



# DEFEATING THE ISLAMIC STATE

## A Bottom-Up Approach

Ilan Goldenberg, Nicholas A. Heras, and Paul Scharre

A Report of the CNAS ISIS Study Group

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### Cover Photo

Members of the Iraqi military's Special Operations Force participate in an exercise at a base near Baghdad International Airport in June 2013. The Counterterrorism Force, a unit within the Iraqi Special Operations Force, is widely considered to be the most effective, and least sectarian, Iraq military unit and it has participated in several battles against the Islamic State, notably the successful battle to take Ramadi from ISIS in December 2015. (Saad Shalash/Reuters)

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## **About the Middle East Security Program**

The Middle East Security Program conducts cutting-edge research on the most pressing issues in this turbulent region. The program focuses on the sources of instability in the region, maintaining key U.S. strategic partnerships, and generating solutions that help policymakers respond to both fast-moving events and long-term trends. The Middle East Security Program draws on a team with deep government and non-government experience in regional studies, U.S. foreign policy, and international security. It analyzes trends and generates practical and implementable policy solutions that defend and advance U.S. interests.



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<b>3</b>	<b>Executive Summary</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Chapter 1: A New Approach</b>
<b>15</b>	<b>Chapter 2: Build Coherent Regional Opposition Groups from the Bottom up</b>
<b>24</b>	<b>Chapter 3: Expand U.S. Military Operations</b>
<b>30</b>	<b>Chapter 4: Increase Leverage with External Actors</b>
<b>35</b>	<b>Chapter 5: Reestablish Governance and Negotiate a Political End-State</b>
<b>41</b>	<b>Conclusion: Mitigate the Risks and Look Beyond Iraq and Syria</b>

## Members of the CNAS ISIS Study Group

For the past six months CNAS has convened regular meetings of its ISIS Study Group. The recommendations outlined in this report are informed by the deliberations of that group, and reflect the ideas that emerged from those discussions. The report represents the views of the three authors alone.

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## Executive Summary

**F**ifteen years after September 11, 2001, al Qaeda has taken significant losses, but the threat from Islamic extremism has morphed and metastasized in ways that remain dangerous to U.S. interests. The most recent iteration of this threat is the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and the emergence of its proto-state in the heart of the Middle East. The ambitions of the Islamic State pose a direct threat to the United States and its allies. Not only has ISIS created chaos and violence in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and other weak, unstable states, but it has also executed major attacks in Europe and the downing of a Russian airliner in Egypt, and inspired an attack in California. Given the scale of the threat, the United States and its partners must act now to intensify the fight against ISIS in multiple ways.

To address this challenge, for the past six months CNAS has convened regular meetings of its ISIS Study

Group, composed of former military officers, former government officials, and experts on counterterrorism and the Middle East. Below we offer an overall strategy and series of recommendations both for President Obama and to his successor who will inherit this problem. These recommendations are informed by the deliberations of the CNAS ISIS study group, and reflect the ideas that emerged from those discussions. But the report represents the views of the three authors alone.

### The Current Approach And Its Limitations

In September 2014, President Obama announced a plan to “degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS.” The administration’s approach, which to date has made gains in rolling back 40 percent of ISIS-held territory, has been based on arming and advising local forces and providing them with air support to retake territory, even as the United States continues to directly target ISIS leadership with Special Operations Forces and air power.<sup>1</sup>

### ISIS Territory and Territory Lost<sup>125</sup>



This map depicts the territory in Syria and Iraq that is currently held by ISIS and the territory that it has lost since August 2014 just prior to the start of the U.S.-led Coalition campaign. (CNAS)



The approach has not been as successful as it must be. It relies too heavily on ground forces that are predominantly Kurdish and Shia, and has not yet built sufficient Sunni forces to retake and, more importantly, hold ISIS territory. U.S. military support has also been limited in a number of unnecessary ways. A lack of embedded combat advisors supporting partners on the front lines, hesitation to deploy more troops, and inadequate delegation of authority have all slowed progress.

The much bigger flaw in the strategy is the policy toward the civil war in western Syria. The Obama administration has prioritized the ISIS fight in the east while seeking a political solution for the civil war in the west. But it was the Syrian Civil War that accelerated ISIS' emergence from the ashes of al Qaeda in Iraq in the first place. If the proto-state in eastern Syria and western Iraq is eliminated and extremist safe havens remain in western Syria, ISIS or like-minded groups will take advantage of the situation to hold territory and continue to present a threat. Moreover, many of the key external regional actors prioritize the outcome of the Syrian Civil War over the defeat of ISIS, and if Washington wants to get their cooperation in fighting ISIS — a necessary prerequisite for its defeat — the United States will need to put a higher priority on resolving the war. Finally, prioritizing a political agreement today in Syria, with little American leverage on the ground and conditions that are far from ripe for an agreement, is unlikely to end the conflict.

### An Alternative Approach

The overall objective of American strategy should be to significantly reduce and, over the long term, eliminate the ability of ISIS to execute and inspire attacks against the United States and its partners. This will require the United States and its partners to destroy the proto-state in Iraq and Syria, which is ISIS' center of gravity. As long as ISIS retains its safe haven it has a base from which to plan attacks against the United States and its allies, and will also be able to present itself as the vanguard of the global Sunni jihadist movement.<sup>2</sup> Equally important and much more difficult to accomplish will be preventing the proto-state's reemergence or the emergence of alternative extremist groups that can hold territory in Iraq and Syria.<sup>3</sup>

In ISIS-controlled territory, this strategy does not entail a fundamental shift in current U.S. strategy but instead some course corrections. Most importantly, it means a willingness to lean further forward in the types of military action the United States would take in this territory. It emphasizes above all the importance of

training local security forces to retake ISIS-held territory and entails a longer slow-burn strategy that may take a number of years but focuses on building the right hold force as opposed to retaking territory with forces that will ultimately be unacceptable to the local population. Importantly, the United States would not introduce U.S. conventional ground troops with the intent of directly engaging in U.S.-led ground combat operations to seize territory from ISIS, as such an approach would be unlikely to work without an adequate force to hold that territory in the aftermath.

**The overall objective of American strategy should be to significantly reduce and, over the long term, eliminate the ability of ISIS to execute and inspire attacks against the United States and its partners.**

In western Syria, a more radical shift is needed. Rather than focusing first on coming to a political agreement, the United States should emphasize arming and training local groups that are acceptable to the United States regardless of whether they are fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad or ISIS. The purpose of this effort is not just to defeat ISIS but to have these groups marginalize other extremist actors and to leave in place an acceptable sustainable long-term governance and security situation, which eliminates future terrorist safe havens and marginalizes al Qaeda's influence and presence. The United States should also be willing to increase its use of military coercion in the west and be willing to threaten and execute limited military strikes against the Assad regime in order to protect these actors while signaling to all of the key external actors in Syria, including both its Middle Eastern partners as well as Russia and Iran, that it is willing to get more engaged.

Over time, these dual approaches to displace ISIS in the east and ensure greater moderate control in the west can roll back extremist influence across Syria and Iraq and set the conditions for negotiated political outcomes in both countries. In Iraq, as a local Sunni force extends its influence and control and displaces ISIS, it can increase Sunni leverage in negotiations with Baghdad and over time help facilitate power-sharing arrangements in Iraq that reflect the new security situation on the ground. In Syria, as moderate forces increase their influence and control in the northwest and southwest,



eventually there can be a power-sharing agreement — acceptable to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, and the internal actors — in which the successor to the Alawi-led Assad regime remains in control of its territory, but local groups reflective of Syria’s ethnic and sectarian mix control and govern their territory.

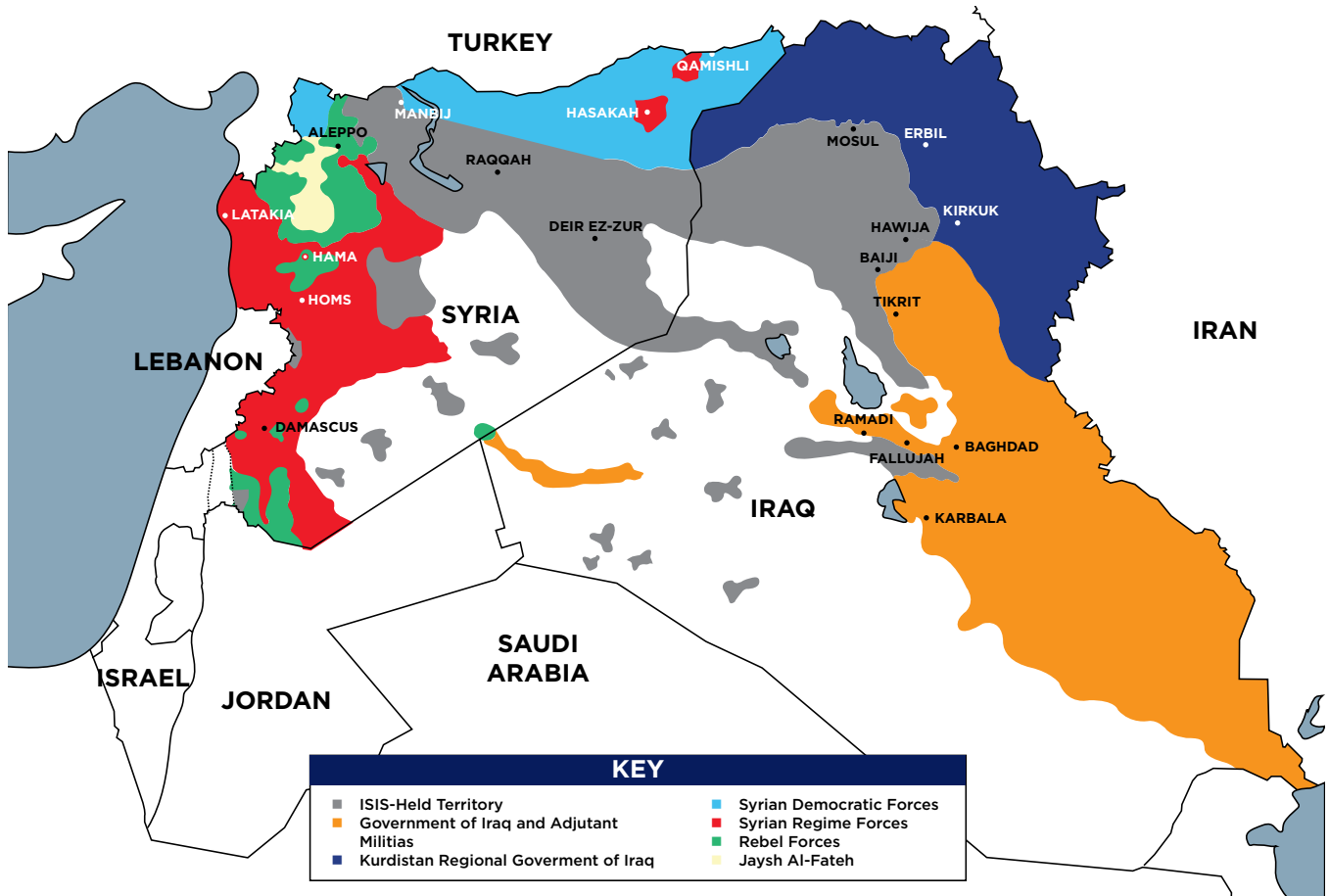
### Policy Recommendations

The approach described above requires four interlocking efforts:

1. Build coherent regional armed opposition groups from the bottom up that can hold territory, provide security, and marginalize extremists. To achieve this, the United States should:
  - » Increase U.S. support for the Southern Front in southwest Syria.
  - » Focus U.S. support efforts on Jaysh al-Nasr and the Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya coalition in north-western Syria, and use them to pursue a patient long-term approach for peeling away organizations from Jabhat al-Nusra and its close allies in the opposition.
  - » Use northeastern Syria as a beachhead from which the United States can train Sunni Arabs displaced from ISIS-controlled eastern Syria and reach into local tribes, while continuing to expand support for the New Syrian Army in southeast Syria.
  - » Prioritize training of Sunni forces in Iraq, ideally through the Iraqi central government, but if that continues to fail, then directly.
2. Increase direct U.S. military support to opposition groups and U.S. direct action counter-network operations against ISIS. Specifically, the United States should:
  - » Embed combat advisors at the battalion level in Iraq and, over time, eastern Syria to enable partner forces to fight ISIS more effectively.
  - » Expand direct action counter-network military operations to degrade ISIS’ ability to carry out external attacks.
3. Leverage increased U.S. investment on the ground into diplomatic influence with key external actors. To achieve this, the United States should:
  - » Establish more flexible authorities for military assistance and intervention, especially in eastern Syria.
  - » Eliminate artificial manpower limitations so that the military missions can be properly resourced.
  - » Use military coercion to deter airstrikes in southwest and northwest Syria to allow local acceptable opposition forces to govern and provide security, including using deterrence and punishment to establish a “no-bombing zone” in certain opposition held territories.
  - » Connect U.S. military actions to a messaging strategy of decisive U.S. intervention against ISIS and a more forceful approach against Assad in order to maximize the diplomatic impact of U.S. actions.
  - » Leverage greater U.S. commitment to addressing the conflict and more willingness to push back on Iran’s destabilizing activities to get Gulf Cooperation Council partners to coordinate their support to armed opposition groups.
  - » Obtain greater Turkish cooperation in arming non-extremist opposition groups and strengthening border control efforts, in exchange for increased U.S. effort in western Syria, putting limits on support for militant Kurdish expansionism and a greater willingness to use military threats and coercion to deter airstrikes near the Turkish border. Also continue to obtain Turkish acquiescence for a combined Kurdish-Arab offensive in the Manbij Pocket.
  - » Achieve an agreement with Russia, over the long term, on a Syrian power-sharing agreement that maintains a strong loyalist center and more moderate forces holding territory in non-loyalist areas.
  - » Convince Iran, over the long term, to accept a power-sharing agreement in Syria with a strong loyalist center, and an outcome in Iraq where the Shia central government retains control but meaningfully addresses Sunni grievances.

4. Reestablish legitimate and acceptable governance and negotiate a political end-state for the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. To achieve this, the United States should:
  - » Emphasize the importance of inclusive and responsible governance and incentivize U.S.-supported groups to adhere to political platforms consistent with those values, using the 2015 Riyadh Declaration as a key building block.
  - » Support and fund local municipal councils as the essential governance building block that complements U.S. strategy to arm local actors, and over time leverage these local councils to build out regional governance. Ensure this aid is closely coordinated with lethal aid and enabling these local councils to govern more effectively than extremist groups.
  - » Remain heavily engaged in Iraqi politics and continue to try to bring the various sectarian parties together; over the long term, leverage the creation of a Sunni hold force to increase the possibility of a power-sharing outcome between Baghdad and the Sunni minority.
  - » Over the long term, after reshaping the situation on the ground, facilitate a negotiated agreement that ends the Syrian civil war and leaves in place a unitary but highly decentralized Syrian state.
  - » Pursue a political end-state that maintains the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria as the preferable outcome, but be willing to accept a wide variety of decentralized governance structures that lead to a near breakup of these states, if that is the most realistic option to best meet core U.S. objectives of defeating ISIS and replacing it with a sustainable alternative.

**Areas of Control in Syria and Iraq<sup>126</sup>**



*This map depicts the different areas of control of the major armed actors participating in the civil wars in Syria and Iraq, as of early June 2016. (CNAS)*

## Risks

This approach comes with some real risks. Increased military involvement places more U.S. troops in harm's way, but the authors believe the risk is merited given the nature of the threat to American citizens and interests at home and abroad. Expanding support to opposition groups risks more weapons falling into the wrong hands in Syria, but at this point we believe the risk of not trying to enable more acceptable actors in Syria is higher than trying. Establishing a no-bombing zone would risk escalation with Russia, but this concern is manageable given that neither side wants to enter a direct conflict and the United States needs to exert some military pressure if it wishes to change Russian and regional calculus and empower more acceptable actors on the ground. While it may be impossible to ever forge a political agreement inside Syria and Iraq, even in that case the approach recommended would enable more responsible actors to seize and hold territory and eventually more ably manage the breakup of these states while reducing the establishment of extremist safe havens.

**Perhaps the greatest risk is that this is a strategy that will take years to execute. During that time the dangers posed by ISIS will remain.**

Perhaps the greatest risk is that this is a strategy that will take years to execute. During that time the dangers posed by ISIS will remain. Therefore, in addition to focusing on the ISIS proto-state in Iraq and Syria, the United States will also have to continue to vigilantly take steps to prevent new proto-states from forming in other parts of the world such as Libya, the Sinai, or Afghanistan. We will also have to work with our partners to counter ISIS' transnational foreign-fighter network through more effective localized counter-radicalization programs to prevent recruitment and foster better intelligence gathering and sharing to stop those who have been radicalized.

