28 August 2013, ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/8/syriakurd878.htm
[106] Christoph Reuter, "'Sex Jihad' and Other Lies: Assad's Elaborate Disinformation Campaign", Der Spiegel, 7 October 2013, www.spiegel.de/international/world/assad-regime-wages-pr-campaign-to-discredit-rebels-a-926479.html
[107] Aron Lund, "What's Behind the Kurdish-Arab Clashes in East Syria?", *Carnegie*, 23 January 2015, carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=58814
[108] "Kurdish security forces capture regime institutions in Syria's Qamishli", *ARA News*, 17 June 2015, aranews.net/2015/06/kurdish-security-forces-capture-regime-institutions-in-syrias-qamishli/
[109] "Syria Kurds ask Russia for arms, coordination", *NOW Lebanon*, 1 October 2015, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565990-syria-kurds-ask-russia-for-arms-coordination
[110] "Syrian Kurdish group may open mission in Russia - paper", *Reuters*, 20 October 2015, uk.reuters.com/article/2015/10/20/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-kurds-idUKKCN0SE0KE20151020
[111] "'More than 90%' of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted Isis, US says", *AFP*, 7 October 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targetting-isis
[112] Michael Weiss, "Russia's Giving ISIS An Air Force", *The Daily Beast*, 8 October 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/08/russia-s-giving-isis-an-air-force.html
[113] C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.", *The New York Times*, 24 March 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html

away from the extremists.[114] The US promised to begin supplying non-lethal equipment such as body armour, food and medicine to vetted rebels in April 2013, and this seems to have begun the following month.[115] The US ostensibly decided to begin sending weapons directly to the rebellion, via a covert CIA programme, in June 2013 after publicly confirming that the Assad regime was using chemical weapons.[116] But those weapons only began arriving in September 2013 after the massive chemical attack in Ghouta.[117] The CIA's weapons-provision programme had been accompanied by a training programme, which had graduated fewer than 1,000 rebels by October 2013[118] and only trained 10,000 by October 2015.[119] The training and weaponry supplied by the CIA is usable against both the Assad regime and IS, and virtually none of the CIA-supplied weaponry has gone astray.[120] Of the weapons that have made the most difference—the TOW anti-tank missiles—more than 550 have been supplied and only four have ended up in the hands of Salafi-jihadists.[121] This stands in bold contrast to the Pentagon-run T&E programme.

There were serious problems in the execution of the T&E programme, particularly the slowness of its progress. President Obama requested $500 million to train 5,000 men per year in June 2014; this only passed Congress in September 2014, and the training only began in May 2015.[122] But the much greater problem with the T&E programme was in conception. Syrian rebels were being recruited to a programme that would have them stop fighting against Assad— cease to be rebels—in order to be a US-directed strike force against IS. The rebels on the T&E programme were even asked to sign a pledge not to use US-supplied equipment against the Assad regime.[123] By June 2015, fewer than 200 men had entered the programme.[124] When the first batch of 54 fighters from the T&E programme entered Syria in July, they were attacked by Jabhat an-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. When the second batch of 70 entered Syria in late September, the commander of the unit—about whom the US had been warned by the rebels[125]—handed over one-quarter of the US-provided military equipment and defected. On 9 October, the US abandoned the T&E programme.[126]

By the time the T&E programme publicly collapsed, support had already been growing within the US administration for backing the PYD-run YPG as an *alternative* to the rebels: this was a force that was "already trained, competent, organised—[and] posed little risk of abandoning the fight

[114] Eric Schmitt, "C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition", *The New York Times*, 21 June 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html

[115] Karen DeYoung, "Kerry says U.S. will expedite new aid to Syrian opposition", *The Washington Post*, 21 April 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kerry-says-us-will-expedite-new-aid-to-syrian-opposition/2013/04/21/91461f40-aa8f-11e2-a8b9-2a63d75b5459_story.html

[116] Mark Mazzetti, Michael Gordon, and Mark Landler, "U.S. Is Said to Plan to Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels", *The New York Times*, 13 June 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-weapons.html

[117] Ernesto Londoño and Greg Miller, "CIA begins weapons delivery to Syrian rebels", *The Washington Post*, 11 September 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html

[118] Greg Miller, "CIA ramping up covert training program for moderate Syrian rebels", *The Washington Post*, 2 October 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-ramping-up-covert-training-program-for-moderate-syrian-rebels/2013/10/02/a0bba084-2af6-11e3-8ade-a1f23cda135e_story.html

[119] Ken Dilanian, "Officials: CIA-backed Syrian rebels under Russian blitz", *The Associated Press*, 10 October 2015, bigstory.ap.org/article/dfe1547ba36f4f968deee227d467dc08/officials-russian-bombs-cia-rebels-had-syrian-gains

[120] *Syria: Countrywide Conflict Report #4*, The Carter Center, 11 September 2014. Page 24.

[121] Ken Dilanian, "US draws a line on protecting CIA-backed rebels in Syria", *The Associated Press*, 13 October 2015, bigstory.ap.org/article/2c9bc3139ece47fb8da35873c27ed124/us-draws-line-protecting-cia-backed-rebels-syria

[122] Ben Jacobs and Sabrina Siddiqui, "US begins training Syrian rebels in Jordan to become anti-Isis force", *The Guardian*, 7 May 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/07/us-begins-training-syrian-rebels-jordan-anti-isis-force

[123] "US-trained rebels reject pledge not to attack Syrian regime", *Al-Araby*, 24 June 2015, www.alaraby.co.uk/english/News/2015/6/24/US-trained-rebels-reject-pledge-not-to-attack-Syrian-regime

[124] Kristina Wong, "US training fewer than 200 Syrian rebels", *The Hill*, 18 June 2015, thehill.com/policy/defense/245489-pentagon-fewer-than-200-syrian-rebels-undergoing-training

[125] Michael Weiss, "Did a U.S.-Trained Syrian Rebel Commander Defect to al Qaeda?", *The Daily Beast*, 23 September 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/22/did-a-u-s-trained-syrian-rebel-commander-defect-to-al-qaeda.html

[126] Michael Shear, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt, "Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS", *The New York Times*, 9 October 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html

[against IS] or worse yet, switching sides".[127] President Obama indicated that he had only authorised the T&E programme as part of an effort to "try different things" because of various "partners"—in context, clearly a reference to Arab allies and Turkey—and was now satisfied that no effort to get rebels to fight IS could succeed unless they were also allowed to fight Assad, which he would not support.[128] With the Russian intervention, US dissociation from the rebels was effectively completed: President Obama ruled out provision of anti-aircraft weapons to the CIA-vetted rebels in western Syria to allow them to protect themselves against a systematic campaign of Russian airstrikes,[129] and the US focus shifted to eastern Syria and the PYD.

With Sinjar and Kobani as the blueprint, the US sought now to support a PYD-led ground offensive with airstrikes to "advance toward Raqqa", IS' de facto capital, "but not try to seize the heavily defended city itself. Rather, the aim is to isolate Raqqa and cut it off from travel and supply lines."[130] But there was an immediate problem: the PKK's designation by the United States as a terrorist organisation.[131] US spokesmen have insisted that in the fight against IS, the US is "not in co-operation with, co-ordination with, or communication with the PKK."[132] This is false.

First, the US maintains that the PKK and PYD "operate under separate command structures and have different objectives".[133] In reality, the PYD is wholly subordinate to the PKK's command structure—as its own rank-and-file fighters understand. "Sometimes I'm a PKK, sometimes I'm a PJAK [the Iranian branch of the PKK], sometimes I'm a YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK," one female fighter for the all-women wing of the YPG, the Women's Defence Forces (YPJ), told *The Wall Street Journal*.[134] Second, the PKK has intervened directly in Syria, joining the YPG in command positions and benefiting from US airstrikes. The PKK had between 7,000 and 8,000 soldiers in late 2014, about three-quarters of them garrisoned in Iraq. Some PKK fighters moved into Syria early, to help the PYD secure control of the Kurdish areas in 2012, and anything up to 2,000 PKK soldiers were in Syria by late 2014.[135] That number is certainly higher now. And third, the US meets directly with YPG commanders—the only people inside Syria who can call in US airstrikes—in coordination centres in northern Iraq, Kobani and the Jazeera region of Syria;[136] some of those commanders are direct PKK members and the rest are subordinate to the PKK. There is also the political problem that support for the PYD, especially in isolation from support for the rebels, creates tensions in the anti-IS Coalition, with the Syrian rebels themselves and with Turkey.

