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POLICY BRIEFING

May 2014

# DYNAMIC STALEMATE:

## SURVEYING SYRIA'S MILITARY LANDSCAPE

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# Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| ATGM | Anti-tank guided missile |
| CT | Counterterrorism |
| CW | Chemical weapon |
| FSA | Free Syrian Army |
| IRGC | Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps |
| ISIS | Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham |
| MANPADS | Man-portable air defense systems |
| NDF | National Defense Force |
| OPCW | Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons |
| OSINT | Open source intelligence |
| PKK | Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan |
| SAA | Syrian Arab Army |
| SNC | National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces |
| SMC | Supreme Joint Military Command Council |
| SRF | Syrian Revolutionaries Front |
| UAV | Unmanned aerial vehicle |
| YPG | Yekîneyên Parastina Gel |

# A Complex Affair

The conflict in Syria has become an intensely complex affair, incorporating overlapping political, religious, sectarian, ethnic, and tribal narratives. The anti-government insurgency currently involves approximately 100,000-120,000 fighters—roughly 7,000-10,000 of whom are non-Syrian nationals—divided among over 1,000 distinct armed units.[1] A majority of these factions are further organized into an assortment of coalitions, fronts, and temporary local alliances known as 'military operations rooms.' Meanwhile, government forces—principally the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)—have both encouraged and adapted to the war's sectarian overtones, primarily deploying Shia and Alawi units in front-line operations alongside increasingly professionalized paramilitaries and Shia militias composed largely of foreign fighters. All the while, both sides receive considerable levels of support from foreign states, organizations, and individuals.

The foregoing refers only to the dynamic of Sunni militias fighting against the Syrian government. The conflict, however, is by no means two-dimensional. Other elements include, but are not limited to, the role of the Kurdish autonomist group, the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, and its armed wings, the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) and Yekîneyên Parastina Jin; the eruption of fighting against the al-Qaeda-disavowed Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS); the interest-specific role of Lebanon-based Hizballah in backing President Bashar al-Assad; the damaging role of frequently incompatible or mutually conflicting policies of opposition-supporting Gulf states; and increasingly evident divisions within the political and military components of the two main Western-backed opposition structures, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (or Syrian National Coalition; SNC) and the Supreme Joint Military Command Council (SMC).

Two-and-a-half years ago, it might have been possible for Western governments to help bring about an accelerated and successful end to the revolution through the formation of a representative opposition structure that both incorporated and helped to unify the armed opposition. Over time, though, the involvement of ever-more actors, and interests, has resulted in escalating brutality, spiraling casualty rates, immense population displacement, and the emergence of what may prove to be unparalleled opportunities for jihadi militancy. This initial failure to act, combined with Assad's proven adaptability and ruthless pursuit of power, now requires Western states to overcome previous miscalculations and current policy stagnation in order to help secure a resolution that best ensures regional stability and international security.

As such, this Policy Briefing aims to provide the reader with a present-day strategic assessment of the conflict in Syria, which itself feeds into a set of specific policy recommendations. This conflict assessment will take the form of several distinct sections outlining the status of the Western-backed opposition, the influence of jihadi militants within the wider opposition dynamic, and the evolving capabilities of pro-government forces. Before delving into this assessment, it is worth outlining and recognizing the wide range of international and local actors involved and their various interests and objectives. Such actors can be loosely divided into two distinct comparative categories: firstly, state and sub-state bodies, and secondly, those either supportive of or opposed to the Assad government.

[1] Based on the author's ongoing calculations since initiating a study on the structure and scale of the anti-government insurgency in early 2013. Data has been compiled and analyzed from a variety of sources, including existing intelligence estimates, public data released by opposition bodies, interviews with insurgent groups, and other existing investigations.

## THE OPPOSITION CAMP

The Syrian opposition currently enjoys the support of a range of state actors. The United States (and its allies in Europe) plays a prominent diplomatic role in facilitating the coming together of opposition-supporting countries under various umbrellas, including the so-called Friends of Syria group. While the United States was initially supportive of an outright opposition victory in Syria through the overthrow of the Assad regime, it recently appears to have adopted a more nuanced strategy based on the realization that a political compromise is the only viable solution to the conflict. As such, the United States is now primarily focused on preventing further regional spillover and destabilization, and on countering the existing—and still growing—threat posed by jihadis, including al-Qaeda. The United States is widely perceived to have adopted a policy of supporting moderate rebel forces only to the extent necessary to induce negotiations capable of resulting in political compromise and a cessation of violence between government and opposition.[2]

Meanwhile, the more determined providers of practical military assistance to the Syrian armed opposition have been regional states, most prominently Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. While all have, over time, adopted differing strategies of opposition support—including the provision of funds and weaponry, as well as the facilitation of cross-border logistics—they all remain determined to precipitate an outright military defeat of the Assad regime. Furthermore, all three states have actively encouraged the formation of overarching opposition structures, such as the political body of the SNC and the military SMC. All three states have been calling for Western military involvement and they were uniformly dismayed when the United States failed to carry out its threat of military action following the chemical weapons attack outside Damascus in August 2013. Nonetheless, there are also several important differences in approach. While Saudi Arabia currently appears to be focusing on re-invigorating moderate armed groups—in broad alignment with U.S. policy interests—Qatar, and to a lesser extent Turkey, remain more supportive of actors in the mainstream Islamist camp (which is distinct from al-Qaeda-type jihadis). Also, while Saudi Arabia remains locked into a political battle with Iran, Qatar and Turkey have chosen to retain constructive relations with the Iranian government. This policy underlines Qatar and Turkey's interests beyond Syria, yet may also represent a hedging of bets on the outcome of the Syrian conflict.

With regard to the armed insurgency inside Syria, a variety of actors play prominent roles. While the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has not represented a distinct military organization for some time, it remains an important umbrella term for those groups and coalitions generally perceived to be acting in the interest of the exiled SNC opposition. There are also a number of politically independent, but largely moderate, rebel alliances, including some that maintain a moderately Islamist undertone (such as Faylaq al-Sham and Jaish al-Mujahideen), which have become natural partners of FSA-branded groups through their shared interests.

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Meanwhile, the Islamic Front—composed of seven groups capable of deploying a total of approximately 50,000-60,000 fighters—is the largest and most militarily powerful alliance in Syria.[3] While it has explicitly called for the establishment of an Islamic state, the Islamic Front in fact represents a relatively

[2] The use of the term 'moderate' armed opposition throughout this paper refers to groups whose military and political objectives, and perception of regional and international relations, are in fitting with traditional Western values, such as religious and ethnic inclusiveness, freedom of speech, and multi-party political representation.

[3] The seven members of the Islamic Front are Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, Alwiya Suqor al-Sham, Liwa al-Tawhid, Jaish al-Islam, Kataib Ansar al-Sham, the Kurdish Islamic Front, and Liwa al-Haq.

broad ideological spectrum. Three of its seven constituent groups (Liwa al-Tawhid, Suqor al-Sham, and Jaish al-Islam) were previously part of the SMC, while another (Ahrar al-Sham) is avowedly Salafi and known to coordinate closely with the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. Both the size and ideological breadth of the Islamic Front makes the alliance a crucial actor in the overall opposition dynamic, as it has the potential to definitively shape the overall ideological direction of the insurgency.

As an al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra's hardline ideology is clear, but since mid-to-late 2012, the group has demonstrated a surprising level of pragmatism in terms of moderating its behavior and limiting its immediate ideological objectives. In keeping with its allegiance to al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra aims, in the long term, to establish an Islamic state in Syria as a stepping stone to liberating Jerusalem and establishing an Islamic Caliphate. In the short term, however, the group is operating at a very local level while paying particular attention to maintaining healthy relations with civilians and moderate rebels. It has also banned the imposition of *hudud* punishments during 'war,' thereby distinguishing itself from the more brutal ISIS, whose extreme behavior and refusal to cooperate with moderate armed groups led to its disavowal by al-Qaeda in February 2014.[4] ISIS now presents itself as an ideologically superior alternative to al-Qaeda within the international jihadi community and it has publicly challenged the legitimacy of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. As such, it has increasingly become a transnational movement with immediate objectives far beyond Iraq and Syria.