The threat posed by ISIS is deeply complex. Certainly, a number of the policies recommended may fail to achieve their desired objectives or have unexpected secondary effects. Still, the authors believe that the approach outlined in this report argues for an overall investment in American blood and treasure that is proportionate to U.S. interests and recommends a strategy that takes acceptable risk to destroy the ISIS caliphate and achieve important U.S. objectives.

# **CHAPTER 01**

## **A New Approach**

**G**iven the complexity of the situation in Syria and Iraq, the first challenge in developing an effective counter-ISIS strategy is to develop a coherent strategic framework. This chapter begins by briefly summarizing current policy and the challenges associated with it. It then describes key assessments and assumptions about the ISIS challenge, from which it derives an overall approach.

## The Current Approach and Its Limitations

Fifteen years after 9/11, al Qaeda has suffered significant losses, but the threat from Islamic extremism has morphed and metastasized in ways that remain dangerous to the United States. The rise of ISIS and the emergence of a proto-state in the heart of the Middle East represents a clear and present danger to America's population, partners, and interests. The large swath of territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq controlled by ISIS is a safe haven from which terrorists can launch and inspire external attacks.<sup>4</sup> The existence of a nascent Islamic caliphate allows ISIS to claim the mantle of leadership in global Islamic extremism and obviate new recruits to join the movement.<sup>5</sup>

**The civil war in western Syria that stretches from Dara'a to Aleppo has killed 300,000 to 500,000 people, displaced more than 11 million, including almost 5 million refugees outside of Syria, and has caused an estimated \$200 billion in damage to the country's infrastructure and economy.**

Meanwhile, the civil war in western Syria that stretches from Dara'a to Aleppo has killed 300,000 to 500,000 people, displaced more than 11 million, including almost 5 million refugees outside of Syria, and has caused an estimated \$200 billion in damage to the country's infrastructure and economy.<sup>6</sup> While ISIS is less of a central combatant in this conflict, the war in Syria has created the security and governance vacuums necessary for ISIS to take and hold territory.<sup>7</sup> The conflict has become a proxy war, with Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United States, and others all arming

and supporting different actors, and Russia launching a direct military intervention in September 2015.<sup>8</sup> The war has spawned one of the worst refugee crises in modern times and has inflicted tremendous pressure on Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and the European Union.<sup>9</sup> And it has created a breeding ground for numerous extremist groups in addition to ISIS.

### Rolling Back ISIS-Held Territory

In response to these challenges, President Obama in September 2014 announced a plan to “degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS.” The administration's approach to date has made gains in rolling back 40 percent of ISIS' territory, primarily in the Kurdish areas of northeastern Syria, and has started to take back territory in western Iraq — most notably in Ramadi, but also Sinjar and Hit.<sup>10</sup> The current approach has been based on arming and advising local forces and providing them with air support to retake territory, while U.S. Special Operations Forces and air power directly target ISIS leadership, oil convoys, financial stores, and other positions.<sup>11</sup>

The current approach, however, is limited in very significant ways. Most importantly, it relies heavily on ground forces that are predominantly Kurdish and Shia: Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga fighters, the People's Protection Units (YPG), which are strongly influenced by the ideology of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and primarily Shia Iraqi security forces.<sup>12</sup> These troops were highly effective in retaking Kurdish and Shia territory from ISIS, or territory that could be used as a launching pad to attack major Kurdish and Shia areas.<sup>13</sup> However, they are likely to be much less motivated to drive deep into the Sunni heartland that is the core of ISIS territory and includes the cities of Raqqa, Deir al-Zour, and Mosul. Moreover, the local population is unlikely to accept these forces, fearing revenge killings or ethnic cleansing.<sup>14</sup> And even if these forces retook Sunni territory, if there was no effective local Sunni security force to hold it afterwards, the likely result would be the alienation of the local Sunni population and the reemergence of ISIS or another extremist alternative.<sup>15</sup>

In Iraq, the current strategy has been based primarily on working through the Iraqi central government to train forces to retake territory, including the possibility of a Sunni National Guard force to provide local security in retaken ISIS territory. However, intra-Shia competition, combined with entrenched sectarianism in the Iraqi political system, is leading the Iraqi government to essentially sabotage any efforts to build a Sunni force.<sup>16</sup> It is unclear whether the Baghdad government will ever be willing to support such a policy, and the Iraqi

government is actively trying to limit the size of the U.S. force in the campaign against ISIS.<sup>17</sup>

Since the start of the anti-ISIS campaign in September 2014, U.S. military support has been highly constrained and has only slowly ramped up, leading to a perception of “creeping incrementalism” in the U.S. effort.<sup>18</sup> The lack of U.S. combat advisors embedded among front-line partner units, for instance, has resulted in the fight proceeding slower than necessary.<sup>19</sup> Further, a lack of delegated authorities for military operations in eastern Syria, and caps on the total number of personnel in Iraq and Syria, limit the effectiveness of U.S. military operations against ISIS.<sup>20</sup>

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### Responding to the Syrian Civil War

Secretary Kerry has led an international diplomatic effort that in February 2016 resulted in a Cessation of Hostilities that has significantly reduced civilian casualties in parts of the country. However fighting continues unabated in other regions, including in some of the most strategically important areas such as Aleppo and Damascus.<sup>21</sup> The United States has supported and armed some anti-Assad groups in western Syria — most notably the Southern Front, which controls swaths of territory near the Syrian-Jordanian and Syrian-Israeli border areas — and selected smaller groups throughout northwest Syria.<sup>22</sup> But the overall primary focus of the U.S. effort has been much more heavily focused on ISIS-held territory.

This approach has a number of problems. Deprioritizing the Syrian Civil War and focusing primarily on the ISIS proto-state ignores the reality that Syria’s conflict creates the conditions under which ISIS will endure. If the proto-state in eastern Syria and western Iraq is eliminated but security vacuums and extremist safe havens remain, ISIS or like-minded groups such as al Qaeda will take advantage of the situation to hold territory and continue to present a threat.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, many of the key external actors — including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Russia — prioritize the

outcome of the Syrian Civil War over the defeat of ISIS or view the challenges equally important. If Washington seeks their cooperation in fighting ISIS — a necessary prerequisite for its defeat — it will need to seek an end to the civil war.

Another drawback of the current American policy in Syria is that it does not match conditions on the ground, which are not ripe for the settlement the U.S. approach envisions. The Assad regime and its supporters are negotiating from a position of strength and believe that a continuation of the conflict will only further enhance their leverage. Meanwhile, the opposition and some of its external supporters remain firmly opposed to any agreement that leaves Assad in power.

Finally, extremist groups — most notably the al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra and its close ally Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya — have been comparatively the more effective fighting and governing forces in northwest Syria and are actively establishing a safe haven for global jihadist fighters.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, feeling besieged and with few options, more moderate elements of the opposition have turned to alliances with these extremist forces to fight Assad.<sup>25</sup>

### Key Assessments

*ISIS’ proto-state is its center of gravity.* As long as ISIS retains its safe haven it will enjoy a base from which to plan attacks against the United States and its allies and present itself as the vanguard of the global Sunni Jihadist movement. Holding territory is essential to ISIS’ capacity to attack the United States and its partners. The recent attacks in Paris and Brussels were executed by ISIS members who received training and indoctrination in Syria and began planning the attacks there before returning to Europe.<sup>26</sup> The legitimacy and recruitment capacity of ISIS depends on its ability to claim the existence of a territorial caliphate. ISIS uses the claim and appearance of a caliphate as central in its messaging to the global jihadist movement.<sup>27</sup> ISIS makes the case that it is an epoch-making correction movement within Islam that is destined to reinstate a true Islamic government of Muhammad, his contemporary supporters, and his immediate heirs.<sup>28</sup> As long as ISIS continues to hold territory and govern as a state, this message holds appeal to potential recruits. The proto-state also provides ISIS with resources including taxes and oil revenues.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, any approach for defeating ISIS must eliminate its hold on territory.

*ISIS’ proto-state will survive as long as Iraq and Syria are embroiled in civil wars and sectarian political conflict.*



The rise of ISIS is the most dangerous symptom of instability in the Middle East. But the real source of the virus infecting the region is the governance and security vacuums brought on by state collapse and civil war. The civil war in Syria gave an opportunity for a deeply wounded al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to find new strength and a new cause and eventually reignited conflict in an Iraq governed by a Shia chauvinist government.<sup>30</sup> As long as the civil wars in Syria and Iraq continue ISIS or another extremist alternative will be able to establish safe havens, attract foreign fighters, and continue to threaten the United States and its partners.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, any U.S. strategy must seek to end these wars.

*The conflicts in Iraq and Syria have different dynamics in different regions of both countries and therefore can only be addressed through a strategy that takes these varying dynamics into account.* A successful strategy must simultaneously address the two separate theaters of conflict that have emerged in Iraq and Syria: (1) ISIS-held eastern Syria and western Iraq; and (2) the Syrian Civil War in the western part of Syria between Dara'a and Aleppo. It must also look at Syria and western Iraq as a number of different regions including: (1) ISIS-held western Iraq; (2) ISIS-held eastern Syria; (3) Kurdish-majority northeastern Syria; (4) northwest Syria; (5) An Alawi-led statelet in Damascus and central Syria; and (6) southwest Syria. Each of these areas will require a separate approach for developing local security and governance structures that are acceptable to the local population and therefore sustainable.

*The conflict in ISIS-held western Iraq and eastern Syria will continue until some combination of local security forces and militias with a sectarian make-up that is acceptable to the population can clear, hold, and govern that territory.* The United States has already learned this lesson after successfully marginalizing AQI in 2007 and 2008 only to see it reemerge as ISIS because of the Shia-led Iraqi central government's failure to address the grievances of the local Sunni population.<sup>32</sup> If the majority of ISIS territory is retaken by sectarian Shi'a militias, the Alawi-dominated Assad regime, and Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish forces, there is a major risk of ISIS' reemergence either in its current form or as a successor organization. In the long term what is necessary is comprehensive political settlements among the major sectarian and ethnic groups in Iraq and Syria. But since that is unlikely in the near term, what will first be necessary is to retake ISIS territory with Sunni actors who do not present a threat to the international community and are acceptable to the local population.



*ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announces the formation of the Caliphate in Mosul, Iraq, in July 2014. ISIS uses its claim of being the Caliphate as a major recruiting tool for global jihadists by positioning itself as the epoch-making movement in Islamic history. (Wilayah Ninewah/Twitter).*

*Neither the Assad regime nor the opposition can completely and indefinitely control all of western Syria and no external power will invest the resources to bring about total victory by one side.* With the support of the Russian intervention, the Assad regime has solidified its hold on its territorial statelet in western Syria, particularly in Latakia, Tartus, Homs, and around Damascus, and has begun expanding this territorial base east to Palmyra.<sup>33</sup> But after five years of fighting it does not have the manpower or military capacity to recapture all of Syria.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, opposition forces have also been unable to make significant gains in territory that is not demographically Sunni Muslim. There are also limits to Russia's willingness to assist the regime in recapturing all of the territory that has fallen under rebel rule throughout the country, as indicated by its announcement that it is beginning to drawdown some of its forces. In spite of major Russian-backed military operations around the city of Aleppo — Syria's largest city — and a possible offensive in eastern Syria against ISIS' putative capital of Raqqa, there are limits to Russia's capacity to intervene in a manner that will win back all of Syria's territory for the regime.<sup>35</sup> And there is no political support or interest in the United States to launch a major land operation to put all of Syria under one authority. Therefore, any long-term solution for the civil war in western Syria will not involve total victory by one side, but instead a political arrangement where much of the responsibility for security is devolved to local actors — at the expense of the power of the Syrian central government.<sup>36</sup>



*Neither the opposition nor the Assad regime is likely at a point yet where either is open to a political solution.* The agreement on a Cessation of Hostilities brokered by the United States and Russia had dramatically reduced civilian casualties and been surprisingly durable.<sup>37</sup> While nominally in effect, it remains fragile, however, and there are few indicators that either the regime or the opposition is ready to permanently put down their weapons and agree on a political transition process, given how deeply they disagree on the role of Bashar al-Assad in such a process. Indeed, in a number of important areas, including in and around Aleppo and the suburbs of Damascus, the ceasefire is failing. Therefore, the U.S. strategy must alter the balance of power on the ground in order to change the parties' calculus and bring them to a point where they can come to a negotiated agreement.

**Any long-term solution for the civil war in western Syria will not involve total victory by one side, but instead a political arrangement where much of the responsibility for security is devolved to local actors — at the expense of the power of the Syrian central government.**

*Other extremist groups will seek to fill territory vacated by ISIS.* It is not enough to simply eliminate the ISIS proto-state — Washington must also ensure that at the end of the conflict in Syria and Iraq, other extremist organizations do not hold territory from which they could threaten the United States. In this regard, the most likely threat is Jabhat al-Nusra — al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate — and its allies within the Syrian armed opposition. Jabhat al-Nusra has established a safe haven in Syria's Idlib province in cooperation with ideological extremist allies in the Syrian armed opposition, most prominently Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, and other groups, most recently through the Jaysh al-Fateh coalition.<sup>38</sup> By aiding and abetting the rise of al Qaeda's proto-state in northwest Syria and providing community cover for global jihadist fighter networks, organizations such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya are as much a threat as al Qaeda. There must be a comprehensive strategy that eliminates the ability of any extremist group in Syria and Iraq from gaining a safe haven from which to plot and

execute terrorist attacks against the United States and its partners.

*No durable resolution to the conflicts in Syria in Iraq is possible without agreement among the external actors who are a source of much of the conflict.* Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey continue to provide support to Sunni extremist groups inside Syria, and Turkey, in spite of recent improvements, has failed to effectively control its border, fueling ISIS and other groups inside Iraq. Russia's intervention has stabilized the Assad regime but has also undercut many moderate rebel groups inside Syria who could potentially control territory and provide security for acceptable governance structures. Iran's insertion of Shia militia groups and continued support of the Syrian government is increasing the level of violence inside Syria, and its sectarian agenda in Iraq has also fueled further conflict and alienated Iraqi Sunnis who are necessary to fight ISIS.

## A New Approach

Given the situation described above the overall objective of American strategy should be to significantly reduce, and over the long term eliminate, ISIS' ability to execute and inspire attacks against the United States and its partners. This requires the United States and its partners to destroy the proto-state in Iraq and Syria. Equally important but much more difficult to accomplish will be preventing the proto-state's reemergence or the emergence of alternative extremist groups that can hold territory in Iraq and Syria. This can only be done by strengthening local security and governance and ending the conflict in a manner that addresses the grievances of the Sunni populations of Iraq and Syria. This approach requires four central lines of effort through which the United States must:

1. Build coherent regional opposition groups from the bottom up.
2. Increase direct U.S. military support to opposition groups and U.S. direct action counter-network operations against ISIS.
3. Leverage increased U.S. investment on the ground into diplomatic influence with key external actors.
4. Pursue a political settlement acceptable to all reconcilable groups while marginalizing irreconcilables.

In ISIS-controlled territory, this strategy does not entail a fundamental shift in current U.S. strategy but requires instead some major course corrections. Most importantly, it means a willingness to lean further forward in the types of military action the United States would take in this territory. This strategy also emphasizes above all the importance of training local security forces to retake ISIS-held territory. This requires patience and a strategy that may take a number of years but focuses on building the right hold force as opposed to retaking territory with forces that will ultimately be unacceptable to the local population. It means recognizing the limits of Syrian Kurdish fighters and providing more support for Arab fighters who can reconquer eastern Syria. It also means that while it is important to try to work through the Shia-controlled Iraqi central government, if this becomes too much of a limitation in building an Iraqi Sunni force, the United States should be willing to consider circumventing Baghdad or at least increasing pressure on it to induce a change in behavior.

In western Syria, a more fundamental shift is needed. Rather than focusing first on coming to a political agreement, the United States should help build security and governance structures from the bottom up. It should emphasize arming and training local groups that are acceptable to the United States regardless of whether they are fighting Assad or ISIS. The purpose of this effort is not just to defeat ISIS but to have these groups marginalize other extremist actors and to create an acceptable, sustainable, long-term governance and security situation, which eliminates future terrorist safe havens and marginalizes al Qaeda's influence and presence. This approach should also include a greater willingness by the United States to use coercive military threats and, if necessary, limited military actions to deter the Assad regime and Russia from attacking these groups from the air, thus creating greater space for them to thrive and govern. The greater commitment to shaping this effort on the ground should be compelling to U.S. partners who have prioritized Assad's fall over the threat from ISIS — most



*Mourners at the memorial site for the victims of the November 13, 2015, ISIS attacks in Paris, which killed 130 people. The objective of American strategy should be to significantly reduce, and over the long term, eliminate ISIS' ability to execute and inspire attacks against the United States and its partners. (Mstyslav Chernov/Wikimedia)*

notably Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The next president should leverage that appeal and the initial goodwill that a new administration often enjoys to launch an early diplomatic effort to convince Saudi Arabia and Turkey to more closely coordinate their arming efforts in western Syria with the United States and also contribute more to the ISIS fight.