The US has attempted to circumvent the legal and political problems of supporting the PYD via "The Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF),[137] which consists of the YPG, some Arab tribes, a Christian

[127] Nancy Youssef, "U.S. Sidelines Its $500M Syrian Rebel Army", *The Daily Beast*, 11 August 2015, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/11/u-s-shelves-its-500m-syrian-rebel-army.html
[128] "President Obama: Steve Kroft questions President Obama on topics including Russia's incursion in Syria, ISIS and the 2016 presidential race", *CBS News*, 11 October 2015, www.cbsnews.com/news/president-obama-60-minutes-syria-isis-2016-presidential-race/
[129] Ken Dilanian, "US draws a line on protecting CIA-backed rebels in Syria", *The Associated Press*, 13 October 2015, bigstory.ap.org/article/2c9bc3139ece47fb8da35873c27ed124/us-draws-line-protecting-cia-backed-rebels-syria
[130] Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, "U.S. Aims to Put More Pressure on ISIS in Syria", *The New York Times*, 4 October 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/10/05/world/middleeast/us-aims-to-put-more-pressure-on-isis-in-syria.html
[131] "Foreign Terrorist Organizations", U.S. Department of State, www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm
[132] Alex Barker, Geoff Dyer, and David O'Byrne, "Turkey urged to show restraint in attacks on Kurdish", *Financial Times*, 28 July 2015, militants www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4a9cd402-3503-11e5-bdbb-35e55cbae175.html#axzz3rH2xoBD1
[133] Matt Bradley and Joe Parkinson, "A Personal War: America's Marxist Allies Against ISIS", *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-marxist-allies-against-isis-1437747949
[134] Matt Bradley and Joe Parkinson, "A Personal War: America's Marxist Allies Against ISIS", *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 July 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-marxist-allies-against-isis-1437747949
[135] Barak Barfi, "Kurds Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 9 October 2015, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurds-now-our-best-ally-against-isis-in-syria
[136] Barak Barfi, "Kurds Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 9 October 2015, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurds-now-our-best-ally-against-isis-in-syria
[137] "Syria Kurds, Arabs form joint military force", *AFP*, 12 October 2015, news.yahoo.com/syria-kurds-arabs-form-joint-military-force-091547153.html

militia and a group calling itself the "Syrian Arab Coalition" (SAC), which appeared in mid-September and allegedly comprised up to 5,000 Syrian rebels. Before SDF's formation in October, it had been announced that the $500 million that Obama requested from Congress for the T&E programme would now be channelled into support for the SAC.[138] The day after the SDF was formed, the US dropped 50 tons of small arms, ammunition and other weapons into Syria, ostensibly to the SAC.[139] But the SAC lacked even the logistical capacity to move the weaponry, and it was the PYD-run YPG that collected it.[140] The US had not made the SAC pledge not to hand the weapons to the PYD, and well understood the military situation.[141] Soon after, US Special Forces were deployed in Syria alongside the SDF.[142] Politically, this does not seem to be working: the US ambassador was summoned by the Turks to complain that the US was arming what Ankara regards as a terrorist group that threatens them—and by late October Turkey had admitted to launching airstrikes against the PYD inside Syria.[143] The SDF is viewed on the ground as a PYD front, and the rebels attached to the SDF are regarded as "Kurdified Arabs".[144]

The Coalition's attempted trade-off in paying a political price for supporting PYD-led armed formations in exchange for military gains against IS has not proven very successful. The ethno-sectarian and military limits of the PYD have meant that even with intense Coalition air support, the PYD has only forced IS from less than half of one province in a year. By contrast Arab rebels, rooted in the populations IS is trying to rule over, expelled IS from nearly five provinces in six weeks at the beginning of 2014, without Coalition support, and in the two provinces rendered "completely free" of IS, it has never returned[145].

Above this remains a conflict of interests between the US and the PYD. While the US wants the PYD to push IS out of Raqqa City, the PYD's focus is on building its proto-state, which means the PYD's main focus is twofold: keeping IS out of Kurdish-majority areas, rather than expending blood to liberate Arab areas; and connecting its "cantons" in north-eastern Syria—Jazeera and Kobani—with Efrin in northern Aleppo. Additional complications arise because Turkey has made clear it will use force to prevent PYD moves west of the Euphrates.[146] Even if the PYD could push IS out of Raqqa City, the Arab detachments in the SDF are unable to secure the city—they could not even secure Tel Abyad[147]—which would either mean the PYD would pull out and IS would return, or the PYD would remain in occupation of the city, which would push Arabs into the arms of IS, not least because of the PYD's own conduct.

As discussed in the previous section, the central recruitment pitch of IS to locals in Syria and Iraq is its narrative of being the protector of the Sunnis against anti-Sunni sectarian actors.[148] This mainly

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[138] Eric Schmitt and Michael Gordon, "U.S. Aims to Put More Pressure on ISIS in Syria", *The New York Times*, 4 October 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/10/05/world/middleeast/us-aims-to-put-more-pressure-on-isis-in-syria.html?smid=tw-share&_r=2

[139] Barbara Starr, "U.S. delivers 50 tons of ammunition to Syria rebel groups", *CNN*, 12 October 2015, edition.cnn.com/2015/10/12/politics/syria-rebel-groups-ammunition-50-tons/index.html

[140] Ben Hubbard, "New U.S.-Backed Alliance to Counter ISIS in Syria Falters", *The New York Times*, 2 November 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/11/03/world/middleeast/new-us-backed-alliance-in-syria-exists-in-name-only.html?smid=tw-share

[141] Eli Lake and Josh Rogin, "U.S. Airdrop in Syria Ends Up Arming the Kurds", *Bloomberg*, 15 October 2015, www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-10-15/u-s-airdrop-in-syria-ends-up-arming-the-kurds

[142] Arshad Mohammed, Phil Stewart, and Patricia Zengerle, "In policy shift, Obama to send U.S. special forces to Syria", *Reuters*, 31 October 2015, www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/31/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKCN0SO1VD20151031

[143] "Turkey confirms shelling Kurdish fighters in Syria", *BBC*, 27 October 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34645462

[144] Hassan Hassan, "Overextension by the Kurds will only benefit ISIL", *The National* (U.A.E.), 26 October 2015, www.thenational.ae/opinion/overextension-by-the-kurds-will-only-benefit-isil

[145] Alexander Dziadosz, "Al Qaeda splinter group in Syria leaves two provinces - activists," Reuters, March 14, 2014, uk.reuters.com/article/2014/03/14/uk-syria-crisis-withdraw-idUKBREA2D1IM20140314

[146] Orhan Coskun, "Turkey warns U.S., Russia against backing Kurdish militia in Syria", *Reuters*, 13 October 2015, news.yahoo.com/turkey-warns-u-russia-against-backing-kurdish-militia-113115494.html

[147] "Kurds Declare Mixed Syria Town Part of Autonomous Region", *Naharnet*, 21 October 2015, www.naharnet.com/stories/en/192529-kurds-declare-mixed-syria-town-part-of-autonomous-region

[148] Charlie Winter, *Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'*, Quilliam Foundation Report, October 2015.

applies to Iran and its Shi'ite proxies, but it also applies to the Kurds, who are regarded as pursuing an expansionist project which will encompass ruling Arab areas of Syria and will partition Syria—both objectives rejected by the overwhelming majority of Syrian Arabs. As with Iran, even the appearance of US support for anti-Sunni crimes helps IS' narrative of a grand conspiracy against which they are the only defence. The fall of Tel Abyad in northern Raqqa to the PYD in June did little to dispel these fears. The loss of a major town so close to IS' capital, which cut off a key IS supply line for foreign fighters from Turkey, was seen by most in the West as a success. But for many residents in the surrounding towns and villages, the view was rather different.

