



**Centre for the Response to  
Radicalisation and Terrorism**

At The Henry Jackson Society

# Turkey and The West in Syria: Course Correction

Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism  
Policy Paper No. 7 (2016)

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December 2016

## Summary

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Turkey began the “Arab Spring” period pursuing a policy of “zero problems with neighbours”. Primarily because of Syria, where Ankara got drawn further and further in against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, this policy fell apart.

For Turkey, the threat of a statelet on its border controlled by the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which the U.S.-led Coalition has chosen as its primary ground ally against the Islamic State (IS), has motivated a number of policies that culminated in a direct intervention in August 2016.

Turkey has not directly supported IS, but policies pursued—notably the unrestricted access back-and-forth across the Syria-Turkey border—led to IS becoming stronger than it otherwise would have done. Turkey has now shut down the border and internally taken aggressive measures against IS, but IS retains the capacity to cause internal strife for Turkey if its infrastructure is threatened.

Al-Qaeda has used Turkey as a rear base and its networks on Turkish territory constitute a key node in its global network, able to strike at Europe and America if and when a decision is made. Some of the Islamist groups Turkey supports in Syria, notably Ahrar al-Sham, have strengthened al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch.

After the attempted coup in Turkey there has been a wide-scale crackdown, which has targeted all opposition to the government. This has accelerated Turkey’s democratic backsliding and risks damaging the anti-IS cause by removing key military officials with whom the West has been working. It is possible that the West will lose, or be threatened with the loss of, basing rights altogether in Turkey.

## Key Recommendations

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1. Work with Turkey to delineate an acceptable role for the PKK in Syria, imposing some limits on an organisation that has heretofore enjoyed uncritical Western support. This will help avert opening another front in the war, and diverting resources from the anti-IS campaign.
2. Apply political and military pressure to push toward the removal of Bashar al-Assad. A rhetorical and physical demonstration of seriousness that the peace process the West is involved in is meant to lead to Assad’s ouster will help bring allies, inside Syria and in the surrounding states, along with the Western strategy, including fighting IS and al-Qaeda.
3. Have Turkey crackdown on al-Qaeda’s operations on its territory, and if possible reduce Turkish support to Ahrar al-Sham, and other Islamist groups that enable al-Qaeda in northern Syria.
4. Explore alternative basing locations, notably Cyprus and Iraqi Kurdistan, to ensure there actually is an alternative if the Coalition is evicted from Turkey and to ensure meanwhile that Ankara does not have excessive leverage from the ability to make this threat.

## Background

The Turkish government, led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), had been pursuing a policy it called “zero problems with neighbours” until the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011. The intention was to reduce areas of political disagreement and to integrate Turkey economically with her neighbours.

Despite initial misgivings, Turkey had developed close political and economic ties with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq after the fall of Saddam Husayn.<sup>1</sup>

Turkey’s relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran became so close as to alarm the Western Alliance, with Turkey’s economic policy undermining the sanctions imposed on Tehran over its illegal nuclear-weapons program,<sup>2</sup> and Turkey’s political posture splitting the coalition against Iran.<sup>3</sup>

Turkey signed a free trade agreement with Georgia in 2007. Turkey had normalised her diplomatic relations with Armenia in 2009,<sup>4</sup> undoubtedly the toughest of Ankara’s relations because of the charged history relating to the genocide committed by the Ottoman government against the Christian population of Anatolia under the cover of the First World War, the Turkish republic being built to a not-inconsiderable extent on the wealth confiscated during those atrocities, and the official refusal to recognise that this happened.<sup>5</sup> Trade between Turkey and Sudan tripled between 2006 and 2009,<sup>6</sup> and only a last-minute cancellation, under pressure from the West, prevented Khartoum’s ruler, Umar al-Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court for genocide, from visiting Turkey in 2009.<sup>7</sup>

Turkey’s relationship with Syria had been bitterly hostile up to the late 1990s, in significant part owing to the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad sheltering Abdullah Ocalan and his Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which Assad was instrumental in building into an effective force in collusion with the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> The PKK launched a separatist insurgency inside Turkey in 1984, acting effectively as a proxy for the U.S.S.R. against a frontline NATO state. After the Soviet Empire collapsed, the PKK was drawn closer to Damascus. On 9 October 1998, under a threat of war from Ankara, Hafez expelled Ocalan and in February 1999 the Turks rounded him up in Kenya, imprisoning him on Imrali Island, where he has been ever since.<sup>9</sup> Turkey and Syria signed the Adana agreement on 20 October 1998, vowing cooperation against terrorism, and relations improved considerably. The accession to power of Hafez’s son, Bashar, in 2000, and Erdogan in 2002, marked a deepening of ties, including a close personal relationship between the two leaders.<sup>10</sup>

For Turkey, Syria was a prime demonstration of the “zero problems with neighbours” policy. Beyond political and military calm, Turkey was able to gain from intelligence-sharing with Syria.<sup>11</sup> Assad’s was an outlaw government with the unique attribute of sponsoring terrorism against every single one of its neighbours. By the early 2000s, Damascus was under renewed international scrutiny and isolation for facilitating the predecessor of the Islamic State (IS) in its war against the elected government, the Shi’a, and Western soldiers in Iraq,<sup>12</sup> and for the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Galbraith, P., *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End* (Simon & Schuster, 2006). Pages 216-18.

<sup>2</sup> Schanzer, J. and Zienba, R., ‘The Anatomy of Turkey’s “Gas-For Gold” Scheme with Iran’, *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, 14 March 2014, available at: [www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/the-anatomy-of-turkeys-gas-for-gold-scheme-with-iran/](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/the-anatomy-of-turkeys-gas-for-gold-scheme-with-iran/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Iran signs nuclear fuel-swap deal with Turkey’, *BBC News*, 17 May 2010, available at: [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/8685846.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8685846.stm), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Armenia and Turkey normalise ties’, *BBC*, 10 October 2009, available at: [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8299712.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8299712.stm), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Akcam, T., *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, (Picador, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Danforth, N., ‘How the West Lost Turkey’, *Foreign Policy*, 25 November 2009, available at: [foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/25/how-the-west-lost-turkey/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/25/how-the-west-lost-turkey/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Bashir cancels visit to Istanbul’, *BBC*, 8 November 2009, available at: [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8349678.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8349678.stm), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Cagaptay, S., ‘Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension’, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 5 April 2012, available at: [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-and-turkey-the-pkk-dimension](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-and-turkey-the-pkk-dimension), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Weiner, T., ‘U.S. Helped Turkey Find and Capture Kurd Rebel’, *The New York Times*, 20 February 1999, available at: [www.nytimes.com/1999/02/20/world/us-helped-turkey-find-and-capture-kurd-rebel.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/20/world/us-helped-turkey-find-and-capture-kurd-rebel.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Magnezi, A., ‘Will Assad-Erdogan love affair last?’, *Ynet News*, 3 April 2011, available at: [www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4051380,00.html](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4051380,00.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Kopolow, M., ‘The Odd and Not So Odd Timing Of Israeli-Turkish Reconciliation’, *Ottomans and Zionists*, 18 December 2015, available at: <https://ottomansandzionists.com/2015/12/18/the-odd-and-not-so-odd-timing-of-israeli-turkish-reconciliation/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Orton, K., ‘The Assad Regime’s Collusion With ISIS and al-Qaeda: Assessing The Evidence’, *The Syrian Intifada*, 24 March 2014, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2014/03/24/assessing-evidence-collusion-assad-isis-qaeda/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

Nonetheless, Turkey retained relations with Assad, even holding a joint military exercise with Syria after cancelling one with Israel in 2009,<sup>14</sup> while formally opening talks to join the European Union.

In al-Hamidiya souk in Damascus on 17 February 2011, a spontaneous protest erupted after security forces beat up a young man.<sup>15</sup> Sporadic demonstrations would be launched for the next month demanding reforms. Assad responded on 15 March 2011 by firing on demonstrators in Deraa, sparking the Syrian uprising that for six months consisted, with a few localised exceptions, of peaceful street demonstrations. Even after Assad had begun shooting demonstrators, Erdogan had retained his relations with the Syrian government. Erdogan and his Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, believed they could get Assad to de-escalate his response and to reach an accommodation with the opposition. But after Assad lied to the face of Davutoglu in the summer of 2011 about his intention to cease massacring protesters and to enact reforms, Erdogan came to a very firm, though largely emotive, decision to secure Assad's fall.<sup>16</sup> In September 2011, Turkey cut off all diplomatic relations with Damascus.<sup>17</sup> A sequence of events was set in place that unravelled the "zero problems with neighbours" policy.