Over time, these dual approaches to displace ISIS in the East and ensure greater moderate control in the West should roll back extremist influence across Syria and Iraq and set the conditions for negotiated political outcomes in both countries. In Iraq, stronger local Sunni forces that displace ISIS can increase Sunni leverage in negotiations with Baghdad. Over time this Sunni force can help facilitate power-sharing arrangements in Iraq that are reflective of this new security situation on the ground. In Syria, as moderate forces increase their influence and control in the northwest and southwest, over time they can work toward a power-sharing agreement in which Assad's Alawi-led successor government remains in control of territory in central-western Syria, which the regime has held throughout the war, while local groups — reflective of the region's ethnic and sectarian mix — control and govern their territory in the northwest and southwest. This could be acceptable to Russia, who would still maintain an ally in the Alawi-led successor

government in western Syria, thus giving the Russians a military foothold and naval base in the region. At the same time, this would reduce extremist threats to Russia from other parts of Syria. It may be acceptable to Iran, which would maintain its relationship with the Alawi-led successor territory, leaving open its lines of communication into Lebanon.

Finally, it is also important to note that the most difficult question in this approach is whether it is even possible to forge political agreements that keep Iraq and Syria whole. The various parties may be too far apart; in that case it will be impossible to preserve Iraq and Syria's territorial integrity. The preferred outcome is for Iraq and Syria to remain whole, as the breakup of states is often a violent experience with unpredictable implications, especially for other regional actors — most notably Turkey, which strongly objects to an independent, Kurdish-dominated state. Even if Iraq and Syria do break up, the strategy described in this paper still holds. The primary objective must be to close the security and governance vacuums that have led to an ISIS proto-state, an al Qaeda safe haven, mass civilian casualties, and destabilizing refugee flows. Empowering local forces that are acceptable to the population is the fundamental building block to doing so.

## **CHAPTER 02**

### **Build Coherent Regional Opposition Groups from the Bottom Up**



**W**ithout a credible ground force acceptable to the local population it will be impossible to displace not only ISIS but also Jabhat al-Nusra and other extremist groups that may threaten U.S. interests. A unified Arab force comprising the armies of multiple Middle Eastern states is probably not the answer. It is unlikely the states are willing or capable of performing such a function; they have a number of problems working together and are absorbed in other conflicts, such as Yemen.<sup>39</sup> The Kurds have been effective partners in Iraq and Syria, but they will not be willing to retake and hold large swaths of Sunni territory and will not be accepted by the local population. Using the Assad regime or Iraqi Shia militias is also unlikely to work and could lead to sectarian and ethnic cleansing and a highly negative reaction from the local population, who would be unwilling to accept these forces.<sup>40</sup>

**The most viable option is to pursue a bottom-up strategy for building cohesive, acceptable regional armed coalitions of multiple local groups that can be tailored for individual regions in Iraq and Syria.**

Thus, the most viable option is to pursue a bottom-up strategy for building cohesive, acceptable regional armed coalitions of multiple local groups that can be tailored for individual regions in Iraq and Syria. This approach would have to be applied differently in southwestern Syria, northwestern Syria, eastern and northeastern Syria, and western Iraq. The United States should focus on providing incentives for groups it has already vetted to join together into larger regional coalitions with genuinely unified command. Over time, as these groups become the center of gravity in their respective regions and marginalize or defeat ideological extremist organizations, they can be brought together to form larger civil-military structures through local councils and govern the predominantly Sunni rebel-ruled areas. As the security and political environment allows, and as the groups acquire leverage, these regional structures can negotiate a long-term political solution with the remnants of the Assad regime, the Iraqi central government, and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Ideally, such solutions would formally devolve governing power

to the local level while maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria.

One of the keys to this strategy is that it adheres to the pattern of mobilization and organization followed by the armed opposition rather than trying to graft an artificial structure external to the conflict over numerous local dynamics and power centers.<sup>41</sup> Most frequently, armed opposition groups are organized at the local level in their areas of origin and typically conduct operations near there. While building from the bottom up may seem complex and difficult to execute, there are examples from Syria and Iraq in which this has worked. The Southern Front — an ideologically moderate force consisting of 40 to 50 local groups in southern Syria and supported by the United States and Jordan — is one of the most striking success stories.<sup>42</sup> Formed in February 2014, this loose confederation of locally organized groups has been able to seize and hold significant portions of territory around the Dara'a, al-Quneitra, and Rif Damascus governorates. The Southern Front can be thought of as having multiple layers. Groups initially arose around leaders recruiting from the local population. These smaller groups then formed broader alliances with those of surrounding areas, eventually evolving into a broader coherent regional organization. The group includes roughly 30,000 fighters and receives support and direction from the United States and Jordan, and all of the constituent groups of the organization have committed to a covenant that supports a democratic and inclusive Syria. But without a loose, bottom-up approach that starts with trusted local leaders, this model would not work.

Another example is in northeastern Syria, where the United States has supported the development of the multi-ethnic, but primarily Kurdish-dominated, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition composed of local Kurdish, Arab, and other ethnic and sectarian militias to eject ISIS from Syrian-Turkish border areas and to hold territory that is being used to stage campaigns against ISIS' core areas of control in eastern Syria. The force began by building on top of the YPG — a PKK-aligned Kurdish military force that had existed for years and was the backbone of the initial fighting force. As with the Southern Front, the key was to take advantage of the already existing local forces instead of building an external one not consistent with how fighting and organizing on the ground was proceeding.

While nascent, the New Syrian Army — a U.S.-backed anti-ISIS organization composed of Free Syrian Army affiliates displaced by ISIS from Syrian-Iraqi border areas around the eastern city of Deir al-Zor — is strengthening into a vanguard force that can encourage and support

local uprisings against ISIS' rule in its core territory in eastern Syria. This is an adaptation of a successful model used in Iraq during the 2006–08 Anbar Awakening, in which the United States engaged with area Sunni tribes to help them build a force capable of displacing al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and holding their territory. Indeed, the Anbar Awakening may be the single best example of how working with local forces can secure Iraq and Syria in the long term. After years of failing to suppress the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, the ability to build a local Sunni force from the bottom up was one of the essential ingredients to reshaping the situation on the ground, which led to a dramatic drop in violence. The key to replicating this effort is that most of the fighters come from areas that are now ISIS-controlled and that they will be responsible for liberating. Moreover, training is conducted nearby on the Jordanian side of the border, thus keeping these fighters very close to the battlefield.

### **The Anbar Awakening may be the single best example of how working with local forces can secure Iraq and Syria in the long term.**

These efforts stand in contrast to more centralized approaches to build national forces, such as that by the United States in supporting the Supreme Military Council (SMC) of the Free Syrian Army at the start of the civil war or the Pentagon's much maligned train-and-equip program in 2014–15. In both those instances, opposition military structures and leadership removed from the battlefield did not reflect realities on the ground, leading to failure.<sup>43</sup> In the SMC, the United States tried to place an artificial command-and-control structure outside of Syria that did not reflect or represent those fighting on the ground — a strong contrast to the Southern Front model. And in the case of the 2014–15 train-and-equip program, forces were trained strictly to fight ISIS despite the fact that most were living in areas where the conflict was primarily with Assad. They were also removed far from the battlefield for training, further disconnecting them from the local dynamic.

Another key lesson from previous U.S. security force assistance efforts has been to demonstrate a degree of patience with the organizations the United States supports. These forces will on occasion suffer setbacks on the battlefield, but that should not lead to the withdrawal of U.S. support. Moreover, some groups may occasionally work together or deconflict with extremist



*Members of the New Syrian Army participate in training to acquire the skills necessary to call in coalition airstrikes for close air support against ISIS. The New Syrian Army is mobilized from vetted eastern Syrian armed opposition fighters with a long record of combating ISIS. (New Syrian Army/YouTube)*

groups unacceptable to the United States. But if the response in such a situation is to immediately cut off all support, it may only lead to greater empowerment of extremists. There are numerous examples, especially in northwest Syria, where too quickly withdrawing support without trying to remedy the situation only led to a loss of U.S. influence and greater inroads for extremists. Prominent examples in northwest Syria were Harakat Hazm, the first moderate armed opposition coalition to receive BGM-71 TOW anti-tank missiles, and Division 30, the first moderate armed opposition group incorporated under the Pentagon's Syria Train and Equip Program.<sup>44</sup>

Admittedly, this approach comes with real risks. Extremists may be too entrenched, especially in northwest Syria, to build a credible and effective alternative. Trying to detach more moderate groups from the extremists will also take time, which requires political space and patience often lacking in Washington and with the American public. There also inevitably will be groups that fail on the battlefield and instances where organizations the United States initially supported become problematic or unacceptable. And there is the danger of catastrophic success, where the groups put too much pressure on the Assad regime and cause it to collapse, though Russian support to the regime should be able to prevent that scenario. But this bottom-up approach is still the only one that has shown any track record of success inside Syria and Iraq.

Below we outline how to pursue this approach in four major regions in Iraq and Syria where ISIS holds territory or there is intensive security and governance competition involving extremist groups.

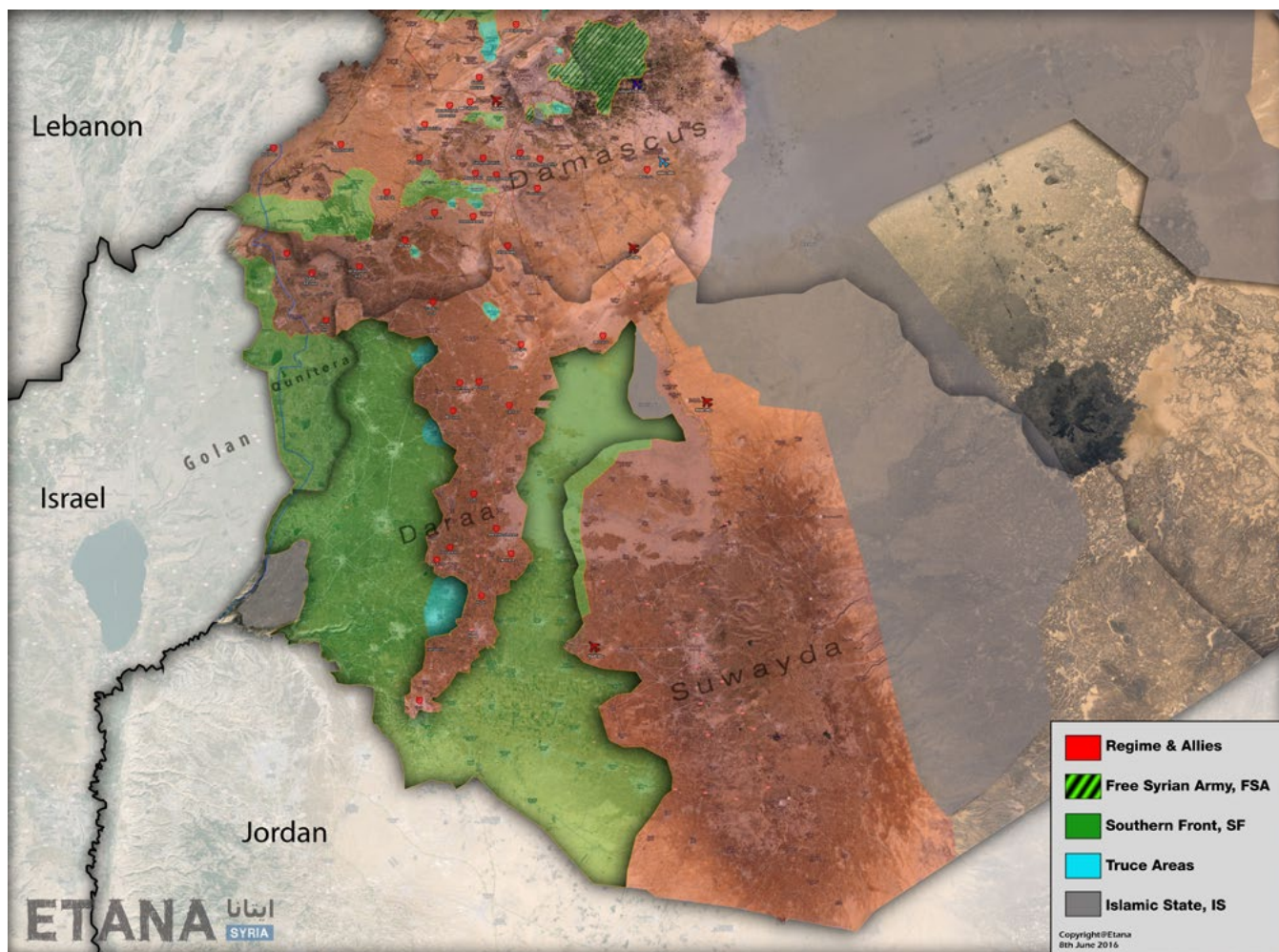
## Southwest Syria

The United States should continue, and deepen, its support for the Southern Front in southwest Syria, which is already an effective acceptable regional force. Due to U.S. and Jordanian efforts, the Southern Front is a working, although by no means perfect, alliance of more than 40 relatively politically moderate armed opposition forces that operate from the Damascus suburbs to the Syrian-Jordanian border.<sup>45</sup> Since its formation in February 2014, the Southern Front has consciously sought to link its military actions on the ground with an inclusive political platform that is acceptable to U.S. policy while simultaneously developing into an effective force against radical Sunni extremists in that part of the country.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, it is now the most powerful opposition force in southern Syria. Because of its effectiveness, it

has also been able to unify many smaller armed opposition groups into a more cohesive fighting and political force.<sup>47</sup> The Southern Front is now putting significant energy into increasing its presence near Damascus to apply pressure on the Assad regime and to strengthen its collective deterrence against radical Sunni groups, including ISIS and al Qaeda, in southern Syria.<sup>48</sup>

The Southern Front is far from a perfect partner. It continues to maintain relations with ideological extremist actors such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya. Those relations generally exist to prevent internecine rebel conflict, as many Southern Front affiliates and local fighters from the ideological extremist groups belong to the same tribe, clan, and extended family.<sup>49</sup> The Southern Front has also suffered significant setbacks since the Russian intervention in the summer of 2015, and Assad regime/Russian air

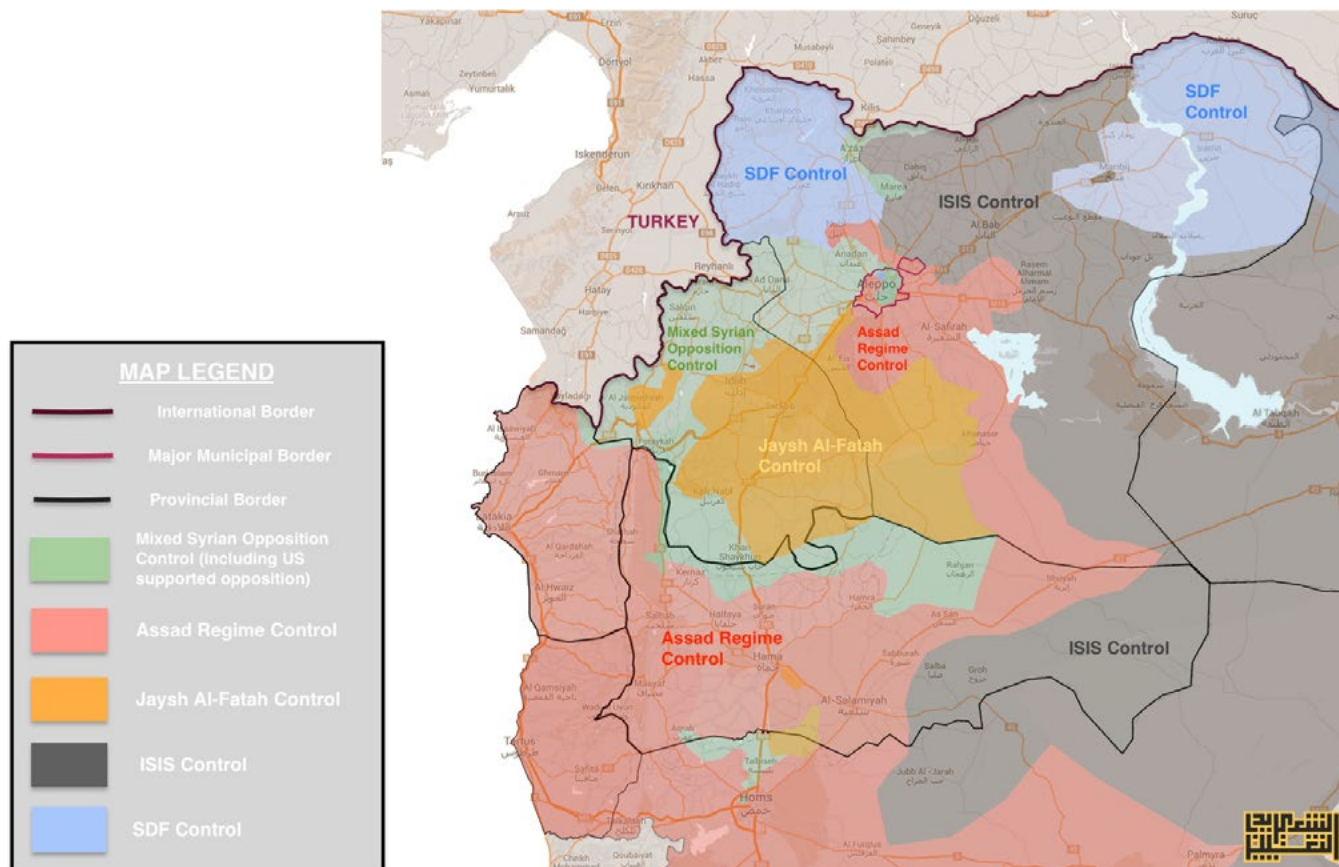
### Areas of Control in Southwestern Syria



