THE ISLAMIC STATE THROUGH THE REGIONAL LENS

edited by
Julien Barnes-Dacey, Ellie Geranmayeh, and Daniel Levy

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Introduction

The rise of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (IS) has thrust the Middle East even deeper into turbulence, confusion, instability, and sectarian violence. The militant group has dramatically altered the region's political and security landscape. It has heightened the security threats facing actors both within the Middle East and the West, and, if claims are to be taken at face value, it has forged a common interest among all international and regional players in seeing the group weakened and ultimately defeated. A number of European governments have now joined with the United States and regional actors in conducting military operations against IS in Iraq, while in Syria, the US and its regional partners have launched an air campaign against the group.

Even as Europe enters into a new military campaign in the region, however, little attention has been paid to how regional actors have in some cases contributed to the rise of IS and how they now perceive and respond to the threat posed by the group. The emergence of a united anti-IS coalition masks the degree of ongoing competition and conflict between actors, against the backdrop of the regional war centred on Syria, which shapes how these actors view the extremist group.

Understanding these regional motivations and dynamics is critical to the success of any European policy approach geared towards degrading the group. Therefore, this collection brings together a series of 15 essays outlining the regional dimension of the IS crisis, with the aim of illuminating this essential perspective. The essays explore regional reactions to IS from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and the Kurds. The collection outlines the key dynamics that drive IS and the factors that limit its expansion within the region, as well as considering Europe's response to the crisis.

What clearly emerges from this collection is that regional actors espouse different – and at times contradictory – narratives on the root causes of the rise of IS and on the most effective means to weaken it. Some regional powers are using the new conditions in the Middle East as an opportunity to press forward with their domestic and regional political ambitions; some are using IS as a means to guarantee the status quo. In many instances, the fight against IS is of secondary importance as compared to other political objectives that drive regional policies and partnerships with the West. Europe must carefully consider these drivers as it makes its own policy choices.

Most regional actors agree that IS represents a clear threat to their respective interests. In discussing the group's regional strategy, Aymenn al-Tamimi describes IS as having "an aggressive, expansionist outlook", but also points out the organic and geographic constraints on the group and highlights the need to assess the IS threat "on a case-by-case basis". Jordan and Lebanon are seen as being most vulnerable to IS incursions, given their porous borders with Syria and Iraq and the ideological linkages between IS and the marginalised elements within the two countries' Sunni populations. The influx of refugees from Syria and Iraq into Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey has dramatically exposed these neighbouring countries to the humanitarian costs of the IS conflict.

Saudi Arabia's ruling elite has been the subject of specific IS threats, and the Kingdom is a natural target given its vast oil resources and symbolic position as the caretaker of Islam's most holy shrines, as well as because of the rising numbers of its citizens joining IS. Despite this threat, Saudi Arabia and smaller Gulf Cooperation Council states such as Kuwait and Qatar have come under fire for having allowed large sums of financial support to flow from their territories to groups affiliated with IS. Meanwhile, Ellie Geranmayeh notes that for Tehran, the IS threat is "largely external and indirect". It poses only nominal risks of internal radicalisation from within, but, more worryingly for the Iranian leadership, it could undermine Iran's access to Hezbollah as the main retaliatory security shield against Israel.

IS poses a common threat, whether direct or indirect, to the interests of all regional actors, but the essays show that policies for managing the threat diverge significantly. The rise of IS has strengthened the hand of authoritarian rulers looking to crack down on any Islamist-associated opposition forces right across the region – a narrative that is being particularly embraced in Egypt and Israel. But since IS plays into several competing political ambitions in the region, different approaches have been adopted by different actors.

Julien Barnes-Dacey, Ellie Geranmayeh, Daniel Levy

Encouraging regional ownership of the fight against the Islamic State

January 2015 marks the sixth month of the military campaign against the self-named Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq. Five European states have participated in air strikes against IS as members of the latest in a series of US-led coalitions fighting in Iraq, with Barack Obama the fourth consecutive president of the United States to embark on military action in the region. The track record so far is hardly encouraging, as the success of the Islamic State itself so stunningly testifies.

The rapid assembling behind the coalition of more than 60 countries, including many from the region, might have suggested a shared vision and prioritisation of the threat posed by this new and particularly rabid strain of extremism. But any such assumption was probably naive. IS has mostly been viewed in the region as a re-enforcer of existing narratives and policy predispositions. Rather than acting as a game changer, IS is being used to entrench status quo approaches behind established geopolitical fault lines and unrepresentative domestic political dispensations – precisely the regional dynamics that have fed the rise of IS. When it comes to the war raging in Syria, in particular, the response to IS has seen all sides double down on the bets they had already placed, while underscoring their respective claims to being the sole indispensable partner in confronting IS. This applies as much to the local protagonists as it does to the key regional actors – Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

The West bears considerable responsibility for the rise of extremist forces, given the role of the 2003 Iraq war in triggering a cycle of violent state collapse and sectarianism. But any solution to the challenge posed by IS must now focus on identifying the regional drivers that have laid the ground for the crisis over the past three years and work towards promoting policies that encourage regional rather than Western ownership of the push-back against the extremist group.

The perils of a military-led response

The threat posed by IS is a real one, not least to those living under its domination. IS is expansionist in its nature. It has actively and effectively recruited foreign fighters, some of whom will potentially pose a threat should they return to their native countries, including in Europe. IS is the apotheosis of intolerance, but it has also learned and adapted from the failings of previous incarnations of extremist groups; it has partly stabilised governance and order in areas under its control, and it is winning pledges of allegiance from jihadi groups in the Egyptian Sinai, Derna in Libya, and elsewhere. It thrives in the ever-more disputed and dysfunctional politics of the Arab world.

The ability of IS to advance in Iraq and Syria has certainly been dealt a blow by the military action taken against it. IS has also bumped up against something of a natural barrier: the exhaustion of the group's military and ideological capacity to expand beyond Sunni-dominated areas. Attempts to weaken IS by targeting its financing and its access to resources, including oil exports, will also take a toll.

However, months into the armed strikes, it is clear that the existing approach can only go so far. Western political leaders, thrown into a state of panic by the mesmerised media coverage of the beheadings of Western hostages, launched extensive military action against IS that has been heavily dominated by the US, in spite of the participation of regional actors who spend tens of billions of dollars on weapons each year. The US alone has flown approximately 85 percent of total combat missions to date in Iraq and Syria, and over the past three months, the US has carried out more than 90 percent of all strikes in Syria.

Doubts are already surfacing about the efficacy and dangers of the military-led response. In Iraq, the attempt to shape a more inclusive political order is faltering, and Shia militias associated with government actors are mobilising and taking advantage of US air power to launch a wider sectarian campaign. In Syria, air strikes, which have been extended to include other non-IS extremist groups, are playing to Bashar al-Assad's benefit.

In both countries, military action risks the unintended consequence of mobilising wider Sunni support behind IS and fuelling anti-Western sentiment, possibly levying costs that outweigh the gains of degrading of the group's assets on the ground. Ultimately, the current strategy may make it more difficult to displace the group – or at least the sentiments that give it life. It could also make

IS even more of a threat to Western interests than is currently the case – partly by making this about us, the West – which was likely part of the intention behind anti-Western IS provocations.

Focusing on the politics

While any attempt to halt the group's territorial expansion will necessarily have a military dimension, it is clear that the forces driving IS are too deep and broad to be defeated militarily. But although the coalition initially recognised the centrality of a broader political approach – not least through the insistence that a new inclusive government be formed in Iraq – this track is looking increasingly perfunctory, stuttering forward at best in Iraq and essentially non-existent in Syria.

IS's emergence is a symptom of the profoundly broken politics that afflict the Middle East today. IS feeds off a powerful narrative of Sunni resentment against a perceived Shia-dominated regional order. The new military strikes have exacerbated this trend by contributing to a belief, however misplaced, that the US is acting as the air force to an Iranian-led Shia ground force. In Iraq and Syria, Shia-leaning powers (the Syrian Alawite regime is not Shiite, but it is tightly tied to the Shia axis) are effectively excluding Sunnis from meaningful representation, often violently. A fierce battle of identity politics has been unleashed, which IS is able to exploit because of an absence of effective Sunni regional leadership as well as endemic problems in governance structures and lack of consensual social contracts in most Arab States.

Iran, as the chief backer of Damascus and Baghdad, as well as of Hezbollah in Lebanon, is culpable in the destructive polices that have excluded and sometimes devastated Sunni constituencies. The perceived Shia-centric nature of Iranian policies, including the direct mobilisation of foreign militias on the ground, has increased the sense of Sunni sectarian marginalisation. It is unclear to many Sunnis in Iraq and Syria why they would necessarily prefer the defeat of IS to the alternative of rule by Shia militia or Assad.

For their part, Arab Gulf States have deliberately supported Sunni sectarian mobilisation for their own geopolitical ends, seeing the conflict in Syria as a means to rebalance the regional power order by pulling Damascus out of the Iranian orbit. They have willingly tapped into and encouraged Sunni disenchantment, either directly or by turning a blind eye to sectarian media, preaching, and funding channels. Extremism has been viewed as a helpful and

malleable tool for weakening rivals and advancing political ambitions in the region (while concurrently channelling abroad the internal dissent generated by non-representative polities). Turkey has placed itself in a similar position, whereby extremist groups operating across its border were at least in part indulged as a means of weakening both Assad and Syrian Kurds, who Ankara fears are taking advantage of the conflict to spur pan-regional Kurdish ambitions and undermine the existing Turkish government peace track with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have encouraged a regional crackdown on moderate forms of Sunni Islamist political expression such as the Muslim Brotherhood, closing the door on potentially more democratically compatible and non-violent forms of religiously-inspired political expression.

Riyadh's willingness to join the military campaign against IS is, therefore, part of a quid pro quo aimed at securing long-sought US intervention in Syria, rather than a reflection of having made the weakening of IS a priority. Turkey is likewise unwilling to commit to the fight against IS without guarantees of action against Assad. Iran's military push against IS preceded that of the Western coalition and will continue regardless, but Tehran has so far refused to countenance a meaningful political track in Syria that might defuse Sunni resentment.

For the moment, despite the shared threat that IS could pose to regional actors given its ambitions to overturn the entire regional order as part of its self-declared caliphate, there has been little recognition of the need for a raw, internal accounting of the drivers behind IS's rise. The blame for this can partly be placed on Western intervention; the West, by assuming central ownership of the response, has relieved regional actors of responsibility. That is the moral hazard inherent in US and Western ownership of the anti-IS struggle: it could enable regional allies to take more risks without facing repercussions and thereby transform IS from a common threat to a manageable opportunity.

At the same time, competition is intensifying for Western, particularly US, support, reflecting the deep sense of uncertainty in the region. The struggle for hegemony is playing out in the shadow of the stated US desire (albeit only partially realised) to reduce its regional presence and to pivot both to Asia and back home, as well as in the context of the ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran. Riyadh is seeking to forestall the prospect of any US realignment and to lock in the current US policy of exclusive alliances against irredeemable adversaries (notably Iran). Israel is taking the same approach and is leveraging its influence in Washington in this regard. For its part, Tehran, while not anticipating a new strategic alliance

with the US, is intent on creating a convergence of interests, offering itself as a balancer to a less invested and less threatening prospective US posture. Neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia currently sees the battle against IS as a primary policy focus. Rather, the emergence of IS represents a powerful opportunity to advance their pre-existing preferences for an internationally-backed regional order.

Other actors, meanwhile, have adopted the battle against IS as a means of consolidating narrower ambitions, also without seeing IS as the key priority. While the Kurds have been threatened by IS, current conditions are seen as an opening to accelerate their longstanding bid for greater autonomy, including securing direct military aid from Western states and re-ordering the internal Kurdish balance of power. Egypt and Israel are both using the threat posed by IS to play up the proclaimed extremist threat and accompanying need for a clampdown on their respective Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas foes. Jordan has taken its claim to being the indispensable oasis of regional stability to new heights. Across the region, in the likes of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, rulers have pinned the introduction of new anti-terror legislation on the IS threat (as has happened in Europe too) – moves that will likely further close down the space for legitimate political dissent and fuel extremism.

The anomaly – Lebanon as precedent?

One country hesitantly bucking the trend is Lebanon, though it makes for an unlikely and imperfect model. Lebanon has witnessed an unprecedented degree of regionally-backed power-sharing that has facilitated meaningful push-back against IS-associated extremism. Iran and Saudi Arabia, alongside the local protagonists they back in Lebanon, have embraced joint ownership of the struggle against IS, fearful of the consequences for stability and their respective influence if extremists were to gain a foothold in the country. The tentative lesson to be drawn from this positive, if very fragile, example is that where domestic and regional actors come together to back an inclusive approach, and the West stays out militarily, the fight against IS stands considerably more chance of success.

The perilous question now facing dominant regional actors and Western policymakers is whether it is possible to forge such consensus more widely – and if so, how. For the moment, Lebanon represents an isolated anomaly, and one that may not hold if escalation proceeds elsewhere. Given the far deeper strategic importance attached to Syria – the fate of the country is perceived as central to determining the wider regional balance – it will be considerably harder to encourage a reversal of positions there.

Incentivising regional ownership

Still, IS has the potential to change regional calculations due to the threat it could eventually pose to them all. IS has made it clear that it harbours designs on Saudi Arabia, given the Kingdom's custodianship of Islam's two holy mosques, its resources, and the significant number of Saudis fighting for IS in Syria and Iraq who could eventually turn their focus back home. For Iran, IS poses a serious military threat to its allies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and is playing a central role in stirring up a regional sectarian war that, while manageable in the short term, can only work to Tehran's overall disadvantage given the minority status of Shias across the Middle East. IS threatens domestic peace in Turkey because of its potential to carry out attacks there and because its ambitions to redraw the Sykes-Picot borders risk empowering Kurdish ambitions. Elsewhere, nearly all countries in the region are threatened by the rising number of their nationals joining IS and the risk that extremism and violence will spread.