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<sup>14</sup> Hammer, J., 'Getting Away With Murder?', *The Atlantic*, December 2008, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/12/getting-away-with-murder/307149/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>15</sup> 'Syria to hold military exercises with Turkey', *Al-Arabiya*, 14 October 2009, available at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/10/14/87976.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Syrian People Will Not Be Humiliated, 17 February 2011 Damascus', *YouTube*, 16 February 2012, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tKdYkgNeCk>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Koplou, M., 'Turkey's Iran Quandary', *Ottomans and Zionists*, 3 September 2014, available at: <https://ottomansandzionists.com/2014/09/03/turkeys-iran-quandary/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Chulov, M., 'Turkey to press ahead with sanctions against Syria', *The Guardian*, 29 September 2011, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/29/turkey-sanctions-syria-ankara-assad>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

## 1. Turkey and the Arab Spring

With the collapse of the Tunisian dictatorship on 14 January 2011 and most importantly the fall of the Egyptian regime on 11 February 2011, a wave of anti-government action overtook the Middle East. In Libya, on 15 February 2011, an insurrection erupted against Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi and NATO intervened on 19 March to stop the Colonel's indiscriminate use of lethal force against civilian areas. On 20 October, Qaddafi was killed and his government toppled. In Yemen, the ruler, Ali Abdullah Saleh, formally resigned on 17 February 2012.

Turkey had emerged on the pro-revolutionary side of these events, which came to be called the "Arab Spring". Ankara had been especially favourable to political Islamists within the opposition in these countries—hardly surprising given that the AKP is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. In September 2011, Erdogan toured the region, visiting Tunis, Tripoli, and Cairo, and was greeted warmly at every stop.<sup>18</sup>

The only negative reception Erdogan had was from a small group of Syrian protesters in Egypt, who chanted: "Erdogan, where is Harmoush?"<sup>19</sup> This was a reference to Colonel Hussein Harmoush, who had defected from the Assad regime in June 2011 and announced the creation of the Free Officers Movement, a secular opposition group.<sup>20</sup> Harmoush was last seen by his family in a Turkish refugee camp on 29 August 2011, before appearing on Syrian state television on 15 September, clearly having been mistreated, "confessing" to being directed to oppose the regime by foreign powers in a conspiracy with the Muslim Brotherhood and denying that the regime had ever ordered its security forces to fire on civilian demonstrators.<sup>21</sup> Harmoush has never been seen since and is presumed to have been executed. It later transpired Harmoush had been kidnapped by the Syrian government with the assistance of a Turkish intelligence officer,<sup>22</sup> Önder Sigircikoglu, an Alawi, the same religious group from which Bashar al-Assad and his inner-circle hail. Sigircikoglu escaped jail and fled to Syria in 2014.

This was an early indication of Turkey being drawn deeper into Syria.

In January 2012, as a full-scale armed revolt took hold in Syria in response to the Assad regime's widening crackdown, the regional states began an organised campaign to supply the armed opposition with weapons. Iran and its proxy Lebanese Hizballah had been involved in the Syrian uprising from its earliest days, providing specialised skills in violently quelling demonstrations.<sup>23</sup> This was a regional push-back. The Central Intelligence Agency got involved, sending officers to Turkey in June 2012 primarily to try to direct where the weapons went by vetting rebel commanders and to prevent certain categories of weapons—notably anti-aircraft weapons—being supplied to the rebellion.<sup>24</sup> But Ankara "had oversight over much of the program, down to affixing transponders to trucks ferrying the military goods through Turkey so it might monitor shipments as they move by land into Syria".<sup>25</sup>

In time the United States would take a more direct role in the channels through which weaponry flowed to the Syrian opposition, including (covertly) supplying weapons directly. Saudi Arabia restricted its weapons supplies to these channels, approved by the U.S. and some European states.<sup>26</sup> The only rebel

<sup>18</sup> Watson, I. and Fahmy, M.F., 'Turkish prime minister arrives for visit to Egypt as role widens', *CNN*, 14 September 2011, available at: [edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/09/12/turkey.diplomacy/](http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/09/12/turkey.diplomacy/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Watson, I., 'Angry activists say Turkey handed deserted officer to Syria', *CNN*, 16 September 2011, available at: [edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/09/15/syria.unrest/](http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/09/15/syria.unrest/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>20</sup> 'Syrian Soldier Hussein Harmoush announces split from Army 09/06/2011', *YouTibe*, 10 June 2011, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLaa9NSC9fo>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Watson, I., 'The mysterious disappearance of Hussein Harmoush', *CNN*, 14 October 2011, available at: [edition.cnn.com/2011/10/14/world/meast/turkey-harmoush-mystery/](http://edition.cnn.com/2011/10/14/world/meast/turkey-harmoush-mystery/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Weiss, M., 'Sons of Idlib', *NOW Lebanon*, 21 May 2012, available at: [henryjacksonsociety.org/2012/05/21/sons-of-idlib/](http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2012/05/21/sons-of-idlib/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Wright, N. and Hider, J., 'Syrian regime "importing snipers" for protests', *The Times of London*, 26 January 2011, available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/syrian-regime-importing-snipers-for-protests/story-e6frg6so-1226254330519>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Schmitt, E., 'C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition', *The New York Times*, 21 June 2012, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Chivers, C.J. and Schmitt, E., 'Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.', *The New York Times*, 24 March 2013, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Hassan, H., 'Old myths perpetuate poor analysis of Saudi', *The National*, 17 January 2016, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/old-myths-perpetuate-poor-analysis-of-saudi-1.181003#full>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

group supplied by Riyadh that was not vetted by the U.S. was Jaysh al-Islam, a traditionalist Salafist group, with no connection, ideologically or materially, to the world of jihadism, and which has proven to be one of the Islamic State's earliest and deadliest foes. Turkey and Qatar, the other main suppliers of the opposition, would work both within the U.S. system and outside it, supplying Islamist groups that the U.S. disapproved of.<sup>27</sup>

In the summer of 2012 an event occurred that was as important as the decision taken the previous summer to bring down Bashar al-Assad. The Assad regime shot down a Turkish reconnaissance jet in international waters on 22 June 2012.<sup>28</sup> NATO convened a meeting under Article Four, but it was clear that there was no appetite to deal with this incident under Article Five—triggering a collective response against the Syrian regime.<sup>29</sup> It was therefore clear to Turkey that the removal of Assad was a goal Turkey would have to accomplish without the support of her superpower ally.

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<sup>27</sup> Allam, H., 'For US, finding right allies in Syria will be tough', *McClatchy*, 11 September 2014, available at: [www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24773038.html](http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24773038.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Mawad, D. and Gladstone, R., 'Syria Shoots Down Turkish Warplane, Fraying Ties Further', *The New York Times*, 22 June 2012, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2012/06/23/world/middleeast/mass-killing-reported-in-syria-apparently-a-rebel-ambush.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/23/world/middleeast/mass-killing-reported-in-syria-apparently-a-rebel-ambush.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Levine, A., 'Can Turkey force U.S. and other NATO countries to attack Syria?', *CNN*, 25 June 2012, available at: [security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/25/can-turkey-force-u-s-and-other-nato-countries-to-attack-syria/](http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/06/25/can-turkey-force-u-s-and-other-nato-countries-to-attack-syria/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

## 2. Turkey's Deepening Involvement in Syria

The Turkish government had maintained an open-borders policy for Syrian refugees, taking in more than 32,000 refugees by late June 2012.<sup>30</sup> The original Free Syrian Army (FSA), which soon became a brand for the mainstream armed opposition, was formed in exile in Turkey by Colonel Riad al-Asaad under close guidance from Ankara.<sup>31</sup> The Turkish border was a critical lifeline for the armed opposition, which was permitted to travel back and forth into Syria, and to be based in the camps in eastern Anatolia. This was a system that served many humane ends, but it was also difficult to police.

The largest number of foreign anti-regime jihadists on Syrian soil in mid-2012 were Iraqis from IS's predecessor, who were able to "flip" the networks Assad had previously run to shelter and facilitate IS in Iraq.<sup>32</sup> With IS came networks in Lebanon and Jordan, and there was a notable contingent of Palestinians in leadership positions.<sup>33</sup> The first new, organised contingent of foreign anti-Assad jihadists to move into Syria came in 2012: the Chechens from among the refugee camps in Istanbul and elsewhere inside Turkey.<sup>34</sup>

It is important to note that at this time not all foreign anti-Assad fighters were jihadists. There were a relatively large number of Libyans who had come to Syria motivated by the revolutionary spirit of the "Arab spring" and humanitarian solidarity above any religious considerations. From Lebanon, there were political considerations: Sunnis understood that the fall of Assad would weaken Hizballah and allow them a chance for freer governance. And from all of Syria's neighbours there were tribal and familial ties.<sup>35</sup>

Altogether there were between 700 and 1,400 anti-regime foreign fighters, many jihadists but many not, in Syria by June 2012.<sup>36</sup>

In July 2012, the rebellion began an offensive against Syria's largest city, Aleppo, and swiftly overran the eastern half. Concurrently, Turkey escalated her support to armed opposition groups, as did Saudi Arabia and Qatar through Turkey.<sup>37</sup> The regime had begun escalating its attacks with the use of rotary-winged aircraft in June; it was using fighter jets to strafe Syrian cities by August and launching Scud missiles intended for international combat within the territory of Syria by December. The death toll rose quickly, reaching 60,000 by the end of 2012.<sup>38</sup> In January 2013, as the Islamists within the insurgency were beginning to surpass the seculars, a series of strategic gains were made against the Assad regime in northern Syria<sup>39</sup>—the last such gains that would be made for two years.