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## THE PRO-GOVERNMENT CAMP

President Assad and his regime have benefited from a more or less consistent and unified international support structure. Featuring most prominently in this regard are the governments of both Russia and Iran. Syria, under Bashar and his father Hafez, has long been Iran's closest strategic ally in the region, particularly for its role as a direct conduit for Iranian support to Hizballah in Lebanon. Should the opposition succeed in overthrowing Assad, or in forcing him to step down as part of a political solution, Iran would instantaneously lose this key asset, which would seriously damage its ability to threaten Israel and, by extension, to deter any potential military action against Iranian nuclear facilities in the future. Since the eruption of anti-government protests in Syria in March 2011, Iran has provided the Assad regime with extensive financial credit assistance, as well as with large amounts of military supplies and, perhaps most crucially, with the deployment of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel. The IRGC, and its specialist Quds Force, have been instrumental in training the pro-government militia and paramilitary forces that have been so indispensable in bolstering the Syrian military's ability to fight back against a determined opposition.

Russia has played a similarly crucial role in defending Assad, particularly in terms of its continued sale and provision of weaponry and spare parts to the SAA. This latter aspect of its support is of particular significance as the SAA is predominantly outfitted with Soviet and Russian equipment. Ammunition, spare parts, and even the repair of helicopters in Russia, have represented a critical form of support for the Assad regime. Equally important on the diplomatic level has been Russia's willingness

[4] *Hudud* is one of four categories of disciplinary justice within traditional Islamic law, consisting primarily of capital punishment, amputation, and flogging.

to employ its veto power within the United Nations Security Council to protect the Assad regime from damaging international action under Chapter VII of the UN's charter. Clearly, retaining a solid ally in the heart of the Middle East has proven more important to Russia than avoiding international recrimination. While support for Assad from President Vladimir Putin is likely to continue, it is equally important to recognize Russia's ability to restrain the Syrian government's behavior, as exemplified by its prominent role in forcing Assad to agree to the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles in September 2013.

On the sub-state level, Assad has benefited from the staunch military support of Lebanon-based Hizballah. The party's escalated role in fighting the opposition in western Syria along the Lebanese border since mid-2013 has had a significant impact on the overall course of the conflict. Moreover, Iran, Hizballah, and Iraqi Shia elements have also been instrumental in establishing, training, and in some cases commanding, several Shia pro-government militia groups. These units, along with the paramilitary National Defense Force (NDF) —a civilian, pro-government, paramilitary body established by the Syrian government in November 2012 and subsequently trained by Hizballah (and allegedly Iran's Quds Force)—have provided a crucial manpower boost for the SAA.

# An Unstable Opposition

The moderate Syrian opposition has undergone a series of fundamental changes since Brigadier General Mustafa al-Sheikh first began establishing provincial-level military councils to command and coordinate FSA units in early 2012. The rapid proliferation of independent resistance militias and the Syrian military's divide-and-conquer tactics made an organized opposition center for command and control an operational necessity. As the conflict has dragged on and accompanying violence has steadily escalated, however, the expansion of armed factions and the increased influence of extremists have far outstripped attempts by the moderate opposition to unite these forces within such a structure. Competition for support in the form of funds and weapons—a great deal of which comes via charities and personal networks based out of the Gulf—has further encouraged this overall trend of factionalism and fragmentation.[5]

While the formation on December 7, 2012 of the SMC appeared to herald a period of enhanced coordination across the disparate moderate insurgent landscape, this unity did not last long. By late 2013, the SMC and its Chief of Staff, Brigadier General Selim Idriss, had come to resemble a corporate PR machine involved in the provision of non-military aid and occasional batches of small arms and light weapons.

Meanwhile, political groupings within the SNC and their foreign allies fostered relationships with specific armed opposition groups, reproducing the political factionalism of the SNC within the insurgency. This did little to shore up the SNC's reputation within Syria, however. Many ridiculed exiled SNC representatives for being more familiar with the comforts of five star hotels than the realities of war-torn Syria. Due in no small part to this widespread perception, a large majority of insurgent groups openly opposed the planned Geneva II talks when they began to be discussed in September 2013. The so-called "Aleppo Statement," signed by 11 of the most powerful insurgent organizations on September 24, 2013, rejected the authority of the Western-backed SNC and vehemently condemned the value of Geneva II.

The failure to establish and build a truly unified and representative moderate opposition structure during the early stages of the conflict provided an environment within which Islamist groups—ranging from more moderate units aligned with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to hardline Salafis—could prosper. This reality, combined with the concerted opposition to Geneva II that emerged from groups inside Syria in late 2013, appeared to catalyze a series of significant Islamist consolidations, the first of which came on September 27, 2013 when at least 50 Islamist groups united under the aegis of Muhammad Zahran Alloush, leader of Jaish al-Islam.[6] The most significant, however, was the formation of the Islamic Front on November 22, 2013, whereby seven large Islamist groups united and called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria.[7] Whatever the long-term viability of the Islamic Front's structural unity, the sheer military clout of its 50,000-60,000 fighters makes it a pivotal actor inside Syria.

[5] Author's interview with Elizabeth Dickinson, February 2014. For more detail, see Elizabeth Dickinson, "Playing with Fire: Why Private Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home," Analysis Paper no. 16, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, December 2013.

[6] "Bayan tashkeel Jaish al-Islam (Statement on the formation of Jaish al-Islam)," posted by "Jaish al-Islam," 29 September 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llo4cdlI9gE>.

[7] "Al-'ilan 'an al-Jabha al-Islamiya – akbar tajamu' lil-quwa al-Islamiya fi Suria (Announcement of the Islamic Front – largest grouping of Islamist forces in Syria)," posted by "Islam Sham," 22 November 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0qKSW1iM9M>; "Mithaq al-Jabha al-Islamiya (The Political Charter of the Islamic Front)," The Islamic Front, 22 November 2013, <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0ByBt2sGl4U4hU2lrZGFoeUtkV1k/edit>.

Additional Islamist coalitions, fronts, and umbrella groups have emerged in recent months, including the Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union around Damascus, Jaish al-Mujahideen in Aleppo, and many others. While it took some time for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to generate a discernible military influence on the ground, its Hayat Duru al-Thawra alliance of insurgent units began operating in January 2013 and is now present across several Syrian governorates. More recently, in late 2013 and early 2014, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has been linked to several other armed groups, including the increasingly capable Faylaq al-Sham, which appears to have attracted a notable number of moderate Islamist units under its umbrella.

***As the two most powerful state backers of the opposition, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are often portrayed as responsible for having encouraged and directed the establishment of multi-group alliances.***

As the two most powerful state backers of the opposition, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are often portrayed as responsible for having encouraged and directed the establishment of such multi-group alliances, particularly in late 2013 and early 2014. Similarly, Turkey is likely to have helped facilitate much of this coalition-building, often through tacit acceptance of armed groups using Turkish territory along the border with Syria for logistical and organizational purposes.

These new alliances have had a positive effect on the opposition's military effectiveness, yet have also helped to increase rivalries between different factions, with destabilizing consequences for the wider political opposition. Any political decision or policy implemented by the SNC, for example, stands little chance of effective implementation if it is opposed by the Islamic Front.