However, the more regional actors assume that the West will take care of IS, the more likely they are to duck their own responsibilities. The key regional actors will not make concessions, such as recalibrating their own policies and making the fight against IS an absolute priority, if they do not have to make them. President Obama's insistence on the limitations of his anti-IS campaign tends to be dismissed in the region, encouraged by the fact that Obama is already engaged in a war he would rather have avoided and that has already escalated beyond its initial aims.

If the West does not intend militarily to reassume ownership of Iraq, as well as of Syria (a move that would be unwise in the extreme), then it will have to be more insistent in its expectations of regional actors. The West's central focus should shift to the level and nature of regional responsibility that it is encouraging. Part of this must involve embracing policies that force regional actors to take ownership of confronting the threats they all face from IS, which will entail limiting the current level of Western military intervention.

Europe and the US must recognise that taking on IS also means taking on an idea – and that cannot be primarily accomplished by military means, nor can it be led by non-Muslim actors. IS undoubtedly feeds off resentment at Western policy – from support for dictators to drones and military interventions to complicity in the fate of the Palestinians – but it is not fundamentally about "us". Excessive Western military intervention, whereby the burden of responsibility for managing the threat is largely borne by non-regional actors, will not ameliorate the ills that fuel IS and will only make the West more of a target. Excessive force is distinguishable from limited action such as the targeting of IS groups when they are seen to be actively planning attacks on the West (of which there is very limited evidence to date) or where the threat of an imminent humanitarian disaster can be successfully diverted by a targeted response that does not entail wading into the broader regional fight. In Iraq, developments have already moved in the opposite direction: limited strikes to protect the Yazidis quickly expanded into a wider fight against IS, including the battle for key strategic locations such as the Mosul dam and the control of contested towns.

The West needs to be prepared for a patient and long-term approach to the phenomenon of extremism. Misplaced interventions tend to extend, not shorten, that timeline. IS may burn itself out. Elements now aligned with IS may become amenable to a more rational and pragmatic form of coexistence in the region over time. Enough Sunnis may abandon IS if the central government convinces them they have a future in Iraq, particularly as IS may lose local appeal as it settles down to the difficult task of local governance in the areas under its control. Either way, the longer game will have to be led by regional powers and from within the communities in which IS operates.

Acknowledging this still leaves much that can be done beyond the residual and narrowly targeted military components mentioned above. Stopping the flow of foreign fighters into the battleground, primarily by working with Turkey and assisting it to better manage its border, would mark a significant step forward. There is also a legitimate case to be made for providing armed support to Kurdish groups – not because the Kurds are more deserving, but because their stated mission is more achievable since they are not as directly implicated in the broader regional and sectarian civil war. The continued provision of humanitarian assistance to the huge Syrian refugee population in neighbouring countries will be critical to preventing IS from spreading its radicalising message, as will support for the efforts of Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon in hosting these refugees. In addition, any areas experiencing a ceasefire inside Syria should receive fast-tracked assistance.

By far the most important area of focus should be supporting efforts to resolve the crises in both Syria and Iraq, as well as between Saudi Arabia and Iran. So long as these crises endure, fuelling radical identity politics and the spread of ungoverned spaces, there is little prospect of successfully dealing with IS. A start on this front would be active support for the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, recognising his pursuit of a freeze of hostilities,

initially in Aleppo, as one of the only available paths towards desperately needed de-escalation between all parties, both local and regional. In Iraq, the West should continue to push for the establishment of a meaningfully inclusive governing system and the reining in of government-linked sectarian militias. Building on this, the West should actively seek to encourage a convergence among the crucial triangle constituted by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

After a decade of escalating conflict across the region, it should be self-evident that the means to defuse these crises will not come through knock-out victories, which will remain elusive given the domestic, regional, and international balance of power. Meaningful solutions will entail compromise-based, inclusive political processes that give local populations real stakes in self-representation. By leaning out rather than always leaning in and by encouraging regional actors to confront the threat that IS poses (first and foremost to themselves), Europeans and Americans could play a more constructive role in pushing forward this urgently needed re-calibration.

The Islamic State's regional strategy

The familiar slogan of the Islamic State (IS), *baqiyya wa tatamaddad* ("remaining and expanding"), is indicative of the group's aggressive, expansionist outlook. The self-proclaimed caliphate, which demands the allegiance of all Muslims, should first encompass the entire Muslim world and should eventually subsume the whole world under its dominion. This ideal has been circulated among members and supporters since the group's founding, when it called itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). In those days, its ambitions were etched clearly on its flag, with graphics of the globe under the group's banner. As ISI expanded into Syria, it renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/the Levant (ISIS/ISIL).

As ISIS/ISIL, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine, along with Syria, were (and still are) in the group's sights. Today, under the IS formulation, it is taken for granted that the group will seek continuous expansion at any cost. However, in reality, IS's overall approach to the region beyond its current bases of operation and control in Iraq and Syria is circumscribed by certain constraints and calculations.

Of greatest concern is IS's strategy in Lebanon and Jordan, two countries mentioned in the IS recruitment video released by its Al Hayat Media Center as places to which IS fighters will go if their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, orders them to do so. Both Lebanon and Jordan are known to harbour domestic elements that support IS.

Lebanon's problems with IS are tied to the broader issue of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian Civil War and of rebels crossing over into Syria by way of the porous border areas in Qalamoun. Pro-IS sentiment appears to be primarily based in the northern city of Tripoli, a long-standing hotspot of Sunni radicalism. IS's military capacity to expand into Lebanon, however, remains

limited for now. Its main entry point would be through the Damascus province. Here, IS's presence is much smaller than that in the north and east of Syria, where IS has focused on building up and consolidating its control of territory. In fact, the IS presence in the Damascus province is quite disconnected from the organisation elsewhere, because IS fighters in the area have cooperated with rebels from a range of factions, including Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) and Jaysh al-Islam, with whom the IS incursion into Arsal in Lebanon was undoubtedly coordinated. However, the coordination in Qalamoun between IS and other rebels may now be in doubt: a recent unity statement calling for enemies to be fought and sharia to be applied came from JAN and other rebel groups but excluded IS.

In Jordan, recent months have seen occasional and small pro-IS demonstrations in the southern locality of Ma'an. The Jordanian daily, *Al Ghad*, reported that the majority of members of the country's Salafi-jihadi movement have shifted their alliance from JAN to IS. This suggests that support for IS is growing, albeit slowly. The group still maintains an interest in extorting toll fees from vehicles carrying goods entering into Iraq's Anbar province, close to the Jordanian border. IS has total control over Anbar's far western areas of Rutba (near the Jordanian and Syrian borders), Al-Qa'im (on the border with Syria), Rawa, and Anah. The other main entry route for IS to expand militarily into Jordan would be through the southern Syrian provinces of Deraa and Suwayda, neither of which has a known IS presence. In fact, since the JAN-IS dispute, militants in both areas are believed to be loyal only to JAN.

Turning to the north, IS's intentions in Turkey have been the subject of much debate. Despite longstanding concerns in Turkish policy circles over alleged IS plots and threats to launch an attack in Turkey, there is no concrete evidence of either. Statements were circulated under ISIS's name in the Turkish media in 2013, but they have all turned out to be unskilled forgeries. Some controversy has also surrounded a supposed ISIS video from March 2014 that threatened an attack if Turkish troops did not withdraw from the site of the tomb of Suleyman Shah, on the grounds that the tomb was within ISIS territory. But the video is of dubious authenticity and the apparent threat was not followed up.

At present, it is clear that IS understands that any deliberate attack on Turkish territory would not be in its interest: an attack would risk pushing Turkey into a direct military intervention in Syria, which would open up too many military fronts for the group to manage. Furthermore, it should be remembered that one factor behind IS's success has been its ability to profit from local Sunni

discontent with the central governments of Iraq and Syria within the hyper-sectarian atmospheres of both countries. In Turkey, there is no such environment to exploit.

As long as the border is not completely shut off, IS depends on Turkish territory for smuggling routes through which it can access the black market. This enables it to purchase goods (for example, basic commodities, including food and drink) with which to engage in outreach to locals within its territory in Syria. It also sells the oil that it extracts from the fields it controls in eastern Syria. This remains the case even as Turkey has taken greater measures to stop the inflow into Syria of potential foreign fighter recruits for IS. To assist in opposing IS, Turkey has provided support to rival rebel groups, particularly ones under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) such as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front.

IS intends to target two areas in the wider region and IS-linked activity poses a security threat in both places. The first of these is Israel-Palestine. Ideologically, the notion of the conquest of Jerusalem (Bayt al-Maqdis/al-Quds) is important in IS rhetoric. One billboard in Hasakah province (back when the group was called ISIS) read: "We fight in Iraq and Al-Sham and our eyes are on Bayt al-Maqdis" (a slogan that is also used by JAN).

However, the real threat lies to the south, in the Gaza-Sinai area. An identifiable IS network exists here, in the form of Jamaat Ansar al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Bayt al-Maqdis, which distributes propaganda material in Gaza for IS. This IS network has acted as a feeder group for IS's Gazan contingent of fighters in the Iraq-Syria arena. The network has expanded after the pledge of allegiance from the better-known group active in the area, Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, now renamed "Sinai Province". Salafi-jihadi groups that oppose the Hamas government in Gaza have been expanding their influence for some time. In five to ten years, they may have the capacity to overthrow the government, which would pose an even greater security threat to Israel and Egypt.

The second area of concern is Saudi Arabia, whose government has been a key backer of FSA-banner forces opposed to IS, including Harakat Hazm in the north, the Southern Front in the south, and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front. Because of this, it is not uncommon for IS circles to refer to Saudi Arabia as the "kingdom of *taghut*" (idolatry or oppression). Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has not pledged allegiance to IS, but elements sympathetic to IS do exist in AQAP. That there are also IS supporters in Saudi Arabia more generally is reflected in the disproportionate number of Saudi fighters within the group's ranks.

Reports suggest that IS may be trying to set up terrorist cells within Saudi Arabia, and IS could find Saudi Arabia a convenient target for strategic reasons. IS knows full well that Saudi Arabia would not send troops to Iraq or Syria. And IS could exploit opportunities in Saudi Arabia – such as oil smuggling or the like – to sustain itself in economic terms. The threat to Saudi Arabia is reinforced by IS's formal acknowledgement of pledges of allegiance of unknown size from within Saudi Arabia as well as Yemen.

Linked to the acknowledgement of pledges of allegiance from abroad is the appearance of "Islamic State provinces" in eastern Libya and Tripoli. The emergence of the trappings of a state in the Libyan city of Derna (including "Islamic police" and "Islamic courts") points to a possible link with the IS Libyan contingent inside Iraq and Syria, Katiba al-Bittar al-Libi. However, it is far from clear that the IS presence can expand much beyond Derna. It must compete with long-established jihadi networks in Libya (most notably the Ansar al-Sharia movement) and faces heavy resistance from the Tobruq-based government forces.

Last but not least, it is worth examining IS's perception of Iran, which it derides as the "Safavid" power in the region that sustains the central "Safavid" government in Baghdad. Despite its rhetoric, IS, unlike al-Qaeda, does not seem to have any networks or assets in Iran that would enable it to strike at Tehran. Thus, expansion into Iran is off limits for the near future at least.

In assessing IS and its regional strategy, each country must be considered on a case-by-case basis. If IS were to take over the entirety of Iraq and Syria, then all neighbouring countries would face the prospect of invasion. But this outcome seems extremely improbable. IS's main priorities are still to expand within Iraq and Syria and to consolidate its military and economic power in both countries at the expense of pro-government forces and insurgent rivals. A much more legitimate concern is that IS supporters – not formally tied to the group – might heed IS spokesman Mohammad al-Adnani's call to target Americans and other Western citizens by any means necessary and might strike within Western countries and those Arab states that are assisting the United States in its airstrikes on IS positions.

Abdallah Helmy

Egypt's Sisi gains leverage from the fight against the Islamic State

The rise of the Islamic State (IS) has helped President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime to justify its security-oriented policies to both the domestic and international audience as a necessary part of the fight against terrorism. IS's links to Egyptian groups remain very limited, yet Cairo has portrayed IS as part of the spectrum of Islamist groups, linking it to the Muslim Brotherhood that is allegedly now threatening the country. Ironically, however, the ongoing authoritarian crackdown that followed the 2013 Egyptian military intervention is itself fuelling new violent extremism. In this environment, IS could find fertile ground to expand its influence in Egypt.

Since the military intervention in 2013, General Sisi has presented the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation, which, during its time in power, incited violent discord and prioritised the interests of the Brotherhood over those of the Egyptian nation. General Sisi has used this narrative to legitimise the army's crackdown on the Brotherhood and to rally political support behind his policies. Citing the Islamist threat, the military regime has called for public patience on delayed political reforms, human rights failings, and the state's inability to provide key basic goods.

In this context, the rise of IS has been seamlessly integrated into the existing regime narrative and has been seized upon as further proof of the necessity of the army's crackdown against any form of opposition. The regime has highlighted the brutality of IS in Syria and Iraq to paint a morbid picture of Egypt's likely course if the military had not intervened or if Islamists had been able to regain the upper hand.

The Sisi regime has ignored the fact that Egyptian opposition groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, have denounced IS and have clearly outlined a strategy for non-violent struggle. The government has found ways to justify this omission

in the statements of the opposition: just weeks before the military intervention against him, for example, President Mohammed Morsi appeared to back the idea of a religious jihad in Syria at a public gathering of hard-line clerics in Cairo. Even though IS had not yet been recognised as a significant player in Syria at the time, Egyptian authorities have since used the gathering to blur the lines between the Brotherhood and IS.