This map, based on reporting from ETANA's network of Syrians inside the region – including from the Southern Front – depicts the areas of control in southwestern Syria, including Dara'a, Suweida, al-Qunaytra, and RIF Damascus governorates. (ETANA)



## Areas of Control in Northwestern Syria



This map depicts the areas of control in northwestern Syria, including Lattakia and Idlib governorates, and areas of Aleppo, Hama, and Homs governorates. It is based on reporting from People Demand Change's network on the ground throughout this area of Syria. (People Demand Change and CNAS)

superiority has led to setbacks on the battlefield. Assad's continued campaign of targeting civilians through barrel bombing and artillery has made it very difficult for the Southern Front to develop effective governance structures, preventing the force from consolidating control and beginning to replace the Assad regime as the new local authority in this region.<sup>50</sup> Since the announcement of the Cessation of Hostilities, though, the south has generally remained quiet, giving the Southern Front a respite from the fighting. Despite the various challenges it faces, the Southern Front remains the most powerful and moderate opposition force in southern Syria — and far preferable to many of the other potential alternatives.

### Northwest Syria

In northwest Syria the United States should support efforts by Jaysh al-Nasr and the Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya coalition, and use them to pursue a patient long-term

approach for peeling away organizations from Jabhat al-Nusra. Northwest Syria presents a more complex challenge, where extremist opposition groups including Jabhat al-Nusra and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya dominate the battlefield. This region has some potentially foundational moderate armed opposition coalitions, but they are newer, smaller, and comparatively weaker than the Southern Front, and military pressure from the Assad regime and its allies is forcing them into deeper cooperation with ideological extremist organizations.<sup>51</sup> In spite of these difficulties, there are nascent moderate armed opposition regional coalitions the United States can work with to take and hold territory, displace extremists, and over time improve local governance. One such promising coalition is Jaysh al-Nasr, which has gone through two iterations since its initial formation in August 2015. The nascent Al-Farqa al-Shamaliyya coalition also has the potential to become



*The Syrian Democratic Forces coalition, here shown announcing its formation in October 2015, has been the primary vehicle for the ground component of the Coalition counter-ISIS campaign in Syria. (Syrian Democratic Forces/YouTube)*

a strong moderate armed opposition institution in northern Syria.<sup>52</sup>

But any effort in this area will take much longer and be much more difficult than in the south. In many cases these moderate groups have been backed into a corner by the Assad regime and turned to more capable extremist organizations for help. Peeling them off from their reliance on groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra or Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya in the near term is unlikely. But in the long term, if thanks to American and international support they are able to fight the Assad regime more effectively than the extremists and govern more effectively than the extremists, they may be able to wean themselves off of this dependency.

Another challenge is that these groups have fought fierce battles against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces supported by the United States in and around Aleppo, posing challenges to coordination, much less eventual integration.<sup>53</sup> These tensions between two U.S.-supported rebel groups show the complex web Washington is grappling with when pursuing this approach. And as the United States increases arming and training for these groups it will have to use its increased leverage to apply pressure on both sides to show restraint and agree on a clear line of control.

Any successful effort in the northwest will also take significantly more coordination between the United States and Turkey to seal the Turkish-Syrian border and coordinate their support for local groups. Only close Turkish-U.S. coordination can lead to the creation of a multi-ethnic armed opposition coalition in the Aleppo

area to stabilize one of the most important front lines against ISIS as well as the Assad regime and its allies.

Ultimately, it is probably too late to eliminate the extremist problem in the northwest — at best it can be marginalized. And even that may not be possible given the deep inroads extremist forces have made in this territory. But it is still preferable to try to empower more acceptable elements, especially given that this is a relatively cost-effective strategy. If it fails, the United States and its partners eventually may have to shift to a containment strategy in the northwest and treat it similarly to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan and conduct persistent counter-network actions to continuously degrade Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies.

## Eastern Syria

The United States should use northeastern Syria as a beachhead from which to train Sunni Arabs displaced from ISIS-controlled eastern Syria and reach into local tribes, while continuing to expand support for the New Syrian Army in southeastern Syria. In Syria, the patchwork counter-ISIS campaign is having its greatest success in the Kurdish-controlled northern areas of the country where it is working through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Militias within the SDF are highly motivated to remove ISIS from Syrian-Turkish border areas. The SDF has great utility to the counter-ISIS campaign, and should remain a central line of effort for the United States.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, there are some real limitations, and the United States must avoid overcommitting to the SDF and by doing so irritating other key players. Despite significant efforts to diversify its membership, the SDF remains dominated by Kurdish fighters. It is not an appropriate force for displacing ISIS from Arab-majority areas including ISIS' putative capital of Raqqa and the city of Deir al-Zor near the Syrian-Iraqi border. Moreover, a majority of the SDF units are linked to the People's Protection Units (YPG), which has close ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey considers a terrorist organization with a long history of conducting attacks inside Turkey.<sup>55</sup> Because of this link, Turkey strongly opposes the continued expansion of the SDF, and any long-term effort will not be able to rely too heavily on the Kurds without causing a major negative reaction from a NATO ally essential for any long-term settlement in Syria and Iraq.<sup>56</sup>

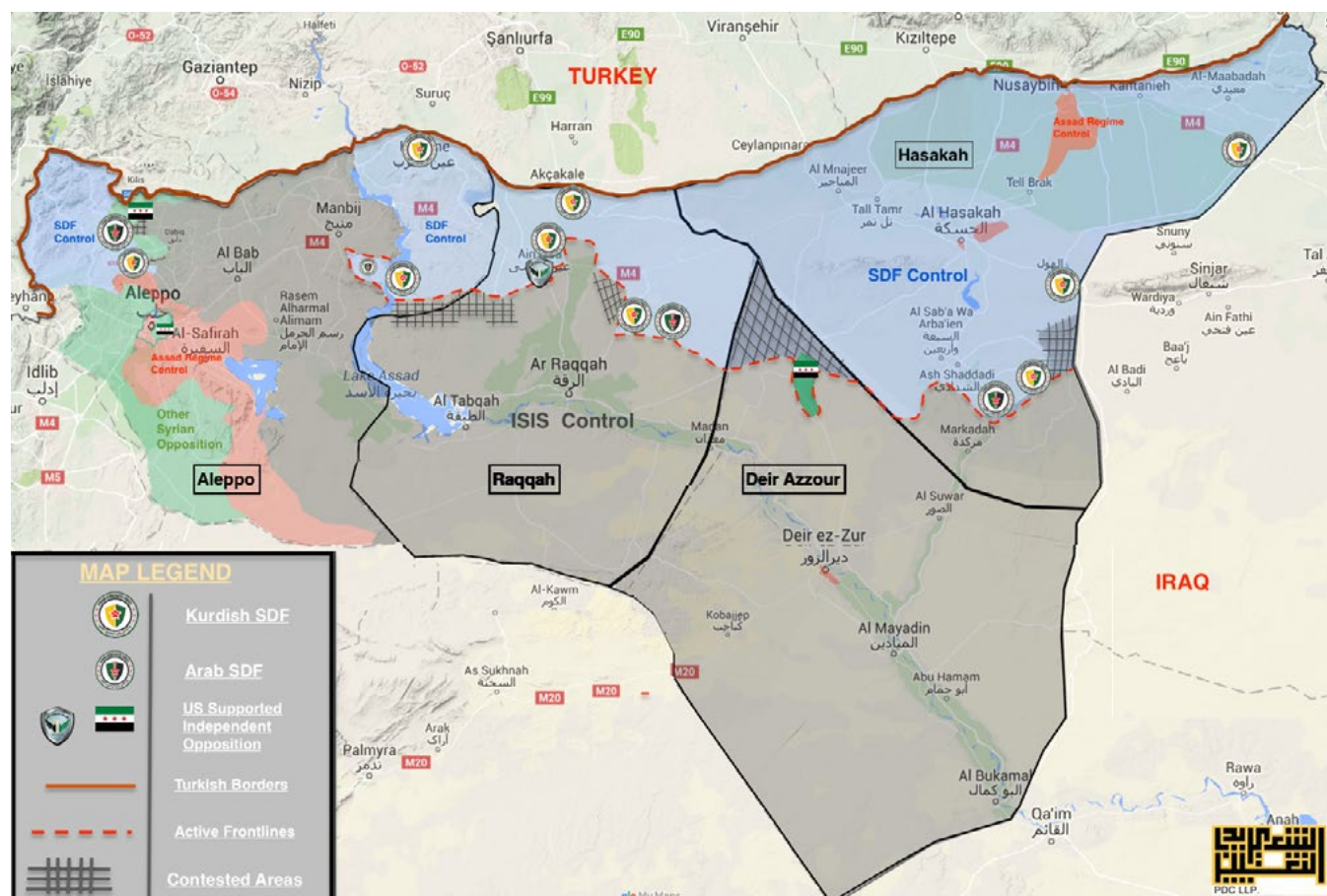
The SDF beachhead also creates an opportunity to build out a base in the heart of the northeastern SDF-controlled Hasakah governorate, which would serve as

the hub of Coalition-led operations to displace ISIS in Raqqa and Deir al-Zor governorate. The United States recently announced an additional deployment of 250 special operations forces to Syria primarily for this mission. Many local fighters do not wish to leave their homes and local areas they are defending to go outside the country. But from this forward base the United States can focus on recruiting primarily Sunni Arabs who have been displaced from ISIS-held territory in eastern Syria to be part of this force as they would be the most motivated to come to this territory and train to retake their previous homes. Ideally, these fighters would eventually form a force separate from the YPG, but in the short term that is unlikely because the YPG's superior capabilities still act as the backbone for any northeastern force. This base can also provide secure lines of supply and reinforcement to support key Sunni Arab tribes, such as the Shammar, Ougaidat, al-Afadlah, Mashahda, Na'ime, Jabbour, Dulaim, Baggara, Bani Khaled, Waldeh, Turki, Bani 'Izz, al-Haddadeen, Jeas, Quliaan, 'Anazah, al-Dyab,

and al-Shay'tat, that live under ISIS rule in eastern Syria. And the United States should push its regional partners, most notably Saudi Arabia, to also use their influence with these tribes to recruit fighters and convince the tribes to turn on ISIS.

In addition to pushing from the north, the United States can also open a new front against ISIS in south-eastern Syria. U.S. forces should continue to build out the capacity of the New Syrian Army (NSA), currently in the nascent stage of its development. The NSA is composed of eastern Syrian Free Syrian Army affiliates primarily displaced from the Deir al-Zor governorate by ISIS. Most of the constituent militias within the NSA belong to the Saudi-supported Asala wal-Tanmiya umbrella organization, which is ideologically Islamist but amenable to a pluralistic post-conflict Syria. Though it remains in its early stages of development, the NSA can stage from Jordan and take advantage of the sparsely populated, difficult-to-police southeastern Syrian Desert region.<sup>57</sup>

### Areas of Control in Eastern Syria



This map depicts the areas of control in eastern Syria, including Deir al-Zor, Hasakah, and Raqqah governorates. (People Demand Change)



## Western Iraq

The United States should prioritize training of Sunni forces in Iraq, ideally through the Iraqi central government, but if that continues to fail then directly. In Iraq, the immediate challenge is to build a credible local Sunni force that can work as an adjutant to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to take and hold territory in western Iraq. The ideal way to accomplish this is for the ISF to become increasingly multi-sectarian, and the United States should continue to work toward this objective in capacity-building programs with the ISF. However, if the Iraqi government continues to be obstinate in refusing to integrate Sunnis into the security forces, then the United States should begin looking for opportunities to test the proposition of directly training Sunnis in Kurdish-held territory in the North.

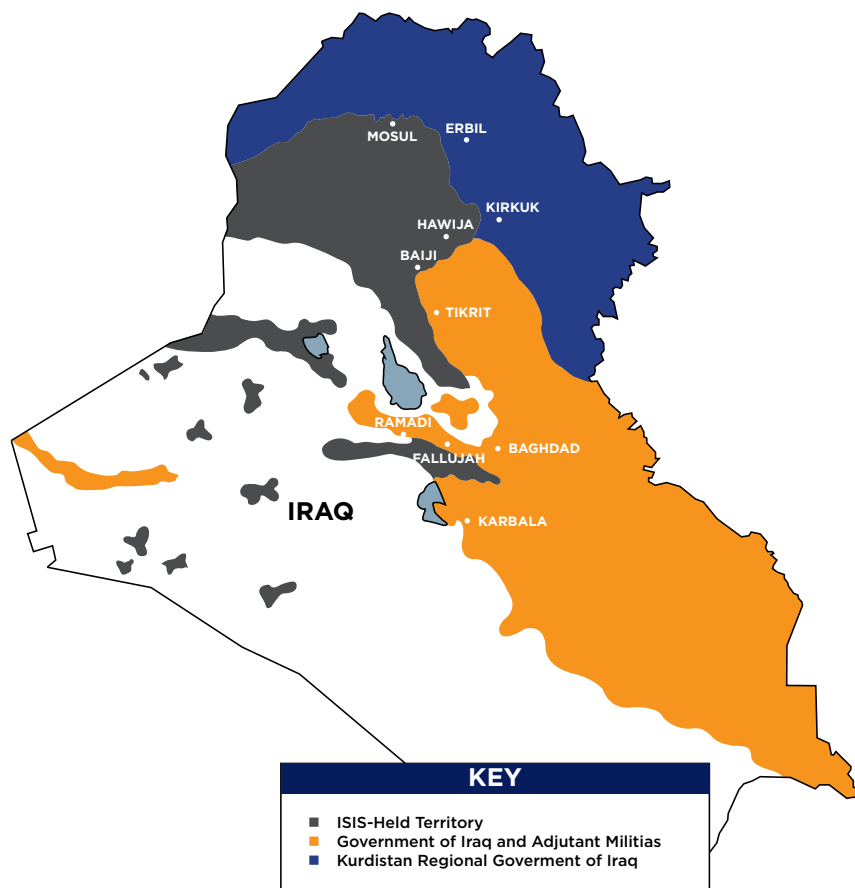
A more capable and inclusive ISF, with Sunni brigades mobilized from the local populations in ISIS-held areas, will be required to defeat the foe on the battlefield and hold recaptured territory in Sunni areas. If Iraq's counter-ISIS forces consist largely of Shia militias, purposely built to model the IRGC's basij militia system that maintains internal obedience in Iran, the end result is likely to be increased sectarian violence.<sup>58</sup> This will only further marginalize Iraq's Sunni communities and divorce them from the Iraqi central government. In the long term, the development of capable local Sunni forces, essentially a Sunni National Guard equivalent to the Kurdish Peshmerga, can give the Sunnis greater leverage in their negotiations with the Shia-dominated central government, thus ensuring Sunni grievances can be addressed in a long-term arrangement. However, political brinkmanship in Baghdad, particularly from Shia leaders, is preventing the authorization of this local Sunni force, and the political challenges will likely need to be overcome first before this line of effort can be pursued.<sup>59</sup>

Building the capacity of the ISF has been a slow process because of the deteriorated state of the ISF prior to ISIS' June 2014 offensive that captured large areas of western Iraq, and will continue to be a challenge throughout the rest of the counter-ISIS campaign.<sup>60</sup> The United States should continue prioritizing its work with Baghdad to identify, place, and empower the ISF's most competent officers, particularly Sunnis, to take the lead in building out predominantly Sunni brigades that can be deployed against ISIS. These brigades will need to spearhead the campaign against ISIS in areas such as Mosul, where the local population is already highly skeptical of the ISF due to years of corruption and sectarian crony politics under Nouri al-Maliki.