For Turkey, early 2013 was a period of optimism for its Syria policy. Islamist rebels that it backed, from Jihadi-Salafists like Ahrar al-Sham to Muslim Brotherhood-oriented groups, were increasingly strong within the insurgency and held key border-crossings in north-western Syria. Meanwhile, in north-eastern Syria, an opportunity appeared to have opened with the Kurds. The Assad regime had withdrawn from the Kurdish-majority areas in July 2012, leaving them under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG),<sup>40</sup> which comprise the Syrian extensions

<sup>30</sup> 'Number of Syrian refugees in Turkey exceeds 32,000', *Trend News Agency*, 22 June 2012, available at: <https://en.trend.az/world/turkey/2039633.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Lund, A., 'The Free Syrian Army Doesn't Exist', *Syria Comment*, 16 March 2013, available at: [www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-free-syrian-army-doesnt-exist/](http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-free-syrian-army-doesnt-exist/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Orton, K., 'The Assad Regime's Collusion With ISIS and al-Qaeda: Assessing The Evidence', *The Syrian Intifada*, 24 March 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Orton, K., 'What Role Do The Palestinians Play In The Jihad In Syria And Iraq?', *The Syrian Intifada*, 6 September 2014, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2014/09/06/what-role-do-the-palestinians-play-in-the-jihad-in-syria-and-iraq/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Lister, C.R., *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, (Hurst Publishers, 2015), pp. 74-5.

<sup>35</sup> O'Bagy, E., 'Jihad in Syria', *Institute for the Study of War*, September 2012, pp. 19-21, available at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/jihad-syria>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Zelin, A., 'Foreign Fighters Trickle into the Syrian Rebellion', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 11 June 2012, available at: [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/foreign-fighters-trickle-into-the-syrian-rebellion](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/foreign-fighters-trickle-into-the-syrian-rebellion), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Chivers, C.J. and Schmitt, E., 'Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.', *The New York Times*, 24 March 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Sterling, J. and Abdelaziz, S., 'U.N.'s Syria death toll jumps dramatically to 60,000-plus', *CNN*, 3 January 2013, available at: [edition.cnn.com/2013/01/02/world/meast/syria-civil-war/](http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/02/world/meast/syria-civil-war/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Tabler, A., White, J., and Zelin, A.Y., 'Fallout from the Fall of Taftanaz', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 14 January 2013, available at: [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fallout-from-the-fall-of-taftanaz](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/fallout-from-the-fall-of-taftanaz), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Caves, J., 'Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)', *Institute for the Study of War*, 6 December 2012, available at: [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Background\\_SyrianKurds.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Background_SyrianKurds.pdf), last visited: 19 December 2016.

of the PKK.<sup>41</sup> With the PKK's leader declaring a ceasefire in March 2013 and real progress appearing to be made on the peace process, it seemed Ankara might at least be able to reach a modus vivendi with the PYD to keep Turkey's border secure and the Assad regime out of PYD-run areas.<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the Turkish-aligned and -based Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had a stranglehold over the political opposition that many states recognised as at least a legitimate representative of the Syrians.<sup>43</sup>

These favourable circumstances unravelled for Turkey with the escalating intervention of Iran in Syria.

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<sup>41</sup> Orton, K., 'Coalition Allies Play Into Islamic State's Hands', *The Henry Jackson Society*, 14 November 2016, available at: [henryjacksonsociety.org/2016/11/14/coalition-allies-play-into-islamic-states-hands/](http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2016/11/14/coalition-allies-play-into-islamic-states-hands/), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Letsch, C., 'Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan declares ceasefire with Turkey', *The Guardian*, 21 March 2013, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/21/pkk-leader-ocalan-declares-ceasefire>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Hassan, H., 'How the Muslim Brotherhood Hijacked Syria's Revolution', *Foreign Policy*, 13 March 2013, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/13/how-the-muslim-brotherhood-hijacked-syrias-revolution/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.



### 3. Regional Deterioration

Turkey's "zero problems with neighbours" was unsustainable by 2013 at the latest. On a number of fronts Turkey was drawn into taking sides in the internal politics of states in the region, axiomatically gaining the enmity of other actors who in a number of cases emerged victorious.

In Syria, the Assad regime retook the town of Qusayr in June 2013, for the first time with the public support of Lebanese Hizballah, which actually dominated the offensive.<sup>44</sup> This was an important military blow to the rebellion; its more significant impact was on the politics of the Syrian war. The intervention of a radically sectarian jihadist force like Hizballah and its known role as the long arm of Iran's foreign policy heightened sectarian polarisation in Syria and acted as a spur to the Jihadi-Salafi forces who were calling for foreign Sunni Muslims to come to the defence of their brethren. These trends were reinforced after the United States and her allies failed to enforce the "red line" on the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons of mass destruction in August 2013, which had a devastating effect on the moderate and Western-supported sections of the armed opposition.<sup>45</sup> In April 2013, there were only between 2,000 and 5,500 foreign Sunni jihadists in Syria<sup>46</sup>; by December 2013, that number was 11,000.<sup>47</sup>

Turkey was—and remains—the primary gate-way for foreign Jihadi-Salafists entering Syria. The primary purposes of Turkey's open-border were to allow refugees fleeing Syria to take residence in Turkey and to support the mainstream rebels. But with Turkey feeling isolated from the U.S., which was moving toward de facto alignment with the pro-Assad coalition because of an excessively narrow conception of counter-terrorism and the nascent Iranian nuclear deal, Turkey used the instruments to hand to achieve her objectives in Syria of bringing down Assad and preventing a PKK-run statelet on her border. Turning a blind-eye, until the summer of 2014, to the flow of Sunni jihadists into Syria met the criteria.<sup>48</sup>

A month after Qusayr, the elected government in Egypt, with which the AKP government was closely aligned, was overthrown in a military coup. Egypt's long-time dictator, Hosni Mubarak, was removed from office as part of the "Arab Spring" in February 2011 and, after a period of military rule, in June 2012 Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood became Egypt's first ever elected head of state.<sup>49</sup> Morsi had demonstrated autocratic tendencies, notably a decree that put his decisions beyond judicial review—which was quickly rescinded by Morsi himself after popular opposition.<sup>50</sup> Still, Morsi's government was freer than those preceding it, and much freer than the regime of Abdelfattah al-Sisi that followed it.<sup>51</sup> The coup would be presented as a mass-supported revolution; in fact the street demonstrations and disorder that provided the pretext for the military to step in was carefully orchestrated by the military itself,<sup>52</sup> partly funded by the United Arab Emirates.<sup>53</sup> Saudi Arabia at the very least supported the coup in the aftermath, endorsing it just hours after it occurred and providing significant funds to the new regime.<sup>54</sup> A number of Islamists escaped the ensuing crackdown in Egypt,<sup>55</sup> and some of them moved to Turkey.

<sup>44</sup> Syria Update: The Fall of al-Qusayr, *Institute for the Study of War*, 6 June 2013, available at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Szybala, V., 'Assad Strikes Damascus', *Institute for the Study of War*, January 2014, available at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/assad-strikes-damascus>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Zelin, A.Y., 'ICSR Insight: European Foreign Fighters in Syria', *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR)*, 2 April 2013, available at: <http://icsr.info/2013/04/icsr-insight-european-foreign-fighters-in-syria-2/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>47</sup> 'Up to 11,000 foreign fighters in Syria; steep rise among Western Europeans', *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR)*, 17 December 2013, available at: <http://icsr.info/2013/12/icsr-insight-11000-foreign-fighters-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Faiola, A. and Mekhennet, 'In Turkey, a late crackdown on Islamist fighters', *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2014, available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-turkey-became-the-shopping-mall-for-the-islamic-state/2014/08/12/5eff70bf-a38a-4334-9aa9-ac3fc1714c4b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-turkey-became-the-shopping-mall-for-the-islamic-state/2014/08/12/5eff70bf-a38a-4334-9aa9-ac3fc1714c4b_story.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Kirkpatrick, D.D., 'Named Egypt's Winner, Islamist Makes History', *The New York Times*, 24 June 2012, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/world/middleeast/mohamed-morsi-of-muslim-brotherhood-declared-as-egypt-president.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/world/middleeast/mohamed-morsi-of-muslim-brotherhood-declared-as-egypt-president.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Hussein, A., 'Egypt: Mohamed Morsi cancels decree that gave him sweeping powers', *The Guardian*, 9 December 2012, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/09/egypt-mohamed-morsi-cancels-decree>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Egypt: Freedom in the World Assessment', *Freedom House*, 2013, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2013/egypt>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Frenkel, S. and Atef, M., 'How Egypt's Rebel Movement Helped Pave The Way For A Sisi Presidency', *BuzzFeed*, 15 April 2014, available at: <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sheerafrenkel/how-egypts-rebel-movement-helped-pave-the-way-for-a-sisi-pre>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Hertsgaard, M., 'Secret Tapes of the 2013 Egypt Coup Plot Pose a Problem for Obama', *The Daily Beast*, 10 May 2015, available at: [www.thedailybeast.com/secret-tapes-of-the-2013-egypt-coup-plot-pose-a-problem-for-obama](http://www.thedailybeast.com/secret-tapes-of-the-2013-egypt-coup-plot-pose-a-problem-for-obama), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Riedel, B., 'Saudi Arabia Cheers the Coup in Egypt', *Brookings Institution*, 7 July 2013, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/saudi-arabia-cheers-the-coup-in-egypt/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Haddad, N., 'Blood, death and flames: memories of Egypt's Rabaa massacre', *Amnesty International*, 14 August 2015, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/08/egypt-blood-death-and-flames-memories-of-the-rabaa-massacre/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