Likewise, disagreements between rival political factions backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar were largely responsible for the SNC's split vote on January 18, 2014, which was marginally in favor of attending the Geneva II talks. The Qatar-linked Syrian National Council (not to be confused with the SNC) withdrew two days later, partly due to the Geneva II vote, but also in frustration at Jarba's reelection as SNC president on January 5. These divisions were likely also partially responsible for the dismissal of Qatar-linked Idriss on February 16 from the largely Saudi-backed SNC and SMC leadership in favor of the little-known Saudi-linked commander Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir. This last move undermined SMC unity, with Idriss and 13 SMC provincial commanders renouncing ties to the SNC soon afterward.[8] Despite contentious mediation efforts to settle these divisions—including a series of meetings in early March that ended in a brawl in which Ahmad Jarba was punched three times—the SMC is now effectively split in two, one half loyal to al-Bashir and the other to Idriss.[9]

The exit of Idriss, the West's favored partner, seemingly led to inertia within Western policymaking circles and left Saudi Arabia with considerable influence within the SNC (through SNC President Ahmed Jarba and Minister of Defense Assad Mustafa) and the SMC (through al-Bashir and his deputy Haitham Afeisi). The return of the Qatar-linked Syrian National Council to the SNC in mid-March may, in theory, restore some balance to the overall structure, yet is ultimately likely to generate a sense of total paralysis within the organization. The SNC will face a key test when Jarba stands for reelection in July.

[8] "Ra'is hi'at al-arkan al-'Amma al-liwa' Selim Idriss yudali bi biyan ijtima'hu ma' qadat al-Jabhat wa al-majalis al-'askariya (Joint Chiefs Chairman General Selim Idriss announcing his meeting with leaders of Military Fronts and Councils)," posted by "Al-Maktab al-'Ilami li-Hi'at al-Arkan al-'Ama," 19 February 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Modr_UXqxo0&feature=youtu.be>.

[9] Susannah George, "Throwing Windmills at the Wyndham," *Foreign Policy*, 20 March 2013, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/20/throwing_windmills_at_the_wyndham_fsa_smc_syria_moderate_opposition_infighting>.

If the United States and Saudi Arabia can resolve their recent differences over regional geo-politics and refocus and align their approaches towards encouraging moderate unity, then the latest period of destabilization may yet be reversed or at least reduced. The increasingly evident reinforcement of moderate insurgent groups and the early April arrival of allegedly Saudi-supplied and American-manufactured anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) in Syria, particularly in the hands of Harakat Hazm—a four-month-old armed group linked to Selim Idriss—may suggest that these perceived Qatari-Saudi and U.S.-Saudi tensions may not be an all-defining reality.[10]

[10] Charles Lister, "American Anti-Tank Weapons Appear in Syrian Rebel Hands," *The Huffington Post*, 11 April 2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/charles-lister/american-anti-tank-weapon_b_5119255.html>.

# Jihadi Dynamics

As has so often been the case in civil conflicts around the world, the drawn-out and brutal conflict in Syria has promoted the growth of extremist actors. Since April-May 2013, Syria has been home to two significant jihadi groups: Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. Jabhat al-Nusra was established in mid-2011 by Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, then a member of the Iraq-based Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). At the time, al-Joulani enjoyed the support of, and funding from, ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, al-Baghdadi later moved to gain influence over the increasingly powerful Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Golani by directly expanding ISI's operations into Syria, forming ISIS in mid-April 2013.

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Despite their shared roots, the two groups have adopted starkly different strategies in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra's comparatively pragmatic, localized, and socially-integrated approach has secured it both al-Qaeda affiliate status and strong levels of popular support—or at least acceptance—inside Syria.[11] ISIS's actions, meanwhile, have left it increasingly perceived as imperious, self-interested, and unconcerned with taking part in a broader revolution. Its consistent brutality and refusal to participate in Islamic-court mediation efforts proposed by the opposition led to its disavowal by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri on February 2, 2014.[12]

Given their different interests and approaches, it was unsurprising, yet extremely significant, that moderate insurgents opened up a front against ISIS in northern and eastern Syria in early January 2014. This new confrontation has had a pronounced impact on the dynamics of the conflict inside Syria. While initial anti-ISIS operations were launched by the SNC-linked Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and the comparatively moderate Jaish al-Mujahideen, the subsequent involvement of the Islamic Front and then Jabhat al-Nusra has led to the near-total isolation of ISIS within the Syrian insurgent theater.

By late January 2014, ISIS had lost control of 28 separate municipalities across Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, al-Raqqa and Deir Ezzor governorates.[13] Rather than suffering total defeats in these positions, however, ISIS strategically redeployed its forces into better-defended and more valuable positions, presumably preparing for its next move. This came on February 2 when a large ISIS force unexpectedly attacked and captured

[11] This has consistently been evidenced by statements of support from moderate opposition groups inside Syria and by civilian demonstrations in support of Jabhat al-Nusra in areas where its influence is particularly strong. When the United States designated Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization in December 2012, anti-government protests took place across Syria in support of the group. The group's stance in opposing the legitimacy of ISIS in Syria has further helped enhanced its status.

[12] Liz Sly, "Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 3 February 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html>.

[13] Charles Lister, "The Anti-Jihadi Revolt in Syria," *Lawfare*, 19 January 2014, <http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/01/the-foreign-policy-essay-charles-lister-on-the-anti-jihadi-revolt-in-syria/>.

[14] "Al-Qaeda breaks link with Syrian militant group ISIL," Reuters, 3 February 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/03/us-syria-crisis-qaeda-idUSBREA120NS20140203>.

[15] "Al-Qaeda splinter ISIS executes civilians as group withdraws from Deir Al Zour," *Zaman al-Wsl*, 11 February 2014, <http://www.zamanalwsl.net/en/news/3658.html>.

[16] "ISIL jihadis retreat in north Syria after ultimatum," Agence France-Presse, 28 February 2014, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/120623>.

the financially valuable Conoco gas field (said to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars per week) from Jabhat al-Nusra and allied tribal forces in Deir Ezzor.[14] This surprise attack was overly bold, however, and prompted a major counter-attack by Islamist militants (including Jabhat al-Nusra), FSA-branded fighters, and local tribesmen, resulting in ISIS's near-total expulsion from the governorate by February 11.[15] Meanwhile, continued pressure against ISIS in northern Syria saw the group withdraw from its positions in northern Aleppo on February 27 and redeploy eastwards, while by March 13 it had completely withdrawn from the northwestern governorates of Latakia and Idlib. This left ISIS in control of parts of eastern Aleppo and, crucially, the key transport routes leading to the jewel in ISIS' crown: the city of al-Raqqa.[16] There, the true face of the organization has since become clear with harsh punishments now being meted out, including the March 22 crucifixion of a man accused of murder.[17]

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Taken in isolation, this concerted pushback against ISIS has been a positive step, especially given its potential for allowing moderate factions (particularly the SRF) to influence power and relational dynamics. As with its predecessor the ISI in Iraq, however, ISIS has demonstrated its capacity to carry out dangerous reprisal attacks. It has declared *takfir* (the act of declaring a Muslim an apostate) on the SNC, SMC, and anyone suspected of links to them. ISIS has been blamed for several car bombings at rival group headquarters, checkpoints, and at the Bab al-Salameh and Bab al-Hawa border crossings with Turkey. Following its dismissal from al-Qaeda on February 2, ISIS was also blamed for the February 23 assassination of a founding member of the Salafi group Ahrar al-Sham and the group's leader in Aleppo, Muhammad Bahaiah (or, Abu Khaled al-Suri), who had an extensive personal history within the highest echelons of al-Qaeda.[18]

Intensifying the situation further, on February 24 Jabhat al-Nusra leader al-Joulani threatened to expel ISIS from all of Syria, and even from Iraq, unless it agreed to join and submit to Islamic arbitration to settle hostilities.[19] The deadline expired on February 29, but senior Jabhat al-Nusra sharia official Abu Abdullah al-Shami clarified on March 4 that his group would continue confronting ISIS in a "defensive" manner.[20] Amid frequent statements deeming each other an illegitimate and un-Islamic force, the two groups and their local affiliates have continued to clash on the ground, most notably in the town of al-Bukamal in Deir Ezzor governorate on April 10 and 11. Four days later, ISIS was blamed for the assassination of Jabhat al-Nusra's leader in Idlib governorate, Abu Muhammad al-Ansari, along with his wife, children, and relatives.[21]