Amnesty International documented numerous war crimes by the PYD around Tel Abyad, notably ethnic cleansing against Arabs and Turkomen, and even some Kurds.[149] In village after village around Tel Abyad and nearby Suluk, the PYD ordered the residents to leave, and then demolished more than 90 per cent of the buildings to ensure they could not come back. In several cases, this demographic change was facilitated by the PYD threatening to call in US airstrikes against people who would not leave. The event that looms largest in the Sunni psyche at present is Tikrit: the displacement and destruction needed to get IS out, followed by sectarian attacks on local civilians, has convinced many that continued IS rule is a less painful option than having IS expelled by ethno-sectarian forces. Tel Abyad reinforced the fears roused by Tikrit and "convinced many Arabs that living under the control of Kurdish forces was a worse fate than supporting ISIS".[150]

There is little option but to help the PYD protect the Kurdish areas in Syria from IS. But support for the PYD *per se* is highly problematic legally and politically, and encouraging the PYD to expand militarily into Arab areas is actively counter-productive in the fight against IS; it creates sectarian dynamics IS can use to recruit and stretches the PYD militarily which will allow IS opportunities to expand its territory. Moreover, the Coalition's attempts to weather the political price of support for the PYD in exchange for military gains against IS has not proven very successful. The Coalition should make clear that its tactical support for the PYD is solely to counter IS, not to help the PYD fasten its rule on Syrian Kurdistan and not to help the PYD expand its dominion to include Arab areas. This could be done by the Coalition trying to cultivate opposition parties in the Syrian Kurdish areas and providing support for the development of Kurdish democratic institutions independent of the PYD. The PYD's ideology is authoritarian and its governance practice has already proven likewise, from arresting political opponents[151] and journalists who cover subjects the PYD does not like,[152] to the attempt to introduce ideological instruction into the schools.[153] The indiscriminate conduct in Arab areas and the ethnic engineering mean the PYD is not a viable force for defeating IS in its Sunni Arab heartlands. A force of Sunni Arabs is needed to do that.

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[149] "Syria: US ally's razing of villages amounts to war crimes", *Amnesty International*, 13 October 2015, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/
[150] Feras Hanoush, "ISIS's Cup is Half Full", *The Atlantic Council*, 13 October 2015, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/isis-s-cup-is-half-full
[151] "Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves of Syria", *Human Rights Watch*, 19 June 2014, https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria
[152] "PYD-linked Assayish arrests Syrian journalist for reporting to 'hostile channel'", *ARA News*, 10 August 2014, aranews.net/2014/08/pyd-linked-assayish-arrests-syrian-journalist-reporting-hostile-channel/
[153] "New PYD curricula in northern Syria reveal ideological, linguistic fault lines", *Syria Direct*, 21 October 2015, syriadirect.org/news/new-pyd-curriculum-in-northern-syria-reveals-ideological-linguistic-fault-lines/

3. Rebel Forces

Syria's hundreds of rebel units, the overwhelming majority of them Sunni, have merged or aligned into six major forces:

- Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest)

- Jaysh an-Nasr (Army of Victory)

- Ansar al-Shari'a Operations Room (Partisans of Islamic Law Operations Room)

- Fatah Halab (Aleppo Conquest)

- Unified Military Command of Eastern Ghouta

- Southern Front

All of these groups are in a state of war with Islamic State (IS), and the rebels have proven their willingness and effectiveness in fighting IS, even without external support. They can be relied upon, if sufficiently empowered, to fight to keep IS out of their areas, which is the most sustainable solution. Most of the rebel units are local to the towns they are operating in. Enabling them to provide security for their areas, to resist encroachments from the regime and its supporters and from IS, is the only long-term means of stabilising Syria.

The difficulty for Western policymakers is that most of these insurgent coalitions coordinate with al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, Jabhat an-Nusra, and two of them—Jaysh al-Fatah and Ansar al-Shari'a—even include Nusra.

A recent report by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) examined the rebel units and classified them according to whether their cooperation with Nusra is a result of ideological commitment or military necessity—in the latter case making them separable if they are given other options for resources and support. This does not mean these groups would fight Nusra, at least not now, because of Nusra's success in embedding itself into the broader insurgency. But these groups can counter-balance Nusra and be prepared to take advantage of the political circumstances—namely after Assad is gone and/or once Nusra begins to try to impose its vision of governance—where rebels would directly fight Nusra. ISW also documented the groups that are already ideologically and operationally independent of Nusra. ISW further assessed the relative power of the rebel groups, and uncovered two useful designations:

Powerbroker: "a group that disproportionately determines the success of military operations against either the Syrian regime or ISIS; is strategically located; and/or plays a leading role in governance."

Potential powerbrokers: "group[s] that could achieve significant battlefield effects" against Nusra and/or IS "upon receipt of increased outside support".[154]

Groups already independent of Nusra should be given Western support to prevent them falling under Nusra's sway, and separable groups, especially those that are either powerbrokers or potential

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[154] Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, *Syrian Opposition Guide*, Institute for the Study of War Backgrounder, 7 October 2015. Pages 2 and 18.

powerbrokers, should be considered candidates for Western support to pull them away from reliance on Nusra.

The rebels can keep IS out of western and southern Syria, and they can be helpful in rolling IS back from areas such as eastern Aleppo and neighbouring Raqqa, but destroying IS in its heartland in eastern Syria requires gaining the allegiance of the tribes on which IS' statelet is considerably based.

Figure 2: The situation map in Syria[155]

3.1 Idlib and Hama

Jaysh al-Fatah is an operations room for insurgent groups operating primarily in Idlib, parts of western Aleppo and north-western Hama around Sahl al-Ghab. Jaysh al-Fatah was announced on 24 March 2015, simultaneous with the announcement that it was beginning an offensive against Idlib City. The Assad regime was pushed out of Idlib City on 29 March, only the second provincial capital to slip from the regime's control. The Idlib offensive was long mediated, beginning in

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[155] Created by, and reprinted with permission from, Thomas van Linge.

December 2014,[156] but the difference-maker was that the insurgency's external backers put aside their differences, and Saudi Arabia, which had long vetoed support to some of the Islamist groups within Jaysh al-Fatah, lifted these restrictions on Turkey and Qatar.[157] Jaysh al-Fatah decided to hang together after this victory and pushed on toward Jisr al-Shughur, which fell on 25 April,[158] and then toward the Assad regime's heartland in Latakia. After the Russian intervention, Saudi reservations about component parts of Jaysh al-Fatah have been further eroded, but the coalition itself has experienced some disunity, specifically on the question of confronting IS.

Jaysh al-Fatah is composed of some hardline factions, notably Nusra, the Salafist Ahrar al-Sham, and Jund al-Aqsa, which was set up as a front for Nusra that has been drifting into IS' orbit. Faylaq al-Sham, Liwa al-Haq and Ajnad al-Sham are Islamists of a more moderate kind, and Jaysh al-Sunna is a non-ideological group.

Ahrar is prima inter pares in Jaysh al-Fatah, not only a powerbroker but also the most powerful individual rebel group in Syria, having shown a rare capacity for expanding its membership while so many rebel groups endure schism. Ahrar's leadership was practically destroyed by a mysterious explosion in September 2014, but the group survived. While Ahrar is the only rebel group with real institutions—described by some as "disturbingly bureaucratic"[159]—its persistence depended on Turkish logistical support and Qatari money.[160] Ahrar, which has always rejected the Free Syrian Army (FSA) branding of the nationalist rebels,[161] occupies a unique place in the insurgent landscape as the step between *Syrian* Salafism and globalist Salafi-jihadism.