The rivalry between Turkey and Qatar on the one side, and the U.A.E., Egypt, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia would also play out in Libya. All parties had backed the revolt that toppled Muammar el-Qaddafi, which eventually received NATO support. They had disagreed on the new order, however. The Emiratis and Sisi concentrated their support on an ex-General, Khalifa Hiftar. Saudi Arabia supported Hiftar, but emerging rifts with the U.A.E. and Egypt over Syria and Russia have complicated the picture. Hiftar was too large a factor to ignore but could not control the whole country, and his attempt to eradicate Islamists, regardless of hue—from jihadists to those in the elected government—made a settlement to Libya’s chaos more difficult. In August 2014, the internationally-recognised elected government of Libya was overrun by Islamist militias under the Libya Dawn banner.<sup>56</sup> The Saudi/Emirati-Egyptian bloc objected to this, even launching direct—if secret—airstrikes in support of the anti-Dawn militias.<sup>57</sup> The Turks and Qataris were supportive of Libya Dawn. That October, Turkey became the first state to send an official envoy to meet with Libya Dawn.<sup>58</sup> Libya Dawn has since dissolved itself and a government of national accord (GNA) has been formed in Libya, which has international sanction and which it is hoped will confront IS and other Islamist terrorists on Libyan territory. The hold-out is Hiftar, who is reluctant to submit to civilian rule. Such political dysfunction allowed IS to gain a foothold in the first place and is now allowing it to retain its operating room.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the most dramatic change in Turkey’s external relations has been with Israel. Turkey was the first Muslim-majority state to recognise Israel in 1949, and a close government-to-government relationship had broadened into something of a societal one by the 1990s. The AKP quite deliberately sought to reassure Jerusalem that an Islamist government was not a threat after it acceded to power in 2002. In November 2003, after Istanbul’s largest synagogue, the Neve Shalom, was bombed by al-Qaeda, Erdogan visited Turkey’s chief rabbi in his office—a first from any Turkish leader. This began to reverse soon after, however. Relations deteriorated further in late 2008 when Israel, at the time involved in peace talks with Syria that Turkey was mediating, initiated Operation CAST LEAD without a warning to Turkey, and Erdogan took this as a personal insult.<sup>60</sup> Relations were virtually frozen in 2010 after a Turkey-backed flotilla trying to break the siege against HAMAS was boarded by Israel and nine people were killed. After the personal intervention of the U.S. President in March 2013, relations appeared to be improving,<sup>61</sup> but relations were once again de facto suspended in October 2013 after reports that Turkey had betrayed ten Israeli intelligence assets in Turkey to Iran.<sup>62</sup> Turkey—and Qatar—supporting HAMAS was among the wedges between the two sides, as it was in Qatar’s relations with Saudi Arabia, since the Saudis seek to blunt the regional influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, of which HAMAS is the Palestinian wing.<sup>63</sup> After recommencing talks in late 2015, amid increasing hostility between Turkey and Russia, Israel and Turkey restored full diplomatic relations in June 2016, though the relationship remains extremely tenuous.<sup>64</sup>

Turkey’s antagonism with Iran over Syria also became apparent in Iraq in December 2015 when Ankara deployed a small force in northern Iraq, near Mosul, which the government in Baghdad—supported by, and heavily dependent upon, Tehran—sternly objected to.<sup>65</sup> With the increase in sectarian trends among the leaders in Baghdad, and Turkey’s counter-assertion of guarding Sunni Arab interests, tensions have only increased.

<sup>56</sup> Stephen, C. and Penketh, A., ‘Libyan capital under Islamist control after Tripoli airport seized’, *The Guardian*, 24 August 2014, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/24/libya-capital-under-islamist-control-tripoli-airport-seized-operation-dawn>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Kirkpatrick, D.D. and Schmitt, E., ‘Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.’, *The New York Times*, 25 August 2014, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/world/africa/egypt-and-united-arab-emirates-said-to-have-secretly-carried-out-libya-airstrikes.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Laessing, U. and Elumami, A., ‘Rival Libyan PM meets Turkish envoy in first known meeting with foreign visitor’, *Reuters*, 21 October 2014, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-turkey-idUSKCN0IA2I520141021>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Orton, K., ‘The End of the Beginning for the Islamic State in Libya’, *The Henry Jackson Society*, 7 December 2016, available at: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/2016/12/07/analysis-the-end-of-the-beginning-for-the-islamic-state-in-libya/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Koplow, M., ‘A Foreign Policy Based on Personal Slights’, *Ottomans and Zionists*, 6 April 2012, available at: <https://ottomansandzionists.com/2012/04/06/a-foreign-policy-based-on-personal-slights/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Sidner, S., Watson, I., and Sterling, J., ‘Israel to Turkey: We apologize for deadly raid on Gaza-bound flotilla’, *CNN*, 24 March 2013, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/22/world/meast/israel-turkey-apology/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Watson, I. and Tuysuz, G., ‘Turkey rejects claims it blew Israeli agents’ cover’, *CNN*, 17 October 2013, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/17/world/meast/turkey-israeli-intelligence-leak/>, last visited: 19 December 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Hearst, D., ‘Saudi Arabia Threatens to Lay Siege to Qatar: Cooperation or Confrontation?’, *Huffington Post*, 9 March 2014, available at: [www.huffingtonpost.com/david-hearst/saudi-arabia-threatens-to\\_b\\_4930518.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-hearst/saudi-arabia-threatens-to_b_4930518.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Koplow, M., ‘Terrorism and Turkey’s Deal with Israel’, *Foreign Affairs*, 29 June 2016, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2016-06-29/terrorism-and-turkeys-deal-israel>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Coles, I., ‘ISIS shells Turkish base in northern Iraq’, *Reuters*, 16 December 2015, available at: <http://uk.businessinsider.com/isis-shells-turkish-base-in-northern-iraq-2015-12>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is a rare exception: the KRG's relations with Turkey are warm, economically and politically, including on the Kurdish issue because of the KRG's opposition to the PKK. Another friendly government is Qatar. As mentioned, both Doha and Ankara have supported the same elements in Libya and Palestine, and a similar pattern has repeated across the region, notably in Syria, where Qatar and Turkey have supported Islamists that the Saudi-led bloc finds unacceptable.

## 4. Turkey's Allies in Syria and al-Qaeda

Turkey has supported many moderate, mainstream rebel groups in Syria, including those vetted by the Central Intelligence Agency, and has helped such fighters battle the Islamic State. But, while the Saudis have worked only through American-backed structures to supply rebels—with the sole exception of Jaysh al-Islam, a Salafi group but *not* a militant one in Damascus<sup>66</sup>—Turkey and Qatar have also given extensive, strategically significant support to Islamists that the U.S.-led coalition opposes, most importantly Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>67</sup> Ahrar has no stated transnational aims, but it has served as the connective tissue between al-Qaeda and the rebellion as al-Qaeda seeks to co-opt the rebellion.<sup>68</sup>

Ahrar is Jihadi-Salafi in orientation,<sup>69</sup> and maintains a close battlefield alliance with al-Qaeda in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, now rebranded as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS). Ahrar has been the greatest enabler of JFS/Qaeda influence in Syria.<sup>70</sup> The U.S. came up with a traffic lights system for working with insurgents in Syria: red for no, green for yes, and yellow for those to be determined. The U.S. put al-Nusra and Ahrar in the red zone and asked Turkey to prevent them transiting her border. “We ultimately had no choice but to agree to disagree,” said the U.S. ambassador to Turkey.<sup>71</sup>

There is a lot of ambiguity and disinformation involved in this situation. For example, in January 2014 it was alleged that Turkey's intelligence services had been caught shipping weapons to al-Nusra, an overt branch of al-Qaeda.<sup>72</sup> But it wasn't true. The weapons went to Ahrar.<sup>73</sup> However, according to an al-Nusra defector, al-Nusra regards Ahrar as “their source for weapons ... in some battles.”<sup>74</sup> Additionally, Ahrar was crucial to al-Nusra's very survival when al-Nusra broke away from its parent organisation, what is now the Islamic State, in 2013.<sup>75</sup> This assistance was offered by Ahrar in no small part because Ahrar's leadership contains veteran jihadists with links to al-Qaeda, Muhammad al-Bahaya (Abu Khalid al-Suri) most obviously.<sup>76</sup> Al-Bahaya, who functioned as “the linchpin of the long-standing operational alliance between al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham,”<sup>77</sup> was later Ayman al-Zawahiri's representative in Syria to mediate al-Nusra's and ISIS's dispute.