Amid these inter-jihadi hostilities, al-Qaeda has reinforced the status of Jabhat al-Nusra as its official affiliate in Syria and encouraged the isolation of ISIS. Given this, along with the relative acceptance Jabhat al-Nusra enjoys in Syria, it is extremely unlikely Jabhat al-Nusra would be attacked or isolated by the wider opposition movement. While ISIS does retain the support of a number of small and localized

[17] Charles Lister, Twitter post, 22 March 2014, <https://twitter.com/Charles_Lister/status/447365661090541568>.
[18] "Senior al-Qaeda commander killed in Syria," Al Jazeera, 24 February 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/senior-al-qaeda-commander-killed-syria-201422317255738147 8.html>.
[19] The submission to an independent Islamic court was one of several conditions proposed by Saudi Salafi cleric and prominent jihadi figure in Syria, Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Moheisini. This initiative was subsequently agreed to, and promoted by all relevant opposition groups, including the Syrian Revolutionary Front, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic Front, Jaish al-Mujahideen, Katibat al-Khadra, Suqor al-Izz, Jaish al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar, and Harakat Sham al-Islam. See "Mubadirat al-Umma (Umma Initiative)," posted by "Dr. Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Moheisini," 23 January 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmYu5kr2zS0>.
[20] "Lu tubayinunahu lil-nas wa la taktumunahu (You Must Make it Clear to the People and Must Not Conceal It)," posted by "Mu'asisat al-Basira," 4 March 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njlyCHa-q7Y>.
[21] A Facebook page purportedly linked to an alleged pro-government military unit known as "QADESH" (https://www.facebook.com/KAADESH) claimed the group's responsibility for the attack on Abu Muhammad al-Ansari. The reliability of this source, however, is highly questionable.

foreign fighter units, Jabhat al-Nusra undoubtedly retains the upper hand. Nonetheless, the continuation of these hostilities into early May appeared to elicit the May 2 release of a detailed statement by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri calling on ISIS to leave Syria (and return to Iraq) and, most significantly, for Jabhat al-Nusra to "stop any infighting" against "the jihadist brothers." In other words, Zawahiri issued an order for his affiliate in Syria to stop fighting ISIS. Given the current levels of antagonism between the two groups, however, it is unlikely that this instruction will result in any discernible changes on the ground. On May 4, Jabhat al-Nusra announced that "as soon as [ISIS] announces the end of its attacks, we will spontaneously stop firing," but that for now, Jabhat al-Nusra was only combating ISIS "where [ISIS] was on the attack." Jabhat al-Nusra's adoption of this defensive posture allows it to continue fighting ISIS so long as its interests are deemed under direct threat.

The opportunity provided to al-Qaeda by the conflict in Syria—where its affiliate has established a solid and seemingly sustainable presence—has led to the arrival of at least five senior al-Qaeda individuals from other areas of the world, and likely several more.[22] There is a distinct possibility that this represents a centralized attempt by al-Qaeda to establish a new base area from which it could one day choose to launch future international operations. In fact, one of these five individuals, Saudi national and wanted al-Qaeda ideologue Abdul Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (also known as Sanafi al-Nasr) may have been instrumental in establishing Jabhat al-Nusra's operational presence inside Lebanon in coordination with the al-Qaeda-linked Abdullah Azzam Brigades.[23]

In all cases, the expansion of extremist groups has impacted Western planning toward opposition forces. Western-backed schemes to provide strategically valuable military support to moderates have long been inhibited by the strong likelihood that such weapons may be sold to or shared with extremists, as occurred in early 2013 when Croatian anti-tank weapons and grenade launchers sent by Saudi Arabia to moderate forces in southern Deraa governorate quickly ended up in the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra.[24] Recently, a small number of these weapons have made their way into the hands of ISIS militants in Iraq's Anbar province.[25]

[22] These are Abdul Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (also known as Sanafi al-Nasr), Mohsen al-Fadhli, Abu Hamam al-Suri, Abu Firas al-Suri, and Abu Khaled al-Suri.

[23] Sharikh—a third cousin of Osama bin Laden, known al-Qaeda ideologue, and number 12 on Saudi Arabia's 85 most wanted list—was widely thought to have had close relations with former Abdullah Azzam Brigades leader Saleh al-Qaraawi (currently under house arrest in Saudi Arabia) and his successor Majid bin Muhammad al-Majid (who was detained in Lebanon on December 27, 2013 and died of kidney failure on January 4, 2014). Sharikh's arrival in Syria in the fall of 2013 coincided with Jabhat al-Nusra's expansion of operations into Lebanon in coordination with the Abdullah Azzam Brigades.

[24] C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria With Croatian Arms," *The New York Times*, 25 February 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html?_r=0>.

[25] See, for example, a 90mm M79 Osa anti-tank weapon: Al-Anbar News, Twitter post, 9 March 2014, <https://twitter.com/Alanbar_news/status/442418072985419776>. See also an RBG-6 Multiple Grenade Launcher: Omarz7, Twitter post, 14 February 2014, <https://twitter.com/omarz7/status/434318433535393792>.

# Pro-Government Forces Fight Back

The successful joint SAA-Hizballah offensive to retake al-Qusayr between April and June 2013 marked the start of a determined and focused counter-attack by pro-government forces. This resurgence has concentrated on securing central Damascus and key transport routes: north towards Homs, west to the Alawi heartlands of Tartous and Latakia, and further north to Aleppo. This concerted push back is the result of a substantial organizational, strategic, and tactical restructuring within the SAA, which has allowed it to exert maximum military effort while depending on a reduced loyalist core of SAA personnel, who are now increasingly capable of close coordination with the paramilitary NDF and both Shia and Alawi militias.

Prior to the outbreak of the revolution in Syria, the SAA's total active deployable manpower was estimated at 295,000 personnel.[26] As of April 1, 2014, the SAA had incurred at least 35,601 fatalities,[27] which when combined with a reasonable ratio of 3 wounded personnel for every soldier killed and approximately 50,000 defections,[28] suggests the SAA presently commands roughly 125,000 personnel. This loss of manpower is exacerbated by Syria's long-entrenched problem of having to selectively deploy forces based on their perceived trustworthiness.

During the Brotherhood-led Syrian uprising in 1980-1982, Bashar's father Hafez relied heavily upon Alawi units such as the then-3rd Armored Division and the paramilitary "Defense Companies." Today, whilst fighting a nationwide civil war, Bashar al-Assad suffers from a similar manpower problem, with active military operations relying primarily on key loyalist units such as the Republican Guard, the 4th Armored Division, the Special Forces Command, and elements within the 14th and 15th Mechanized Divisions. To flesh out additional manpower, the SAA typically attaches individual sub-units from less-reliable formations under the command of loyalist components.