Repeated violent protests and a number of militant attacks blamed on Islamists are cited as evidence of the immediate dangers now facing the country. The threat posed by armed groups in the Sinai Peninsula has given support to this narrative, particularly given the recent pledge of allegiance to IS by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, an Islamist militant group active in the area. The group has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks on military forces that have resulted in over 100 deaths, including a number of beheadings that have appeared similar to those carried out by IS.

Sisi's supporters frequently point to regional developments, including neighbouring Libya's steady descent into a conflict in which Islamists play a prominent role, as a warning against the radicalisation gripping the Middle East. They say that this could have happened in Egypt too, if the military had not intervened.

However, Sisi and his supporters may be over-confident about the regime's ability to contain internal radicalisation. Sisi has gained the support of much of the population. But his failure to address core political and economic demands and to accommodate the opposition into the military-dominated order, along with the increase in state repression, are also serving as powerful recruiting tools for hard-line groups that are ideologically close to IS. Some opposition activists who are angered by the new order and have little or no faith in the ability of the non-violent Islamist movement to direct change are turning to more violent measures. The country is already facing an increasing pernicious security environment, and IS could look to exploit this space through expanded links with groups such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis.

At the same time, as many as 300 Egyptians are alleged to have already joined IS in Syria, raising fears about the potential for blowback if and when they return to Egypt. The county was shocked by the recent example of Islam Yaken, an upper class Egyptian law graduate from Cairo, who joined IS in Syria – and fears have been raised about the future if more Egyptians travel to fight in Syria.

On the regional level, meanwhile, the rise of IS is providing Sisi with increased leverage. Prior to IS's rise, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) already viewed Sisi as a critical lynchpin in their common struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood, given his willingness to confront the group. But the rise of IS, which is seen as a direct threat to the Gulf monarchies, has further strengthened Sisi's hand, making Egypt an even more important ally in the fight against Islamic extremism. The country recently demonstrated this strengthened position in Libya, where it participated in military strikes against Islamists.

The Egyptian military's controlled, anti-Islamist regime is seen as a crucial ally. Its standing army, larger than that of either Saudi or the UAE, and the influence of the Al-Azhar religious establishment over the Sunni world, are seen as potentially important tools in the regional struggle. Consequently, Sisi has been able to make greater demands and expect greater support from his Gulf allies, who have already been key to sustaining the ailing regime economically. This has happened despite the fact that Sisi has supported Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and outgoing Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on the basis of their abilities to counter regional extremism, which runs contrary in particular to Riyadh's strong position in favour of the Syrian opposition.

IS gains have also helped the Sisi regime deflect Western criticism of its domestic policies. The September 2014 meeting between Sisi and United States President Barack Obama, and Egypt's inclusion in the anti-IS coalition, boosted Sisi's international status. Also in September, the US said it would supply Egypt with ten Apache helicopters, suggesting a shared focus on counter-terrorism and a greater role for Egypt in Western-backed efforts in the region, whether in its own backyard or against IS and other extremist groups. Given the importance of the fight against IS, the West is likely to further relegate concerns about the Egyptian military regime's crackdown on political space and human rights abuses to the back burner.

Ellie Geranmayeh

Iran's strategy against the Islamic State

4

Iran has three principal objectives with regard to the Islamic State (IS): to stop IS in its tracks and eventually defeat the group in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon; to keep intact the territorial integrity of these states; and to ensure that IS itself and/or the international coalition deployed to defeat IS do not sweep away Iran's allies in the region or have a negative impact on Tehran's security strategy.

In contrast to other areas of Iran's foreign policy, this position is uniformly held across Tehran's decision-making organs and internal factions.

Iran's strategy for reaching these goals does have a political dimension, but it has so far focused more on a firm security response channelled through the governments in Damascus and Baghdad and through local Shia groups. The gains made by IS have strengthened Iran's convictions that extremist Sunni insurgents must be contained in Iraq and Syria and that this can only be achieved successfully through coordination with the Iraqi army and the Syrian security apparatus that is held together by President Bashar al-Assad.

IS threat: largely external and indirect

IS rejects and calls for the destruction of Shia Islam (practiced by more than 90 percent of Iranians) and the *velayat e-faqih* (rule of the jurists) system of governance adopted by the Iranian state. In spite of this, and unlike other countries in the region, Iran perceives the threat of IS as broadly external and indirect.

Iranian security branches have concluded that IS does not have the military capability to carry out its threats against Iran successfully, and, at least for now, have ruled out the possibility of substantive IS incursion across Iranian

borders. However, one of the more immediate internal security issues for Iran is the use of its territory as a corridor for passage into Iraq by Sunni extremist insurgents based in Pakistan and Afghanistan who want to join IS forces.

A growing worry for Iran is the terrorist attacks targeting its southern Sistan and Baluchestan province by Sunni insurgent groups operating from neighbouring Pakistan. Since September, there has been a surge in attacks reported against Iranian security personnel in this region. These have raised concerns in Tehran that the Sunni extremist group Jaish al-Adl, based in Pakistan, could eventually become an IS affiliate on Iran's doorstep. In response, President Hassan Rouhani's administration has taken active steps to cooperate with Iran's local Sunni leaders to draw Sunnis away from extremist sympathies.

However, in contrast to Iraq, Iranians are confident that their army will remain able and willing to combat IS and other Sunni extremist groups. They are also confident that internal radicalisation is unlikely, especially given that the Iranian government and clergy and the overwhelming majority of Iran's population reject the ideologies practiced by the radical Sunni group. While Iran has its share of disgruntled Sunnis, Kurds, and other minority groups who have pressed for greater recognition of their rights and voiced their desire for independence, they are unlikely to collude with or feel sympathetic towards IS insurgents in the way that some Sunni tribes have done in Iraq. But if the risk of internal radicalisation by Sunni extremist ideology were to grow dramatically, Tehran would not hesitate to respond with immediate and overwhelming force.

A substantive yet indirect IS threat to Tehran is that the group's expansion undermines Iran's regional security interests. Iran is keen to safeguard the position of its allies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon in view of threats from the US, Israel, and more recently Saudi Arabia. Ease of access through Syria and Iraq, which has been weakened by increasing IS control of territory, is the conduit that Iran uses to maintain Hezbollah as an effective retaliatory shield against Israel.

The general threat of regional mayhem is also a worry for Iran. The disintegration of Syria and Iraq and the empowerment of separatist groups could encourage Iran's minority groups to press harder for independence. Moreover, when viewed through a sectarian lens, a prolonged escalation of the violence propagated by IS in neighbouring Iraq and Syria does not bode well for Iran and its Shia allies in a Sunni-dominated Arab region.

Iran's strategy

Iran's executive and security branches have agreed on a unified position to actively support local and central forces in Iraq and Syria in trying to squeeze IS territories.

Military pushback: Shia militias and the Peshmerga

Iran is coordinating with and providing military assistance to Shia groups in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon that also wish to confront the threat posed by IS. The Mahdi Army, Kataib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq are among the major groups receiving training, intelligence, and arms to fight IS from Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These groups have long been involved with insurgency warfare in the region and are ideologically tied to Iran as a Shia state. For example, when Iran's army collapsed during the Iran-Iraq war under Saddam Hussein, the IRGC mobilised Shia militia groups in Iran and Iraq to fight back. The close relationships that Iran has formed with these volunteer militias and the vast experience it has built up over the years placed it in a strong position against IS from the beginning: it was the first and most fully operational actor on the ground in Iraq countering IS.

As a result of Iranian support and the expertise of these Shia militias, they have managed to cultivate intelligence on and a deep understanding of IS warfare. If IS carries out its threat to attack the Shia towns of Najaf and Karbala, for example, this would trigger a more intense response from Iran, which would likely involve a redoubling of assistance to its Shia allies.

Iran was also the first country to openly provide President Massoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with arms to fight IS. Iran supplied weapons to the KRG's Peshmerga forces with the blessing of Baghdad. While acknowledging that the Peshmerga are effective against IS, Iran worries that if it aligns itself too closely with Barzani, it may inadvertently support Kurdish aspirations for independence, which Iran opposes. Iran is concerned that its own Kurdish minorities will want either to carve out an independent state or to join one elsewhere. It is likely that Iran's support to the Peshmerga has been made conditional on the KRG's loyalty to Baghdad. Iran is also reported to have allowed large numbers of its own separatist Kurds to cross into Iraq to join the fight against IS, with no guarantees that they can return.

Iran has deployed special security advisors and provided the Iraqi and Syrian armies with weaponry (including, reportedly, sending SU-25 jets to Iraq), intelligence, and logistics with which to combat IS. For the foreseeable future, the Iranian army will not be sent either into Syria or Iraq in an effort to avoid Iran being dragged into the IS quagmire. Instead, advisors and intelligence personnel from IRGC's Quds Force have been embedded into the Iraqi army the same way as they have been in Syria.

A political track

Iran acknowledges that a military response alone cannot defeat IS without a corresponding political resolution of the sectarian divisions that have plagued Iraq and Syria. While Iran is hoping that a new, inclusive government in Baghdad may help to address Sunni grievances in Iraq, it has been unable to propose solutions acceptable to opposition groups in Syria.

Iran has generally been open to a more inclusive central government in Iraq, as long as the administration remains Shia-dominated and Tehran-friendly. The first step towards this was Tehran's agreement to remove Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and to advise incoming Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on the orientation of his new cabinet. As in Iraq, Tehran has been pushing for a national unity government in Syria that would draw in some elements of the opposition. In the short term at least, Tehran views Assad as the only figure able to keep the Syrian state apparatus intact, contain IS, and maintain Syria's alliance with Iran. Although there is some dialogue between Tehran and the Syrian opposition, given the divisions over Assad's future role, the prospect of an imminent breakthrough seems slight.

However, Iran's military pushback in Iraq and Syria, viewed by many Sunnis as a Shia-led incursion against their interests, will have negative consequences for the long-term political track. Iran's military role in these areas, similar to that of the West, has been used by IS as an ideological tool for recruitment.

Widening international engagement

Iran and Saudi Arabia (and other backers of Sunni opposition groups in Syria and Iraq) perceive IS as a common threat. These regional players have accused one another of causing the overspill of IS. Iran blames the Gulf states and Turkey for providing funding and logistics to IS. Saudi Arabia and others blame Iran for supporting the Assad regime, which has fuelled the IS sectarian onslaught. Meanwhile, Iran and Saudi Arabia, rival powers for dominance in the region, hope to use the current situation to tip the balance in their own favour.

Despite these stark divisions, new openings do exist for cooperation among regional actors. High-level political meetings have taken place between Iran and Turkey to discuss how cooperation on IS could take place. The visit of Iran's deputy foreign minister for Arab affairs to Saudi Arabia in late August and the first bilateral meeting between the foreign ministers of the two states on the sidelines of the 2014 United Nations General Assembly may have paved the way for the senior diplomatic engagement on IS that later took place. Importantly, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey were able to agree that Maliki should be removed. Tehran hopes that IS will force Riyadh to lower its ambitions for Syria and has indicated that it would be willing to exert more pressure on Assad to open the door to deal-making. However, despite the logic suggesting that the rise of IS would force Iran and Saudi Arabia to reach a grand bargain on Syria, neither side yet looks likely to make meaningful compromises in the near future.

It is firmly understood that the rise of IS presents new possibilities for regional engagement between the West and Iran – as underscored by President Barack Obama's recent letter to Iran's Supreme Leader. Western powers have long rejected substantive dialogue with Tehran on regional matters before the nuclear file was resolved, fearing this could spoil the nuclear negotiations or give Iran undue leverage. Defeating IS has now become a priority for the West, and new channels are therefore being opened in view of Iran's prominent regional position.

Tehran has tacitly accepted US airstrikes targeting IS in Iraq. The West and Iran have reached a similar consensus on the need to arm the Peshmerga to fight IS in Iraq despite their differences in Syria. There has also been some tactical coordination between the US and Iran: US warplanes and Iranian-backed Shia and Kurdish groups coordinated their efforts through the Iraqi Security Forces in their siege against IS in the Iraqi town of Amerli in August and in the towns of Saadiya and Jalawa in November. Iran's Quds Force now effectively leads troops on the ground with coordination of US-led air support. There was no hostile backlash in Iran against the US air strikes in Syria this September because both Tehran and Damascus were placed on notice –

although the Iranian president tepidly asserted that such conduct could entice more individuals to join IS in Syria.

However, this has not been enough to push the West to include Iran as part of its official international coalition in fighting IS. In response to its exclusion from this coalition, Tehran has accused the West of partnering with the very regional actors who are responsible for the formation of IS and of fuelling the turbulence through its recent authorisation for funding to and training of the Free Syrian Army.

The US has talked about a long-term campaign targeting IS in Syria and Iraq. It is politically difficult for either Washington or Tehran to openly endorse the actions of the other or to actively cooperate against IS. Nevertheless, US and Iranian efforts in Iraq have been accepted by both sides as a necessary evil to weaken IS, although the same cannot be said for Syria. Iran's role in the anti-IS front took centre stage during the bilateral meeting between President Hassan Rouhani and the United Kingdom's Prime Minister David Cameron on 24 September, the first meeting of its kind since 1979. This unprecedented encounter, coupled with the meeting between Rouhani and France's President François Hollande a day earlier, was a symbolic gesture from the West that it sees Iran as a dominant regional stakeholder that must be engaged in the IS debate. The forms of engagement that may emerge between Iran and the West in the next phases of the offensive against IS in both Iraq and Syria will probably be judged against the background of how the nuclear negotiations develop.

Sajad Jiyad
Iraq, the Islamic State, and sectarian divisions

The fall of Mosul to the Islamic State (IS) in June 2014 brought Iraq back to the world stage. IS's subsequent declaration of the borderless caliphate linked Iraq's troubles with Syria's. The Iraqi government initially struggled to stall the IS offensive after the army's collapse in Mosul. Recently, though, based on the strength of Shia militias and with external assistance from Iran and the United States, it has retaken territory and pushed IS back. An attempt is now being made, on the back of the formation of a new government, to shape a new inclusive system that can convince Sunnis to turn against IS. The future of Iraq, while it still hangs in the balance, looks more assured than it did last summer.