Ahrar is so large it naturally includes a range of ideological commitments,[162] and it has recently been publicly moderating from the top down, including with outreach to the West by, for example, publishing op-eds in Western newspapers.[163,164] But this effect was rather marred when Ahrar shortly afterward publicly mourned the death of the Taliban's leader.[165] Ahrar is not, even by the most capacious definition, "moderate", and nor is it separable from Nusra: on most major questions Ahrar aligns with Nusra's ideology, and one of Ahrar's founders (though Ahrar denies he was a founder) was a senior al-Qaeda agent who set in motion Ahrar's close battlefield alliance with Nusra, which continues to the present.[166] On one major question, Ahrar does differ with Nusra, however: Ahrar has no stated intentions beyond Syria's borders, which leads to accusations of "nationalism" from globalist Salafi-jihadists.[167] The major question is whether Ahrar will serve as a Taliban-style

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[156] "Islamic fighters deal Syrian army a fresh blow", *The Associated Press*, 16 December 2014, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-army-bases-wadi-deif-and-hamidiyeh-fall-to-islamic-fighters/

[157] Hassan Hassan, "Syria's Revitalized Rebels Make Big Gains in Assad's Heartland", *Foreign Policy*, 28 April 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/28/syrias-revitalized-rebels-make-big-gains-in-assads-heartland/

[158] Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, "Syrian rebels hail fall of Jisr al-Shughour as sign of growing strength, *The Guardian*, 27 April 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/27/syrian-rebels-hail-fall-of-jisr-al-shughour-as-sign-of-growing-strength

[159] Aron Lund, "Abu Yahia al-Hamawi, Ahrar al-Sham's New Leader Lund", *Syria Comment*, 12 September 2015, http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/abu-yahia-al-hamawi-ahrar-al-shams-new-leader/

[160] Orton, K., "Turkey fears a Kurdish state more than the Islamic State", *NOW Lebanon*, 28 July 2015, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565654-turkey-fears-a-kurdish-state-more-than-the-islamic-state

[161] Aron Lund, "The Free Syrian Army Doesn't Exist", *Syria Comment*, 16 March 2013, http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-free-syrian-army-doesnt-exist/

[162] Charles Lister, "Are Syrian Islamists moving to counterbalance Al-Qaeda? Will it last?", *Brookings Institution*, 23 March 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/03/23-syrian-islamists-balancing-with-alqaeda-lister

[163] Labib al-Nahhas, "The deadly consequences of mislabeling Syria's revolutionaries", *The Washington Post*, 10 July 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-deadly-consequences-of-mislabeling-syrias-revolutionaries/2015/07/10/6dec139e-266e-11e5-aae2-6c4f59b050aa_story.html

[164] Labib al-Nahhas, "I'm a Syrian and I fight Isil every day. It will take more than bombs from the West to defeat this menace", *The Telegraph*, 21 July 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11752714/Im-a-Syrian-and-I-fight-Isil-every-day.-We-need-more-than-bombs-from-the-West-to-win-this-battle.html

[165] "Syrian Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham mourns Taliban leader", *Reuters*, 1 August 2015, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/08/01/uk-afghanistan-taliban-syria-ahrar-idUKKCN0Q63BG20150801

[166] Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, (New York: Regan Arts, 2015). Page 185.

[167] Sam Heller, "Ahrar al-Sham's Abu Yazan: 'It's our country and our revolution'", *Abu al-Jamajem*, 5 September 2014, https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2014/09/05/ahrar-al-shams-abu-yazan-its-our-country-and-our-revolution/

incubator for al-Qaeda, or whether Ahrar's "nationalism" will prove over the long term to be insulation against al-Qaeda-style jihadism. Ahrar seeks to build an Islamic State in Syria,[168] and is aware that globalist intentions endanger that by triggering an international reaction, and "no modern jihadist statelet has provoked international intervention and survived".[169]

There is much debate about whether the West can even engage Ahrar in dialogue because of its al-Qaeda connections, but Ahrar's power and organisation mean it is going to be powerful in Syria's future. Ahrar is also an enemy of both the Assad regime and IS that does not threaten Syria's neighbours. Nor does Ahrar plot international terrorism—though it is accused of being prepared to shelter people who would. Much will depend on the outcome of this debate, but there is a good argument that having channels of communication to Ahrar has intelligence value. Contact with Ahrar also has value in itself as a signal of engagement with the armed opposition that the Coalition needs to defeat IS, and it does havethe potential to help enforce the distinctions between Ahrar and al-Qaeda.[170]

Nusra is effectively divided into three branches: the one that is part of Jaysh al-Fatah, one in the Qalamoun Mountains and one in southern Syria. Nusra previously had a branch in Deir Ezzor which was destroyed by IS in the summer of 2014.[171] Nusra's Idlib-based branch is its ideological centre; the other branches are largely local and tribal in character.[172] The Idlib branch includes the prominent foreigners sent into Syria by al-Qaeda Central (AQC) to prevent Nusra "going local".[173] While al-Qaeda in Syria has hitherto shunned joint-command formations, Nusra has joined Jaysh al-Fatah as part of its long-term strategy of gaining legitimacy by weaving itself into the Syrian insurgency so it avoids sparking an IS-type backlash, and can over time socialise the Syrian population into its worldview.[174] Nusra is a powerbroker.

Jund al-Aqsa is a small, Salafi-jihadist group composed of foreigners whose main role in the Idlib offensive was as a provider of suicide bombers against hard targets. Jund al-Aqsa has branches bearing its name in Aleppo, Latakia and Hama, but these groups are very small and weak. The Idlibi branch of Jund al-Aqsa is a powerbroker, however, and was likely an al-Qaeda front all along.[175] Recently, Jund al-Aqsa has seen defections to IS, and IS infiltrators in Jund al-Aqsa have assassinated commanders of rebel groups in Idlib.[176] Whether this means Jund al-Aqsa is being slowly seized by IS, as has happened to other insurgent groups, is unclear.

Faylaq al-Sham (The Sham Legion) began effectively as the armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, but Faylaq has since put some distance between itself and the Brotherhood in a bid to attract Saudi sponsorship.[177] Ajnad al-Sham—not to be confused with al-Ittihad al-Islami li-Ajnad

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[168] Sam Heller, "Ahrar al-Sham Spiritual Leader: The Idol of Democracy Has Shattered", *Jihadology*, 3 June 2015, jihadology.net/2015/06/03/guest-post-ahrar-al-sham-spiritual-leader-the-idol-of-democracy-has-shattered/

[169] William, McCants, The ISIS Apocalypse: *The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State,* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015). Kindle Location 2752.

[170] Charles Lister, "Syrian Islamists reach out to the U.S., but serious issues remain", *Brookings Institute*, 14 July 2015, www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/07/14-syrian-islamists-us-issues-lister

[171] Aron Lund, "Syria's al-Qaeda Wing Searches for a Strategy", *Carnegie*, 18 September 2014, carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=56673

[172] Author interview with a Syria analyst connected to the tribes.

[173] Orton, K., "Al-Qaeda Central in Syria", *The Syrian Intifada*, 14 September 2015, https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/09/14/al-qaeda-central-in-syria/

[174] Charles Lister, "Al-Qa'ida Plays a Long Game in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, 11 September 2015, https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-plays-a-long-game-in-syria

[175] Thomas Joscelyn, "An al Qaeda front group in Syria", *The Long War Journal*, 2 May 2015, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/05/an-al-qaeda-front-group-in-syria.php

[176] Hassan Hassan, "Coalition must seek a common goal in Syria", *The National* (U.A.E.), 27 July 2015, http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/coalition-must-seek-a-common-goal-in-syria

[177] Raphael Lefevre and Ali el-Yassir, "The Sham Legion: Syria's Moderate Islamists", Carnegie, 15 April 2014, carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55344

al-Sham (The Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union)—is often described as *jihadi*, and it is claimed by regime-linked sources that Ajnad's former commander was connected to al-Qaeda.[178] There is no evidence for this, however, and Ajnad's public statements indicate a more moderate Islamism that intends a consensual government to follow the Assad regime.[179] Both Faylaq and Ajnad are separable from Nusra, and both are potential powerbrokers.