The ideological composition of Ahrar's leadership, their closeness to al-Qaeda veterans, and their start-up funds coming from al-Qaeda-linked networks on the Gulf,<sup>78</sup> as well as al-Qaeda's known desire to hide its hand in Syria,<sup>79</sup> leave open questions about Ahrar's own relationship with al-Qaeda's network.<sup>80</sup>

Regardless of Ahrar's intentions, it is symbiotic with al-Nusra/JFS.<sup>81</sup> Ahrar provides al-Qaeda a nationalist carapace that allows it to burrow into local dynamics, affording al-Qaeda a degree of protection from foes inside and outside Syria, and provides al-Nusra a deniable channel to forms of state support, which al-Nusra is ideologically opposed to accepting. On the other side, al-Nusra provides Ahrar credibility in the wider Jihadi-Salafist world, which keeps Ahrar's hardliners from defection or splitting the group, allows Ahrar to vary its revenue streams by tapping into channels of finance that can

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.theationalae.com/opinion/comment/old-myths-perpetuate-poor-analysis-of-saudi#full>

<sup>67</sup> <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/06/24/the-crowning-of-the-syrian-islamic-front/>

<sup>68</sup> <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/01/al-qaeda-is-gaining-strength-in-syria/>

<sup>69</sup> <http://timep.org/commentary/jihadist-legacy-still-shapes-ahrar-al-sham/>

<sup>70</sup> Lister, C., ‘Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra’, *Brookings Institution*, 27 July 2016, p. 26, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/profiling-jabhat-al-nusra/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Allam, H., ‘For US, finding right allies in Syria will be tough’, *McClatchy*, 11 September 2014, available at: [www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24773038.html](http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24773038.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Tastekin, F., ‘Turkish military says MIT shipped weapons to al-Qaeda’, *Al-Monitor*, 15 January 2015, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/turkey-syria-intelligence-service-shipping-weapons.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Pamuk, H. and Tattersall, N., ‘Exclusive: Turkish intelligence helped ship arms to Syrian Islamist rebel areas’, *Reuters*, 21 May 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-arms-idUSKBN061L220150521>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Karoumy, M., ‘Resilient insurgent group Ahrar al-Sham to play bigger role in Syria’, *Reuters*, 22 September 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-syria-crisis-ahrar-insight-idUSKCN0RM0EZ20150922>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>75</sup> Author conversation with a U.S. counterterrorism official focused on Syria, June 2016

<sup>76</sup> Heller, S., ‘Muhammad al-Amin on Ahrar al-Sham's Evolving Relationship with Jabhat al-Nusra and Global Jihadism’, *Jihadology*, 9 December 2014, available at: <http://jihadology.net/2014/12/09/guest-post-muhammad-al-amin-on-ahrar-al-shams-evolving-relationship-with-jabhat-al-nusra-and-global-jihadism/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, (Regan Arts, 2015), p. 185.

<sup>78</sup> Lister, C.R., *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, (Hurst Publishers, 2015), p. 58

<sup>79</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, D. and Joscelyn, T., ‘Rebranding Terror’, *Foreign Affairs*, 28 August 2016, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-08-28/rebranding-terror>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Cafarella, J., Heras, N.A., and Casagrande, G., ‘Al Qaeda Is Gaining Strength in Syria’, *Foreign Policy*, 1 September 2016, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/01/al-qaeda-is-gaining-strength-in-syria/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Martin, M., ‘A Strong Ahrar al-Sham Is A Strong Nusra Front’, *Jihadology*, 7 April 2015, available at: <http://jihadology.net/2015/04/07/guest-post-a-strong-ahrar-al-sham-is-a-strong-nusra-front/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

be counted on even during the periods when states draw back, battlefield capabilities such as suicide bombers to break hard targets that Ahrar has been largely unwilling to engage in, and deniability from dirty work like assassinations.<sup>82</sup>

These indirect support systems became more direct in early 2015 with the formation of Jaysh al-Fatah, an insurgent coalition that was a result of unification among the insurgency's *backers*, namely the Turkey/Qatar faction and Saudi Arabia, though the project was led by the government of Turkey.<sup>83</sup> Jaysh al-Fatah received public support, despite having al-Nusra as an official member.

The least that can be said is that al-Qaeda finds Turkey a permissive destination, able to move freely across the border with Syria and untroubled by an official crackdown inside Turkey. A prime example of this is Rifai Taha, an al-Qaeda-linked jihadist who moved to Turkey after the coup in Egypt and who was acting as a go-between for al-Nusra and other jihadists considering a merger with it, notably Ahrar al-Sham.<sup>84</sup> Taha was known to be on Turkish soil but the U.S.-led coalition had to wait for him to enter Syria before they could launch the drone strike that killed him.<sup>85</sup> In short, Turkey is to the Syrian jihad what Pakistan was to the Afghan jihad or Azerbaijan was to the Chechen jihad—or indeed Syria was to the Iraqi jihad. A rear-base from which fighters can enter the battle, but to which they can take shelter to hide, recuperate, fundraise, and organise.

This threat is not limited to the region, either. The U.S. Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, has said that al-Qaeda still “aspires to attack the U.S. and its allies” and Turkey is among the “nodes” in al-Qaeda’s network, where the organisation is “dedicating resources to planning attacks”.<sup>86</sup> Clapper was later quoted as saying that the direct threat to the U.S. and Europe from al-Qaeda’s Syrian-Turkish network is “aspirational” rather than “imminent,”<sup>87</sup> but that is a question only about the timing, not the capabilities or intentions of al-Nusra and al-Qaeda writ large.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Author interview with Hassan Hassan, June 2016

<sup>83</sup> El-Beeb, S. and Karam, Z., ‘Turkey unlikely to drop Syria rebels in latest realignment’, *The Associated Press*, 9 August 2016, available at: <https://apnews.com/3a9ddec99064768ba92c8e5a591f5dd/turkey-unlikely-drop-syria-rebels-latest-realignment>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>84</sup> <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/04/us-strikes-al-qaedas-khorasan-group-in-syria.php>

<sup>85</sup> Warrick, J., ‘Double game? Even as it battles ISIS, Turkey gives other extremists shelter’, *The Washington Post*, 10 July 2016, available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/double-game-even-as-it-battles-isis-turkey-gives-other-extremists-shelter/2016/07/10/8d6ce040-4053-11e6-a66f-aa6c1883b6b1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/double-game-even-as-it-battles-isis-turkey-gives-other-extremists-shelter/2016/07/10/8d6ce040-4053-11e6-a66f-aa6c1883b6b1_story.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>86</sup> [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Clapper\\_02-09-16.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Clapper_02-09-16.pdf)

<sup>87</sup> Ignatius, D., ‘A reality check on the Middle East from America’s spy chief’, *The Washington Post*, 21 July 2016, available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-reality-check-on-the-middle-east-from-americas-spy-chief/2016/07/21/a221a1aa-4f86-11e6-aa14-e0c108717583\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-reality-check-on-the-middle-east-from-americas-spy-chief/2016/07/21/a221a1aa-4f86-11e6-aa14-e0c108717583_story.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Simcox, R., *Al-Qaeda Still Threatens Europe: How the U.S. Can—and Should—Help*, Heritage Foundation, 24 October 2016, available at: [www.heritage.org/terrorism/report/al-qaeda-still-threatens-europe-how-the-us-can-and-should-help](http://www.heritage.org/terrorism/report/al-qaeda-still-threatens-europe-how-the-us-can-and-should-help), last visited: 19 December 2016.

## 5. The Islamic State

Turkey has not directly supported the Islamic State, and is now engaged a direct military confrontation that has cleared the organisation from hundreds of square miles of territory, but she has pursued policies in the past that have strengthened IS in the present.