Reserve manpower for an expanded Sunni National Guard force could be mobilized partly from the hundreds of thousands of Sunni Iraqis that have been internally displaced from areas now under ISIS' authority, most of whom are now resident in northern Iraq. The Iraqi central government has been slow in arming and supporting Sunni opposition forces as a result of sectarian concerns and pressure from Iran, which carries significant influence in Baghdad. U.S. support for local Sunni tribal-based security forces should continue to be run through Baghdad with the assistance and coordination of the ISF. This will help to knit a closer relationship between the Iraqi national government and these bottom-up Sunni groups, an important political step. But the United States should make clear to the Iraqi government that if it is not willing to step up its support for the Sunnis, the United States may be willing to provide its own direct support to local Sunni security forces. The reason for caution is the fragility of Haidar al-Abadi's government in Baghdad — one we would prefer to see remain in power and that could be harmed if the United States were to directly arm the Sunnis. But U.S. interests in rolling back ISIS are too important to be held hostage by dysfunctional Baghdad politics. Moreover, Abadi's ability to continue to keep his position stems from a dearth of viable alternatives, as none of the parties are necessarily interested in a months-long stasis that comes with the formation of a new government.

The United States and the Iraqi central government should also focus on internal armed opposition to ISIS inside of the territory it currently controls in western Iraq. Tribally mobilized resistance organizations such as Ninewah's Quwat al-Usuud (Lions' Force) are already providing the coalition with intelligence on ISIS and assisting in providing targeting data for coalition airstrikes against ISIS targets.<sup>61</sup> The United States and Baghdad should invest more heavily in recruiting these internal opposition actors that work against ISIS and in providing them with weapons, training, and advising where possible. In some cases, that will mean taking greater risk to contact and potentially provide assistance to peel off ISIS' uneasy Sunni allies that currently subordinate themselves to the ideological extremist organization because they strongly dislike Baghdad's policies.<sup>62</sup> While internal opposition organizations such as Quwat al-Usuud are not yet powerful enough by themselves to displace ISIS, they can be demonstrably more effective if coordinated into a resistance network that, alongside Iraqi national forces, can take and hold territory from the Islamic State.

## Areas of Control in Iraq<sup>127</sup>



*This map depicts the areas of control by the major combatants in the Iraqi civil war. (CNAS)*

One major question is whether, if the Iraqi central government continues to obstruct efforts to integrate Sunnis, the United States should find ways to work around Baghdad and train Sunni fighters in the Kurdish north. This comes with significant risks, as it could cause the Iraqi government to ask the United States to leave and cause Iran to turn against American efforts and target U.S. troops. It would also then be very difficult to deploy these forces outside of Kurdish territory if they are not welcomed by the ISF.

The preference should continue to be going through the Iraqi central government, as starting to train Sunnis separately in the Kurdish areas will take significantly longer, require more American manpower, and might accelerate the splintering of the Iraqi state into three independent entities. Still, the United States should not foreclose this option, particularly if a more sectarian leadership seizes power in Baghdad. Ultimately, without a capable Sunni force, ISIS will not be displaced and

the Sunnis will never have the leverage to negotiate a political agreement that addresses their grievances. Both Tehran and Baghdad need the U.S. presence in Iraq to help fight off ISIS, and would think twice before asking the United States to leave — or before targeting American forces.

It is also important not to forget the Kurdistan Regional Government, which has been the most effective fighting force in stemming ISIS' momentum. The United States should continue to work directly with the Kurdish Peshmerga and, if necessary, provide direct U.S. military assistance, including arms and salaries, to maintain Kurdish defenses against future ISIS attacks.<sup>63</sup> This assistance is likely to be necessary because of the poor state of the economy of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG). Suppressed oil prices and disputes with Baghdad over sharing diminishing oil revenues have made it increasingly difficult for the KRG to pay its security forces.<sup>64</sup>

# **CHAPTER 03**

## **Expand U.S. Military Operations**

**B**uilding coherent regional opposition groups from the ground up will take time and additional support from the United States. In order to execute this strategy, some current limitations on U.S. military operations will need to change. Most of these changes will focus on the ISIS battlefield in eastern Syria and western Iraq. U.S. combat advisors should be embedded among front-line partner units to be most effective. U.S. unilateral direct-action counter-network operations should be expanded. Military commanders will need to be delegated increased authority for operations within Syria. Additional personnel will be needed to effectively resource this strategy, necessitating lifting the current personnel caps in Iraq and Syria and authorizing larger deployments. While these expanded military operations against ISIS would entail greater resources and greater exposure of U.S. troops to harm's way, they would not involve a return to the 2003–2010 U.S. footprint in Iraq when U.S. troops “owned” terrain. U.S. military involvement would remain predominantly in a supporting role to local partners, not undertaking large-scale conventional U.S.-led combat operations to defeat ISIS. In western Syria the United States should be willing to use the threat of limited military force against the Assad regime to deter air strikes against U.S.-supported opposition groups by Assad or his Russian allies.

**While these expanded military operations against ISIS would entail greater resources and greater exposure of U.S. troops to harm's way, they would not involve a return to the 2003–2010 U.S. footprint in Iraq when U.S. troops ‘owned’ terrain.**

### Embed Combat Advisors

The United States should embed combat advisors at the battalion level in Iraq and, over time, eastern Syria. Right now, U.S. forces provide training and support to local forces on Iraqi government and Kurdish-held territory. They also provide training and support to Syrian and Iraqi forces in neighboring countries such as Turkey and Jordan. And U.S. forces provide air support when Iraqi forces go out to fight ISIS and conduct targeted special operations raids against high-value targets. But American



*U.S. special operations advisors, embedded within the Syrian Democratic Forces coalition, coordinate the campaign to seize the strategic ISIS stronghold of Ash-Shadadi, Hasakah governorate in northeastern Syria. The United States has a secure beachhead in Syria through the SDF to wage the counter-ISIS campaign. (France 24)*

advisors on the ground do not accompany Iraqi or Syrian opposition forces to the battlefield.<sup>65</sup>

Embedding small numbers of Americans has been shown in the past to significantly increase the confidence and capacity of U.S. partners. For example, during the initial invasion of Afghanistan, the presence of Special Forces and CIA advisors among Northern Alliance fighters significantly tipped the battlefield balance in their favor. Embedding advisors allows a closer integration between American air power and partner ground forces and more direct U.S. assistance in planning and advising operations. Additionally, the presence of U.S. advisors can have a mitigating effect on the worst sectarian impulses in local forces. Iraqi security forces would be less likely to commit problematic acts such as taking sectarian revenge in recaptured territory under the watchful eyes of U.S. advisors.<sup>66</sup> Such an approach does come with greater risk to U.S. forces.

### Expand Direct-Action Counter-Network Operations

Rolling back ISIS-held terrain and replacing ISIS with effective, legitimate security forces will take time. Strategic patience is vital to executing this plan. A rush to seize terrain without the right mix of counter-ISIS forces could exacerbate sectarian tensions. Attacking ISIS with forces that are not yet ready could lead to failure that degrades their morale and effectiveness. The unfortunate reality is that fully eliminating ISIS' safe haven in Iraq and Syria will take years. In the meantime, ISIS' ability to



carry out external attacks in Europe or the United States must be degraded. The United States should increase its direct-action counter-network operations against ISIS to degrade its ability to carry out external attacks.

Over the past 15 years, the United States has honed an effective counter-network force composed of intelligence community and special operations professionals who have already systematically degraded al Qaeda's ability to carry out large-scale attacks against Western targets. While a systematic campaign of air strikes and raids cannot establish security and governance on the ground, it can deny terrorist networks sanctuary from which to plot attacks.

While the United States has, to date, carried out air strikes against ISIS and some limited raids in Syria, an expanded campaign of intelligence collection, airstrikes, and direct-action raids could further degrade ISIS' capabilities. The most significant change from the Obama administration's current approach would be increased raids against ISIS targets, since the administration already carries out airstrikes against ISIS.

**The United States should revisit the authorities it is providing to its military to allow for operations necessary to displace and replace ISIS, especially inside Syria.**

Raids, similar to the U.S. raid to kill Bin Laden, are vital tools for degrading terrorist networks because they can often yield valuable intelligence collected from the site, as happened at bin Laden's compound. The administration has authorized some raids in Syria; a March 2016 raid that killed senior ISIS leader Abd ar-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli was publicly reported. While raids place U.S. troops in harms' way, they have the potential to significantly accelerate U.S. efforts to dismantle ISIS' terror network. Military commanders on the ground should be authorized to conduct direct-action raids in Iraq and Syria in order to degrade ISIS' ability to plot external attacks, and sufficient resources should be authorized to carry out and support these operations.

### **Establish More Flexible Authorities, Especially in Eastern Syria**

A key component of executing expanded military operations in Syria — both training and advising missions to

support local forces and U.S. unilateral counter-network operations — is establishing more flexible authorities for military commanders. The United States should revisit the authorities it is providing to its military to allow for operations necessary to displace and replace ISIS, especially inside Syria. Even though eastern Syria and western Iraq are one unified battlefield controlled by ISIS, for bureaucratic, legal, and historical reasons the U.S. government does not currently allow the American military the same flexibility in eastern Syria. While the official border between Iraq and Syria has been virtually erased by ISIS, the military must obtain very high-level approval for nearly any action it takes on the ground in eastern Syria, despite much greater flexibility in western Iraq. Indeed, most operations on the ground in Syria have to go all the way up to the President or his top deputies for approval. This extended process makes it incredibly difficult to respond quickly and nimbly as conditions on the battlefield change.

There are justifiable reasons for this disparity. In Iraq, the United States is there at the request of the Iraqi government and also has a long history of conducting operations. Western Syria certainly requires more caution, as there is indeed potential for direct conflict with the government of Syria or even with Russia. But in eastern Syria, circumstances should permit more flexibility, as the Assad regime has lost its ability to project power or control over that territory and has not interfered with the American presence.

### **Eliminate Artificial Manpower Limitations**

The current limitations on U.S. personnel engaged in counter-ISIS operations in Iraq and Syria are inadequate to resource the expanded strategy laid out in this report. As of the time of writing, the Obama administration had authorized 300 military personnel in Syria and approximately 4,000 in Iraq. In Iraq, the actual number of personnel on the ground is often higher, due to rotating units and contractor support.<sup>67</sup> In order to execute this strategy of expanded support to local actors on the ground and increased direct-action operations against ISIS, additional troops will be required in Iraq and Syria. In addition to the military personnel directly participating in advising and counter-network operations, these operations require significant support in the form of quick reaction forces, logistics, intelligence, force protection (e.g., base security), fire support, medical evacuation support, and air support. In order to properly resource this strategy, the administration should lift the current

caps on U.S. military personnel in Iraq and Syria and, in consultation with Pentagon leadership, authorize larger troop deployments to both countries. While a detailed troop-to-task analysis is beyond the scope of this report, adequately resourcing these missions would go beyond the current troop limitations and likely require on the order of several hundred to a few thousand troops in Syria and 10,000–20,000 troops in Iraq. A return to large-scale deployments of 100,000-plus troops or more, on par with peak levels in Iraq and Afghanistan, would not be required. Troop levels will be limited to some extent by the capacity of partners to absorb U.S. assistance, as well as the political appetite for additional U.S. troops in Iraq, where this remains a significant limitation. To the extent that necessary U.S. troop deployments exceed the comfort level of the Iraqi government, some of these additional support troops could be based in Turkey or Jordan.

## Use Military Coercion to Deter Airstrikes in Southwest and Northwest Syria

The United States must look for ways to protect local partners on the ground from aerial bombardment. Regime/Russian air superiority has been central to preventing these actors from taking and holding more territory or being able to govern effectively. Moreover, a more muscular U.S. approach on this issue will send broader signals to all of the external and internal actors to the conflict, thus increasing American leverage.

The Cessation of Hostilities negotiated in Geneva has proven to be both highly fragile yet also more durable than expected. It has significantly reduced civilian casualties inside the country. It has largely held in the south, but in Aleppo and Damascus it has failed to stop the fighting. While ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra are not part of the Cessation of Hostilities, Russia and the Assad regime have taken an expansive interpretation of opposition groups they consider extremist and have often attacked moderate groups supported by the United States while accusing them of being extremists.<sup>68</sup> This reduces the ability of acceptable groups to pick up momentum over time and begin to govern and hold more territory, thus reducing extremist pockets within the country and creating greater distance between the current situation and a desired end-state of a decentralized federal Syria, one with acceptable local forces providing governance and security on the ground.



*A senior non-commissioned officer in the U.S. Army's 524th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 17th Sustainment Brigade, issues an M-16 rifle to an Iraq Security Forces soldier at Camp Taji near Baghdad in April 2016. The United States currently supports the ISF to conduct the counter-ISIS campaign through the Iraq Train and Equip Program. (Sgt. Kalie Jones/U.S. Army)*

In the south, since the Russian intervention in the summer of 2015, the Southern Front has been losing ground due to the advances of the Assad regime and its allies. However, since the Cessation of Hostilities, the situation in the south has remained largely quiet. The United States can and should do more to help the Southern Front by reducing its vulnerability to air attack and eliminating regime air superiority in Southern Front-controlled territory. Without that step, it will be impossible to build a real rebel army and institutions capable of controlling and governing Southern Syria. And it will be impossible to insert Americans or other foreign forces to help train, advise, and supplement Southern Front military and governance efforts.

Addressing the Southern Front's vulnerability to air attacks would ideally be done by continuing the current agreement with Russia. But should bombing in the south resume, the United States should go beyond the current Cessation of Hostilities and ask Russia to agree not to treat the Southern Front as an extremist group and to cease air attacks on the territory it controls in Dara'a and al-Qunaitra, while the Russians pressure the Assad regime to do the same. This should be possible since the Russians could possibly accept an end-state where the Southern Front controls rebel-ruled areas of southern Syria, so long as the successor state to the Assad regime maintains its authority and territorial control in a core

area including Damascus and large sections of western Syria.

If the Russians or the Assad regime refuse, one option to consider would be for the United States to declare a “no-bombing zone” over Southern Front–held territory, which would be potentially less risky and resource-intensive than a no-fly zone but come with many of the same benefits. The aim of such a declaration would be to use punishment to deter Russian and Assad regime air-strikes against the Southern Front and local supporting communities. Under such a plan, the United States would declare that any air attacks would be met with a U.S. response of targeted strikes primarily with standoff weapons against Assad regime targets. Unlike a no-fly zone, this would not require the United States to obtain air superiority or take out Syrian air defenses because it would not require persistent sorties over Syria, and so would be less resource-intensive. It would also purposefully avoid Russian targets, thus creating a proportional response: Russian strikes on American proxies would result in American strikes on Russian proxies. This would mean avoiding Syrian airbases, where Russian forces are present, but could include forward operating bases for Syrian ground forces or Syrian security apparatus facilities in Damascus that are fixed regime targets and would require less invasive reconnaissance. The targets need not be tied directly to actions taken against U.S. partners as long as U.S. messaging about the reason and motivation for the strikes is clear.

**If the United States were to successfully establish a no-bombing zone, it could then increase its support for the Southern Front through more direct actions, including inserting American, Jordanian, or Emirati special forces.**

Were the United States to make clear it was serious about this threat, that stance could likely be parlayed into an understanding with the Russians to not target U.S.-supported groups and thus break the regime’s air superiority in the south. However, it is also quite possible that the Russians and Syrians would test a no-bombing zone and force a U.S. response. A robust American response against regime targets would demonstrate to Russia and Syria that attacks on the Southern Front are counterproductive, however, and likely result in a change

of behavior. Should this prove ineffective in deterring Russian and/or Syrian attacks in the no-bombing zone, the United States would have to be willing to go up the escalatory ladder by increasing the pace of military strikes as well as the value of the targets. It could also consider arming rebel groups in the zone with man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS), with appropriate technical-use controls, in order to self-enforce the no-bombing zone.<sup>69</sup> Before such a step was taken, the threat of inserting MANPADS would need to be clearly communicated to Russia and the Assad regime in an effort to induce a change in behavior.