Liwa al-Haq is composed mostly of Homsi locals who espouse a vague Salafi-nationalism, while Jaysh al-Sunna is an apolitical, FSA-branded group, composed wholly of Homsi locals whose only aim is to overthrow the regime. Both are separable from Nusra.

It is important to note that Jaysh al-Fatah has been aided by the cooperation of the small, local, FSA-branded groups in Idlib and Hama, who provide logistical support and important military cover because of their possession of US-supplied TOW anti-tank weapons.[180] This support from the FSA-branded groups has been noted on the ground: Jaysh al-Fatah's success, while undoubtedly an important gain for its hardline components, redounded politically to an increase in stature, all across the armed opposition and opposition-supporting populations, for the TOW-possessing moderate groups[181].

When the Russian intervention began in September, it first targeted the FSA-branded rebels, especially those connected to the CIA, and then turned on Jaysh al-Fatah. It intended to halt its momentum as it pressed toward Assad's heartland on the coast, underlining that while Moscow's stated aim was degrading IS, its real aim was to preserve the Assad regime.[182]

Jaysh al-Fatah is undoubtedly the most successful insurgent alliance yet to emerge in Syria, but its cohesiveness might now be at an end. Halted from moving on the coast, Jaysh al-Fatah has turned south toward Hama, and that brings it into areas where it might come into conflict with IS as well as with the regime. In late October, Jund al-Aqsa quit Jaysh al-Fatah, explicitly citing pressure from Ahrar to fight IS as its reason for leaving, adding that Jaysh al-Fatah was not sufficiently zealous in its imposition of the shari'a and that it would only rejoin Jaysh al-Fatah if Jaysh al-Fatah issued a declaration of war against Russia and America.[183] Ahrar's chief judge issued a biting reply, which accused Jund al-Aqsa not only of posturing but also of committing a "sin" by leaving the fight against IS.[184]

Whether or not Jund al-Aqsa now rejoins Jaysh al-Fatah, there are clear fissures within the alliance that are not going to be tenable in the long term. The US-led Coalition should exploit these fissures to draw Faylaq al-Sham, Liwa al-Haq and Jaysh al-Sunna out of Nusra's orbit. Ajnad al-Sham is more extreme in its ideology, but it is separable from Nusra should the Coalition try. Jund al-Aqsa is too small and cohesive to be splintered and drawn into the mainstream, but there are sections of Ahrar and even Nusra that could be drawn away from the ideologically committed leaderships of

[178] "Al-Qaeda-linked terror leader killed in Syria's Idlib", *The Shia Post*, 30 March 2014, en.shiapost.com/2014/03/30/al-qaeda-linked-terror-leader-killed-in-syrias-idlib/

[179] Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Jund al-Aqsa withdraws from Jaysh al-Fatah", *Jihad Intel*, 24 October 2015, jihadintel.meforum.org/189/jund-al-aqsa-withdraws-from-jaysh-al-fatah

[180] Charles Lister, "Why Assad Is Losing", *Foreign Policy*, 5 May 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/05/why-assad-is-losing-syria-islamists-saudi/

[181] Alex Rowell, "A quiet comeback for the Free Syrian Army?", *NOW Lebanon*, October 28, 2015, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/566133-a-quiet-comeback-for-the-free-syrian-army

[182] Joanna Paraszczuk, "Why Russian Propaganda Links Chechen Militants, IS, And Assad's Coastal Stronghold", *RFE/RL*, 14 September 2015, http://www.rferl.org/content/why-russia-propaganda-links-chechens-is-latakia/27248094.html

[183] Sam Heller, "The End of the Army of Conquest? Syrian Rebel Alliance Shows Cracks", *World Politics Review*, 9 November 2015, www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/17163/the-end-of-the-army-of-conquest-syrian-rebel-alliance-shows-cracks

[184] Abu Muhammad al-Sadiq, "Quick points about the statement of Jund Al-Aqsa", 25 October 2015, justpaste.it/Ahraar_Sadiq

these groups and into the rebel mainstream. The strategy is risky, but it is the rough model that succeeded with the Awakening.

Alongside an effort to split Jaysh al-Fatah, there is an important potential counterweight in Hama Province, the six-group alliance called Jaysh an-Nasr, which operates without any coordination at all with Nusra and is supported by the MOM, the operations room in Turkey for the Western and Allied intelligence services who support the insurgency. (There is such an operations room in Jordan, which covers southern Syria, called the MOC.) Two groups within Jaysh an-Nasr—Suqour al-Ghab and Suqour al-Jabal—are potential powerbrokers.[185] Unity between Jaysh an-Nasr and detachable formations of Jaysh al-Fatah is a visible path toward keeping IS out of Hama and Idlib, and degrading the influence of al-Qaeda.

3.2 Aleppo

Aleppo Province is divided broadly between IS in the east and rebels in the west. Aleppo City is divided into regime-controlled west and rebel-controlled east. The regime controls an area to the south of Aleppo City covering its supply lines, and has also established a cordon besieging the rebel-held enclave in the east of the city. The Kurds control an area in the far north-west of the province around the town of Efrin.

The insurgency in Aleppo has grouped into two broad coalitions: the Ansar al-Shari'a Operations Room and Fatah Halab.

Ansar al-Shari'a is Salafi-jihadist in orientation and was formed in early July from 13 groups, of which the most visible are Nusra, Ahrar and Jabhat Ansar ad-Deen (JAD), which is also active in Idlib Province.[186] JAD groups together the largest theoretically independent Salafi-jihadist groups— i.e. neither IS nor al-Qaeda—in Syria. Most of JAD's components are units composed overwhelmingly of single nationalities like Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa-Ansar (Chechen) and Harakat Sham al-Islam (Moroccan).[187] But JAD is practically aligned with al-Qaeda, and is also not militarily very significant. Apart from Ahrar and Nusra, the most militarily significant group in Ansar al-Shari'a is Liwa al-Sultan Murad, a Turkoman-dominated rebel group that receives assistance from MOM[188]. Liwa al-Sultan Murad is a potential powerbroker and is like all the units in Ansar al-Shari'a, apart from Ahrar and JAD, separable from Nusra.[189]

Liwa al-Sultan Murad is also a member of Fatah Halab, which was formed in April, composed of most of the remaining Aleppine insurgent units, which are more moderate. Fatah Halab notably excludes Nusra, though it includes Ahrar. Fatah Halab includes, apart from Ahrar, a number of groups that are already powerbrokers: Jaysh al-Mujahideen, a coalition of moderate Islamists that came together to lead the offensive against IS in 2014; Jabhat al-Shamiya (The Levant Front), which contains moderate and nationalist groups, including the remnants of Harakat Hazm, a US-vetted group that is led by military defectors; Faylaq al-Sham; and Kataib Nooradeen az-Zangi, a group that has received support from MOM, including US TOW anti-tank missiles. Jaysh al-Mujahideen,

[185] Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, *Syrian Opposition Guide*, Institute for the Study of War Backgrounder, 7 October 2015. Page 24.
[186] Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front, allies form new coalition for battle in Aleppo", *The Long War Journal*, 3 July 2015,
http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/al-nusrah-front-new-coalition-aleppo.php
[187] Aaron Zelin, "Syria: The Epicenter of Future Jihad", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 30 June 2014,
http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-the-epicenter-of-future-jihad
[188] "Turkman Component of the Syrian National Coalition", ETILAF, 2015, en.etilaf.org/coalition-components/national-blocks/turkman-component-of-the-syrian-national-coalition.html
[189] Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, *Syrian Opposition Guide*, Institute for the Study of War Backgrounder, 7 October 2015. Page 14-15.