The SAA's critical manpower problem has left it consistently unable to sustain intensive offensive operations in more than one strategic region at a time. While the infamously ruthless 'Shabiha' gangs had proven valuable to the government in suppressing protests in 2011, their subsequent role in actual military operations has been minimal. In fact, many Shabiha members are thought to have joined the government-initiated and state-backed NDF, which consists of civilian volunteers trained by Hizballah and also allegedly by Iran's Quds Force. The NDF now constitutes as many as 100,000 personnel,[29] which when combined with Hizballah (which has deployed as many as 3,500-7,000 at any one time) and other pro-government militias (which constitute at least several thousand fighters), has represented a crucial loyalist infantry manpower boost.[30] Moreover, the resulting emphasis on sectarian military and paramilitary mobilization—which reinforces a sense of defensive solidarity within Assad's core loyalist community—has contributed towards the intractable nature of the conflict as a whole, to the regime's benefit.[31]

The government's relatively small number of troops has led it to focus its efforts on areas seen as key to its survival, and to limit the use of ground forces until sustained air and artillery power have softened the area for a ground assault. The general inability to deploy SAA infantry and special operations personnel in multiple theaters at any one time has prioritized encirclement-and-siege tactics, whereby

[26] The Military Balance 2011, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011.
[27] "Akthar min 150 alf Istashhadu wa laqu masra'hum au qutilu mundhu intilaqat al-thawra (Over 150,000 martyred, died or killed since outset of revolution)," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 1 April 2014, <http://www.syriahr.com/index.php?option=com_news&nid=17296&Itemid=2&task=displaynews#.U1OPKidwpah>.
[28] Estimates for SAA defections have varied widely, from 40,000 to 130,000.
[29] Sam Dagher, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad," Wall Street Journal, 26 August 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>.
[30] Author's interview with Phillip Smyth, March 2014.
[31] Steven Heydemann, "Syria's Adaptive Authoritarianism," Project on Middle East Political Science, 12 February 2014, <http://pomeps.

opposition areas are placed under sustained aerial and ground bombardment in order to compel population displacement. Despite conventional counter-insurgency strategy suggestions that the overuse of airpower serves to encourage insurgent escalation and support,[32] the SAA's intensified use of the inordinately destructive barrel bomb (which first appeared in Syria in August 2012[33] and is likely to have since been paired with chlorine gas in April 2014[34]) has become a key component of this force-minimal but effective strategy. Following sustained bombardment and sporadic raids, NDF personnel are often deployed to seize control of territory and flush out any remaining insurgents. Captured areas are often razed to prevent the return of opposition fighters, as frequently occurred in July 2012 and July 2013 around Damascus and in Homs.[35]

This force-minimal strategy empowers key loyalist military units to move sequentially from area to area, carrying out manpower-intensive offensives as needed. The new emphasis on securing localized ceasefires under the guise of providing humanitarian aid has enabled even more frequent shifting of military resources to other areas in need of offensive operations. An example of this came in early 2014, when a series of ceasefires around Damascus allowed government military personnel to redeploy to al-Quneitra and northern Deraa to combat a determined insurgent offensive. Additionally, the notorious Air Force Intelligence Directorate appears to be assuming more of an urban area-control role. In Aleppo, for example, between September 2013 and January 2014 it became the most powerful of all government security bodies, as the number of checkpoints it controlled out of the 22 government-held districts in the city grew from 6 to 10. By comparison, the SAA controlled only six districts in January 2014.[36]

At the same time, Hizballah has acquired an increasingly prominent lead role in commanding SAA forces during key government offensives in Syria. In the 2013 al-Qusayr offensive, its special forces took a command role for the first time, while standard SAA personnel assumed secondary importance. In so doing, Hizballah's emphasis on urban warfare training since the late 2000s received its first test—a successful one. Since then, Hizballah has been deployed more widely across Syria's south, west, and north, in a zonal command structure—focusing primarily on individual localized conflict theaters. The group is also thought to have deployed European mercenaries flown into Beirut and smuggled across the Syrian border,[37] where Hizballah unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) provide an increasingly important reconnaissance capability,[38] particularly in monitoring pro-Syrian opposition strongholds like Arsal, where car bombs destined for Beirut or pro-Hizballah towns in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley are suspected to originate.

***At the same time, Hizballah has acquired an increasingly prominent lead role in commanding SAA forces during key government offensives in Syria.***

From a broader standpoint, the Syrian government and its military apparatus have steadily escalated their tactics in combating the opposition. Between March and December 2011, protests were violently repressed with small arms, while staunchly pro-opposition areas were periodically assaulted by infantry and armor.

[32] Matthew Kocher, Adam Thomas Pepinsky, and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Aerial Bombing and Counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War," American Journal of Political Science 55, no. 2 (April 2011): 1-18.
[33] Eliot Higgins, "The Mystery of the Syrian Barrel Bombs," Brown Moses Blog, 30 August 2012, <http://brown-moses.blogspot.com/2012/08/the-mystery-of-syrian-barrel-bombs.html>.
[34] Eliot Higgins, "Evidence Chlorine Gas Was Used in a Second, Failed, Chemical Attack on Kafr Zita," Brown Moses Blog, 13 April 2014, <http://brown-moses.blogspot.com/2014/04/evidence-chlorine-gas-was-used-in-kafr.html>.
[35] "Razed to the Ground: Syria's Unlawful Neigbourhood Demolitions in 2012-2013," Human Rights Watch, 30 January 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria0114webwcover.pdf>.
[36] "Mapping the conflict in Syria," Caerus Associates, 18 February 2014, <http://caerusassociates.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Caerus_AleppoMappingProject_FinalReport_02-18-14.pdf>.
[37] Antoine Ghattas Saab, "Hizballah channels European mercenaries to Syria," The Daily Star, 21 February 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Feb-21/248012-Hizballah-channels-european-mercenaries-to-syria.ashx#axzz2vG9zqTkL>.
[38] Roi Kais, "Hizballah expanding drone use to Syria and Lebanon," Ynet News, 30 January 2014, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4482951,00.html>.

January 2012 saw the SAA's first employment of artillery, while April 2012 saw it introduce attack helicopters. By August 2012, the SAA had deployed fixed-wing jet aircraft and barrel bombs,[39] and four months later, in December 2012, activists reported the first alleged use of ballistic Scud missiles and chemical substances.[40] Since the chemical weapons attack outside Damascus on August 21, 2013, there is little else the government can do to militarily escalate, which leaves it with few additional threats against the opposition in the future. For now, though, the SAA's effective adoption of force-minimal strategies—combining brutal and often indiscriminate tactics, whilst incorporating Hizballah forces and other militia groups—has proven remarkably successful in ensuring the regime's immediate survival, which by extension damages Western-backed initiatives aimed at securing a political solution.

While the SAA has deployed small UAVs for reconnaissance for some time in the conflict, the appearance of what appeared to be an unarmed version of Iran's first unmanned combat air vehicle, the Shahed-129, over the skies of Damascus on April 10 could potentially indicate a new tool and dynamic to be included in the pro-government military apparatus.[41]

[39] Lt. Col. S. Edward Boxx, USAF, "Observations on the Air War in Syria," Air & Space Power Journal 27, no. 2 (March-April 2013): 147-168.

[40] "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2013," Arms Control, March 2014, <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>; Martin Chulov, "Assad troops fired Scud missiles at Syrian rebels, says US," The Guardian, 12 December 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/12/assad-troops-fired-scuds-syria>.

[41] "Sham reef Dimashq al-Ghouta al-Sharqiya tahliq lil-tayran al-istitla' fi ajwa' al-mintaqa (Eastern Ghouta countryside, Damascus – circling of surveillance plane in the skies of the region)," posted by "SHAAM SNN," 10 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2nb7iajUdI>. For analysis see Jeremy Binnie, "New UAV spotted over Damascus," IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, 13 April 2014, <http://www.janes.com/article/36703/new-uav-spotted-over-damascus>.

# Conflict Assessment

The conflict in Syria contains countless fronts and dozens, if not hundreds, of localized theaters of battle. Taken together, neither the opposition, the Assad regime, the Kurds, nor the jihadis can be said to be "winning." While one side may make gains in one area, the other invariably secures a victory in another.