The rise of IS has precipitated a further challenge to Baghdad from the north, where the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has taken advantage of IS's advance to seize the long disputed city of Kirkuk. This is another threat to the territorial integrity and common purpose of the Iraqi state, and one which, although it is currently sidelined in the face of the larger IS threat, will likely provoke serious repercussions down the line. Tensions have been eased by a temporary agreement with the KRG over oil sales and the continuation of payments from Baghdad to the KRG, but it remains to be seen whether this can any time soon lead to a more comprehensive accord over ongoing differences, including over the fate of Kirkuk.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Mosul, major geopolitical changes have occurred in Iraq that will occupy the central government for months if not years to come. Most significantly, the sectarian divide between the Shia majority, who control the government, and the Sunni minority, some of whom have rallied behind IS, has been entrenched, perhaps irrevocably. It is increasingly uncertain whether Iraq can hold together as one, multi-confessional state. If it does, the best hope for defeating IS and dampening the deep sectarian and political tensions probably lies in the implementation of

meaningful federalism that would keep the country loosely united but empower unprecedented local administration.

By rejecting Shia rule in Baghdad, IS has won support from large parts of the Sunni population that was disenfranchised by the post-2003 political order, which handed power to the Shia majority. Despite its extremist practices, many Sunnis see IS as the only means of securing greater rights and putting an end to the perceived repressive rule of Baghdad. IS has highlighted the deep divide between Sunni politicians in Baghdad who remain part of the governing system and are committed to the idea of a united, federal Iraq led by Shia Islamist parties, and their communities in the Sunni majority provinces of Anbar, Salahudin, and Nineveh, who are not committed to a united Iraq and no longer view politicians in Baghdad as their legitimate representatives.

At the same time, the rise of IS and the violence accompanying it, including the deliberate targeting of Shias – such as the mass killing of army and air force cadets in Camp Speicher, allegedly in collaboration with Tikriti tribes – has hardened Shia attitudes towards the Sunni population. There is decreasing Shia appetite for reconciliation and increasing fears about a conspiracy to defeat Baghdad by Sunnis, who are widely perceived as terrorists and former Baathists. The loss of Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city, long hostile to the Shia-dominated government, was a real shock from a military point of view. It also led to a renewed conviction among Shia politicians that Baathists such as Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiya (JRTN) are conspiring with IS to bring about the collapse of Iraq.

The response to the rise of IS is more and more conceived of through a sectarian lens. Baghdad has responded to the Iraqi army's failure to adequately confront IS by mobilising Shia militias such as Kat'aib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Jaysh al-Mahdi, and the Badr Organisation as its primary offensive tools. Their experience in urban warfare, especially those re-tasked from the ongoing conflict in Syria where some have been fighting in support of Bashar al-Assad's regime, along with their ideological commitment, is seen as critical in the fight against IS. Their ability to operate outside the normal rules of engagement of a standing army is also seen as the only match for a brutal enemy like IS. The slow pace of US military support, allowing IS to reach the outskirts of Baghdad, reinforced the view in Baghdad that the US is an unreliable partner, accelerating the Iraqi government's reliance on Shia militias (as well as Iran). Meanwhile, a fatwa issued by the Shia religious leader, Ayatollah Sistani, calling on volunteers to join the army in the fight against IS, while not specifically aimed

at the Shia population, was nonetheless predominantly heeded by them, thereby exacerbating the sectarian dimension.

Moving forward, and recognising that it will be difficult to pacify the areas overrun by IS without local Sunni support, there now seems to be a strategy to militarily fortify Baghdad and the south. Baghdad then hopes that increased disaffection with IS in Sunni areas will, coupled with political reform initiated by Baghdad, give the internationally-backed Iraqi army a better chance of ultimately defeating IS in co-ordination with local support. Signs are already emerging of a new regional and international partnership that includes both the US and Iran in support of Baghdad on this basis. This strategy has borne some fruit, leading to military successes and also renewed diplomatic ties with important neighbours such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Given the deeply entrenched divisions, however, it remains to be seen how far the incoming prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, can truly initiate a new inclusive beginning that rallies domestic support behind the fight against IS. Some of the difficulty has been removed by the resignation of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who is personally viewed by many Sunnis as the chief architect of the discriminatory policies against them. And so far, Abadi seems to have been able to turn a new page in relations with political parties previously at loggerheads with Maliki, including drawing both Sunni and Kurdish parties into the new government. But the real challenge lies in mobilising sufficient support among the wider Sunni population, which is far removed from the politics of Baghdad.

This population is now faced with very difficult choices. The failure of the previous government to win them over and, indeed, their direct alienation through heavy-handed security policies, sometimes deployed in response to peaceful protests, has left them with little trust in their ability to regain influence through the political process in Baghdad. However, these grievances, aired prior to the rise of IS, are now being lost in the language of war. Some, alarmed at the brutality of IS, are joining the likes of Ahmed Abu Risha, a key figure in the Anbar Awakening against al-Qaeda over the past decade, working alongside government troops to counter IS. Tribes in Anbar such as Albu Nimr, Albu Fahd, and Albu Alwan have also fought back against IS and worked with the ISF to regain territory. If this model of cooperation can be replicated elsewhere, with the promise that tribal Sunni fighters will be integrated into a new proposed provincial National Guard, then other tribes in Anbar, Salahudin, and Nineveh may eventually follow suit in siding with the government.

One potential option, widely touted as the key means of empowering lower Sunnis and mobilising them in the fight against IS, is the implementation of greater federalism. There is little support among Sunni and Kurdish politicians for the complete break-up of Iraq. The Sunnis know they control a small pool of energy resources, unlike the oil-rich KRG and the Shia south. The Kurds have found little support for their initial push for independence from the US and the international community. Meanwhile, the Shias want to keep together the state they currently rule. As such, a key demand being made by some Sunnis is greater autonomy from Baghdad, while at the same time they seek to retain economic equality with the more prosperous regions of Iraq. Abadi may need to move quickly in this direction if he is to secure the broader Sunni support necessary to ultimately defeat IS.

Daniel Levy
The Islamic State in the Jewish state's wing mirror

One of the best summations of Israel's current threat assessment of the Islamic State (IS) came not from a government official or a military analyst, but from a popular Israeli satirical TV show. In a sketch on *The Kitzis Program*, spoof IS insurgents exclaim that they will not get around to confronting Israel until at least 2017, because they are up to their necks dealing with Shia, Yazidi, and others. In the end, they complain: the world does not always revolve around Israel.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did convene an urgent security meeting hours before United States President Barack Obama's IS strategy speech on 10 September 2014. And the Israeli prime minister has formally outlawed IS, enabling a series of counter-terrorism measures to be taken against it. Nevertheless, the focus of Israel's response has not been on any clear and present danger posed by IS. In line with Israel's general response to regional upheaval, including that in Syria, as well as with how other regional actors have addressed the success of IS, Israel's reaction has been part concern, part opportunism.

Israel, especially under Benjamin Netanyahu, likes to think of itself as the "CT 'R US" state. Given Israel's experience and existing policies, IS so far presents little by way of a new challenge. Israeli intelligence assessments say that IS has not (yet at least) established itself in the occupied Palestinian territories – neither in Gaza nor in the West Bank nor in East Jerusalem – even though other extremist non-IS groups do have adherents there. Even during an uptick in violence in November, no connection was made to IS. One factor in IS's absence is that these Palestinian territories are permanently under Israel's intense and obtrusively watchful eye, subject to drone surveillance and covered by an extensive network of informants. Border crossings are strictly controlled and internal closures are applied. All of these security measures predate IS and make any new deployment essentially unnecessary.

In terms of Israeli fighters joining the ranks of IS, it is estimated that up to a few dozen Arab Israelis may have gone to fight in Syria, although they have mostly joined other rebel groups rather than IS. Israel has consistently maintained an extensive network of oversight and surveillance of its own Arab citizenry, and it is widely thought to operate racial profiling at border entry and exit points. Therefore, slipping back home undetected would likely prove very difficult for an Arab Israeli.

IS has so far neither actively targeted the Jewish state nor even made it a central talking point in its endless PR messaging. Even though one of the hostages beheaded by IS, Steven Sotloff, had acquired Israeli citizenship, the fact was apparently unknown to his captors: the harrowing texts and videos that accompanied his killing were addressed to the US, not to Israel. Most interpretations of the use of "al-Sham" in IS's earlier preferred name, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), suggest that it does have designs on Israel – and its al-Qaeda roots would confirm as much. But so far, no such ambition has come to the fore. Even so, Israeli or Jewish targets overseas are an area of potential concern, although the attack by a returning fighter on a Jewish museum in Belgium in May 2014 does not appear to have been carried out in the name of IS.

In recent years, Israel has become acquainted with extremist Sunni Islamist militias operating in its immediate border areas: the Golan area in Syria, the Egyptian Sinai, and even in southern Lebanon. Although affiliations can be fluid, most of these groups have been more aligned to al-Qaeda than to IS. That might be changing – the Sinai-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis declared its allegiance to IS in November 2014. From an Israeli security perspective, the difference may not be significant. When it has determined that hostile groups or individuals could pose a threat, Israel has conducted military strikes by air and at sea, including in enemy states, mostly claiming the justification of intercepting the delivery of weapons systems. It is reasonable to assume that it would take similar action in relation to IS.

The most serious threat from IS for Israel right now might be the prospect of an IS breakthrough in Jordan. Israel considers the stability of the Jordanian regime to be a strategic priority, despite recent disagreements with the kingdom related to Israeli policy in Jerusalem. Assessments regarding IS inroads into Jordan are thus far reassuring, and Israel is leveraging the situation to make itself more indispensable to the Hashemite kingdom. Israel is not alone in looking out for Jordanian stability, but if IS were to make advances there, Israel would have much at stake.

Given the degree of pre-existing Israeli consensus on what constitutes acceptable anti-terror policy, the response to IS has not been a particularly controversial domestic political issue. The IS challenge to Israel may come more in the arena of regional geopolitics – and not because of IS itself, but as a result of the dynamics that it could set in motion. Regionally, Israel is positioning itself to benefit from the brouhaha surrounding IS. This is neither unique to Israel nor particularly surprising.

The IS moment is seen by Netanyahu as an occasion to solidify Israel's deepening ties with the region's Sunni Arab states who are allied to the US – and to do so without offering concessions on the Palestinian front. At the annual conference of Israel's International Institute for Counter-Terrorism in September 2014, Netanyahu claimed "Arab states are re-evaluating their relations with Israel due to the fact we are facing the same enemies."[1] Many of these Arab states, together with Israel, are keen to use the IS crisis in order to drive home their broader message and policy: that the Islamist threat should be more expansively defined (to include the Muslim Brotherhood) and should include Iran and its Shia allies. For Israel, this most particularly means linking IS to Hamas, as Netanyahu has relentlessly done.

This is seen as an opportunity for Israel to demonstrate that it can continue to deny Palestinian rights and even conduct a devastating onslaught against Gaza, while simultaneously singing from the same hymn sheet as key Arab states (notably Egypt, Saudi, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates) on the defining regional issue of the day. That is a powerful narrative for a rightist Israeli government to be able to convey to its public.

This Israeli approach carries with it a number of potential risks. Israel has long opposed the supply of heavy weaponry to the Western-backed Syrian rebel opposition, given Israel's preference for maintaining its absolute qualitative military superiority and freedom of action. That line might now be more difficult to hold. More worrying is the prospect that the Sunni allies will be unable to contribute effectively to the anti-IS coalition, especially when compared to Iran's ability to intervene meaningfully, including on the ground. Israel's regional threat map, at least as articulated by Netanyahu, continues to hold Iran as public enemy number one, and the potential impact of the

1 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: Don't strengthen Iran to weaken Islamic State", *Haaretz*, 11 September 2014, available at http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.615382

IS fallout on Iran's geopolitical standing considerably unnerves Jerusalem. IS may be targeting and even weakening Iran's allies (such as Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad, and the Baghdad government), but in so doing it is creating new shared interests and opportunities between Iran and states aligned with Israel.

IS has the US and Iran lining up on the same side of a major regional fault line. They have conspired, if not together then at least in parallel, to replace the Nouri al-Maliki-led government in Iraq. The new prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, is still allied to Iran, as well as being better positioned to form an inclusive government in Baghdad that could be the beneficiary of stepped-up US assistance.

None of this means that the US and Iran are riding off into the sunset together, nor that US positions in the nuclear negotiations will be traded off against Iranian deliverables versus IS (or vice versa), as was again demonstrated when the negotiations could only produce another extension on 24 November 2014. Rather, the prospect has come tantalisingly into view of Iran and the West not only recognising shared interests, but also acting on them in some kind of coordinated fashion, something Israel has for decades been heavily invested in preventing. And regional actors that Israel now considers to be in its camp may recalibrate their approaches accordingly. The Kurds could be one example, given the support Iran has provided to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Northern Iraq.

Far more dramatic would be the emergence of a Saudi Arabia-Iran détente. But in spite of some rare high-level meetings and elements of Saudi-Iranian cooperation both in Lebanon and in Iraq, that still looks to be a stretch.

Still, it might be worth recalling that the last time the US put together a region-wide coalition to act militarily in Iraq, with Israel cheerleading from the sidelines but not on the field, was Gulf War I in 1991. What followed was an Arab-supported American push on Palestine that was unwelcome in Jerusalem and that unseated a Likud prime minister.

For now, though, Israel is welcoming the active redeployment of the US military to the region as set out in the US strategy for countering IS, although, characteristically, Israel still upbraids the White House for not doing enough. Israel is one of a phalanx of the US's Middle East allies that are eager to see America re-up its military footprint in their backyard. Israel and that same coalition of Sunni states had grown anxious at the talk of a US pivot to Asia and to state-building at home. Any inkling from Washington of a prolonged return to the global war on terror will be music to Netanyahu's ears.