Jabhat al-Shamiya and Faylaq are separable from Nusra, and Zangi already operates wholly independently of Nusra.[190]

Both the Ansar al-Shari'a operations room and Fatah Halab have opposed IS, though Russia's airstrikes have damaged the rebels and allowed IS to make advances further west in Aleppo. Both alliances also contain powerful factions that could be peeled away from al-Qaeda if they were to be given another source of support to sustain their operations against the regime.

3.3 East Ghouta

East Ghouta, the suburbs east of Damascus, was one of the first areas to fall to the rebellion after the armed phase of the uprising began in December 2011. The formal administrative body in the area is the Unified Military Command of Eastern Ghouta (UMCEG), which was formed in August 2014.[191]

UMCEG includes Ahrar al-Sham, which is influential, as it is everywhere else in the country, but by far the most powerful faction is Jaysh al-Islam (JAI), led by Zahran Alloush. JAI is among the most powerful rebel groups in all of Syria—certainly a powerbroker—and like Ahrar it has shown a capacity for absorbing rebel units. JAI is ideologically Salafist, but it does not tend toward Salafi-jihadism as Ahrar does; it comes more out of the quietest tradition. Some of the more extreme Salafists, even in Saudi Arabia from where Alloush receives the bulk of his support, consider Alloush a "Sururi", a hybrid Salafi-Ikhwani ideology much-detested by the globalist Salafi-jihadists.[192]

Alloush has shown a certain ideological flexibility, putting on record some extremely sectarian, anti-democratic statements in times when the insurgents were trying to "out-Muslim" one another in ideological combat with IS.[193] And at other times Alloush has sounded a conciliatory note with the West, the minorities, and some kind of consultative governance.[194] JAI has been one of the most zealously anti-IS actors on the ground in Syria, keeping IS out of East Ghouta, though JAI has also shown a tendency to use anti-IS operations to monopolise power.[195]

While JAI's religio-political nature makes it a difficult partner, a more natural partner in East Ghouta is the other powerbroker in the area: Faylaq ar-Rahman (FAR, Legion of the Most Merciful One),[196] led by Captain Abd al-Nasr Shmeir (a.k.a. Abu Nasr), a military defector from Homs Province. Shmeir is much less ideological than Alloush and has overseen efforts to demilitarise the governance structure in the area.[197] Nusra is weak in East Ghouta, which means JAI and FAR are eminently separable from what little coordination they currently undertake with Nusra.

If the Assad regime loses Damascus, UMCEG—JAI and FAR, specifically—is one of the two forces that will be positioned to take the city. The other is the Southern Front.

[190] Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, *Syrian Opposition Guide*, Institute for the Study of War Backgrounder, 7 October 2015. Page 8-13.
[191] "Key rebel groups form joint military command in Eastern Ghouta", *Zaman al-Wasl*, 27 August 2014, https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/6333.html
[192] Author interview.
[193] Hassan Hassan, "Islamic Front's new covenant is a step in the right direction", *The National* (U.A.E.), 20 May 2014, http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/islamic-fronts-new-covenant-is-a-step-in-the-right-direction
[194] Roy Gutman and Mousab Alhamadee, "Islamist rebel leader walks back rhetoric in first interview with U.S. media", *McClatchy*, 20 May 2015, http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article24784780.html
[195] Darayya News. (1 September 2015). غوطة لريق شرق لا: جيش الإسلام يحكم منذ الإعدام حق وأب علييك "خبيخة" نين نيط من ه عاجيم.
[196] Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, *Syrian Opposition Guide*, Institute for the Study of War Backgrounder, 7 October 2015. Page 28.
[197] Nicholas A. Heras, "Beating on Assad's Door: Syrian Militia Fighter Abd al-Nasr Shmeir", *The Jamestown Institute*, 30 June 2015, mlm.jamestown.org/feature-single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=44104&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=539&cHash=8e66cff2112c37e64112179a0da3ebc7#.VkfbenbhDIU

3.4 Southern Front

In February 2014 it was announced that 50 FSA-branded rebel groups covering Syria's southern provinces—Deraa, Quneitra and parts of Rif Dimashq—had formed the "Southern Front" (SF).[198] SF comprised essentially all the nationalist and moderate-Islamist rebels in the southern areas, about 30,000 fighters, and was led by Bashar az-Zoubi, whose Liwa al-Yarmouk had about 5,000 fighters.[199] SF's statement of principles was very notable because it was sternly secular, and by 2014 the dynamics in Syria meant that even apolitical and nationalist rebels made some kind of obeisance to political Islam. Most of SF operates independently from Nusra already—not least because of the influence of MOC over SF—and the rest of the components would separate if they were to have a replacement for the resources provided by Nusra.[200]

Nusra does operate in southern Syria, but it is largely tribal in character, adopting the branding mostly for resource reasons rather than having global aspirations. The more Salafist-inclined insurgents in the south, including Ahrar and Nusra, gathered into Jaysh al-Fatah in the Southern Regions (JAFSR) on 20 June,[201] an extension of the branding from the Idlib coalition but with limited operational connections. JAFSR does not, at present, show any signs of wanting attack the FSA/SF, but JAFSR seems to want to balance the nationalists—especially because the SF has links with foreign governments—so that if the regime were to fall it would not only be the SF that was positioned to benefit.

IS is attempting to make inroads in both East Ghouta and SF-held areas. In April 2015, IS overran the Palestinian refugee camp in Yarmouk before being forced out by JAI within two weeks. In April and May 2015, IS' infiltration of southern Syria came into the public through two groups, Jaysh al-Jihad in Quneitra and Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk in Deraa, which began attacks on rebels. Jaysh al-Jihad was rolled up by the rebels; Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk still operates.[202]

There has recently been some tension between SF and its foreign backers in the MOC because MOC has restrained SF offensives against the regime. But SF remains crucial to keeping IS out of southern Syria, and SF has also demonstrated a capacity to counter the regime and Iran's Shi'a militias when the MOC allows it to.[203] Moreover, the SF has erected a functioning governance system that has even worked out matters of civil-military governance, holding out a viable alternative to the regime, and the extremism or chaos that plagues so much of the rest of Syria.[204]

3.5 Tribes

Many tribes formed rebel militias in Syria to fight the regime, but many in eastern Syria have now given their allegiance to IS as part of a pragmatic calculation of accommodating the ruling power. The near-total lack of Western engagement with the Sunni Arab tribes in eastern Syria and western Iraq is a chronic shortcoming of the campaign to defeat IS.[205] It is also the most surprising. When the Coalition defeated IS in 2007-08, driving it from its former strongholds and politically

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[198] *Zaman al-Wasl.* (13 February 2014). 49 لا يصف فورنعل ي القتهية القل جبهة ي قنج ي ي قف تاظ لخم.
[199] Aron Lund, "Does the 'Southern Front' Exist?", *Carnegie*, 21 March 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55054
[200] Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, *Syrian Opposition Guide*, Institute for the Study of War Backgrounder, 7 October 2015. Page 40-45.
[201] Conquest Army. (20 June 2015). نان ي أسيرب جيشت فتح قل ي منطقف القل ي جنب Retrieved from https://youtu.be/88TlWxoNKlM
[202] "The Islamic State in Southern Syria", *The Carter Centre*, 15 May 2015, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/islamic-state-in-southern-syria-may2015.pdf
[203] "South Syrian rebels say Assad foes are supplying more arms", *Reuters*, 23 March 2015, www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/24/us-mideast-crisis-syria-south-idUSKBN0MJ21I20150324
[204] Dafna Rand and Nicholas Heras, "The South Will Rise Again", *Foreign Policy*, 29 December 2014, foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/29/the-south-will-rise-again-syria-deraa-southern-front/
[205] Charles Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, December 2014. Page 40.

discrediting it,[206] it was accomplished by partnering with the Iraqi tribes in the western Anbar Province and in Baghdad,[207] providing support to empower them to take control of local security.