Sustained insurgent gains in the southern governorates of al-Quneitra and Deraa in March 2014—involving large numbers of FSA-aligned groups coordinating closely with Salafis from Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra—underline that the south retains considerable potential for the opposition. The leading role played by certain moderate groups in Deraa—including Alwiyat al-Omari—along with the external provision of Chinese HJ-8 ATGMs, implies that this latest push may be at least partially supported by opposition-backing states. The opposition's gains in the south, combined with a recent insurgent offensive in northern Latakia and small but notable gains around Aleppo city and in Idlib and Hama governorates, underline the continued capacity of rebel fighters to impose costs on the government. Moreover, the appearance in April and May of small numbers of American-manufactured BGM-71 TOW ATGMs among newly established FSA organizations in Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia and Deraa governorates and new claims regarding an alleged recent expansion of U.S. training of FSA fighters abroad, suggests the coming months will be decisive for the future of this conflict. [42]

At the same time, though, more significant government gains in the strategically valuable Qalamoun region bordering Lebanon—thanks in part to the role of Hizballah—have helped secure the main route north of Damascus toward Hama and Aleppo and, more importantly, into the Alawi heartlands of Tartous and Latakia. This puts the government in a comfortable position compared to 12-18 months ago, and has served to consolidate a sense of stalemate in Syria for the immediate term.

This stalemate is the result of the conflict's intensity and protracted nature. Statistically, in asymmetric conflict, if insurgents survive 12 months of activity, the likelihood of opposition victory increases significantly, but should the conflict perpetuate for at least three years, the chance of insurgent victory begins to diminish and political agreements become more likely.[43] Given the inability of the opposition to unite under a single cohesive and effective structure, the Syrian military has seized on this logic. The regime's steady escalation of violence, its compartmentalization of anti-government strongholds, and its recruitment of militiamen and paramilitaries along sectarian lines has undoubtedly helped extend the duration of the conflict, aided further by cunning diplomatic maneuvering in the background.

Crucially, extended asymmetric conflicts tend to induce greater rates of insurgent group proliferation, meaning there are more potential spoilers in any negotiating process, making a diplomatic resolution of the conflict that much harder.[44] Assad's release of Salafi detainees from prison in a series of amnesties during the revolution's outset undoubtedly facilitated the formation of powerful insurgent groups, including Ahrar al-Sham (led by Hassan Abboud), Jaish al-Islam (led by Muhammad Zahran Alloush), and Suqor al-Sham (led by Ahmed Issa al-Sheikh).

[42] Author's interviews with several insurgent sources based in Idlib and Deraa in March 2014, potentially corroborated with information shared by individuals who have recently visited those areas, all of whom requested anonymity.
[43] Erin Simpson, "Conflict Outcomes," *Caerus Analytics*, December 2013.
[44] See for example: David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (October 2006): 875-892; Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter, "Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence," *International Organization* 56, no. 2 (April 2002):263-296.

Likewise, conditions on the ground have boosted the potential role of jihadis, both during, and potentially after, the conflict. The fact that the particularly extremist ISIS has now been isolated by the wider opposition as well as Jabhat al-Nusra has accentuated this trend even more. Considering ISIS's self-interested strategy and modus operandi, the group will not leave Syria of its own volition and is unlikely to be fully defeated or forced out. ISIS still receives periodic statements of support from members of the jihadi community around the world, and it now seems quite feasible that, as a result of its alienation in Syria, ISIS may in the future seek to internationalize, expanding its operations to the West. ISIS and al-Baghdadi already present themselves as a kind of 21st Century, second-generation alternative to al-Qaeda, going so far as to claim on April 17, 2014 that "al-Qaeda today is no longer a base of jihad … its leadership has become a hammer to break the project of an Islamic state … [and] al-Qaeda's leaders have deviated from the correct path."[45] The possibility that Jabhat al-Nusra may also seek to expand its operations to Europe, or further afield, after the conflict should also not be discounted.

Whenever and however Syria's war finally draws to an end, it will continue to impact regional security for many years and across an array of issues. Weapons proliferation has been particularly significant. Insurgents have captured a wide range of small arms, heavy machine guns, artillery, armored vehicles, anti-tank weaponry, and man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS). Additional weapons have been externally provided, mainly via Libya, Egypt, and Sudan. Border security has weakened considerably, increasing the likelihood of a secondary flow of such weapons to locations outside of Syria. Pre-existing smuggling and criminal networks have been dramatically empowered, further increasing the likelihood of weapons proliferation, the consolidation of pre-existing transnational jihadi networks, and the unprecedented rate of foreign fighter recruitment.

The rise of what are effectively warlords means that a post-conflict Syria will likely be riddled by sub-state authoritarianism and criminality, which would directly affect chances for state recovery and revitalization. The extraordinary levels of destruction, particularly in residential areas but also in terms of key state infrastructure, will require significant amounts of immediate foreign aid and investment for recovery after the conflict. A recent economic study concluded that should the conflict in Syria end in 2014, reconstructing the country would require $165 billion (equivalent to a combined 18 Syrian annual budgets) and would take between 15 to 25 years.[46]

***With over 1,000 insurgent units active across the country, a smooth post-conflict political transition is close to impossible.***

Additionally, an end to fighting along government-opposition lines would not mean the end of fighting in Syria. With over 1,000 insurgent units active across the country, not to mention a plethora of pro-government militias and extremist Sunni jihadis, a smooth post-conflict political transition is close to impossible. Protracted and complex warfare can lead to a state of conflict dependence and the emergence of a war economy, whereby a cessation of fighting can pose more of a threat to individual or group interests than a continuation of combat.[47]

[45] Abu Mohammed al-Adnani al-Shami (ISIS official spokesman) "Ma kan hadha menhajuna wa lan yakun (This Was Not Our Method and it Will Not Be)," posted by "Kafir bil Demoqratiya," 17 April 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=roUKoO1-3hc&feature=youtu.be>.

[46] "Reconstruction in Syria to cost 165 bln USD: report," Xinhua, 29 March 2014, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2014-03/29/c_133223476.htm>.

[47] See Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, Mans Soderbom, "On the Duration of Civil War," *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2004): 253-273. Regarding the element of 'greed' as the prime motivational factor in civil war protraction, see Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *The World Bank Development Research Group*, May 2000; or, supporting a case for opposition victory, see Monica Duffy Toft, "Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory," *International Security* 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 7-36; and in the specific case of Syria: Jihad Yazigi, "Syria's War Economy," European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2014.

Moreover, the long-running regional Kurdish issue may well become more pronounced with time. Should the ongoing peace process between the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) and the Turkish government fail, it seems highly likely that the Syrian YPG, which belongs to the PKK's overarching transnational Koma Civakên Kurdistan structure, may be perceived by the Turkish government as an unacceptable security threat. The PKK's recent advancement of hawkish individuals and the promotion of Syrians into senior positions within the PKK's armed wing, the Hêzên Parastina Gel may be indicative of the party's plan to bolster the YPG's role in the regional Kurdish cause should the peace process with Turkey fail.[48]

[48] Specifically, the more reactionary Murat Karayilan became commander-in-chief of the HPG and two similarly conservative Syrians—Nuretin Halef al-Mohammed (Nurettin Sofi) and Fehman Husain (Bahoz Erdal)—were promoted to senior HPG positions.

# Policy Recommendations

Conflict in Syria, in one form or another, will continue for a long time—potentially for more than a decade. Neither the government, nor the opposition, nor any other interested party maintains the capacity—in terms of manpower or military hardware—to win an outright victory. As such, a political solution to the conflict now appears to be the only possible hope for peace. Statistically, anything that is perceived by all or most parties as an opposition or "rebel" victory in civil wars is considerably less likely to result in repeated violent flare-ups or to engender (or fail to neutralize) discontent.[49] As such, the region and the wider world find itself in a desperate situation, with regional security irreparably threatened for years to come. However, there are policy options available to regional and Western states that can help lessen the damage and, perhaps most importantly, that will help to reacquire some influence over the future trajectory of developments in Syria.