In mid-2014, shortly after IS overtly took over Mosul, Turkey's open-border policy was ended.<sup>89</sup> By that time, 12,000 foreign fighters had joined IS, al-Qaeda, and similar groups—not all of them through Turkey, but the overwhelming majority.<sup>90</sup> Important as this change of policy was, by then it was very difficult to close down the border because the smuggling networks—and IS's infrastructure inside Turkey—were already in place. There were also political reasons why Turkey did not want to shut down the border entirely.

If Turkey's border were sealed it would leave the mainstream Syrian opposition at the mercy of the regime and the Sunni jihadists. Moreover, a policy from Ankara that moved against IS could be met with a counter-attack from IS's networks of spies, operatives, and assassins inside Turkey, which would aggravate the already-heightened sectarianism in eastern Turkey and destabilise the AKP government.<sup>91</sup> IS had threatened, "If they close the borders we will cause civil and economic chaos," and it proved to be a believable threat with a mounting series of attacks in Turkey through 2015 and 2016.<sup>92</sup>

One accusation levelled at Turkey is that she facilitated IS's oil trade. In December 2015, the Russian government even accused the Turkish Prime Minister of being personally involved in the oil trade with IS,<sup>93</sup> and presented a map which Moscow claimed showed IS's trade routes into Turkey.<sup>94</sup> That these trade routes were all held by parties—Ahrar, the PKK, and the Kurdistan Regional Government—at war with IS, suggested it was unlikely.

There has, however, been some truth in the allegation of a (non-official) Turkish role in IS's oil trade. In October 2014, David Cohen, the U.S. undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, gave a speech in which he said:

According to our information, as of last month, ISIL was selling oil at substantially discounted prices to a variety of middlemen, including some from Turkey, who then transported the oil to be resold. It also appears that some of the oil emanating from territory where ISIL operates has been sold to Kurds in Iraq, and then resold into Turkey. And in a further indication of the Assad regime's depravity, it seems the Syrian government has made an arrangement to purchase oil from ISIL. ... We estimate that beginning in mid-June, ISIL has earned approximately \$1 million a day from oil sales.<sup>95</sup>

The evidence is that by late 2014 and early 2015, under the pressure of the U.S.-led Coalition airstrikes, IS's oil income was severely diminished. But IS's oil revenue appears to have crept back up later in 2015. Treasury sanctions at the end of September 2015 disclosed that Sami al-Jibouri, an Iraqi who had been IS's shari'a council chief and deputy in southern Mosul, was IS's supervisor of oil and gas,

<sup>89</sup> Trofimov, Y., 'Porous Syria-Turkey Border Poses Challenge in Fight Against Islamic State', *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 February 2015, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/porous-syria-turkey-border-poses-challenge-in-fight-against-islamic-state-1424334057>

<sup>90</sup> Barrett, R., 'Foreign Fighters in Syria', *The Soufan Group*, June 2014, p. 25, available at: <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Albayrak, A., 'In Southern Turkey, Renewed Fears of Sectarian Strife', *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 November 2013, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304391204579179664159130986>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>92</sup> Scott, A. and Christie-Miller, A., 'Exclusive: ISIS Starts Recruiting In Istanbul's Vulnerable Suburbs', *Newsweek*, 12 September 2014, available at: <http://europa.newsweek.com/exclusive-how-istanbul-became-recruiting-ground-islamic-state-269247>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Tsvetkova, M. and Kelly, L., 'Russia says it has proof Turkey involved in Islamic State oil trade', *Reuters*, 2 December 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-idUSKBN0TL19S20151202>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>94</sup> 'Russian military reveals details of ISIS-Turkey oil smuggling', *YouTube*, 2 December 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMA4B2ZuQ2o>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>95</sup> Cohen, D.S., 'Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence', *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 23 October 2014, available at: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2672.aspx>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

antiquities, and mineral resources operations beginning in April 2015.<sup>96</sup> At that time al-Jibouri had, in collaboration with Fathi al-Tunisi (Abu Sayyaf al-Iraqi), IS's "oil minister," "worked to establish a new funding stream for ISIL from *increased production* at oil fields held by the organisation" [italics added]. It might well be that IS's oil income is now decreasing again: U.S. military officials said at the beginning of December 2015 that over the previous thirty days, more than 40% of IS's income from oil had been "affected".<sup>97</sup>

This is only to say that IS's oil trade had taken place *in* Turkey. But there have been serious accusations of official Turkish complicity in the IS oil trade. Al-Tunisi was struck down by a U.S. Special Forces raid in May 2015, and some of the captured documentation was made public:

[Al-Tunisi] was almost unheard of outside the upper echelons of the terror group, but he was well known to Turkey. From mid-2013, the Tunisian fighter had been responsible for smuggling oil from Syria's eastern fields ... and Turkish buyers were its main clients. ... One senior western official familiar with the intelligence gathered at the slain leader's compound said that direct dealings between Turkish officials and ranking Isis members was now "undeniable". "There are hundreds of flash drives and documents that were seized there," the official told the *Observer*. "They are being analysed at the moment, but the links are already so clear that they could end up having profound policy implications for the relationship between us and Ankara".<sup>98</sup>

This conflicts with other evidence. By the end of 2014, the security measures taken inside Turkey to suppress IS's activities were severe. On the border, the Turks were unable to shut down everything—the smuggling routes are old, dating back at least to the efforts by Saddam Husayn to evade the sanctions—but Ankara "clamped down on key supply routes" to IS, adding troops, razor wire, floodlights, and drone surveillance to its border security, and "suffocated the illegal fuel trade". As one U.S. official put it, "We knew that there was illicit oil smuggling activity along the Turkish border, but Turkey was actively seeking to contain the smuggling".<sup>99</sup>

The current level of oil transactions between IS and actors in Turkey is believed<sup>100</sup> to be minimal and not operationally significant,<sup>101</sup> not least because IS's ability to refine fuel has been reduced by the airstrikes and there is little market for crude oil in Turkey.<sup>102</sup>

In the confusion as al-Nusra and IS split in 2013 and early 2014, it is likely that some of the financiers of the insurgency based in eastern Turkey—some acting for regional governments—ended up supplying resources to al-Nusra and IS.<sup>103</sup> The middle-men who have their own agendas and their manipulation by their intended recipients is a small-scale problem, however. More serious are the robust al-Qaeda networks running through Turkey, which feed al-Nusra/JFS in Syria, an organisation heavily-dependent on such external support.<sup>104</sup> IS has never needed significant outside funding—indeed specifically constructed itself model of war-making to be immune to such pressures<sup>105</sup>—and has never received it.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>96</sup> 'Treasury Sanctions Major Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant Leaders, Financial Figures, Facilitators, and Supporters', *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 29 September 2015, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0188.aspx>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>97</sup> 'About 43 percent of Islamic State's oil revenues affected by U.S.-led strikes - Dunford', *Reuters*, 1 December 2015, available at: [www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-usa-oil-idUKKBN0TK56520151201](http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-usa-oil-idUKKBN0TK56520151201), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>98</sup> Chulov, M., 'Turkey sends in jets as Syria's agony spills over every border', *The Guardian*, 26 July 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/26/isis-syria-turkey-us>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>99</sup> Nissenbaum, D., Peker, E., and Albayrak, A., 'Oil-Smuggling Allegations Dominate Turkey-Russia Rift', *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 December 2015, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-claims-against-turkey-on-islamic-state-oil-unfounded-officials-and-experts-say-1449255250>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>100</sup> Faulconbridge, G., and Saul, J., 'Islamic State oil is going to Assad, some to Turkey, U.S. official says', *Reuters*, 10 December 2015, available at: [www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-oil-idUKKBN0T2QP20151210](http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-oil-idUKKBN0T2QP20151210), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>101</sup> 'ISIS oil smuggling to Turkey insignificant: US official', *AFP*, 4 December 2015, available at: [www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Dec-04/325974-isis-oil-smuggling-to-turkey-insignificant-us-official.ashx](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Dec-04/325974-isis-oil-smuggling-to-turkey-insignificant-us-official.ashx), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>102</sup> Reed, M.W., 'Revealed: Assad Buys Oil From ISIS', *The Daily Beast*, 10 December 2015, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/10/isis-is-the-con-ed-of-syria.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>103</sup> Orton, K., 'Turkey Fears A Kurdish State More Than The Islamic State', *NOW Lebanon*, 28 July 2015, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/07/28/turkey-fears-a-kurdish-state-more-than-the-islamic-state/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>104</sup> Lister, C., 'Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra', *Brookings Institution*, 27 July 2016, pp. 31-2, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/profiling-jabhat-al-nusra/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>105</sup> Whiteside, C., 'New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016)', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 8 August 2016, available at: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/523/html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

Turkish intelligence has also aggressively picked apart IS's networks on Syrian territory in late 2015.<sup>107</sup> Inside Syria, Turkey has supported the rebellion's efforts in northern Aleppo to drive IS from some of its final border holdings in the Azaz-Jarabulus pocket, notably the town of al-Rai, and recently Turkey went even further in combatting IS.