The Awakening forces were given American guarantees of inclusion within the security architecture of the Iraqi government, but as soon as the US left Iraq in December 2011, Baghdad ceased to finance the Awakening councils properly, and also began to target its members for arrest or killing.[208] This has left a lot of resentment within the tribes against not only the sectarian, Iran-dominated government in Baghdad, but also the West, which made promises that it made little effort to enforce. Enforcing those promises is a major component of defeating IS because it was the withering of the Awakening councils that opened the security vacuum that IS has now filled in western Iraq.

The "Awakening" among the Iraq tribes—which are closely linked with the tribes in eastern Syria—and the Coalition's facilitation of funding and logistics for the local tribal councils and militias that established consensual, humane rule after the expulsion of IS was so successful a model that IS itself sought to replicate it. In late 2009 or early 2010, IS circulated a "Strategic Plan"[209]—a document described by one analyst as having "the look and feel of a DC think tank report"[210]—which praised the "clever, bold idea" of the Americans in forging a population-centric strategy that secured their aims by proxy and won the allegiance of the tribes. IS was convinced that it could annex this model, not least because the tribes would rather take their funding from fellow Muslims. IS pursued this policy, in tandem with a major assassination campaign against Awakening leaders and militia members—1,300 fell to assassins between 2009 and 2014[211]—and had not inconsiderable success. But it was the establishment of a beachhead in Syria that allowed IS to conquer so much of Iraq when it did; the process would have been much longer and more hazardous without IS being given the time and space to intrude into the Syrian conflict, which provided IS with resources and provided a political context that helped reignite the Iraqi civil war at the end of 2013.

The history of tribal engagement is very different in Syria and Iraq. The Syrian Ba'ath regime, dominated by minorities and more politically radical, kept considerable distance from the Sunni tribes in the east, engaging them only haphazardly, usually to stir up divisions to put down unrest—for example, against the Kurds.[212] IS' "State" is far more intrusive than the Assad government was in terms of tribal governance in eastern Syria. In Iraq, by contrast, the Ba'ath regime, Sunni-hegemonic in a Shi'a-majority country, opted for deep engagement and co-optation of the Sunni tribes in western Iraq, but did also engage Shi'a tribes to keep local order and even to secure borders.[213] Throughout the 1990s, the Saddam regime's patronage of tribes grew more sectarian. After the first part of the Gulf War, averting a repeat of the 1991 Shi'a uprising became the primary strategic objective of the Saddam regime. Saddam's regime set up a grey economy—effectively an organised crime network—to evade the sanctions and provide for an internal patronage network that could

[206] Joel Rayburn, *Iraq After America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance,* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2014). Page 124.

[207] Gordon, R, M and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama.* Page 380-85.

[208] "Iraq VP Tariq al-Hashemi rejects guilty verdict", *BBC*, 10 September 2012, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19540960; "Iraq MP Ahmed al-Alwani arrested in deadly Ramadi raid", *BBC*, 28 December 2013, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25534541

[209] "Strategic Plan for Reinforcing the Political Position of the Islamic State of Iraq", Islamic State of Iraq Shari'a Committee, Muharram 1431 (18 December 2009 to 16 January 2010), https://ia802604.us.archive.org/16/items/Dirasa_dawla_03/khouta.pdf

[210] William, McCants, The ISIS Apocalypse: *The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State,* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015). Kindle Location 1354.

[211] Craig Whiteside, "War, Interrupted, Part I: The Roots of the Jihadist Resurgence in Iraq", *War on the Rocks*, 5 November 2014, warontherocks.com/2014/11/war-interrupted-part-i-the-roots-of-the-jihadist-resurgence-in-iraq/

[212] Carole A. O'Leary and Nicholas A. Heras, "Syrian Tribal Networks and their Implications for the Syrian Uprising", *The Jamestown Foundation*, 1 June 2012, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39452&no_cache=1#.Vkdkb3bhDIU.

[213] Amatzia Baram, *Saddam Husayn and Islam, 1968-2003: Ba'thi Iraq from Secularism to Faith,* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pages 110; 239-45.

resist a renewed Shi'ite revolt; much patronage went to Sunni tribes.[214] It was the disruption of that patronage system that led the Sunni tribes to resistance, first against the Coalition and then against IS.

IS fears a repeat of the Awakening, so has followed the path of Saddam in "terrorizing and enticing": using brutal methods for those who resist but also incentives to make tribes an integral part of its governance structure, which guards against internal overthrow.[215] A bottom-up displacement of IS will be extremely difficult. IS might have been able to resist the first Awakening, but the tribes were able to call on 170,000 American troops in Iraq. Still, the tribes have shown a willingness to fight IS since 2014. But without outside support their efforts have been defeated.

In the Abu Hamam area of Deir Ezzor, the Shaitat tribe rose up against IS in August 2014, spending nearly $6 million to finance the revolt, which lasted two weeks before it was brutally repressed.[216] Seven hundred Shaitat tribesmen were massacred over a three-day period.[217] In October and November 2014, Albu Nimr tribe in Anbar Province, an important component of the Awakening, fiercely resisted the imposition of IS' rule in the area. Albu Nimr were defeated and a series of large-scale massacres left more than 600 people dead.[218]

With the addition of these massacres, which the West did nothing to stop, to the perceived abandonment of the Awakening by the US, a lot of trust-building is needed between the Coalition and the tribes. IS is threatening enough to be conducive to such trust-building, provided the Coalition can convince the tribes that it is committed over the long-term and that the Coalition's offer is a viable alternative—which is to say the ability for locals to protect themselves from IS *and* Iran's militias.

US foreign policy has shown a very strong Westphalian bias—which in Iraq has meant a policy of sending anti-IS resources through Baghdad.[219] Iran has veto capability in Baghdad, rendering this policy void in countering IS: the sectarianism and authoritarianism of the Iranian-dominated central government in Iraq, and the policies of the Iran-subservient government in Damascus, are what led to the instability that IS has exploited.[220] The US has engaged with Kurdish sub-State actors in both Iraq and Syria; this policy should be extended to the Syrian rebels and the tribes on either side of the Iraq–Syria border.

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[214] Orton, K., "Izzat ad Douri and ISIS", *Baghdad Invest*, 4 July 2015, www.baghdadinvest.com/izzat-ad-douri-isis/

[215] Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 9 (2015), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/447/html

[216] Charles Lister, *Profiling the Islamic State*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, December 2014. Page 40.

[217] Liz Sly, "Syria tribal revolt against Islamic State ignored, fueling resentment", *The Washington Post*, 20 October 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/syria-tribal-revolt-against-islamic-state-ignored-fueling-resentment/2014/10/20/25401beb-8de8-49f2-8e64-c1cfbee45232_story.html

[218] Orla Guerin, "Iraq: Sunni tribe 'left for slaughter' by Islamic State", *BBC*, November 10, 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29984668

[219] David Kirkpatrick, "Graft Hobbles Iraq's Military in Fighting ISIS", *The New York Times*, 23 November 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/11/24/world/middleeast/graft-hobbles-iraqs-military-in-fighting-isis.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=0

[220] Marisa Sullivan, *Maliki's Authoritarian Regime*, Institute for the Study of War Middle East Security Report 10, April 2013, pages 34-37.

Policy Recommendations

There is no such thing as a stalemate with the Islamic State. Every day it controls territory it is able to exact rents that can be used to further its military conquests, both by funding its war machine and by the purchase of allegiance, and to plan international terrorist attacks. One of the lessons IS took from the Awakening was that it "cannot afford to wait for others to spy on us. ... We need to have a presence outside our territories," as one of its *amni* (security officials) has explained.[221] At a minimum, having sleeper cells in other countries ready to execute terrorist attacks at short notice means that IS' propaganda of perpetual momentum, on which it depends for survival, can be maintained. If IS loses territory in Syria or Iraq, it can switch the narrative with an international terrorist incident, diverting attention away from the question of whether its caliphate is faltering. This makes IS' removal a matter of some urgency.