**1. Restructure the Syrian opposition and discourage political factionalism.** Over the past 18 months or so, the Western-backed SNC structure has been crippled by internal factional rivalries and has failed to acquire and maintain widespread support within the opposition inside Syria. This has arguably engendered a dangerous separation between the external political leadership and the armed insurgency fighting on their behalf. As such, the insurgency requires an expanded role within a restructured opposition, which should itself be designed from the bottom-up to incorporate those opposing Assad inside Syria. Crucially, this process appears to have begun on the ground through the formation of several moderate umbrella organizations, but it is unclear whether these groups have been afforded greater representation, or at least involvement, in the wider political opposition. Concurrently, a continued and expanded effort is needed to draw in any members of the so-called "swing Islamist" camp interested in joining a wider opposition structure.[50] Moreover, the United States and its allies in Europe and elsewhere have the much-needed capacity to exert a more intensified diplomatic effort within the SNC and with its various regional supporting states, to emphasize the importance of unity of purpose while discouraging factionalism.

**2. Increase support to a revitalized military opposition in order to force Assad to a more favorable negotiating table.** Syrian insurgent dynamics are highly fluid and heavily reliant on sustained sources of funding. Without money, insurgent groups wither away to irrelevance. This is a key reason why Salafi and jihadi groups, given their robust funding networks, have flourished. With ISIS under pressure in the north and inter-insurgent relations in the south wholly stable, the West must, in conjunction with other states, increase its provision of support—logistical coordination, funds, training, and light weaponry—to operationally proven localized *and* provincial-level FSA fronts and related 'military operations rooms.' Such assistance should then be predicated on a clear, and potentially public, mechanism for verifying its legitimate and effective use. The much-debated issue of providing MANPADS should be considered with extreme caution considering the proliferation potential of these weapons and the consequent threat posed to civilian targets inside or outside of Syria. Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups already control several MANPADS in northern and southern Syria and adding to this threat would be a grim political mistake. In the more immediate term, however, an increase in provision of small and medium arms as well as tactic-specific anti-tank and other guided weaponry has proven valuable in securing localized gains, which contribute towards stretching pro-government forces to their deployable limits.

[49] Many statistical and analytic studies have suggested this, including: Monica Duffy Toft, "Ending Civil Wars."
[50] Term first coined by Aaron Zelin, Twitter post, 25 September 2013 <https://twitter.com/azelin/status/382641547667206145>.

Considering the scale of the jihadi presence in Syria, the United States and its allies have adopted an increasingly counterterrorism-focused approach to the conflict. This has led some to consider the potential value of abandoning the hope of facilitating an opposition victory (military or political) and instead to simply cut a deal with Assad. Such short-term thinking ignores the more damaging consequences such a decision would have, most particularly in reinforcing an already existing suspicion amongst large portions of the opposition (and regional Sunni community) that the U.S. no longer wants an opposition victory and is instead more interested in wider political maneuverings, including détente with Iran.

**3. Engage Islamist actors willing to participate in a wider and restructured opposition.** The majority of the insurgents have no representation in, and do not recognize, the SNC and SMC opposition bodies. Much of this has to do with the fact that vast swathes of the insurgency are composed of Islamists of one kind or another. Many of the groups that fall under this category are militarily dominant players in the conflict and maintain active social and political wings. Their leaders—particularly in the case of the Islamic Front—are highly politically active individuals and are almost certainly positioning themselves to play a political role in a post-Assad Syria. The key is determining which of these groups and their leaderships are realistically capable of aligning with the SNC's political nature and are willing to do so. A long-running obstacle to this has been the adoption of harsh sectarian rhetoric by these groups to frame their military operations and to mobilize support. In the author's private discussions with senior Salafi insurgent leaders and other figures, however, this black-and-white public rhetoric does not always appear to accurately represent their understanding of an acceptable political compromise. It is crucial that some of these potential swing voters are encouraged to be part of a wider opposition, both due to their capacity to exert more clout in the political process, but also to underline they are not necessarily the al-Qaeda extremists the Assad regime and others portray them as.

**4. Engage with Gulf states to coordinate improved mechanisms aimed at countering sources of extremist financing.** Since fall 2011, Islamic charities and influential individuals based in the Gulf have been actively involved in assisting in the formation and financing of insurgent groups inside Syria. As time has passed and the role of Islamist groups and units within or linked to Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS has expanded, many of these supporters have directly or indirectly ended up providing funding that reaches jihadi organizations. Much of the charity-based and private fundraising for the insurgency in Syria focuses on particular areas of the country, or more often on specific battles and frontlines, a large majority of which now involve jihadi actors. A great deal of this activity is coordinated online or via social media, and until mid-to-late 2013 it was possible to find the international depository banking details for donations. Today, this has been replaced by cell phone contact information and WhatsApp accounts used to coordinate donations, and sometimes even physical street addresses where money is collected.

Some of these individuals openly express their support for extremist organizations or are photographed with them during visits to Syria, while other charity-based organizations are in fact under sanction by the U.S. Treasury Department.[51] Three Kuwaiti individuals who publicize their activities openly—Nayef al-Ajmi,[52] Shafi al-Ajmi, and Hajjaj al-Ajmi—led advertising campaigns to collect funds for an offensive to "liberate the Coast," referring to the Alawi heartland in Tartous and Latakia.[53] The offensive occurred in early August 2013 and resulted in the death of at least 190 civilians—something Human Rights Watch designated as constituting crimes against humanity.[54]

[51] For example, the Salafi Revival of the Islamic Heritage Society– "Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling Al-Qaida Network," U.S. Department of the Treasury, 13 June 2008, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1023.aspx>.
[52] Nayef al-Ajmi was later appointed Kuwait's Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs and Endowments ministries on January 7, 2014, although he has since submitted his resignation after a senior U.S. Treasury Department official highlighted his alleged "history of promoting jihad in Syria" on March 4.
[53] See, for example, the first poster in a collection published by POMEPS in December 2013: <http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Appendix-posters.pdf>.
[54] "You Can Still See Their Blood," Human Rights Watch, 11 October 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/node/119675/>.

Considering Kuwait-based private donors alone have sent several hundred million dollars to insurgent groups in Syria, this is an issue that urgently needs to be addressed.[55]

**5. Cooperate with Syria's neighbors to enhance border control.** In just over two years (between late 2011 and early-March 2013), at least 11,750 foreign fighters from 78 nations have travelled to fight in Syria against the Assad regime, predominantly as members of jihadi groups.[56] Given the timescale of the Syrian case, the rate of foreign fighter arrival is unprecedented. According to several studies on the subject, the previous record was held by the Afghan jihad, when an estimated 5,000-20,000 travelled to the conflict in the space of 12 years (1980-1992).[57] While most foreign fighters in Syria are predominantly focused on that conflict theatre, many also perceive themselves as members of a transnational movement destined to one day re-establish an Islamic Caliphate. Jabhat al-Nusra has expanded operations into Lebanon and attracted several senior al-Qaeda figures into its ranks,[58] some groups (like Harakat Sham al-Islam) have been led by former Guantanamo detainees who retain links in other zones of jihad,[59] and ISIS operates across Syria and Iraq and increasingly perceives itself as a superior alternative to al-Qaeda. In fact, ISIS has received pledges of support from senior al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula commanders and from two groups in Egypt and Gaza—Jamaat Ansar Beit al-Maqdis and Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen. Moreover, the Gaza-based al-Nusra al-Maqdisiya pledged bay'ah (or allegiance) to ISIS on February 11, 2014.[60]

*Immediate priority must be placed on bolstering regional security collaboration, aimed at enforcing strong border control and reconnaissance.*

While preventing the influx of foreign fighters into Syria is a vital policy priority, preventing them from leaving and travelling elsewhere is perhaps even more important. Clearly, immediate priority must be placed on bolstering regional security collaboration, aimed at enforcing strong border control and reconnaissance. The Turkish, Iraqi, and Lebanese borders require immediate attention. Such multilateral cooperation will be an extremely valuable opportunity for enhancing regional security relationships and for the continued management of the conflict's security fallout in the years to come.