Finally, Israel looks at the IS threat as a branding opportunity. Israel and the West can be presented as fighting the same good fight against Islamic terror, with a side benefit for Israel of again being able to market its own counter-terrorism practices, hardware, and software, to Western allies. IS is also being used as part of official Israel's push-back against recent European initiatives to recognise Palestine, with Prime Minister Netanyahu asking before a French parliamentary vote: "Is it what France should do in this moment when some people behead people across the Middle East, including a French citizen?"[2]

Israel is undoubtedly adept in its public messaging, but its branding efforts can have a tendency to be too clumsy, overbearing, and transparent. *Haaretz* columnist Chemi Shalev has said that "Benjamin Netanyahu copy-wrote and then fell in love with his 'Hamas=ISIS' equation", noting that he sounds to European capitals "like a used car salesman".[3] Israel's own sales pitch aside, it is hard not to see Netanyahu's policies as being a driver of rather than a countermeasure to Palestinian and regional radicalisation. In Netanyahu's worldview, IS in any case is not the defining regional fault line – even Hamas is not given that honour. Former US official Dennis Ross has most adeptly defined the fault line as Netanyahu sees it (although he avoided describing it as an Israeli position, instead recommending it for US policy): "a fundamental division between Islamists and non-Islamists. On one side are the Islamists – both Sunni and Shiite. ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood represent the Sunni end of the spectrum, while the Islamic Republic of Iran and its militias constitute the other."[4]

With this in mind, perhaps the biggest danger for Israel, as it is for some of its neighbours, is that the "IS metastasising threat narrative" could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If Israel gets too carried away with its own rhetorical spin, Israeli analysis and subsequent policy regarding the Palestinians and

2 Maïa de la Baume, "French Legislators Debate Stand on Palestinian Statehood", *New York Times*, 28 November 2014, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/29/world/europe/french-lawmakers-debate-recognizing-palestinian-state.html
3 Chemi Shalev, "Faulty lines: Netanyahu says 'ISIS' but his listeners hear 'Gaza, occupation'", *Haaretz*, 14 September 2014, available at http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/west-of-eden/.premium-1.615612
4 Dennis B. Ross, "Islamists Are Not Our Friends", *New York Times*, 11 September 2014, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/12/opinion/islamists-are-not-our-friends.html?_r=1

Hamas will deviate even further from a sensible and sustainable path. In the current environment, Israeli overreach along with a doubling down on its already egregiously punitive policy towards the Palestinians could yet see the sprouting of something akin to the Islamic State in the territories controlled by the Jewish state. And all this at a time when Israel's prime minister has been busy promoting new "Jewish state" legislation so disturbing that it not only contributed to the collapse of the governing coalition, but also gave rise to the cheeky new hashtag #JSIL – the Jewish State in the Levant.

Saleem Haddad

Jordan combats the Islamic State by addressing domestic grievances

Since the Islamic State (IS) took over Mosul in early June last year and soon after declared an Islamic Caliphate on Syrian and Iraqi land, many Jordanians have been worried that they will be next. According to a poll published in September 2014 by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, 65 percent of Jordanians see IS as the biggest threat to Jordan's stability.

This fear is not unfounded. Jordan has long been an exporter of jihadi fighters – IS itself evolved out of a group founded by Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Footage of IS fighters tearing apart and then burning their Jordanian passports, as well as threatening to slaughter King Abdullah II, only confirms that Jordan, and its leader, are in their sights. An estimated 2,000 Jordanians are currently fighting in Syria, and many of them are doing so under the banner of IS. In response, the government pushed through a controversial anti-terror bill earlier this year, which broadens the definition of terrorism to include "joining or attempting to join", the "direct and indirect funding" of, and "attempting to recruit" for "any armed group or terrorist organisation in the Kingdom and abroad".[1] This makes it impossible for Jordanian fighters to return to the country without facing prosecution.

In June, in response to IS advancing to within a few kilometres of Jordan's 180km border with Iraq, the government deployed about 100 Special Forces and Air Force personnel to the Iraqi side of the border. While in theory IS might attempt to seize border crossings as it tried to do in Lebanon, the group is highly unlikely to be successful given that Jordan's borders are protected with state-of-the-art technology, as well as about 40,000 Jordanian army personnel and

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[1] Taylor Luck, "True jihadist threat", *The Jordan Times*, 17 May 2014, available at http://www1.jordantimes.com/true-jihadist-threat

1,000 American troops brought in to fend off threats from the war in Syria. Since late April 2014, Jordanian authorities have also implemented a new security campaign along its borders, no longer allowing unidentified persons to cross. Given the length of its borders with Syria and Iraq, however, it will be impossible to seal them off entirely.

IS and Jordan's Salafi movement

More worrying to the Jordanian regime is the level of support IS might enjoy among Jordanians inside the country, particularly those belonging to the large underclass that is heavily concentrated in Amman, Irbid, Zarqa, and Ma'an. For decades, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Action Front was the most prominent opposition group in Jordan. Following the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in 2013, however, there has been an increase in support for more radical groups, including for both the Quietist Salafi and Salafi-jihadi movements in Jordan. Quietist Salafis represent a much larger proportion of Salafis in Jordan, but the rise in jihadi rhetoric among Salafis is a worrying trend. While Islamist groups in Jordan have long enjoyed the support of Palestinian-Jordanian communities in Zarqa and elsewhere, support for such movements has risen, particularly amongst East Bank Jordanians – who have traditionally been the king's most loyal supporters. This reflects the hollowing out of the regime's social base after two decades of economic liberalisation policies, as well as the perception in Jordan that the traditional Brotherhood is a Palestinian-oriented organisation.

The Salafi-jihadi movement, however, is split on its support for IS. Some have rejected its announcement of an Islamic caliphate, which they regard as a "rush job", "forced", and "illegitimate".[2] For example, the spiritual leader of the Salafi-jihadi movement in Jordan, Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, has attacked IS, accusing it of killing Muslims and criticising its declaration of an Islamic caliphate. Maqdisi was released from jail on 16 June 2014, days before he made his statements, raising questions about a possible deal between him and the Jordanian authorities. Some have claimed that he was released only after he had been persuaded to issue two fatwas declaring followers of IS "deviants" and telling them not to carry out attacks in Jordan (although his release did coincide

with the end of his jail term). More recently, al-Maqdisi has spoken out against IS's tactics of kidnapping and beheading aid workers and journalists, claiming that these victims are messengers and helpers that should be protected.

A group of Salafi-jihadis, including two of the movement's leaders, Irbid's Abu Mohammad al-Tahawi and Ma'an's Mohammed al-Shalabi (better known as Abu Sayyaf), openly attacked al-Maqdisi for his criticism of IS. Abu Sayyaf accused al-Maqdisi of defending "the regime and its security arm".[3] Even so, Abu Sayyaf and others are quick to deny any organised IS presence in Jordan, stating that support for the group amongst many Salafis in Jordan remains purely ideological. This did not stop the government from cracking down on the Salafi movement's hard-line elements in June 2014, arresting over 100 and referring over 40 members to the country's state security court since the beginning of last year.

More recently, the government imposed new rules on the country's clerics in an effort to curb jihadist rhetoric in Jordanian mosques. The government is demanding that preachers refrain from making any remarks inciting violence against the royal family, leaders of neighbouring Arab states, the United States, and Europe, and has also warned preachers against using sectarian, jihadist, or extremist rhetoric. The government is rewarding preachers who adhere to these new guidelines through government salaries of about $600 a month, as well as other perks including religious workshops and travel assistance.

Domestic disturbance in Ma'an

However, the emphasis on the religious motivations of IS's supporters tends to obscure the many grievances that have motivated fighters to join the militant group. A history of government oppression, marginalisation, and the absence of basic services have also played a part in the emergence of IS in Iraq and Syria. For this reason, another concern for the Jordanian government is how IS's strategy of preying on existing grievances could play out in Ma'an, a city 200km south of Amman, where citizens have long-standing grievances towards the regime. There, a number of protests took place between April and July last year, and more recently in October, which included a small group of protestors waving IS

2 Elisa Oddone, "Jordanian jihadist leader condemns ISIS caliphate", *Al-Monitor*, 2 July 2014, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2014/07/jordan-maqdisi-jihad-iraq-isis-caliphate-qaeda.html

3 Osama al-Sharif, "Jordan takes wait-and-see approach on Islamic State", *Al-Monitor*, 11 August 2014, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/jordan-isis-islamic-state-salafist-jihadist.html

flags and chanting their support for the Islamic State. Since then, IS militants operating in Syria have allegedly released a series of messages, including a video in May announcing their solidarity with the people of Ma'an and referring to the city as the "Fallujah of Jordan".

Political troubles in Ma'an go back to 1989, when protests first erupted over the removal of bread and fuel subsidies. The protests then spread to Karak, Salt, and Amman, which eventually resulted in the lifting of martial law and the reinstatement of parliament. Since then, however, residents of Ma'an have complained of political and economic marginalisation at the hands of the central government and of being shut out of jobs in phosphate and cement production, the region's two main industries. The city has an unemployment rate of 20.6 percent, much higher than the national average, as well as the highest poverty rate in the country, at 24.1 percent. Tensions also exist between residents and the gendarmerie, with at least ten people having died in clashes at the hands of police in the 2013 alone, according to human rights activists.

Both residents and the local government in Ma'an have stated that national and international media are exaggerating the threat of IS there, claiming that while the group may be trying to recruit potential members, no formal organisational structure exists. They warned, however, that this situation might change if heavy-handed policing continued. Mohammed Abu Saleh, a political leader in Ma'an who helped organise the anti-government rallies, has told media that heavy-handed actions by Jordanian security forces are "suffocating" the population. "The only state services we get are riot police", he said. "The city has been forgotten. There are no jobs, no development, no dignity."[4] As in Fallujah and Mosul, growing frustration could lead some to use the threat of IS to send a message to the central government.

The need for a political approach

Despite the rising popularity of jihadi rhetoric in some circles, and the growing frustration in parts of the country, the vast majority of Jordanians do not aspire to carry out jihad in Syria or elsewhere and are appalled by the violent tactics IS have adopted since their rise to power. According to an opinion poll carried out by the Center for Strategic Studies, an overwhelming 89 percent of respondents reject the ideologies of al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusra, and IS. Additionally, for over a decade, Jordan has hosted a consistent influx of refugees from Iraq and Syria, who serve as a constant reminder of the risks of rocking the boat. Given the country's professional army, strong state institutions, and homogenous population, its challenges are not the same as those that allowed IS to prosper in Syria and Iraq. The major risk for Jordan is that the regime might respond too forcefully to existing threats and thereby alienate and radicalise significant segments of its population.

Of the nearly 60 states who have joined the American-led coalition against IS, Jordan is a country whose participation is particularly critical. Beyond the "local" legitimacy that Jordan's involvement brings to the campaign, the country has also proved to be an indispensable ally – from deploying fighter jets to providing support and training to Syrian rebels. This involvement has undoubtedly brought criticism from opposition elements in the country, both secular and religious. Abu Sayyaf, among others, has called the campaign an attack on Islam, and at the beginning of September 2014, 21 members of Jordan's parliament sent a memo to its speaker rejecting the Kingdom's participation.

But while Jordan has an important role to play in the fight against IS, it should not fight the battle through security and military means alone. After all, the fight against IS is fundamentally a struggle between inclusive and pluralistic approaches to governance and violent and exclusionist ones, and it is at the political level that the battle against IS will be won or lost. At the regional level, Jordan's role should be to support a political process in Iraq that tries to address the underlying causes that have led to the rise of radical groups like IS. Domestically, the government should work towards sustainable peace and security by addressing long-term problems of inequality, poverty, and development in the country, which is as essential as monitoring borders and keeping a watchful eye on potential jihadis.

4 William Booth and Taylor Luck, "Jordan fears homegrown ISIS more than invasion from Iraq", *The Washington Post,* 27 June 2014, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/jordan-fears-homegrown-isis-more-than-invasion-from-iraq/2014/06/27/1534a4ee-f48a-492a-99b3-b6cd3ffe9e41_story.html

Cale Salih

Divided Kurds fight the Islamic State

The rise of the Islamic State (IS) is dangerous for Kurds across the region. For more than a year, the group has fought deadly battles over territory with Kurds in Syria. Now, IS threatens to undo the hard-won security of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, putting the KRG on the back foot and deepening its dependence on external powers. IS is also having a significant impact on intra-Kurdish rivalries, strengthening the hand of Abdullah Öcalan, head of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), over that of Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani, who heads the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

When IS took over Mosul last June, pushing the Iraqi army to abandon all but 50km of its border with the KRG, many Kurds were initially excited. They thought that the Kurdish Peshmerga forces' swift takeover of the long disputed oil-rich territory of Kirkuk would provide the KRG with its moment to declare independence, a sentiment that Barzani initially appeared to promote. The KRG, which had shaky relations with then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, eagerly joined voices condemning his exclusionary policies and calling for his ouster.

Kurdish excitement quickly dissipated, however, when the highly regarded Peshmerga forces began losing ground to IS. Kurds quickly realised that problems in the rest of the country would affect their own ambitions and options, particularly as tens of thousands of internally displaced Iraqis streamed into KRG-controlled territories. Further anxiety set in when IS suddenly set its sights on the KRG capital of Erbil, prompting the United States to intervene with airstrikes. Maliki was replaced, as the KRG had hoped, but by a candidate from the same political faction; despite some positive signs, it remains unclear whether the Kurdish position will change significantly under the new prime minister, Haider al-Abadi.

The KRG, now facing the rise of IS on its borders with Iraq and Syria, is arguably in its most vulnerable position since before 2003. Contrary to what many had expected, the IS threat limits Barzani's flexibility, including on the matter of independence. To face the new threat, the KRG has become increasingly dependent on military support from nations that reject Kurdish independence: Iran and the US.