If the United States were to successfully establish a no-bombing zone, it could then increase its support for the Southern Front through more direct actions, including inserting American, Jordanian, or Emirati special forces. It could also give the Southern Front more assistance in building out governing institutions in the territory it controls. A no-bombing zone would also send a powerful signal to U.S. partners and the Syrian opposition about a shift in American engagement, increasing overall U.S. leverage and the willingness of U.S. partners to fall in line with the American approach. And finally, a southern no-bombing zone could also over time be expanded to include New Syrian Army territory, as the NSA continues its fight against ISIS in southeastern Syria.

The United States may also wish to consider a no-bombing zone in northwestern Syria around the areas of Idlib and Aleppo and farther north. This would be more complicated, because there are many fewer acceptable opposition forces in the north and the United States wants to stay out of the business of providing air cover for al Qaeda–affiliated groups. Still, providing incentives to groups in this area, contingent on their willingness to more clearly separate themselves from Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies, could strengthen moderate forces.

Another challenge is that the northwest is also a much higher priority for the Assad regime, which could raise the threshold of the type of strike it would be willing to tolerate. Such an approach could also help avoid a major ground escalation in Aleppo that could lead to a new massive wave of refugees and put pressure on Turkey and Europe. And a no-bombing zone in the north would be deeply meaningful to the Turks, who have chafed under Russian violations of their air space resulting in the shoot-down of a Russian plane and a major crisis in Russo-Turkish relations.

Ultimately, this approach comes with real risks. It is always possible that deterrence fails or an American strike inadvertently hits a Russian target. In this scenario

there is the possibility that the Russians strike back directly at the United States or escalate their campaign in Syria and dare the United States to respond and escalate. This is a possibility that must be taken seriously. But at the same time, neither the United States nor Russia is interested in entering a major conventional conflict, and the United States still possesses escalation dominance. Even if there is an escalation, there are multiple opportunities to stop short of direct military conflict. Perhaps the most applicable precedent was the 2013 American response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. In that case, the Russians were eager to avoid a direct U.S. military intervention and were able to convince Assad to give up most of his chemical weapons. Similarly, in this case the most likely outcome is that the Russians will press the regime to come to a negotiated agreement, which simply is a more strict enforcement of the Cessation of Hostilities.

### **Limit U.S. Involvement — U.S. Troops Should Not Seize and Hold Terrain**

Expanded troop deployments to the region is not a slippery slope to a return to occupying Iraq. The United States should not — and these additional troops would not be tasked to — seize and occupy terrain. U.S. combat advisors embedded with local forces in Iraq and Syria would serve in a supporting function. This might at times

involve advising forces while they are in combat. Indeed, some U.S. personnel have been killed in recent operations. U.S. combat roles should be restricted, however, to supporting partner forces or conducting direct-action raids against senior ISIS leaders. U.S. conventional forces should not be engaged themselves in rolling back ISIS territory, however.

The U.S. military is undoubtedly capable of seizing ISIS-held terrain, and a desire to get “quick wins” and show progress against ISIS might drive a desire to send U.S. troops to Iraq and Syria for this purpose. This would be a mistake. Pushing back ISIS is not enough to eliminate it as a threat. In order to prevent a return of ISIS or the re-emergence of another extremist group, ISIS must be replaced by legitimate local security forces and governance structures. Sending in American forces to retake ISIS-held terrain would put the United States right back in the position it was in Iraq in 2003–2010: stuck in the middle of a quagmire. The notion that U.S. troops might be able to seize terrain while transferring the “hold” and “build” elements of a “clear-hold-build” strategy to local partners was elusive throughout the Iraq war and remains elusive today. A better approach — and a more enduring one — is to support and enable partner forces to clear, hold, and build themselves. A partner-first strategy may move more slowly, but it is more likely to result in more sustainable gains over the long term, and at a level of commitment that is more feasible and commensurate with U.S. interests.

# **CHAPTER 04**

## **Increase Leverage with External Actors**



**T**he third major challenge with addressing the situation in Iraq and Syria is the role of external actors. The parts of Iraq and Syria where U.S. policy has arguably had the most success are those where there are actors on the borders of the conflict zone who can play a constructive role. This is most pronounced in southern Syria, where the United States and Jordan have coordinated effectively to build up the Southern Front. It is also the case in the Kurdish areas of Syria and Iraq, where Kurdish partners in both countries have been mostly constructive partners who have not only fought the Islamic State, but also provided a territorial beachhead for training local Sunni forces.

Foreign actors such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Russia, and Iran are currently pursuing their own agendas, leading to an escalatory cycle of uncoordinated arming, training, and military intervention on all sides. Part of the challenge is that many of America's most important partners, especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia, are concerned about ISIS but also have different priorities than the United States.<sup>70</sup> Saudi Arabia prioritizes its competition with Iran and therefore views Iran's support for Assad and the IRGC's strong influence in Syria as a greater concern than ISIS.<sup>71</sup> Qatar is working to support militant Islamist organizations and Turkey worries more about the Kurdish presence in northern Syria, the increasing influence of the PKK in that region, and the American decision to double down on support for these Kurdish forces.<sup>72</sup> Simultaneously, these partners — Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey — are cooperating with the United States to provide bases for training moderate Syrian armed opposition fighters.<sup>73</sup> For Russia, preservation of the Assad regime is seen as the best way to preserve their military bases on the Mediterranean, counter the extremist foreign fighter challenge they face at home, and increase their own standing as a great power.<sup>74</sup> For Iran, the highest priority is the preservation of its supply lines to Hezbollah from Damascus to Beirut.<sup>75</sup>

Any U.S. strategy to get these players to act in a more constructive fashion amenable to U.S. interests will need to take their concerns into account while also using increased American engagement and military pressure to shift their calculus. The first step is to get Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar to pursue a coordinated strategy primarily by being more willing to work with them on their own priorities, but also expecting a greater commitment from them for the anti-ISIS fight. The second step further down the line is to impact Russia and Iran's calculus and create an environment more conducive to a long-term settlement. This will require engaging the

Russians and Iranians in negotiations but also pushing back more forcefully where we disagree.

## Messaging to Leverage Greater U.S. Military Involvement

The steps described in Chapter 3 should be coupled with a robust public and private messaging strategy to maximize the diplomatic leverage gained from greater U.S. involvement. This could consist of more forward-leaning public statements signaling a commitment to U.S. partners in the region and a willingness to get more engaged in the conflict in Syria and Iraq — to not just target ISIS but also others who would threaten acceptable local groups inside those two countries. It should be made clear to internal and external actors that the United States has made a decision to engage decisively in the conflict. The purpose would be to signal all of the players about an increased U.S. willingness to use force if necessary. Such an approach could be particularly effective early in a new president's term when both adversaries and allies are seeking initial signals about how the new president may govern.

**Foreign actors such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Russia, and Iran are currently pursuing their own agendas, leading to an escalatory cycle of uncoordinated arming, training, and military intervention on all sides.**

The most important audience for such a step would be Russia, whose own leverage in the Middle East has increased significantly since its intervention last July. Indeed, Russia's recent intervention is an excellent example of how a relatively small deployment combined with the right messaging can have a dramatic effect on the calculus of the various actors.<sup>76</sup> This approach would also send an important message to U.S. partners about our commitment to them, which would then influence their own behavior and willingness to cooperate with us in Syria. And it could also have a deterrent effect on Assad, who would have to worry about the possibility of a more direct U.S. intervention.



*The IRGC Quds Force leader Qassam Sulaimani meets with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of the Iraqi Hashd Shaabi organization, in Karbala, Iraq, in August 2015 to discuss the anti-ISIS campaign. Qassam Sulaimani is taking the leading role in coordinating the IRGC's unconventional warfare mission in Syria and Iraq. (Hashd Shaabi/Twitter)*

## Align Priorities with Gulf Partners

The United States should leverage its greater commitment to addressing the conflict and more willingness to push back on Iran's destabilizing activities to get GCC partners to coordinate their armed opposition support. Saudi Arabia is highly anxious about Iranian actions in the region and the fear that the United States is beginning a broader policy pivot to Iran in the aftermath of the Iran Nuclear Agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This insecurity is driving Saudi Arabia to invest in actors who can push back against the Iranian buildup inside Syria, including extremist groups unacceptable to the United States.<sup>77</sup>

For the Saudis a decision by the United States to increase its support for groups inside Syria that are against not just ISIS but also the Assad regime, combined with an increased American military commitment, could reassure them and help move Riyadh to a more cooperative position. Moreover, a new president who continues implementation of the JCPOA but is also willing to push back more aggressively against Iran's behavior elsewhere in the region and make countering Iran a higher priority in the U.S.-Saudi bilateral relationship will find a more willing partner in Riyadh.<sup>78</sup>

As part of this effort, the United States would also expect more from Saudi Arabia, including arming and supporting the same groups we are arming in western

Syria. The United States would also need Saudi Arabia to engage with tribes in eastern Syria, where the Saudis have historical relationships with local tribes. And ideally, the Saudis would also be more open to improving relations with Iraq — though that is a more difficult ask and might not be realistic given the intense suspicion the Saudis have for the Shia-led government.

In terms of Qatar, its concerns have less to do with Iran than with the fact that it has great influence already with some of the extremist elements inside Syria. But a greater American investment should also come with more pressure for Qatar to get in line. And if the United States can convince Saudi Arabia and Turkey to align behind its strategy, those two countries will also have great influence in getting the Qataris to cease their support for extremist groups.

## Manage the Turkish Conundrum

In exchange for greater U.S. effort in western Syria, putting limits on support for the Kurds, and a no-bombing zone near the Turkish border, the United States should continue to obtain greater Turkish coordination for armed opposition groups and border control, and to continue to work toward a positive, locally acceptable clear and hold force and governance structure for the Manbij Pocket. Shifting Turkish behavior may be the single biggest challenge among our regional partners. The United States needs Turkey's cooperation to close down the Turkish border, which is the main source of transit for arms and recruits for ISIS into Syria.<sup>79</sup> It also needs Ankara to stop support for extremist groups such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and be willing to fully coordinate whom they arm with the United States.<sup>80</sup> The biggest challenge arises from Turkish concerns over U.S. support for Kurdish fighters in northern Syria, many of whom have close ideological ties to the PKK, and which Turkey believes to be as great or a greater existential threat to it than ISIS.<sup>81</sup> Still, the United States will have to find an accommodation with Turkey, and it is in both countries' interests to work together on a common approach, especially given their historic alliance and Turkish membership in NATO. It is also important to remember that, as noted previously, despite Kurdish success in northern Syria, Kurds are not going to be the leading vanguard force that can retake ISIS-held Sunni territory in the rest of Syria and Iraq.<sup>82</sup>

The United States must continue to work with Turkey to achieve a common approach on sealing the border (and specifically the Manbij pocket west of the Euphrates).<sup>83</sup> The United States should make clear that



it is increasing its investment to acceptable opposition groups in eastern and northwestern Syria, which the Turks will welcome as well.<sup>84</sup> A no-bombing zone around Aleppo and further north would also be reassuring to Turkey in terms of its recent problems with Russia.<sup>85</sup> The United States should reassure Turkey that its investment in the YPG is limited to helping them regain and hold their own territory that was taken by ISIS — not expanding further south or building a contiguous swath of territory across the entire Turkish-Syrian border. The United States should be willing to offer Turkey greater intelligence sharing to deal with its PKK problem and press its Kurdish partners in northeastern Syria to limit their ties to the PKK or make a clear statement about their lack of interest in meddling in Turkish affairs.<sup>86</sup>

At the same time, the United States should also present Turkey with a much clearer and tougher alternative of what it will do if Turkish behavior does not change. The United States should make clear that if Turkey is unwilling to seal the border over the long term, and continues to support ideological extremist proxies, the United States will have no choice but to exclusively support the Syrian Democratic Forces coalition to finish cutting off the border in order to fight ISIS and protect American interests. This combination of reassurance and threat can apply greater pressure on Turkey to comply.

Ultimately, the U.S. approach to Turkey on this question has been too careful, and Erdogan believes that he has most of the leverage in the relationship. He must be made to understand that the United States has a strong preference for continuing to work with Turkey, but defeating ISIS is an American priority and we do have a real alternative with the SDF.

## Come to an Understanding with Russia

The United States should leverage its increased investment on the ground to forge an agreement with Russia on a Syrian power-sharing agreement that maintains a strong Alawi center and more moderate forces holding territory. Russia has multiple interests in Syria. First, it wishes to maintain its military footprint and ability to project power through its naval and air bases in the successor regime to Assad in Tartus and Latakia. It also has an interest in dealing with the threat of extremism and foreign fighters given that more than 2,500 Caucasian jihadists have come to Syria and joined ideological extremist groups, particularly ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>87</sup> The Russians also have a broader geopolitical interest in being treated as a major global power and pushing back



*Russian President Vladimir Putin meets Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on September 23, 2015, at the Kremlin in Moscow to discuss Syria. Russia and Turkey support different sides in the Syrian conflict, and getting them to agree on similar acceptable end-states is a major challenge to ending the war. (The Kremlin)*

against what they see as an interventionist, meddling American foreign policy.

The Russian approach thus far has been to pursue a strategy of keeping Assad in power to protect Moscow's interests, which was the primary purpose of the intervention. However, the Russian willingness to engage in Syria is not a blank check to expend unlimited resources, and there is some evidence that Russians' views on their recent military cooperation with Syria created considerable frustration.<sup>88</sup> The Russians have also shown a willingness to engage pragmatically with the United States as evidenced in the negotiations over the Cessation of Hostilities, which has held largely because of American and Russian pressure and investment in the process.

Thus, it is likely that Russia would accept an end-state where, over time, more moderate forces take and hold territory in Syria and a power-sharing agreement with a decentralized federal system is reached, and where there is an Alawi-led successor state to the Assad regime that preserves central Russian interests. But before the Russians can be convinced of this approach they will first need to see a more serious American commitment to this strategy. Otherwise, they will continue to simply pursue an approach focused primarily on supporting Assad under the assumption that the United States is not willing to commit enough to offer a real alternative.

There is a risk that the Russians are not convinced by the increased American commitment or that they

counter-escalate. But the Russian response in 2013 to U.S. military threats against the Assad regime is instructive. During the one moment in the Syrian Civil War that the United States seriously contemplated direct military action against the Assad regime, after a chemical weapons attack in Ghouta in August 2013 killed 1,400 people, Russia did not escalate or threaten a major response. Instead it quickly intervened diplomatically and helped negotiate an outcome where Assad gave up the majority of his chemical weapons.

### **Gain Iranian Acquiescence for a Power-Sharing Agreement**

The United States should leverage its increased investment on the ground combined with Russian acquiescence to convince Iran to accept a power-sharing agreement. Iran is deeply invested in the Syrian conflict. It has deployed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force to assist Syrian government fighters and trained and inserted thousands of Shia fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq.<sup>89</sup> Iran's ally Hezbollah has also played a central role, providing thousands of fighters, especially in territory near the Lebanese border. Iran also continues to provide significant financial support to the Assad regime. Iran's primary interest is maintaining supply lines from Damascus into Lebanon

for arming and supporting Hezbollah — Iran's most important and capable regional proxy. Iran also has few allies in the region and would prefer not to lose the Assad regime, but at the same time believes it has been an unreliable ally whose poor management of the initial uprisings in 2011 led to the civil war. It is hard to see significant overlap in U.S. and Iranian interests in Syria, but ultimately with increased American intervention and particularly if the United States is able to convince Russia, Iran may have no choice but to accept an outcome where there is still a pliable successor to the Assad regime at least in the loyalist areas of central-western Syria. This would be much more likely if this entity retains control in areas bordering Lebanon.

In Iraq, Iran has a very strong common interest with the United States in fighting ISIS, which at its height of strength in 2014, came very close to the Iranian border. Iran has aggressively mobilized Shia militia groups and support for the Iraqi government against ISIS. But Iran also would prefer to keep Iraq relatively weak and dominated by the Shia. And despite the fact that Iran saw that Nuri al-Maliki's sectarian approach caused the backlash that spawned ISIS, there are still few indications that it will forgo a sectarian agenda. Still, over time the United States should use the channels established with Iran during the nuclear negotiations to explore whether an accommodation in Iraq might be possible.

## **CHAPTER 05**

### **Reestablish Governance and Negotiate a Political End-State**

**T**he challenge of reestablishing effective governance in Iraq and Syria is twofold — a near-term approach to building governance structures at the local level from the bottom up combined with a long-term approach to try to forge national reconciliation, ensuring the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria through a decentralized governance system. This approach must be directly linked to U.S. security assistance and military strategies described in Chapters 2 and 3.