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<sup>106</sup> Allam, H., 'Meticulous bookkeeping bolsters ISIL's march on Baghdad', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July 2014, available at: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/meticulous-bookkeeping-bolsters-isils-march-on-baghdad-20140704-zsvyf.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>107</sup> 'Biggest probe into ISIL in Turkey completed', *Hürriyet*, 18 December 2015, available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=92735&NewsCatID=509>, last visited: 19 December 2016.



## 6. After the Attempted Coup in Turkey

On 15 July 2016, a faction of the military attempted to bring off a violent coup d'état in Turkey and nearly succeeded.<sup>108</sup> The attempted coup included bombing the Parliament building, killed 250 people, and injured 2,000 more.<sup>109</sup> Before the coup, Turkey had repaired relations with Israel and to a degree with Russia,<sup>110</sup> and there was some speculation that in the aftermath Turkey would be consumed by internal turmoil and would now pull back from Syria.<sup>111</sup> This did not prove to be the case.

In the early hours of 24 August 2016, Turkey for the first time overtly put ground troops in Syria, with tanks and Special Forces rolling into the border town of Jarabulus to support a rebel offensive that expelled IS. Within ten hours the town was cleared and soon IS had been cut off from the Turkish border.<sup>112</sup> The direct trigger for the intervention was an IS suicide bombing in Gaziantep on 20 August. Turkey wanted to thwart not only IS but the PKK, which had been advancing across more of Turkey's border, in violation of an agreement reached with the international Coalition to keep out of areas Turkey regarded as especially sensitive.<sup>113</sup>

Turkey had informed Russia before this intervention, and Iran seems to have been informed as well, if only for “deconfliction” purposes.<sup>114</sup> The Assad government was informed ahead of time by Russia, too.<sup>115</sup> The U.S. was informed and asked to participate but slow-rolled the response, so Turkey acted alone, without directly informing the U.S. of the timing of the intervention.<sup>116</sup>

Turkey had proposed to set up a “safe zone” covering roughly the area she and allied forces now occupy in June 2015, but that idea was abandoned when Turkey was given assurances that the Coalition's support of the PYD/PKK—working through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) front group<sup>117</sup>—would not extend west of the Euphrates River and that the Coalition would support Turkish-allied rebels to hold that area once IS was gone. In December 2015, with the help of Russian airstrikes, the PYD crossed the Euphrates, and in May 2016 the PYD launched a U.S.-backed offensive in Minbij, west of the Euphrates. Unhappy with this, the Turks nonetheless sought a diplomatic settlement and negotiated with the U.S., which led to an agreement where the PYD promised it would return east of the River once Minbij was liberated, leaving the area to local forces. But after the fall of Minbij to the PYD in August this proved untrue and was among the major concerns that led Turkey to intervene. The PYD's maximalist intentions have now been checked,<sup>118</sup> and though there are short-term clashes between the Turks and their allies with the PYD, which have delayed the Raqqa offensive wherein the U.S.-led coalition is supporting the PYD/SDF, it is likely that this leads over the long-term to a more stable situation.

It is true that the U.S.-led Coalition has antagonised Turkey, first failing to seriously meet Ankara's security needs in Syria, namely ending the war early by applying serious pressure against Assad, and then making the PYD into the U.S.'s primary ground force in Syria after 2014, assisting it in displacing IS in a belt of territory all along Turkey's border.<sup>119</sup> The threats to Turkey's security from a PKK statelet

<sup>108</sup> Stein, A., ‘Inside A Failed Coup And Turkey's Fragmented Military’, *War on the Rocks*, 20 July 2016, available at: <http://warontherocks.com/2016/07/the-coup-operation-and-turkeys-fractured-military/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>109</sup> ‘Turkey coup attempt: Nearly 9,000 soldiers joined plot - army’, *BBC*, 27 July 2016, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36906724>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Weise, Z., ‘Turkey buries hatchet with Russia and Israel as Erdogan tries to break out of isolation’, *The Telegraph*, 28 June 2016, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/28/turkey-buries-hatchet-with-russia-and-israel-as-erdogan-tries-to/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>111</sup> Lund, A., ‘How Will the Failed Coup in Turkey Affect Syria?’, *Carnegie*, 28 July 2016, available at: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64206?lang=en>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Syria's war: ISIL “driven out” from Turkey-Syria border’, *Al-Jazeera*, 4 September 2016, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/syria-war-isil-driven-turkey-syria-border-160904164425932.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>113</sup> Entous, A. and Libold, G., ‘Turkish Offensive on Islamic State in Syria Caught U.S. Off Guard’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 August 2016, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-offensive-on-islamic-state-in-syria-caught-u-s-off-guard-1472517789>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Lund, A., ‘After Murky Diplomacy, Turkey Intervenes in Syria’, *Carnegie*, 24 August 2016, available at: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64398?lang=en>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Turkey Deputy PM says not in war, no plan to stay in Syria: NTV’, *Reuters*, 29 August 2016, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-dypm-idUSKCN114196>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>116</sup> Entous, A. and Libold, G., ‘Turkish Offensive on Islamic State in Syria Caught U.S. Off Guard’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 August 2016.

<sup>117</sup> Lund, A., ‘Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces: A Primer’, *Syria Deeply*, 22 January 2016, available at: <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/01/22/origins-of-the-syrian-democratic-forces-a-primer>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>118</sup> Stein, A. and Stephens, M., ‘The PYD's Dream of Unifying the Cantons Comes to an End’, *The Atlantic Council*, 25 August 2016, available at: [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriaource/the-pyd-s-dream-of-unifying-the-cantons-comes-to-an-end](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriaource/the-pyd-s-dream-of-unifying-the-cantons-comes-to-an-end), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Youssef, N.A., ‘U.S. Sidelines Its \$500M Syrian Rebel Army’, *The Daily Beast*, 11 August 2015, available at: [www.thedailybeast.com/us-sidelines-its-dollar500m-syrian-rebel-army](http://www.thedailybeast.com/us-sidelines-its-dollar500m-syrian-rebel-army), last visited: 19 December 2016.

on her border are real and would be felt by any government of any ideological character.<sup>120</sup> But it is also true that Turkey has more interaction with the PYD/PKK than its public posture would suggest, and, more importantly, Ankara has been on a long trajectory under the AKP of distancing from the Western Alliance.

The damage to Turkish-Israeli relations was the most visible sign of Turkey's drift from the West, with the Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010 as an important marker. But this was nearer to the culmination of a trend, not its beginning. As early as 2004, the U.S. had detected Erdogan's "hunger for absolute power," the "serious corruption" of his government, and his extremely isolated circle of trusted advisers, which left him susceptible to "Islamist theories" of world events that invariably skewed against the West in general and the United States in particular.<sup>121</sup> In early 2006, the AKP government invited HAMAS to Ankara and publicly attacked the United States for not restraining Israel after Hizballah started the war in Lebanon in the summer of that year—both moves undertaken by AKP officials around the executive without the knowledge of the Turkish foreign ministry.<sup>122</sup> The U.S.'s inability to get Turkey to shut her border to jihadists trying to get to Syria was a long-running complication in relations, as was Ankara's refusal to recognise the putschist government in Egypt and Turkey's eventually-reversed decision to purchase an air-defence system from a sanctioned company in China rather than a NATO partner.<sup>123</sup>

In the wake of the coup attempt in Turkey, the AKP government has moved further away from Western interests and values, purging 70,000 public sector officials—from the military, police, civil service, schools, and so on.<sup>124</sup> In addition to executing clearly pre-planned directives—these lists had not been drawn up overnight—that eroded a significant amount of the progress Turkey had made away from authoritarianism, the Coalition's anti-IS campaign was impacted. Most notably, General Bekir Ercan Van, the commander at Incirlik airbase, which is used by the Coalition to target IS, was removed with eleven other officers.<sup>125</sup> Further military personnel would be arrested or fired,<sup>126</sup> which U.S. officials judged has a deleterious impact on the anti-IS war.<sup>127</sup>

Still, as difficult a partner as Turkey has been under the AKP government, it retains a capacity to help meet Western interests. Turkey's intervention in northern Syria is congruent with Western interests. The intervention has, for example, helped drive a wedge between the rebellion and al-Qaeda that could be further exploited.<sup>128</sup> And recent statements from Erdogan suggested that Turkey would join with the U.S. to expel IS from its Syrian capital.<sup>129</sup> It is possible the statement was intended only to legitimise the intervention in north-east Aleppo, but, given the reluctance of Western powers to commit ground troops in Syria, the possibility of Turkish troops filling this role is worth pursuing, especially since Turkey and its rebel allies liberating Raqqa offers the path to the most durable defeat of IS.