The crisis has exposed the KRG's vulnerabilities and the true extent of its dependence on other parts of Iraq. For instance, just days after Iraq's Baiji oil refinery had to shut down because of fighting, gas stations in Kurdistan ran out of fuel. Urban Kurds faced a choice between buying gas at exorbitant prices on the black market or waiting for hours in a queue at gas stations – the first sign that the comfortable lives to which they had grown accustomed over the past decade might now be in peril.

Moreover, the KRG will not want to walk away from Iraq without Kirkuk in hand. Yet the disputes plaguing the oil-rich province are far from resolved. Although Peshmerga forces now control much of Kirkuk, IS holds areas in the south of the province. And substantial Turkmen, Assyrian, and Arab communities live in the areas that the Kurds now control. Not all of them will be willing to accept Kurdish authority.

Developments over the last summer served to weaken Barzani in relation to his PKK rival, Öcalan. The two figures have long been vying to become the most powerful Kurdish transnational leader, using domestic influences and regional proxies to gain the upper hand. The rise of IS has had a direct impact on this rivalry. As things stand, Öcalan's model has won out over Barzani's in Syria, with PKK-affiliated groups seizing political and military control in majority-Kurdish parts of Syria. As of summer 2013, the PKK had quickly begun to raise its profile in Iraq.

Barzani and Öcalan espouse competing models of Kurdish nationalism. Barzani's model is capitalist-minded, designed around powerful relationships with multinational companies and economic integration with neighbours such as Turkey. Öcalan's is rooted in a leftist political ideology and remains focused on the struggle for Kurdish rights in Turkey. Öcalan benefits from a disciplined armed force that maintains operational bases in the Iraqi Kurdish Qandil Mountains and has close links with affiliated armed groups in Syria and Iran.

Both the KDP and the PKK have funded Syrian Kurdish political parties and trained Syrian Kurdish fighters. But the forces affiliated with the PKK have emerged as the dominant Kurdish political and military powers in Syria. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Defence Units (YPG), political and military powers aligned with the PKK, have fiercely defended Kurdish territories against jihadi onslaughts and have maintained an enclave of relative governance and security in some majority-Kurdish areas throughout the Syrian civil war. This has earned them recognition as the protectors of the Kurds in Syria. KDP-affiliated parties, meanwhile, are mostly only known for bickering among themselves in hotels in Erbil. Barzani has not been able to move a Kurdish armed force loyal to his proxies into Syria, as he is mindful of threats from the PYD/YPG that they would reject other Kurdish armed groups.

In Iraq, PKK and YPG fighters have helped to reclaim territory previously lost to IS, including Makhmour, as well as to re-secure the Rabia border crossing and to provide critical assistance in the face of Peshmerga setbacks. This has won the PKK and YPG widespread support, including among Iraqi Kurds. In addition, Barzani no longer holds the Kurdish monopoly on international legitimacy and support. In spite of Turkish objections, the Pentagon has announced a new collaboration system in which YPG fighters send ground intelligence to guide US airstrikes. Since the rise of IS, there have been calls – for example, in op-eds and editorials in influential newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Bloomberg* – for Western powers to reconsider the PKK's designation as a terrorist organisation.

While the PKK's profile has risen dramatically, the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces under Barzani's control have lost their aura of dauntlessness in the face of IS gains. Many in the KRG and abroad were stunned when the Peshmerga quickly lost ground to IS – much of which was only won back later with the help of the PKK. The PKK was proving what the KRG, amid its modern economic and state-building successes, may have lost sight of in recent years: military might matters most in times of crisis in the Middle East.

Barzani saw an opportunity to remedy this slump in profile when a unique convergence of interests among the US, Turkey, the KRG, and the YPG emerged in Kobane in late October 2014. By that point, the YPG had been fighting IS in the town for weeks, in full view of international TV crews set up just across the border. Kobane's name gained global recognition and, though it had been emptied of its civilians, it was brimming with spectacular propaganda value. But many were starting to predict that Kobane would soon fall.

The finger of blame for the seemingly inevitable fate of Kobane soon pointed at Turkey. Ankara was criticised for blocking Kurdish fighters and supplies inside Turkey from crossing the border into Kobane to support the YPG. Many complained that Turkey for years had allowed a "jihadi highway" to develop on its border, but was now preventing Kurdish fighters going in to fight those same jihadis. This gave rise to a widespread impression among Kurds that Turkey would be happy to see Kobane fall, if, as a result, the YPG would be seriously damaged. As a result of this growing distrust, PKK leaders threatened to end the PKK-Turkey peace process if Kobane were to fall.

Faced with the threat of the collapse of the peace process and mounting international pressure, Turkey finally caved – to an extent. After about 40 days of fighting in Kobane, Turkey agreed to allow 150 Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga carrying weapons and ammunition to enter the besieged town to provide artillery support to the YPG.

This move served the purposes of many players. Barzani, eager to partake in the primetime battle and win back some credibility after the Peshmerga's humiliating defeats in Iraq, finally got to play a small but symbolic military role in Syria – a move that the YPG had previously prevented. Turkey, wary of the growing iconic status of Kobane, preferred that a victory there be shared by its Iraqi Kurdish allies, rather than entirely owed to the PKK-backed forces. The US, which had long pushed for power sharing between Barzani and PKK-backed Syrian Kurdish factions, won more legitimacy for its co-ordination with Kurdish ground forces in Syria. And the YPG, holding out but fatigued after weeks of fighting, received much-needed supplies and artillery support.

In many ways, the Kurds seem to be making important gains. The rare collaboration between the YPG and Iraqi Kurdish ground fighters, backed by US airstrikes, appears to be successfully holding off the IS advance into Kobane. Both the PKK and KRG-backed forces have received unprecedented international support for their efforts and have been widely recognised as the only reliable ground forces that can fight IS in both Iraq and Syria. Iraqi Kurds have recently won back territory from IS in northern Diyala, and have reached a temporary budgetary and oil export accord with Abadi's government in Baghdad, which will allow for the overdue payments of KRG civil servants' salaries.

Even so, key challenges remain. Fighters in Kobane may be turning into international heroes, but almost all of the town's civilians have become refugees in Turkey. A deadly car bomb in Erbil in late November last year unnerved the population there and added to investor scepticism, even as the Peshmerga claimed victory in Jalawla and the government restarted salary payments. And perhaps most crucially, despite some points of coordination when and where interests converge, such as in Kobane, Kurdish political rivalries remain very much intact. The Barzani–Öcalan divide will continue to shape the Kurdish response to IS, and ultimately, the jihadi group's rise will constrain both of their visions of Kurdish nationalism.

Elizabeth Dickinson
Kuwait: the crisis in Syria comes home

The rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) has shaken the Middle East, and few countries are more at risk – or more concerned – than Kuwait. In a country whose security has often been upended by Iraq, Kuwait's government was alarmed by the ease with which the IS militants captured territory from the Iraqi army. But the authorities' more immediate concern is closer to home: a broad spectrum of Sunnis in Kuwait have expressed sympathy for IS. Kuwait has already served as a hub for private donors seeking to fund Syrian Salafist rebel groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, as well as the al-Qaeda branch, Jabhat al-Nusra. IS's success risks fragmenting those donors and potentially sparking an internal conflict within Kuwait's Sunni religious establishment. Kuwait's Shias fear that they will become one of the victims of this dynamic and are already sounding alarm bells about growing sectarian tensions.

Adding to the authorities' difficulties, Kuwaitis across sectarian lines have criticised the idea of a US-led coalition to stop IS – but Kuwait's government has signed onto the coalition. Many Kuwaitis view IS as a result of the United States' policies toward the Syrian conflict, if not as a direct creation of the US. Any effort to target the group without deposing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will be unacceptable to many Sunnis. But military action against IS is also unacceptable to many Shias, who suspect that the US has broader designs for the region. Amid all of this, Kuwait is under increasing international pressure to crack down on terrorist financing, and any effort to do so will inevitably come at the expense of its cherished freedoms of association and speech. Needless to say, in the coming months the government will have to deploy its considerable experience in balancing constituencies to maintain an already delicate political balance.

Kuwait's involvement in the Syrian-Iraqi crisis began in late 2011 and early 2012. Kuwait City joined fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in expelling its Syrian ambassador, but the government was reluctant to follow the leads

of Qatar and Saudi Arabia by directly supporting opposition groups in Syria. A small group of individuals, however, did get involved. Groups from within the estimated 120,000 Syrian expatriates in Kuwait paired up with powerful political and religious figures within the Sunni community and began to send money and supplies. In what was originally a peaceful uprising, donors sent start-up funds for armed brigades specifically linked to their own ideologies or goals. As the rebels coalesced into larger groups, donors likewise consolidated their efforts. They operated with ease, thanks to Kuwait's rich tradition of charity work as well as its freedom of association. In 2011, Kuwait was also the only country in the GCC that did not criminalise terrorist finance, making it a hub not just for locals but also for citizens from across the Gulf to send donations to Syrian rebel groups.

The Sunni donor community in Kuwait is dominated by activist Salafists, who have particularly rallied around Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra. These donors have not only encouraged the groups' armed activities, but have also contributed to fortifying their jihadist and sectarian ideologies. So connected were the Kuwaitis to Ahrar al-Sham that when its leader, Hassan Aboud, died on 9 September 2014, the Salafist Umma party issued an official statement mourning his death. The leader of Umma, Hakim al-Mutairi, as well as one of its prominent fundraisers, Hajjaj al-Ajmi, posted the final messages they had received from Aboud on Twitter. (Ajmi was one of two Kuwaitis who were designated for sanctions over terrorist financing by the US Department of the Treasury in August last year.)

Kuwait's donors were overwhelmingly opposed to IS's role in the Syrian conflict. Many of them echoed the popular Syrian belief that IS was created by the Assad regime. When the internal rift between IS and its parent organisation al-Qaeda emerged, some Kuwaiti donors tried to mediate between the two sides and council IS back towards al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri. When their work failed, they denounced IS as *takfiri*.

But just a few months later, IS's success across the border in Iraq met with a very different reception. The majority of donors welcomed its takeover there as a "revolution". Whereas IS is seen as having divided the Sunni opposition in Syria, the group is seen as a champion of the Sunnis in Iraq who were persecuted under the government of Nouri al-Maliki. The same donors have also denounced the US strikes against IS, particularly because they have targeted al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra as well – a group backed by numerous Kuwaiti funding networks.

The resulting disconnect, whereby donors support IS in Iraq but not in Syria, paired with US military action, now risks splitting the donor community by causing some Kuwaiti Sunnis to back IS, rather than Jabhat al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham. This is just one chapter in a broader regional battle between al-Qaeda and IS for support. The greatest risk is that donors on both sides will attempt to prove their dominance by accelerating their efforts to fund and provide ideological support to the groups they favour.

In addition to the immediate risks of radicalisation, these processes could destabilise Kuwait's internal political situation. It was no coincidence that the Salafist and Islamist communities' funding of the Syrian conflict coincided with their meteoric political rise at home in Kuwait. The regional precedent of Sunni empowerment and revolution invigorated these networks, inspiring mass protests in 2011-2012 that drew tens of thousands of Kuwaitis to demand a more democratic government. The authorities were visibly shaken by the demonstrations and donors leveraged that unease to deter the government from interfering in fundraising events and gatherings. If the Sunni donor community is once again electrified by events abroad, it could make another push to take control at home.

Such a push would exacerbate the rift between the ruling family and the broader Sunni community, including the vast majority of Kuwait's Sunnis who are not involved in any funding operations. Over the last four years, Sunni and tribal opposition leaders have complained of official corruption and of the ruling family's perceived bias towards wealthy merchant families, many of whom are Shia. The examples of Shia-led persecution of Sunnis in Syria and now in Iraq have brought new attention to those longstanding grievances. And almost four years after the mass protests, the opposition is now far more organised and capable.

The Shia community, for its part, also feels under siege – not from the government, but from events in the region. Many supported the Shia-led opposition in Bahrain and grievances about its treatment are still fresh. Kuwait's Shias see a tidal wave moving against them across the Arab Gulf monarchies. Of course, some Shia politicians are also capitalising on the events in Iraq. Pro-Iranian MPs, some of whom are close to the Syrian regime, have cited IS as evidence that the Assad government has in fact been fighting terrorists all along. They are deploying their sharp anti-IS rhetoric to boost their own anti-terrorism credentials while decrying fellow Gulf states for supporting the Syrian opposition.

But neither side of the sectarian rift has been enthusiastic about the international coalition that aims to stop IS. Kuwaitis have been broadly appalled by the Assad government's behaviour and they find it morally abhorrent for the US to strike IS without also tackling the Syrian issue – particularly given that Washington threatened air strikes in 2013 and then backed down. Many believe that the US has its own interests in mind rather than those of the local people. Even those who would like to support US military action are sceptical that Barack Obama's administration is committed to seeing the effort through, given his famous reluctance about involvement in the region. Finally, Shia supporters of Iran and Hezbollah fear that the attacks on IS are simply another iteration of American imperialism.

The government now has the unenviable task of managing popular opinion while still meeting international expectations. It has joined the international coalition against IS, and as part of the alliance, American forces will likely ask to use their Kuwaiti military base in the anti-IS operation.

Kuwait will also face increasing pressure from the US Treasury to crack down on terrorism financing, and there are signs it is taking steps to do so. Over the summer, Kuwait's first independent Financial Intelligence Unit began operations, tasked with flagging and referring to prosecution any suspicious laundering or terrorist finance activity. Several individuals have also been barred from travelling and most visible fundraising has been halted. It is likely, however, that funds continue to move quietly.

Still, in the short term, domestic political stability may be the priority, which could explain why Kuwait has not participated directly in military strikes. While Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates have sent planes to join the bombardments in Iraq and Syria, Kuwait has hinted that it may take on a less politically provocative humanitarian role, as it has in Syria, by organising and rallying international donors to the United Nations' relief effort. Kuwait has been equally non-committal on the issue of Iran's participation in the coalition. Kuwait's foreign minister said he was willing to talk with Tehran about regional issues but quickly shot down any suggestion that his country would mediate between Iran and members of the coalition against IS.