**6. Exert pressure to ensure implementation of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) deal via a meaningful re-assertion of the threat of force.** President Obama's effective withdrawal of the threat of the use of force immediately prior to the September14, 2013 agreement to destroy Assad's chemical weapons (CW) stockpiles dramatically reduced U.S. leverage in Syria. Assad (and his backers) received a huge boost in confidence, which they rode all the way into and out of Geneva II. Already, the Syrian government has failed to keep to OPCW deadlines to remove CW components and

[55] Joby Warrick, "Private Donations Give Edge to Islamists in Syria, Officials Say," The Washington Post, 22 September 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/private-donations-give-edge-to-islamists-in-syria-officials-say/2013/09/21/a6c783d2-2207-11e3-a358-1144dee636dd_story.html>.

[56] Author's interview with Aaron Zelin, March 2014.

[57] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," International Security 35, no. 3 (Winter 2010/11): 53-94.

[58] Such as: (1) the aforementioned Abdul Mohsen Abdullah Ibrahim al-Sharikh, who was seriously wounded in Latakia on March 21, 2014; (2) "Abu Firas al-Suri," a senior envoy of Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan-Pakistan, who formed and commanded training camps in Afghanistan in the 1980s; (3) potentially also Mohammed Haydar Zammar, a German national of Syrian origin who was highly influential in assembling the so-called Hamburg Cell, which planned and carried out the 9/11 attacks. Zammar was released from prison in Aleppo as part of a prisoner exchange negotiated by Ahrar al-Sham in September 2013.

59 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Moroccan Ex-Guantanamo Detainees Fighting in Syria's Civil War," Jihadology, 18 September 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/09/18/musings-of-an-iraqi-brasenostril-on-jihad-moroccan-ex-guantanamo-detainees-fighting-in-syrias-civil-war/>; Aymenn Zawad al-Tamimi, "Moroccan ex-Guantanamo Detainee Mohammed Mizouz identified in Syria," Syria Comment, 22 December 2013, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/exclusive-former-moroccan-ex-guantanamo-detainee-mohammed-mizouz-identified-syria/>.

[60] "Al-nusra al-muqadisiya lil-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-'Iraq wa al-Sham (Holy Victory to ISIS)," posted by "Al-Nusra al-Muqadisiya," 11 February 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b5DI9h74elw>.

they continue to use delaying tactics. Should such behavior continue without redress, any meaningful mechanisms capable of exerting influence upon the Assad regime may well be lost altogether. Whatever opinion one takes on the September 2013 deal, its enforcement *must* be a policy priority within Western circles. This pressure should come in the form of constant public mechanisms for monitoring CW removal progress and the clear threat of further economic sanctions and military force as a consequence of noncompliance. Pressure should also be exerted on Syria's two principal foreign allies, Russia and Iran, as their consistent support for the Assad regime should result in similar accountability.

**7. To avoid strengthening and unifying al-Qaeda and the broader Syria-based jihadi community, assess the potential use of kinetic counterterrorism (CT) operations in or around Syria with extreme caution.** The al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra is arguably the transnational movement's most successful and promising player in over a decade. There is currently no evidence that it intends to expand its operations beyond Syria and Lebanon, but that possibility cannot be discounted for the future. Given the extent of its popularity and acceptance inside Syria, however, any future move against it, especially from within the opposition, is either highly unlikely or destined to cause more division than it would be worth. Nonetheless, the effective isolation of ISIS in Syria and its divisive impact within the wider jihadi community is something that could be exploited. In many respects, ISIS is attempting to lead a revolution within al-Qaeda.[61] The statements of support it has acquired from within other al-Qaeda affiliates suggest such a division could prove more deeply damaging to the broader movement in the future. This dynamic has developed without any apparent Western action, and would undoubtedly be reversed should the United States choose to initiate kinetic CT operations inside Syria or on its borders. All notable jihadi groups in Syria constitute a total of at least 20,000-25,000 fighters, equaling approximately one quarter of the total insurgents. Implementing drone strikes or similar kinetic CT operations in Syria could potentially give jihadis a reason to unify in resistance against "Western imperialism." Only if a discernible threat to international security arises from within Syria would such kinetic operations appear worthwhile.

**8. Expand resource provision to open source intelligence (OSINT) collection and analysis within the intelligence community.** The conflict in Syria has revolutionized the preferred methods used by jihadis to publicize their activities. Whereas access to official group content used to be limited to security-restricted online forums, social media has been embraced by groups inside Syria, with impressive effect. While Jabhat al-Nusra maintains a tight core of officially recognized accounts for group releases and individual senior commanders, ISIS has individual accounts for every province or region in Iraq and Syria in which it operates, plus several well-known commander accounts. Of particular importance to the Western intelligence community is the fact that Western foreign fighters have similarly embraced social media applications, such as Twitter, Facebook, AskFM, Kik, and others. There, they openly speak about how they travelled to Syria's borders, the best methods for smuggling oneself into the country, the process of joining specific groups, the extent of training provided, funds and other items needed in country, specific ideological beliefs, local dynamics, and many other such details. Groups and individuals actively recruit online, encourage and facilitate the donations, encourage violence, and legitimize sectarian hostility and brutality.

In the author's experience, Western intelligence communities are aware of social media's growing importance as a source of vital OSINT, yet although many initiatives actively collate OSINT from Syria, not enough is being done to assess, analyze, and operationalize it. An increased emphasis should therefore be placed upon integrating expanded OSINT collection programs within the wider intelligence apparatus, potentially reinforced by enhanced engagement with open-source analysts of Syria-related jihadi communities.

[61] Author's interviews with jihadi fighters, including British nationals, during late 2013 and early 2014

# Conclusion

The Syrian uprising has changed significantly since the first signs of localized armed resistance began emerging in late April 2011. While Western states and regional countries opposed to President Assad's continued rule should have better managed the immediate formation of an organized, representative, and capable political and military opposition, this did not happen. Instead, the prevailing dynamics within the opposition and the conflict as a whole present a number of serious threats to immediate and long-term regional and international security and stability.

The conflict in Syria today is extremely complex and is no longer restricted to Syrian territory. Three years on, a stalemate is steadily consolidating itself as a definitive military victory appears out of reach for all sides. As such, a political solution appears to be the only viable way of ending the internal opposition versus government conflict. However, the proliferation of armed groups and the opening up of additional fronts in the conflict suggest that any future political agreement between the existing government and any opposition will be unlikely to put an end to the conflict altogether.

Therefore, current and future Western policy regarding the Syrian conflict, and its various related regional issues, must be based on two core objectives, both of which incorporate the eight recommendations provided above. First, policies should be put into effect that aim to bolster the capacity for Syria's political and military opposition to form a more cohesive structure capable of more effectively challenging the Assad regime in the battlefield and on the negotiation table, with the eventual aim of forcing a political solution to the conflict acceptable to as wide a swathe of the armed opposition as possible. Second, the international community's policies should aim to secure the capabilities of Syria's neighbors to manage existing and future violent spillover and to curtail the potential for jihadi groups inside Syria to expand their operations beyond Syria's immediate vicinity.

All of this is predicated on the inherent necessity for policymakers to grasp the extent of the complexity that the Syrian conflict now presents. Should this complexity be overlooked in favor of seemingly all-encompassing solutions, the only result will be further deterioration of the existing status quo.

# About the Author

**Charles Lister** is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. He was formerly head of MENA at IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, where he focused on sub-state security threats in the Middle East. Lister's current research assesses the state of the insurgency in Syria, particularly the growth of Salafi and jihadist groups. He is currently authoring a book, *The Jihadist Insurgency in Syria.*

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