In the near term the key is to empower acceptable local actors to outcompete and outgovern extremists, who are actively seeking to entrench themselves in the political and security bodies that administer rebel-ruled areas of the country and are already building “post-Assad” governance structures. In southwest Syria the Southern Front has been able to effectively coordinate with local councils to marginalize extremists. In northwest Syria there is an open competition between extremists such as Jabhat al-Nusra and its close ally Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and more moderate elements, though the extremists currently hold the upper hand.<sup>90</sup> The most difficult effort will be in eastern Syria and western Iraq, where ISIS dominates governance. Work can begin now on establishing governing councils that will seize control after ISIS is displaced, but any strategy will also have to bring local tribes and anti-ISIS activists still living in ISIS territory, which can only happen after that area is cleared. Only such an approach that emphasizes governance as well as security can achieve overall long-term U.S. objectives of significantly reducing and over the long term eliminating the ISIS caliphate and preventing its reemergence.

**The strategy laid out in this paper is intended to set conditions for sustainable national political agreements to end the civil wars in Iraq and Syria. But it will take a number of years to set conditions on the ground for these types of agreements.**

The strategy laid out in this paper is intended to set conditions for sustainable national political agreements to end the civil wars in Iraq and Syria. But it will take a number of years to set conditions on the ground for these types of agreements. And even if achieving national

reconciliation proves impossible and Iraq and Syria fragment into multiple states, the strategy we are proposing still has the best chance of ensuring long-term stability and marginalizing extremist control of territory and governance.

## Incentivize Inclusive and Responsible Governance

Using the Riyadh Declaration as a key building block, the United States should emphasize the importance of inclusive and responsible governance and incentivize U.S.-supported groups to adhere to political platforms consistent with those values. It is imperative for the United States to actively bolster acceptable, non-extremist governance in opposition-controlled areas, as these are the actors most likely to negotiate a long-term political outcome in Syria that is acceptable to the United States and its partners. Inclusivity is particularly important to cultivate, as the Syrian opposition will have to coexist and refrain from exacting revenge on minority elements of Syrian society that supported the Assad regime — most notably his Alawi sect.<sup>91</sup> To date the United States has pushed a broad national political process to end the conflict, but some of the ideas in that process can also be leveraged at the local level.

The December 2015 Riyadh Declaration is a product of direct U.S. pressure on the Syrian opposition, both its armed and political actors, and regional partners that are backers of the Syrian rebel movement. It brought together many of the most powerful armed opposition groups to state their support for transitional and post-Assad governance that is inclusive and secular. The purpose of the declaration was to establish a standard by which opposition groups would be part of the U.S./Russian/U.N.-sponsored negotiation process. And while we believe that this process is unlikely to yield results at the moment, the Riyadh Declaration can serve as a useful guideline going forward for vetting the Syrian armed and political opposition for future U.S. support.

The declaration provides a political platform that is applicable to building acceptable, non-ideologically extremist governance structures in opposition-controlled areas of Syria, while also providing a roadmap for transitional governance in Syria in the aftermath of the conflict. Members agreed to an overarching governance structure for Syria that was pluralistic, supported administrative decentralization, and whose members were chosen by free and fair elections.<sup>92</sup> Parties to the Riyadh Declaration also stated their support for maintaining the current security structures of the Syrian state, with

the provision that these security structures be internally reorganized. The declaration also rejects the presence of foreign fighters.

The Southern Front's political platform might also serve as a model. That platform includes respect for sectarian and ethnic minority rights, the rejection of religious extremism, and protection of all Syrians' rights to determine their country's representative government. Also included in the Southern Front's covenant is a process whereby the armed opposition coalition's constituent groups would slowly transition into local security forces, akin to a gendarmerie, as the conflict in their region winds down. Although still a work in progress, the Southern Front's political platform, in conjunction with the Riyadh Declaration, are good starting points for building out an alternative governance model to the sharia court system that ideological extremists within the armed opposition are seeking to propagate.

## Support Municipal Councils

The United States should support and fund local municipal councils as the essential governance building block that complements U.S. strategy to arm local actors and over time help them coalesce into regional governing bodies. It should ensure this aid is closely coordinated with lethal aid and enable these local councils to govern more effectively than extremist groups. Syrian opposition governance structures, such as local municipal councils, are frontline actors in building the future Syria and can be the venues through which ideological extremist actors in the Syrian opposition are marginalized. Local municipal councils administer the basic functions of government throughout rebel-ruled Syria, most of which are secular, rooted in the sociocultural and sociopolitical dynamics of the local area, and are not actively seeking to establish a sharia state as envisioned by prominent jihadist theorists.<sup>93</sup> Part of U.S. aid to the Syrian opposition includes support to local governance councils. This should continue to be a primary piece of U.S. efforts and should be expanded, including greater support for Syrian opposition media organizations to counter the messaging of extremist groups. As more acceptable forces seize hold and govern broader swaths of territory, the United States should also incentivize these municipal concerns to form broader regional governing bodies. This process would be similar to the coalescing process this report recommends in Chapter 2 for encouraging the consolidation of the armed opposition. Importantly, it should also be carefully coordinated with American support to the armed opposition to ensure the two efforts



*Sustained U.S. support for local councils, like the Kafrnabl Local Council in Idlib governorate pictured here in a 2015 meeting, in opposition-controlled communities is important to outcompete ideological extremist governance structures. (Kafrnabl Local Council/Facebook.)*

are mutually reinforcing.<sup>94</sup> The challenge, especially in northwest Syria, is that these municipal councils operate in parallel to, and frequently interact with, local sharia court systems, which in theory are supposed to focus mostly on personal status laws such as marriage, death, and inheritance issues. The sharia court systems are not supposed to determine how the rebel-ruled areas are to be governed.<sup>95</sup> However, in many areas of opposition-controlled Syria, the local sharia court systems are the only venue where ideological extremist organizations will arbitrate disputes with more ideologically moderate organizations.<sup>96</sup>

The dynamic of sharia court systems governing more and more of daily life in many rebel-ruled areas of Syria, and the generally stronger military power and influence of extremist organizations in many of these areas, is a major long-term challenge to U.S. Syria policy.<sup>97</sup> The more dominant these courts become and the more they replace other civic governing institutions, the more difficult it will be to marginalize extremists in these areas.<sup>98</sup> This challenge is especially prevalent in northwestern Syria where Jabhat al-Nusra and its close and continuing ally, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, and several smaller Sunni ideological extremist organizations, are powerful players.

In northeastern Syria U.S. influence is significant given its strong support for the Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>99</sup> This is an opportunity for the United States to leverage its escalating, and likely long-term, presence in the



Kurdish-led region in northeastern Syria, to work closely with the Kurds, Arabs, and other ethnic and sectarian groups in this region of the country to build out effective, inclusive, and resilient local governance.<sup>100</sup> The biggest challenge will be how to work proactively with Turkey and the Syrian Kurds to determine how the Kurdish-majority Rojava (western Kurdistan) region interacts with its neighbors and the rest of Syria. ISIS has actively sought to utilize Arab-Kurdish ethnic animosities in northeastern Syria to recruit and mobilize Arab fighters, and therefore building inclusive governance there should be an overarching objective.<sup>101</sup>

### **Replacing ISIS with a sustainable alternative will require a simultaneously inside-out and outside-in approach to establishing local governance.**

The strategically important Manbij Pocket, west of the Euphrates River and east of Aleppo along the Syrian-Turkish border, is a primary example of how the local sociopolitical realities will make it difficult for the United States and Turkey to agree on governance and control structures.<sup>102</sup> Although a majority of the population in the Manbij Pocket is either ethnic Arab or Turkmen, whose armed groups are generally backed by Turkey in the area around Manbij, there is a significant native Kurdish population there that identifies with the SDF.<sup>103</sup> As much as possible, the United States and Turkey will need to coordinate with each other, and then with their local partners, to find a compromise solution that allows a multi-ethnic governance administration in these areas. The area should not fall solely under the control of the Kurds, and it should also not be left entirely to the other, non-Kurdish, primarily Turkish-backed armed opposition coalition either.

The most difficult area of territory in which to execute this approach will be eastern Syria and western Iraq, where ISIS retains its position as the authoritative power broker.<sup>104</sup> It has brutally crushed incipient tribal revolts against it, while simultaneously providing significant social benefits to the atomized tribal groups organized on the village and district levels.<sup>105</sup> The longer ISIS has to entrench its sociopolitical ties into the local population, particularly local tribal structures and tribal youth, and to root out opposition networks, the more difficult it will be for the coalition to support alternative governance to ISIS.<sup>106</sup> The counter-ISIS forces in eastern Syria and Western Iraq, or the more numerous anti-ISIS armed

opposition groups that are acceptable to the United States but which have been displaced from eastern Syria and western Iraq, are not currently in any position to build an alternative governance structure to ISIS.<sup>107</sup> Such alternatives, in the first days after ISIS is removed, may appear to be “occupying” armies.<sup>108</sup> Relying on anti-ISIS armed opposition groups that have been displaced from eastern Syria and western Iraq to provide a vanguard security force, in cooperation with local tribal militias, may also be difficult. The challenge with these groups in eastern Syria and western Iraq is that they may carry with them the stigma of abetting ISIS’ rule.<sup>109</sup>

Therefore, replacing ISIS with a sustainable alternative will require a simultaneously inside-out and outside-in approach to establishing local governance. Councils consisting of community leaders currently displaced and living in areas of Syria that are outside of ISIS’ control, Baghdad, and the Kurdistan Regional Government should be established to interact with the clear-and-hold forces made up of locally displaced fighters. At the same time, this strategy should also leverage local networks of armed actors and activists who have remained in ISIS territory.<sup>110</sup> As American partners seize a foothold in eastern Syria and apply greater pressure on ISIS, the United States should look to sustain support for a networked rebellion against ISIS throughout its territory.<sup>111</sup> This will require not just the United States but also regional partners such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates to leverage their relationships with the local tribes in these territories.<sup>112</sup>

### **Engage in Iraqi Politics**

The United States must remain heavily engaged in Iraqi politics and continue to try to bring the various sectarian parties together. Over the long term, it can leverage the creation of a Sunni hold force to increase the possibility of a power-sharing outcome between Baghdad and the Sunni minority. There will be no acceptable end-state in Iraq until the country’s fractious national politics and ongoing communal warfare are resolved to the satisfaction of the Iraqi people. While it is highly preferable that Iraq remains a single state, even with devolved federal regions such as the Iraqi Kurds now enjoy, that is not the only acceptable end-state to resolve the ISIS challenge in Iraq. Although the actual contours of Iraq’s end-state are still to be determined, what is clear is that the United States will need to be actively engaged diplomatically, with all of Iraq’s communities, in order to help them resolve the internal political challenges.

Iraqi Sunnis want guarantees from the United States that if they assist in the anti-ISIS campaign it will not abandon them to face Tehran's wrath, via Baghdad, as happened after the Anbar Awakening. Iraqi Sunnis are too frequently branded broadly as being ISIS by some of the most sectarian actors in Baghdad, including the predominantly Shia Hashd Shaabi militias, and are genuinely concerned whether Baghdad will ever allow them a federal region, with their own local security forces, to administer and protect their areas. Baghdad's refusal to authorize a National Guard system for Iraqi Sunni areas, while continuing to allow the Hashd Shaabi to be the primary security forces in many parts of the country, is a strong signal to the Sunnis that their interests will not be addressed.<sup>113</sup>

The United States should continue to pursue a political end-state in Iraq that emphasizes cooperation and inclusivity among Iraq's sectarian and ethnic communities. It should also pressure Baghdad to allow for Iraqi Sunnis to have greater self-government. But this will only be possible if there are effective Sunni-led forces that can control western Iraq and be leveraged to build local governance structures — as the Kurds have in the north. This will then allow the Sunnis to negotiate from a stronger position as they try to come to political power-sharing agreements that address their grievances as part of a more integrated Iraqi government.

**If the United States is more deeply invested in addressing the conflict and takes the steps outlined in this report, it should be able to get America's European and Arab partners to buy into this end-state.**

Iran will continue to be a major, if not the most decisive, actor in Iraq, and a great deal of Iraq's internal stability will depend on some tough choices being made in Tehran over the shape of a future Iraq that is acceptable to Iran. The Iranians, and the IRGC in particular, must choose whether they want a cohesive, if decentralized, pluralistic, and relatively stable state on Iran's border where it maintains a significant, although not decisive influence. Or Iran can work toward the continuation of a fractured Shia-dominated state where it has greater influence but will likely remain an active safe haven for powerful Sunni jihadist groups that will seek to target Iran and its interests

Other long-term issues that have become even more difficult to resolve since the ascension of ISIS include: the future status of Kirkuk, now under Iraqi Kurdish control; overcoming corruption and other governance issues causing widespread discontent in Iraq's civil society; the fair distribution of the country's oil revenue; resettling displaced populations; and minority rights. KRG independence is also looming over the horizon, and already there have been fierce clashes between Peshmerga forces and Shia militias in areas of Iraq, such as around Kirkuk and in the eastern Diyala governorate, that foreshadow the battle between the KRG and the Iranian-backed Shia militias over what additional territory should be incorporated into the Kurdish state.<sup>114</sup> The United States should continue to push all sides to settle these issues peacefully through a negotiated agreement. But it is not at all clear if that is possible or ever will be.

## **Facilitate A Negotiated Agreement to End the Syrian Civil War**

Over the long term, after reshaping the situation on the ground, the United States can help facilitate a negotiated agreement that ends the Syrian Civil War and leaves in place a unitary but highly decentralized Syrian state. If the United States is able to pursue the approach outlined in this report, it can, after some time, push for a sustainable and acceptable political settlement where extremists are marginalized in a future Syria. This will require years of empowering and consolidating moderate Syrian armed opposition groups, increasing military support, shifting the dynamics with outside actors, and focusing on local governance structures. Such a settlement would turn Syria into a decentralized state. Each region, which could include a Kurdish-majority area in the northeast, areas that are now under armed opposition control (including those areas that are taken from ISIS but do not fall to the Assad regime), and the successor state to Assad in western-central Syria, would each have their own local security forces and a governing agreement would need to be reflective of that reality.

The key will be how to convince all of the major actors that such an outcome is possible and acceptable. If the United States is more deeply invested in addressing the conflict and takes the steps outlined in this report, it should be able to get America's European and Arab partners to buy into this end-state. Convincing Turkey to live with a Kurdish-dominated administration on parts of its border will be a more difficult challenge. The Russians will likely resist at first and keep pushing for a full Assad regime victory. But once they recognize that the United



*U.S. President Barack Obama and his advisors meet Russian President Vladimir Putin and his advisors to discuss developments in the civil war and the counter-ISIS campaign after the Russian intervention in Syria on September 29, 2015. A negotiated solution to the Syrian Civil War will be difficult without Russian pressure on the Assad regime. (The Kremlin)*

States is more deeply committed to tilting the balance of power on the ground, a power-sharing system where extremists are marginalized and a successor statelet to the Assad regime remains part of Syria should be acceptable. It will be more difficult for the Iranians to accept such an outcome, but if the Russians come around the Iranians may have no choice.

Finally, the hardest to convince will be the Syrian parties to the conflict themselves — both the regime and the opposition. The most difficult issue will be the status of Bashar al Assad. His regime's deplorable actions are a violation of every acceptable international norm, and were a major contributor to ISIS' rise. Given this history, it is hard to imagine a power-sharing agreement acceptable to all parties where Assad is not required to leave — even if it is a gradual transition. But ultimately this is not a decision the United States can make. If a solution that includes Assad can be found that is acceptable to the warring parties, the United States should not stand in the way.

## Maintain the Territorial Integrity of Iraq and Syria

Maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria should be the preferable outcome, but if it is not possible the United States should be willing to adjust. There are many reasons to prefer that the territorial integrity of both Iraq and Syria are maintained. Breaking up these states risks even greater violence if other actors across the Middle East see this as an opportunity to begin redrawing lines. Partition along sectarian lines has also often led to ethnic cleansing and forced migration, as it did in the case of Pakistan and India in 1948.<sup>115</sup> And partition could cause new and intensive violence as different states struggle for control of contested territory — in Kirkuk, for example, where the Kurdistan Regional Government would likely clash with the Shia Iraqi state. It is also questionable whether some of the newly formed states would be viable, especially Sunni Iraq, which would have few natural resources. And if this breakup led to the declaration of an independent Kurdistan in northeastern Syria, it would raise very serious concerns for Turkey, who views such a move as a direct threat to its territorial integrity.<sup>116</sup>

For all these reasons a breakup should be avoided if at all possible. Many options that retain existing national boundaries, but that still devolve significant power to the local level, are available. However, preventing the dissolution of Iraq and Syria should not be prioritized over destroying the ISIS proto-state and establishing sustainable local governance in its place. This means being willing to take risks to push the Shia-dominated Iraqi government to arm Sunnis, and even considering going more directly to the Sunnis if that is the only option for building a Sunni hold force in Iraq. It also means being willing to continue to take risks in arming various regional opposition groups in Syria and Iraq, even as such steps lead to the devolution of authority away from the center.