In the long term, the persistence of radical donor networks is a risk not only to Kuwait but to the broader region. These communities are deeply connected and their ideologies are persistent. And with each political event that reaffirms their convictions, they become more difficult to break.

Nicholas Noe

Confronting the Islamic State: Lebanon's tenuous success amidst growing threats

When Sunni Islamist fighters launched a series of deadly attacks in August 2014 against the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) in the Bekaa Valley border town of Arsal, the immediate repercussions for Lebanon and the wider region could have been extremely damaging. If the militant surge had been successful, those who carried out the attack, including members of the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), could have established a base for expanded violent operations within Lebanon. Simultaneously, the perception of IS's ascendency and potency in the region would have been bolstered, further fuelling the group's momentum and complicating efforts to contain it.

However, even as IS found success elsewhere, Lebanon was able to quickly repel the threat – due in large part to a shift in trajectory that predated IS's surge into Iraq, away from political confrontation between domestic parties and towards unprecedented cooperation aimed at combating the threat of extremism. In a region in which security arrangements and political structures are widely and violently being deconstructed, Lebanon is now one of the few states that is able to produce and maintain a level of political coherence strong enough to move the needle against IS in the opposite direction.

This almost unique trajectory in the Middle East and North Africa has, at least for the moment, reversed the decades-old formula of Lebanon as a site for regional and international score-settling. The reasons for Lebanon's success are fourfold and of relatively recent origin. The first reason is the unprecedented intelligence cooperation taking place between the United States and some European states with all of Lebanon's security agencies, a dynamic that works in parallel with the military actions of the Shia Lebanese political party, Hezbollah, along the Lebanese-Syrian border. Secondly, rival parties in Lebanon now share a sense of grave, impending danger with regard

to IS and violent Sunni extremists. The key parties here are the Hezbollah-led March 8 movement and the Future Movement, which leads the March 14 movement, an alliance that stands against both the Syrian regime and the March 8 movement. This temporary alignment began to crystallise more than one year ago when IS and JAN ramped up their attacks in Lebanon. Thirdly, these important actors have found a way to share key levers of power effectively, with the Sunni elite officially delegated the task of containing their domestic co-religionists. And fourthly, there is a regional and international desire – especially on the part of the US, Saudi Arabia, and Iran – to stabilise Lebanon in an arena of growing unrest and negative contingency.

If this convergence of interests had not taken place, it is quite possible that IS would have carried out an Arsal surge before the Mosul surge. But instead, a new government was formed in March 2014 that has successfully worked together to counter the threat. As part of the new agreement, the cabinet statement on Hezbollah's perceived legal right to carry arms outside of the state was watered down, though not eliminated, and, most importantly, the Future Movement was given the Justice, Interior, and Telecommunications seats, portfolios that hold particular importance in Lebanon's security and intelligence sectors. General Ashraf Rifi, a figure long opposed to Hezbollah (among other groups), who had served as director-general of the ISF, was appointed minister of justice. Shortly after the cabinet was formed, Rifi met directly with Hezbollah's domestic security coordinator, Wafiq Safa, and concrete steps were taken across the country to target extremists and regain the upper hand on security, with the strong support of regional and Western states. Tripoli in particular saw an extraordinary turnaround, with leading fighters and political figures on both sides rapidly arrested or disarmed. In the weeks and months that followed, the LAF also expanded its presence in fortified positions along the border with Syria, including close to Hezbollah positions and smuggling routes – an unprecedented step along that particular border.

Up until the events of late July and early August that led up to and surrounded the battle for Arsal, the new arrangement largely worked. As the conflict in and around Arsal steadily subsided, Lebanese political elites found themselves in an even more advantageous position than in early July to build new alliances and arrangements that could maximise the fragile successes in the security field. The dramatic (though brief) mid-August visit to Lebanon of the Future Movement's leader, Saad al-Hariri, after years of self-imposed exile, together with the apparent continuation of an Iranian-Saudi détente over IS in Lebanon, only consolidated this position further.

Unfortunately, although the various domestic and international actors that are invested in the current political-security arrangement hope to continue to buffer Lebanon's status quo, this will likely prove extremely difficult without further consolidation of the existing political agreement (a tough sell given the animosity between different domestic actors) along with a substantial bolstering of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Lebanon faces an array of proliferating threats largely predicated on intensifying regional dynamics that are challenging the country's fragile equilibrium. To take but one example, key Future Movement and Hezbollah leaders believe that Lebanon's current arrangement would be substantially undermined if IS and its allies are fought in Iraq, not by other Sunni forces, but by a triple alliance of Iran, the US, and yet another chauvinistic, Shia-led government in Baghdad. This would only reinforce the regional sectarian narrative, which would resonate powerfully in Lebanon given its own internal balancing act.

Meanwhile, even if Iraq has some success in containing IS, the ongoing violence there and in Syria and the consolidation of territorial gains by IS, JAN, and other violent Sunni extremist groups will together represent a growing threat to Lebanon. At the same time, an out-and-out rupture in the (once again postponed) negotiations between Iran and the E3+3 (Britain, France, Germany, the US, Russia, and China) would also likely harm the existing arrangements in Lebanon. Such circumstances would, at the very least, disrupt the current internal political truce by moving Lebanon, once again, into a contested rather than a symbiotic space where conflict is used to promote each side's interests, undermining the fragile cooperation now in place and providing new room for IS and likeminded groups to advance their interests.

These risks are further exacerbated by the fact that the present arrangement – which clearly benefits Hezbollah during a period of severe pressures – could, if not properly balanced by expanded power-sharing and a bolstered Lebanese Armed Forces, enhance Hezbollah's intermittent desire and ability to exercise chauvinism, authoritarianism, and possibly violence in the domestic arena, potentially fuelling a backlash from Sunni extremist groups both within and outside the country and leading to a breakdown in the hard-fought cooperation that currently predominates. Be that as it may, the bottom line that has emerged is a particularly frustrating one for Hezbollah's longstanding opponents. Whatever Hezbollah's actions were in the past, and even if one believes that the group is wholly at fault for attracting the spectre of violent Sunni extremism to Lebanon through its direct support for the Syrian regime,

historical arguments have lost much of their rallying power on the ground. Instead, this has been subsumed (for the moment) by a commonly held, greater threat hammered home by the Islamic State and its fellow travellers.

Qatar sees the Islamic State as a threat to Saudi Arabia, not to Doha

Qatar has consistently faced accusations that, of all the forces backing Syrian insurgents, it is the most responsible for funding the Islamic State (IS). Doha has consistently denied these allegations. Although Qatar is open about its support for the Syrian opposition, it rejects allegations linking it to extremist groups and it claims to be taking measures to promote stability in the region.

Qatar is in an awkward position: it does not face the same internal security threat from IS that other regional actors do. Therefore, it has been perceived, even by some of its allies, as somehow more reckless and more to blame for the creation of IS. Indeed, the immediate risk to Qatar is low. It is a small state distant from Syria and Iraq, and it is easy for its security services to monitor any IS movements into its territory. Additionally, there is no significant domestic dissent on which jihadi radicals can build. Although, as in Saudi Arabia, Qatar's religious scholars follow an Islamic school of law in which Salafi jihadism has its roots, the country has used political Islam to temper conservatism and potential puritan zealotry. Qatar views its good links with Islamist groups across the region as affording it a form of protection from the ire of more radical Islamic organisations, in spite of sharp differences in ideology.

The accusations against Qatar from its neighbours and allies in Europe and the United States, however, represent a threat to its global standing and to the brand it has carefully cultivated over the past decade. The country already faces international pressure as a result of bribery allegations regarding its hosting of the 2022 soccer World Cup and its treatment of the migrant labour hired to build stadiums and infrastructure for the competition. A loss of prestige over IS could further damage international perceptions of the country and its 2022 plans. That, in turn, could threaten the ruling circle's hold on power. Therefore, the stakes are high.

Qatar is not the only Gulf state that has actively backed the armed Syrian uprising. In general, Saudi funding focused on Salafi groups and Qatari support was focused on Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups (and on organising the Syrian National Coalition out of Doha), but there has been a degree of overlap. Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) is one key Salafi group that is widely considered to have received money and arms via informal and popular funding in Qatar (through charities and other non-governmentally organised support).

JAN links itself to the al-Qaeda network. Qatar's rulers did not seem to mind that money, including some allegedly from government sources, was going across their borders to the group. Qatar's pan-Arab TV channel, Al Jazeera, has run reports touring rebel zones with the JAN, an indication of the close relations between Qatar and the group. Kuwaiti arms buyers for the opposition, including those who work for JAN, have openly solicited financial support from Qatar's rulers. Hajaj al-Ajmi, identified by the US government as a JAN fundraiser, has been an occasional visitor to Doha to lobby for cash.

By late 2012, Western diplomats were complaining of Qatari recklessness in its support for the insurgents and its lack of control over where the arms bought with its money were going. In a speech in March 2014, US Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen described Kuwait and Qatar as having "permissive jurisdictions" for terror financing, suggesting that IS had received unofficial donations from both countries.[1] Given Doha's ongoing support for the Palestinian group Hamas, which like JAN, is designated as a terrorist organisation by the US, there have been some calls in the US Congress for punitive US sanctions. The country has since come under growing pressure to pay more attention to its funding, and Britain, France, and the US have started to request monthly submissions regarding the nature of Doha's support to opposition groups.

Partly as a result of this irritation among Western governments, Doha gave up its role as the main organiser of the Syrian opposition abroad, giving way to a Saudi-backed head of the Syrian National Coalition. In part, this was also due to the Qatari leadership's preoccupation with the handover of power from Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa to his son Tamim in June 2013. Kuwaiti campaigners for JAN began to complain that Qatar was putting the squeeze on them. This year

1 "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen before the Center for a New American Security on 'Confronting New Threats in Terrorist Financing'", US Department of the Treasury, 4 March 2014, available at http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/jl2308.aspx

Qatar told other groups to which it has links, such as Ahrar al-Sham, that they must cut ties with JAN. In May 2014, Doha pushed these groups to sign the front's so-called Revolutionary Charter which Washington wanted as part of a bid to draw clear lines between "moderate" and "extremist" Islamist fighters.

Meanwhile, the role of former Saudi intelligence chief Bandar bin Sultan in allegedly supporting some radical Islamic groups in Syria also helped to divert some attention away from Qatar's role in allowing extremist groups to become so dominant on the ground. Doha and Riyadh have each been engaged in a low-level game of blaming the other for jihadi extremism in Syria, as well as competing to demonstrate their commitment to fighting IS. After the beheading of Westerners began in August last year with US photojournalist James Foley, pressure mounted to show that they were on the same page as Washington in combatting what it defined as a new regional and global menace, with echoes of the "war on terror" climate after 9/11.

In the face of a gathering storm of criticism, Doha moved quickly to activate its connections with insurgents in Syria to secure the release of hostages, affirming to Washington that it takes the IS threat seriously and is prepared to prove itself as an ally with key connections among Islamists. Days after Foley's death, Qatar managed to secure the release of another US journalist held by JAN, with some reports of a ransom payment, and was reported to be cooperating with US President Barack Obama's administration to secure the release of more hostages. In September 2014 Doha also helped secure the release of 45 Fijian UN peacekeepers kidnapped by JAN.

Qatar is now attempting to position itself as a critical mediator in response to the IS crisis, much as it has successfully done over the past decade in a number of regional conflicts. This Qatari stance can be seen as a direct response to the accusations that have been thrown Doha's way – accusations that began to merge with the animosity that many regional players harbour towards Doha because of its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and other political Islamic groups.

The intensity of the US effort to rally an international coalition in the fight against IS may now be buying Qatar some breathing space. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from the country earlier last year in protest against its backing for the Muslim Brotherhood, and there was speculation that they would suspend Qatar's membership of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to raise the pressure further. But a GCC

meeting in Jeddah in August 2014 decided to put off indefinitely an evaluation of Doha's response to their long list of demands, and in November a deal was reached to return the three ambassadors. Meanwhile, Doha also participated in September 2014 in summit in Jeddah, committing alongside Saudi Arabia to the international campaign against IS.

Qatar's role in the US strikes against IS was telling: the UAE and Saudi Arabia wanted to be seen at the forefront, publicly proclaiming their involvement as if it was an extension of their war on the Brotherhood. Qatar was on board – Gulf states really had no choice in the face of America's labelling of the group as a new threat to global security – but played the smallest of parts, providing Mirage jets in an escort role. There was no official confirmation of Qatari involvement, while Al Jazeera reported heavily on civilian casualties and deployed the same populist anti-Western discourse critical of US attacks on Sunni Muslims that it has followed since its inception. Thus, Qatar has, typically, been keen to play to both sides.

Nawaf Obaid, Saud al-Sarhan
A Saudi view on the Islamic State

As the threat posed by the Islamic State (IS) grows greater and more sinister, Saudi Arabia stands at the front line of the battle against the extremists. Saudi Arabia is adamant that it has the unique knowledge, expertise, and legitimacy to effectively lead the effort to defeat IS. The country's guardianship of the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina underpins Saudi credibility in pushing back against the misguided interpretation of the Islamic faith that IS is now propagating in the heart of the Arab world.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has consistently asserted that the fight against extremism ought to be locally owned by the regional stakeholders. This has led to some contention between the United States and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia believes that policy should be guided by the idea that Sunni empowerment is the key ingredient needed to defeat Sunni extremism. IS's rise in Syria has been helped by the lack of sufficient international support for the moderate opposition for more than three years. This has allowed IS to feed off local resentment and build itself up as a military force. In Iraq, Saudi Arabia has consistently criticised the exclusionary polices of outgoing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who betrayed the Sunnis after their role in defeating al-Qaeda in Iraq. The political exclusion of the Sunnis created the conditions for IS to thrive by attracting disgruntled members of the Sunni population.