1. Ignore the Iraq–Syria border.

The US-led anti-IS Coalition has managed to contain IS with its aerial campaign. The airstrikes have prevented IS from moving into Baghdad or attacking Jordan as had been feared. But IS has physically abolished the Iraq–Syria border, which makes it puzzling that only 11 of the more than 60 countries in the Coalition are engaged in airstrikes in Syria. (Canada is now withdrawing from the Coalition and Britain has conducted one airstrike in Syria under a very specific condition of legally defined self-defence.[222]) When the US began airstrikes into Syria, it was announced that "Iraq is our main effort and it has to be."[223] This was mistaken. IS' centre of gravity—militarily, economically and politico-ideologically—is in Syria. IS' most valuable territory is in Syria, a revenue stream it must be denied if it is to be defeated. IS is able to move fighters and weapons into Syria to protect them from Coalition attack. IS' supply lines and command structure for its actions in Iraq run into Syria. If a country is intending to defeat IS, it must also be at war with IS in Syria. This recognition seems to have occurred at some level and the Iraq-first policy has now been softened. But Syria is still not an equal focus in the Coalition's campaign.

2. Emphasise regime change in Syria.

Formally, the United States, Britain, France and the other leading Western governments in the Coalition are committed to the ouster of Bashar al-Assad. There are sound military reasons for this: Assad's regime does not have the manpower needed to defeat the terrorist groups it fostered, which now threaten Europe and the United States. And there are compelling political reasons, too. Assad and his senior lieutenants are guilty of crimes against humanity on a scale with few historical precedents,[224] and to mobilise allies, regionally and inside Syria, to defeat IS, the West has to be committed to Assad's fall. But the nuclear deal and actions on the ground—from providing close air support to the Iranian-led offensive in Tikrit to airstrikes against non-transnationalist insurgents in Syria—have brought US policy into closer and closer alignment with Iran's regional ambitions. This is encouraging the Gulf States and Turkey to deprioritise IS, and the effect on the ground is even more damaging. The government in Baghdad and even more directly the Assad regime, both under the influence of Iran, are responsible for creating the conditions under which IS rose. Aligning with

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[221] Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, (New York: Regan Arts, 2015). Page 211.
[222] Robin Simcox, *The Legal Basis for Targeted Airstrikes Against Islamic State's British Citizens*, Henry Jackson Society Policy Paper, 8 September 2015.
[223] "Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Austin in the Pentagon Briefing Room", U.S. Department of Defense, 17 October 2014, www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606948/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-austin-in-the-pentagon-briefing
[224] "Report details 'industrial' killing of 11,000 in Assad jails", *Reuters*, 21 January 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/21/us-syria-crisis-crimes-idUSBREA0K0NM20140121#rcbgLWdw0DUf7q7K.97

these governments only helps IS. The central narrative IS uses to legitimise itself locally is that it is the protector of Sunni interests against Iranian-led mass atrocities backed by the United States. The anti-Sunni mass atrocities are documented for all to see; the sense of American and Western support has done great harm already. Repair can begin by publicly stressing that Coalition policy is to pursue the removal of Assad in order to formulate a political transition.

3. Restrain and where possible reverse Iranian power.

An extension of the above point: aligning with Iran's assets, notably the Shi'a militias, ratifies IS propaganda and helps it recruit locally and internationally. To retake major cities like Mosul, the loss of which would be a severe blow to IS' legitimacy and financial viability, requires some measure of cooperation from the local Sunni population. The sectarian atrocities of the militias, notably in the course of the Tikrit offensive and in its aftermath, have convinced many Sunnis that if the alternative to IS rule is domination by Iran, IS rule is the lesser evil. One of the militias involved in the Tikrit offensive, Kataib Hizballah, is a US-designated terrorist organisation, as is the Iranian Quds Force and its commander, Qassem Suleimani, who personally led the troops into Tikrit. So is Lebanese Hizballah, one of the principle forces defending the Assad regime. The US provided airstrikes for Suleimani's offensive in Tikrit and has not challenged Hizballah in Syria—unlike, for example, the Khorasan Group, the external operations unit of Jabhat an-Nusra. These inequalities in Coalition policy bolster IS' claim that Sunnis are being unfairly targeted and IS can defend them.

The symbiotic rise of IS is only one facet of the problem of tacitly endorsing the expansion of Iranian power, however. Iran is a threat to the West in its own right, and much more sophisticated and global in reach than IS. The designation of Shi'a militias like the Badr Corp and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, which have been involved in terrorist actions against Western targets in the region and have killed Western soldiers and diplomats, as terrorist organisations would complicate trans-border movements of Shi'a militiamen into Syria and Russia's support for the same.[225] Whether or not the Coalition would then take kinetic action to prevent the shipment of fighters and weapons by and to these groups, it would provide a legal basis to do so. It would also be politically beneficial because the Coalition would be seen to be even-handed between Sunni and Shi'a terrorists, and a public effort to suppress the shipment of resources to forces propping up the Assad regime would also help convince the Sunni populations the Coalition needs to ally with to defeat IS that the Coalition was not supporting the Assad regime's atrocities against them.

4. Do not rely on Kurdish forces outside Kurdish areas.

Just as Shi'a forces cannot sustainably defeat IS, neither can Kurdish forces. The attempt to push Kurdish forces into Arab areas will spark a reaction that politically redounds to IS' benefit, and it will stretch Kurdish forces to a point of potentially opening a military opportunity for IS as well. The Coalition should be clear that it supports only the effort of the PYD to protect Syrian Kurds from IS and other extremist Islamist groups. The Coalition should not support the PYD politically, neither in its attempt to conquer areas of Syria currently under Arab rule nor its attempt to fasten its own rule over the Kurdish-majority areas. The Coalition should support Kurdish institutions in Syrian Kurdistan that separate the PYD from government and try to foster democratic opposition to a party whose ideology and governance is distinctly authoritarian.

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[225] Louisa Loveluck and Roland Oliphant, "Russia transporting militia groups fighting Islamic State to frontlines in Syria", *The Telegraph*, 17 November 2015, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11999694/Russia-transporting-militia-groups-fighting-Islamic-State-to-frontlines-in-Syria.html

5.   **Increase support to vetted rebel groups, test the proposition that certain groups can be separated from Nusra, and engage the tribes.**

Degrading IS militarily is only part of what is necessary to defeat it; something has to replace it. Military defeat is a crucial component in destroying the appeal of IS internationally and cutting off the flow of (mostly young male) recruits, whose potential return, especially in Europe, poses such a notable security problem for the West.[226] But to prevent a recrudescence of IS in another form, the local factors that allowed IS to take root and expand have to be resolved. IS is far more a symptom of political failure in Syria and Iraq than it is a prime mover. IS offered a political project that seemed better than the alternatives. Local Sunni leaders must be empowered to provide a better alternative, above all security against IS and against Iran's assets.

The judgment about which rebel groups and which tribal leaders will be entrusted as partners will undoubtedly be as much a political decision as a military one—on all sides. The tribes will only engage once they are sure that the Coalition means to complete its mission, and rebel groups will need reassurance after a litany of broken promises and the recent decision of the Coalition not to defend its rebel allies against Russian attack. Neither will engage if the Coalition's mission does not include the replacement of Assad.

There are risks involved in outreach to the rebels and tribes, notably that the Coalition would be supporting extremists, and that weapons provided might either be confiscated or transferred—out of ideological sympathy or avarice—to IS. But there is no alternative. The Iranian-run security forces of the regime will never be accepted as legitimate in the Sunni Arab areas of Syria, even if they could militarily conquer those areas, and neither Shi'a nor Kurdish forces can permanently occupy Sunni Arab areas, and it would help IS if they tried.

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[226] J.M. Berger, "ISIS Is Not Winning the War of Ideas", *The Atlantic*, 11 November 2015, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/11/isis-war-of-ideas-propaganda/415335/

About the Author

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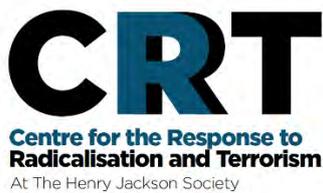
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