Moreover, it may be impossible to keep Iraq and Syria together. The Kurdistan Regional Government is already indicating that it may soon declare independence.<sup>117</sup> It may be impossible to get the various factions of the Syrian Civil War to agree on a political solution. Or all factions might decide that they prefer to partition the country. The United States should be open to such a solution if it works for the parties involved, but it should continue to pursue the preferred outcome of maintaining the unity of Iraq and Syria, even if it is through a highly decentralized governance system.

# **CONCLUSION**

**Mitigate the Risks and Look Beyond  
Iraq and Syria**

**R**olling back ISIS' gains in Iraq and Syria and establishing effective local security structures to replace it with a sustainable alternative will take years. Indeed, even pursuing this strategy, it may be impossible to achieve the ideal desired end-state — one where ISIS and other extremist territorial control in Iraq and Syria is eliminated and replaced with local forces acceptable to the United States, its partners, and the local population. And given the deep divisions in Iraq and Syria, it may not be possible to get to political power-sharing arrangements that are acceptable to all sides. Therefore, it is vital that the United States and its international partners also have a strategy to degrade ISIS' ability to threaten the United States that does not hinge solely on other actors reconciling in these thorny, seemingly intractable conflicts.

**An effective risk-mitigation strategy requires looking beyond Iraq and Syria at ISIS' other facets including its governorates in other countries, transnational networks, and inspired adherents.**

An effective risk-mitigation strategy requires looking beyond Iraq and Syria at ISIS' other facets including its governorates in other countries, transnational networks, and inspired adherents. All of these elements of ISIS would be significantly handicapped by the destruction of the caliphate, but in the meantime they need to be managed, degraded, and diminished. This global approach should focus on two primary objectives. First, the United States must prevent new ISIS safe havens from forming elsewhere that could act as a substitute for Iraq and Syria. Second, it should diminish the ability of ISIS' transnational network to recruit, train, and inspire attackers who would conduct operations against the United States and its partners. We briefly touch on both of these elements below, though a more comprehensive approach to this challenge is beyond the scope of this effort.

### Prevent New Safe Havens

Most of ISIS' governorates operate in weak states that are experiencing jihadist revolutions or civil wars. Despite the focus on taking territory, ISIS governorates also include clandestine terrorist organizations and insurgent

groups able to occupy but not govern territory. Direct action will remain necessary in numerous ISIS theaters to neutralize potential threats and sever links between ISIS leaders in Iraq and Syria and their governorates by targeting key nodes between the two. These types of operations will require increased military access from various established and would-be partners. The Obama administration is already in the process of augmenting U.S. counterterrorism posture across the globe and determining where additional military bases or "lily pads" across parts of Middle East, Africa, and Asia might be located to be enable these types of operations.

Outside of Iraq and Syria, ISIS' Libya franchise is furthest along in the process of becoming a new potential proto-state. It holds a strip of territory centered on the central coastal city of Sirte and has mobilized 4–6,000 fighters.<sup>118</sup> Similar to its moves in Iraq and Syria, in Libya ISIS is seizing terrain and constructing governance structures in the presence of vacuums brought on by a civil war that has prevented a unified, Libyan-led military response. There is also evidence of close coordination between ISIS' leadership in Libya and the organization's core caliphate, and it is a likely fall-back base for senior ISIS leaders in the event they lose their base in Iraq and Syria.<sup>119</sup> Libya is proximate to Europe and important and vulnerable North African countries such as Tunisia. And Libya also has significant amounts of oil and gas, which can be used to fund and sustain ISIS operations. If left unaddressed, this safe haven could eventually develop a similar capacity and inspirational appeal as the one in Iraq and Syria, or act as a substitute.

Ultimately, the problems facing Libya are not all that dissimilar than those facing Iraq and Syria and therefore require a similar response. The United States and its European partners should work as much as they can with the UN-backed national unity government and the Libyan armed forces. But for the time being it will also be necessary for the United States, and its partners ideally working with NATO, to provide more direct military support to local ISIS-fighting militias that are a central part of the security structure. The United States should play a central role in mobilizing the international community and leading planning, but this effort should rely heavily on France, the United Kingdom, and Italy, which have already taken the lead. The United States should provide support through an increased tempo of air strikes and counter-network actions. But if U.S. assets are stretched thin, first priority must go to Syria and Iraq. Finally, as in Syria and Iraq, greater U.S. involvement should come with a concerted effort to coordinate external efforts. U.S. military assistance targeted at



counterterrorism and border security should be prioritized to support bordering states, such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Algeria. As the only remaining possible success story of the Arab Spring, Tunisia should receive special attention. The United States and its European partners should also leverage their increased investment, to get greater buy-in from regional actors such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Turkey, which are all backing opposing militias and political camps in Libya, to put more effort into achieving a unity government that can work toward displacing and replacing ISIS.

Sinai (Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis), the Lake Chad region (Boko Haram), and Afghanistan/Pakistan (Islamic State of Khorasan Province) represent additional examples of ISIS' insurgencies, but these have not achieved the civil and military authority to gain a monopoly on violence in the areas in which they operate, and their ties to ISIS-central are weaker. The challenge with addressing these insurgencies is pursuing effective strategies that ensure they do not become havens from which to threaten the United States, while avoiding getting deeply engaged in costly counterinsurgency efforts around the globe. The United States should prioritize its level of investment in these efforts based on a combination of: a) how receptive local partners are to U.S. involvement; b) the country's importance to U.S. interests beyond simply the ISIS threat; and c) the level of the ISIS threat. This framework leads to an approach where the United States maintains the most significant investment in Afghanistan, where it has a long history and a partner looking for continued support; a more modest level of investment in Egypt, where U.S. interests are certainly engaged but there is much less of a demand from the Egyptian government; and finally in the Lake Chad region, where U.S. interests are least engaged and the direct threat from Boko Haram to the United States is relatively limited.

The Balkans, Southeast Asia, North Africa, and the Gulf Cooperation Council remain fully in control of their territory but have a history of vulnerability, and there have been signs of potential ISIS attempts to establish toeholds in these areas. The United States should continue to prioritize investments in intelligence, law enforcement, and building partner capacity to counter terrorist threats with these stable but vulnerable friends.

## Counter the Transnational Network in Europe and the United States

In addition to its governorates, ISIS boasts transnational networks undergirded by the glut of foreign fighters who flocked to Syria. The growth of social media combined

with the greater ease of travel into war zones has increased the capacity of ISIS to recruit adherents in the West, train and indoctrinate them in Syria and Iraq, and then deploy them to their home countries to execute major attacks such as those in Paris and Brussels. It has also enabled ISIS to inspire homegrown terrorists, such as the December 2015 attack in San Bernardino. Tackling this problem requires more effective counter-radicalization programming to detect and stop the process, and more effective intelligence and law enforcement actions to stop the movement of foreign fighters.

The radicalization process is very localized; pockets of extremism appear not in entire countries but in specific communities. For example, the Molenbeek neighborhood in Brussels or the Somali community in Minneapolis, which became a recruiting ground for al-Shabaab.<sup>120</sup> At some point in the radicalization process, an individual needs to go from being merely inclined to pursue this pathway to being activated and convinced. Most of the time the people who do the convincing know the recruit and are often peers.

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This problem therefore requires a localized community-based response. It should offer non-law enforcement alternatives for parents, friends, teachers, and others to raise flags with a community organization without fear that this will lead to an immediate resort to law enforcement. To take one example, the World Organization of Resource Development and Education (WORDE) has launched such a model and is attempting to replicate it in major cities across the United States.<sup>121</sup> The approach is based on building a network of adult community leaders who then receive training and information on how to spot trouble signs, the resources available to deal with such a situation, and assistance with professional intervention. It is grounded in a local history of dealing with previous minority or immigrant groups that also felt

alienated by society, often leading them to extremism. The U.S. government should stay out of the business of establishing these types of organizations. But it can expand federal funding and play a facilitating role by supporting training of organizational leaders, bringing these types of organizations together to share best practices, and help set common standards and strategies.

In the online domain, efforts focus heavily on taking down extremist content as quickly as possible, as well as finding and suspending key accounts of Syria- and Iraq-based ISIS online leadership, which coordinates messaging and sets the agenda that ISIS followers then echo to spread the word.<sup>122</sup> A second effort has focused on developing targeted counter-radicalization content that hits the desired audience. There is no shortage of such content, but the challenge is getting it to the right audience. In the private sector, the large majority of online advertising dollars goes not to generating content but to digital advertisers that have become so capable of using tools developed by social media companies to segment and target a desired audience. More emphasis should be placed on this targeting and less on content.

**The goal of a U.S. strategy in Iraq and Syria should be to eliminate the ISIS proto-state, taking away a safe haven for Islamic extremists and reducing ISIS' claim to be the vanguard of a global movement.**

Beyond community counter-radicalization efforts, there comes a time when individuals have become radicalized enough that they are an imminent threat. This is when the problem shifts from a societal challenge to a law enforcement and intelligence challenge. Since the 9/11 attacks the United States has made great strides in breaking down the silos that exist between law enforcement and intelligence agencies to build integrated databases, which have made it much more effective at stopping potential terrorists. And the more likely sources of attack in the United States are individuals inspired by ISIS but acting on their own. But still, U.S. homeland security efforts must remain a priority.

Given its geographic proximity to the Middle East and much larger Muslim population, Europe is in a much more challenging situation. The Europeans have also struggled to integrate Muslim immigrants, as failing to do so effectively causes greater alienation and a higher rate

of radicalization.<sup>123</sup> And Europe has a much more difficult task of sharing intelligence and building common databases than in the United States. Indeed, there have been numerous examples in the case of the Paris and Brussels attacks where lack of information sharing, or lack of action after information was shared, failed to halt the plots. This is because some of the countries with more effective intelligence agencies fear jeopardizing sources and methods by sharing with other members of the EU who are less so, but it is also the result of a lack of investment by some European countries in law enforcement and intelligence personnel. And there are also concerns about privacy and common standards across the 27 members of the EU.

European states, especially those most vulnerable, will need to strengthen their ability to collect, analyze, and share information, and the United States can assist them in that process. Moreover, information-sharing forums in Europe are largely optional; they need to be mandatory. And if there are major concerns about sources and methods, then perhaps the E3 (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) should consider a series of information-sharing and integration steps that might apply to a small group of important or vulnerable players. Promoting and enhancing the use of open source intelligence platforms could help overcome a significant number of these classification problems and could also reduce reliance on foreign intelligence organizations. The United States and Europe can also consider a deeper dialogue to break down some of the impediments that inhibit cooperation between them — most notably European concerns about privacy and about how the United States would use information shared by Europe about its citizens.<sup>124</sup> And as part of this effort, the United States should also increase its intelligence presence in Europe in order to promote better intelligence sharing and to establish a working-level relationship between American and European intelligence professionals.

## Back to the Caliphate

Ultimately, eliminating the ISIS proto-state is a complicated and daunting task, and there are numerous risks associated with the approach we propose. Extremist groups may be too deeply entrenched in Iraq and Syria. It could prove impossible to come to agreement with external actors such as Iran and Russia. Both Iraq and Syria have deep-seated internal divisions making it impossible to reach a negotiated outcome. Even if political settlements do take hold in Syria and Iraq, divisions will remain, both inside and outside those

countries. Differing religious, ethnic, and tribal groups will continue to have strong political differences. Even if they are able to resolve those differences mostly without resorting to violence, ideological extremists may still be able to exploit those differences for their benefit and gain support from disenfranchised Sunni communities.

Still, the goal of a U.S. strategy in Iraq and Syria should be to eliminate the ISIS proto-state, taking away a safe haven for Islamic extremists and reducing ISIS' claim to be the vanguard of a global movement. Islamic extremist terrorism will remain a problem, however, as will regional tensions that may flare into conflict. In the midst of these enduring challenges, the United States must exercise strategic patience. It must be willing to use national power including military power, decisively to secure America's interests. However, the United States cannot "solve" the underlying problems in Iraq and Syria. It must seek instead to manage the security challenges of the region in ways that secure U.S. interests, but at levels of commitment that are sustainable for the long term.

And in the end, even if not all American objectives are met in Iraq and Syria, the plan that we propose is likely to improve the situation over time. At worst it will continue to reduce ISIS territorial control, empower more moderate actors, increase U.S. ability to influence events in Syria and Iraq, and do so with a military investment that is proportional to U.S. national interests. At best, it will accelerate our progress toward the overarching goal of defeating ISIS.

## Endnotes

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96. Jabhat al-Nusra tolerates parallel court systems as part of its politically and religiously pragmatist approach to coalition building within the broader rebel movement, and works particularly through the Jaysh al-Fateh (Army of Conquest) coalition that controls significant areas of Idlib governorate. State collapse in rebel-held areas eviscerated nearly all forms of governance, and the heavily Jabhat al-Nusra influenced, Jaysh al-Fateh coalition utilizes a system of Sharia courts to set the foundation of a state as advocated by jihadist theorists in its areas of control. Jaysh al-Fateh’s governance framework accommodates the natural desire for order and offers an arbitration mechanism for addressing grievances among different rebel actors in opposition-controlled areas under its jurisdiction. The Jaysh al-Fateh model actively seeks to build governance in rebel-held areas that positions the coalition, and Jabhat al-Nusra and its close allies such as Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, as the vanguard of the broader revolutionary movement. Jaysh al-Fateh’s governance model addresses a wide range of quotidian concerns inside of opposition-controlled areas, including battlefield disputes, civil conduct, and other livelihood matters away from the front lines. Jaysh al-Fateh is working to position itself as a disciplined arbiter that is capable of tackling social matters with the same competency that it adjudicates disputes among armed factions, supporting jihadist activities against the Assad regime and building community cover for trans-national jihadist networks. For more on the function of the Jabhat al-Nusra influenced Jaysh al-Fateh system of governance, see Corri Zoli and Emily Shneider, “Shari’a Courts Move to the Battlefield: Jabhat al-Nusra Opens a Legal Front in the Syrian Civil War,” *Harvard Law School National Security Journal*, February 3, 2014), <http://harvardnsj.org/2014/02/sharia-courts-move-to-the-battlefield-jabhat-al-nusra-opens-a-legal-front-in-the-syrian-civil-war/>.
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98. The judicial mosaic in rebel-held areas is fraught with competition between rival factions, though powerful jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and its principal ally Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, working through Jaysh al-Fateh, have strong influence in northwestern Syria. This competition is best characterized by the existence of rival judicial courts in Aleppo, namely, the Jabhat al-Nusra-backed Sharia Authority and the Integrated Judicial Council – both of which administered Sharia law in Aleppo before their intended merger collapsed in December 2013. Heavy clerical presence diminished the role of secular civilian judges whose authority was superseded by religiously aligned jurists backed by armed Islamist groups. Indeed, the absence of a uniform legal code has led to independent application of sentences, punishments, and rulings on all matters of civil life to the benefit of the most powerful factions in rebel-held areas. See “Taqrir mara’iy ‘an Majlis al-Qada’ al-mushkil fi madina Idlib [Visual Report on the Formative Judiciary Council in Idlib City],” Harakat Ahrar al-Sham YouTube page, September 26, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLX2zd19elw&feature=youtu.be>; Asaad Hanna, “Syria’s Sharia Courts,” *Al Monitor*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/syria-extremist-factions-sharia-courts-aleppo-idlib.html>; Mattieu Aikins, “A Tale of Two Courts,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 2013, <http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/a-tale-of-two-courts/>; and Neil MacFarquhar, “A Battle for Syria, One Court at a Time,” *The New York Times*, March



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During the closing weeks of May 2016, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) declared control of Rutba in Anbar province though the adjoining territory remained contested at the completion of this map. Updated versions indicate the ISF in full control of the town in June, 2016. Thomas Van Linge, “The Situation in Iraq,” June 1, 2016, [http://www.mediafire.com/convkey/cba7/6hfrz89iybbzhy6zg.jpg?size\\_id=d](http://www.mediafire.com/convkey/cba7/6hfrz89iybbzhy6zg.jpg?size_id=d)





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