<sup>120</sup> Orton, K., 'The West's Kurdish Allies in Syria Can't Escape Their Authoritarian Legacy', *The Syrian Intifada*, 13 August 2016, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2016/08/13/the-wests-kurdish-allies-in-syria-cant-escape-their-authoritarian-legacy/>, last visited: 19 December 2016; Orton, K., 'One Man's Terrorist ...', *The Syrian Intifada*, 30 August 2016, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2016/08/30/one-mans-terrorist/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>121</sup> 'Erdogan and AK Party After Two Years in Power: Trying To Get A Grip On Themselves, On Turkey, On Europe', *U.S. Embassy in Ankara*, 30 December 2004, available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ANKARA7211\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04ANKARA7211_a.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>122</sup> 'Turkey's Foreign Policy Split - The PM's Circle to the Fore', *U.S. Embassy in Ankara*, 11 August 2006, available at: [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06ANKARA4688\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06ANKARA4688_a.html), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>123</sup> DeGhett, T.R., 'Turkey Suddenly Remembers It's Part of NATO and Decides Not to Buy Chinese Weapons', *Vice*, 24 November 2015, available at: <https://news.vice.com/article/turkey-suddenly-remembers-its-part-of-nato-and-decides-not-to-buy-chinese-weapons>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>124</sup> Keller, J., Myklyahyshyn, I., and Timur, S., 'The Scale of Turkey's Purge Is Nearly Unprecedented', *The New York Times*, 2 August 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/02/world/europe/turkey-purge-erdogan-scale.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>125</sup> Barnes, J.E., 'Turkey Arrests Incirlik Air Base Commander', *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 July 2016, available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-arrests-incirlik-air-base-commander-1468760920>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>126</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/20/middleeast/turkey-military-failed-coup/>

<sup>127</sup> Lake, E., 'America's Friends Get Arrested in Turkey's Post-Coup Purges', *Bloomberg*, 26 July 2016, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-07-28/america-s-friends-get-arrested-in-turkey-s-post-coup-purges>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>128</sup> Haid, H., 'The Symbolic War of Fatwas among Rebels in Syria and Its Implications', *The Atlantic Council*, 14 October 2016, available at: [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-symbolic-war-of-fatwas-among-rebels-in-syria-and-its-implications](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-symbolic-war-of-fatwas-among-rebels-in-syria-and-its-implications), last visited: 19 December 2016; Hassan, H., 'The US focus on JFS ignores the real battleground', *The National*, 25 September 2016, available at: <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/the-us-focus-on-jfs-ignores-the-real-battleground-1.219075#full>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>129</sup> Barnard, A. and Yeginsu, C., 'Erdogan Says Turkey Would Join U.S. to Fight ISIS in Raqqa, an ISIS Bastion in Syria', *The New York Times*, 7 September 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/08/world/middleeast/erdogan-raqqa-syria-isis.html>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

## 7. Policy Recommendations

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Turkey's Islamist government has set the country on a path that has taken it away from its traditional role as a solid ally of NATO and the broader West. There are, however, things that the West could have done, and could do, differently to extract more constructive policies from Ankara.

**Work closely with Turkey to delineate the limits for the PKK in Syria and de-escalate tensions.** Whether working with the Syrian branch of an organisation NATO itself considers terrorist organisation and which regularly assaults the civilian population of a member state was wise is now irrelevant. Ankara itself has channels of communications with the PKK and has shown a willingness to accede to the Syrian PKK having a presence and de facto statelet in northern Syria, on the eastern side of the Euphrates River. Discontinuing the policy of uncritical support to the PKK, imposing on it effective penalties for violating agreements it makes limiting its reach, and co-ordinating between all sides to prevent misunderstanding can enable a workable compact in northern Syria that does not open up another front in the war, and divert resources from the anti-IS campaign.

**Take steps to push toward the removal of Bashar al-Assad.** The removal of Assad after the fall of Aleppo city is now militarily inconceivable absent a large-scale external intervention. The Russian intervention has done its work and the recent U.S.-Russia "cessation of hostilities" agreement confirmed that the political process has had its nature reversed: from an instrument to transition Assad out of power to one that constructed the terms under which he can stay. Simply reversing the perception that the West has done this deliberately and has sided with the pro-Assad coalition would be salutary. This highly damaging impression prevents Syrian opposition forces and Western-aligned states like Turkey prioritising the fight against IS or al-Qaeda, because they believe they are paving the way for regime gains, and thus direct threats to their own security. Reversing this impression could be done in a number of ways: rhetorically, making clear that the West's end-goal is Assad's ouster; politically, with sanctions and war-crimes charges; and militarily, either in limited direct ways or indirectly by equipping the tens of thousands of mainstream rebels who remain in the field to complicate the regime coalition's policy of mass-atrocities.<sup>130</sup>

The regime—even backed by Russian airstrikes and a near-endless supply of Iranian manpower—has been, and will continue to be, unable to suppress the uprising entirely. Strategically neutralising the rebellion does not end the war: while Assad remains, Syria will be condemned to perpetual instability as neither side has a motive to negotiate a final settlement, and these conditions—particularly the sense of Western abandonment while Jihadi-Salafists fought alongside the revolutionary forces—will provide continuing zones of operation for international terrorists, which the pro-regime forces are neither willing nor able to defeat. The pro-Assad coalition had already decided that IS-held areas beyond the symbolic Palmyra had no value to them and the IS problem would be left to the international coalition.<sup>131</sup> In December 2016, it was demonstrated that the regime did not even have the capacity to execute that policy. Simultaneous with the regime coalition conquering Aleppo, deporting and massacring its population,<sup>132</sup> it lost Palmyra to IS, despite a decision "to prevent the city falling at all costs".<sup>133</sup> A negotiated settlement that transfers executive authority from the hands of Assad and his inner-circle to an interim government that would have enough legitimacy to pacify the country is still the most advantageous course for Western interests. But it would require meaningful political and military pressure on the pro-Assad coalition.

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<sup>130</sup> Rowell, A., 'What Would the Fall of Aleppo Mean?', *NOW Lebanon*, 29 November 2016, available at: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/567526-what-would-the-fall-of-aleppo-mean>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>131</sup> McDowall, A., 'After Aleppo, Syria's Assad still far from regaining his state', *Reuters*, 11 December 2016, available at: [www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-assad-analysis-idUSKBN1400CC](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-assad-analysis-idUSKBN1400CC), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>132</sup> 'Aleppo battle: UN says civilians shot on the spot', *BBC*, 13 December 2016, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38301629](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38301629), last visited: 19 December 2016.

<sup>133</sup> Weiss, M., 'ISIS Retakes UNESCO Heritage Site Palmyra—So Where Is Putin's Army Now?', *The Daily Beast*, 11 December 2016, available at: [www.thedailybeast.com/isis-retakes-unesco-heritage-site-palmyra-so-where-is-putins-army-now](http://www.thedailybeast.com/isis-retakes-unesco-heritage-site-palmyra-so-where-is-putins-army-now), last visited: 19 December 2016.

**Have Turkey crackdown on al-Qaeda's operations on its territory.** The use of Turkey as a node in al-Qaeda's network on Europe's doorstep is extremely dangerous. There is no doubt al-Qaeda currently has the capacity to launch terrorist strikes against the West from the networks overlapping the Turkey-Syria theatre, but chooses not to for reasons of strategic caution.<sup>134</sup> Dismantling, or at least severely degrading those networks on the Turkish side of the border where they enjoy the most operational freedom and the least threat at the present time would remove a direct threat to the West and would help to weaken al-Qaeda inside Syria and its hold over the insurgency without triggering a collapse of the rebellion, as was risked by prior policies, such as U.S.-Russia direct airstrikes.<sup>135</sup> Reducing the Turkish support to Ahrar al-Sham,<sup>136</sup> and other Islamist groups that enable al-Qaeda in northern Syria, would assist this goal.

**Explore alternative basing locations.** It took a year to negotiate access to use Incirlik for strikes at IS, and in the wake of the coup it is not clear that this permission will not be revoked. For the practical reason of *having* an alternative and for the political reason of *appearing* to have an alternative, which is more likely to tame any reckless temptations of AKP government, it would behove the West to explore the feasibility of using alternate regional bases—Cyprus and Iraqi Kurdistan most obviously—for the anti-IS mission, and having contingency plans in place should access to Incirlik become impossible. This would cut down Turkish leverage and make clear that to have its interests met with regards to the PKK and Assad, it has to meet its obligations to the Coalition on al-Qaeda and IS.

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<sup>134</sup> Simcox, R., 'Al-Qaeda Still Threatens Europe: How the U.S. Can—and Should—Help', Heritage Foundation, 24 October 2016.

<sup>135</sup> Itani, F., 'What If A U.S.-Russian Deal In Syria Goes Exactly As Planned?', *War on The Rocks*, 27 July 2016, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/what-if-a-u-s-russian-deal-in-syria-goes-exactly-as-planned/>, last visited: 19 December 2016.

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