Because the international community failed to act sooner, harsher medicine is unfortunately now needed in Iraq and Syria. That is why Saudi has accepted the need for direct military intervention by the US and by other Western powers – and military reality dictates that America will lead this phase of the air effort. However, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf and regional powers will play a central role.

Saudi Arabia's active military participation in the international coalition against IS is a clear sign of the county's commitment to defeating this extremist group. It also signals Saudi Arabia's intention to be the regional leader in the broader struggle.

Saudi Arabia has already pushed back against extremism in Egypt, Lebanon, and elsewhere. Saudi Arabia believes that, ultimately, Sunni communities on the ground are the only ones who have the necessary capacity and legitimacy to defeat IS – and the country's leaders believe that Saudi Arabia is the power best placed to work with and facilitate the deployment of those communities against IS.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in 2011, and in Iraq even before IS's gains in Mosul and beyond, Riyadh has made it clear that if there is to be any prospect of real success, a locally-owned effort must be supported. For this reason, Saudi Arabia is making a case within the anti-IS coalition for positions that Riyadh has held for a long time. It says that airstrikes against IS should be matched with a significant ratcheting up of support for the moderate Syrian fighting opposition. It also wants guarantees that the new Baghdad government will not slide back into disempowering the Sunnis in Iraq.

The gains made by IS in recent months have convinced not only Saudi Arabia, but also its allies, that much more is now needed to defeat IS. A military campaign conducted from the air will not be enough. Saudi Arabia believes that airstrikes must quickly be followed by a meaningful policy on the ground if the effort is to be truly effective. Saudi Arabia is best placed to lead this effort. The priority must be placed on moving forward local ownership by arming and training the Syrian rebels and Iraqi tribal forces who are prepared to take the fight to IS.

Riyadh has already taken steps to make this happen and is now working closely with the US to organise and equip vetted moderate rebels in Syria and to support tribal forces in Iraq. As part of this effort, Saudi Arabia is currently training Syrian rebels within its own borders.

For his part, US President Barack Obama has accepted the Saudi contention that any successful anti-IS strategy in Syria will have to be accompanied by an equally combative anti-Assad strategy. Saudi Arabia has long made it clear that there can be no solution to the problem of extremism in Syria, or in the wider region, without the removal of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad.

Through his brutal and repressive policies, to say nothing of his longstanding policy of turning a blind eye to extremist groups, Assad is directly fuelling the problem.

Just as it took the removal of Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq to bring different communities together against IS, from the Saudi perspective, the removal of Assad is a prerequisite for securing the necessary unity and strength to fight IS in Syria. Unless this more comprehensive policy is followed, Riyadh argues that narrow coalition intervention risks providing oxygen to the IS propaganda machine and giving weight to the IS message that the Sunnis have been abandoned. The issue is not Saudi regional interests or personal dislike of Assad: it is simply a fact that Assad continues to be the number one source of recruitment for IS.

This same point of view guides Saudi thinking with regard to coalition building. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly asserted that the states that back Assad – in particular, Iran – cannot be meaningful partners in the fight against IS unless and until they shift their position on Syria's discredited and destructive president. Riyadh has no objection to engaging with Iran – Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal met with the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, in New York at the United Nations in September 2014, and Iran's deputy foreign minister was recently received in Saudi Arabia. But if Iran is to be constructive in the fight against IS, it must withdraw its support from Assad, just as it must accept that the new government in Baghdad needs to be significantly more inclusive. Tehran has continued to fuel the conflict through its ongoing support for the Assad regime, including the provision of Shia fighters through proxies such as Hezbollah.

In spite of its longstanding call for action in Syria, Saudi Arabia is very aware of the continuing accusations that it somehow plays a role in supporting IS-style extremism. For Saudi Arabia, the accusation that its policies serve a double agenda – exporting extremism abroad to insulate itself at home – attributes an insulting degree of naiveté to Saudi policy and ignores the extent to which the country has suffered in the past from manifestations of extremism. Riyadh thinks that its critics have deliberately misrepresented the Sunni theological underpinnings of the Saudi state. Moreover, claims of broad Saudi public sympathy for IS are wrong: the Saudi people identify with the legitimate grievances of the Syrian and Iraqi people and decry Western hypocrisy towards Syria, but they do not support IS's ideology or practice.

Saudi Arabia's willingness to play a leading role against IS should not surprise anyone. IS poses a more direct threat to Saudi Arabia than to the West. Saudi Arabia is convinced that its leadership of the Sunni Islamic world and its guardianship of the two holy mosques make it a key target for IS. To restore the "caliphate", IS would ultimately need to implant itself at the epicentre of Islamic life, the two holy mosques in Mecca and Medina. Therefore, IS's road to the caliphate runs through the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. To demonstrate the breadth of its ambition, IS has launched a campaign to take over Saudi Arabia, ominously called Qādimūn: "we are coming".

Saudi Arabia's enormous wealth and resources also make it a strategic target for IS. Like al-Qaeda, IS covets Saudi Arabian riches while publicly denouncing the country's choice to modernise in order to capitalise on oil wealth. IS's members believe that Saudi Arabia's enormous economic, educational, and social transformations have led it astray from proper Islamic practices.

Saudi Arabia is the only authority in the region that has the power and legitimacy to bring IS down. The Kingdom has an impressive array of counter-terrorism resources, both in materiel and intelligence, and its counter-terrorism strategies are considered some of the most sophisticated and effective in the world.

The kingdom's security forces have successfully thwarted IS attempts to launch a series of attacks in the country. A key current priority of the government has been to eliminate the possibility of any future attacks on the country. For instance, a new border security programme has been launched that will cover 900km of the northern frontier so as to prevent infiltration by IS-affiliated fighters.

Saudi Arabia has emphasised that it will not tolerate IS in any form and the Saudi leadership has attempted to block all support for the organisation, including funding, from within the country. Saudi Arabia has put in place some of the tightest anti-terrorism funding controls in the region and it has deployed these measures against IS. The group is now looking to self-fund from the resources it controls in Syria and Iraq and targeting those funding sources is part of the coalition's current effort.

The effort to counter IS enjoys broad popular support from many stakeholders in Saudi Arabia, including the religious establishment, which is doing its bit in speaking out against IS's distorted ideology. "The ideas of extremism, radicalism, and terrorism do not belong to Islam in any way, but are the first enemy of Islam, and Muslims are their first victims, as seen in the crimes of the so-called Islamic State and al-Qaeda," Saudi Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh said in August 2014.[1] Saudi Arabia sees its leading role against IS as a natural fit, given its own interests, the resources at its disposal, its spiritual authority, and its experience in fighting terrorism. If it is to be successful, Riyadh is convinced that the fight against IS must be won by a Sunni Arab coalition – in political and diplomatic terms as well as with fighters on the ground.

1 "Saudi Grand Mufti Denounces ISIS and Al-Qaeda", Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, Washington, D.C., 19 August 2014, available at http://www.saudiembassy.net/press-releases/press08191401.aspx

Julien Barnes-Dacey

The Islamic State and the struggle for control in Syria

After more than three years of civil war in Syria, the rise and expansion of the Islamic State (IS) has marked a pivotal moment in the development of the devastating conflict. Radical Islamists now undisputedly represent the most powerful force among the armed opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a reality that is bringing to completion the internationalisation of the conflict. In September, the United States, together with a number of regional allies, launched military strikes against IS positions in Syria, though with the immediate stated aim of counter-terrorism rather than regime change. While IS has been heavily targeted, Assad's forces remain untouched.

But with US action unlikely to be decisive, especially given the absence of ground troops, the prospects for success remain very ambiguous. The fallout from the attacks is already feeding new uncertainties in the longstanding civil war, as well as entrenching local support for IS. Both Assad and the non-IS rebels are actively trying to position themselves as the West's natural partner in the fight against extremism (as are Syrian Kurds). Critically, however, they, as well as some of the regional players now supporting air strikes, remain at cross-purposes with the US about the aims of the war and about the threat posed by IS.

Most significantly, Obama's narrow counter-terrorism focus is not shared by Syria's non-IS affiliated warring parties, which view the group's relevance through the prism of the ongoing civil war. Neither the regime nor non-IS rebels are primarily occupied with IS's strength as a jihadist group – although it is a concern. Instead of seeing IS as a unifying interest, both see the group as a means of leveraging international support behind their pursuit of victory in the broader domestic conflict. This is an instinct partly shared by some of the key regional partners involved in air strikes, including Saudi Arabia, which hope that initial US intervention against IS will be a prelude to

eventual military action against Assad. Like the rebels, Riyadh says that IS can only be effectively defeated once Assad, who it views as the source of the problem, is removed. Indeed, some countries such as Turkey and France have resisted active engagement in the anti-IS fight in Syria, demanding a more comprehensive targeting of Assad before they join the campaign.

Moreover, by making it clear that air strikes will not target Assad, and by using the strikes to also hit a wider range of opposition groups with extremist links, some of whom are seen as integral elements of the nationalist opposition, the US is rallying some local support behind IS – and thereby exacerbating the very threat it is seeking to address through military action. Many now view the coalition as partnering with the regime, with air strikes therefore acting as a boon to IS recruitment.

IS now controls approximately 35 percent of Syrian territory (although much of the territory it holds is uninhabited), including a significant proportion of the country's oil fields. The CIA estimates that IS fighters number between 20,000 and 31,500 in Syria and Iraq, though some estimates put the number considerably higher. The number of foreign fighters joining its ranks is increasing steadily. Where it does control population centres, including in the self-declared caliphate's capital of Raqqa in Syria, IS has established a range of state structures, from education and healthcare services to judicial oversight, positioning itself less as an insurgent group and increasingly as a quasi-state body.

Even if the number of open fronts between IS and the regime remain limited, IS represents the most formidable fighting force standing against the Assad regime. Over recent months, IS has inflicted a number of military defeats on regime forces, signalling the outbreak of open conflict between the two after long periods of effective cohabitation. The group clearly also outmatches other rebel forces in both resources and fighting abilities. Before the beginning of air strikes, the group had been advancing west towards the city of Aleppo and key border crossings with Turkey – an advance that air strikes slowed but did not stop. For a significant segment of Syria's Sunni population, IS increasingly represents the only legitimate and effective vehicle of opposition to the Assad regime, a sentiment that has deepened as a consequence of US-led air strikes. IS's current position in Syria is somewhat remarkable given that, in January 2014, a coalition of rebel armed groups united to take on the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), as it was then known, and forced it to withdraw from vast swathes of territory. It was IS's June 2014 surge into

Iraq, which significantly boosted its material resources and gave it an aura of unprecedented success, that allowed it to reverse this retreat. But this same advance into Iraq also provoked US President Barack Obama to mobilise a US-led international coalition to "degrade and destroy" the group, initiating the military campaign now under way.

For Assad, the creation of an international coalition targeting IS represents the hoped-for culmination of three years of deliberate strategy partly aimed at forcing the West to recognise him as a necessary partner in the fight against extremism. While claims of direct collaboration between Assad and IS appear largely unfounded, it is clear that the regime has long focused its military campaign on non-IS rebels as a means of consolidating extremist trends. Even as the regime has now initiated a meaningful campaign of air strikes against IS and is calling for a common international front against IS, it nonetheless continues to channel more of its resources towards the fight against weaker non-IS rebels in the hope of cementing a regime-extremist binary. While the West is adamant that Assad cannot play any partnership role in the campaign against IS, he believes the US and Europe will eventually be forced to reverse position.

Assad is playing a risky game. IS may represent an opportunity, but it also poses significant threats, not least its growing military strength, which has already been used to inflict a series of blows on the regime. Recent IS victories against regime forces, notably the seizure of the Tabqa airbase near Raqqa, are also provoking increased dissent among regime loyalists angered by Assad's apparent unwillingness or inability to fully confront the group. This internal dissent is not game changing but it is noteworthy, particularly if it is tied to unease on the part of the regime's key external backers, Iran and Hezbollah, over Assad's hesitant position towards a group that threatens their broader regional interests.

The regime may be most concerned, however, that this will now play out as envisaged by non-IS rebels: through a partnership with the West that results in significant international arming of the opposition, or in wider international action against the regime itself. Even if Obama has committed to narrow ambitions in Syria, including the limited training and arming of some rebel fighters – tied to fighting IS rather than bringing down the regime – the continued insistence that there will be no coordination with Assad offers rebels an opportunity to eventually position themselves as the West's fighting partner on the ground. With air strikes only going so far in weakening an

increasingly embedded and emboldened IS, this could result in wider intervention and heavier direct arming, which a number of coalition countries are now pressing the US to carry out. (Although, if this does happen, Syrian Kurds could be among the prime beneficiaries given their relative unity and perceived moderation compared to other rebel groups – despite claims that they are affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is designated as a terrorist group. The coalition has been forcefully defending the Kurdish city of Kobani since IS launched an attack on the city.)

What is clear, though, is that, Kurds aside, many of these rebels see the fight against IS as of secondary importance. The overthrow of the regime remains their central preoccupation, and weapons channelled their way will primarily be focused on this struggle.

The respective positioning of non-IS rebels and Assad highlights an inconvenient truth: as long as Syria's civil war rages, international attempts to defeat IS militarily will be significantly hampered, particularly if regional allies are also pulling in different directions. While tactical lines may shift as a result of air strikes, they are unlikely to provoke significant strategic realignments, but will serve to fortify zero-sum ambitions driving the civil war and to feed the narrative that has fuelled IS's rise. Only when domestic and international actors address and resolve the core dynamics behind the Syrian civil war can there be any hope of defeating IS.

Turkey faces pressure to take a stance

Turkey's response to the Islamic State (IS) has baffled observers. As Washington sought to build a regional alliance of forces against the group, Turkey stood conspicuously apart, refusing to allow combat missions to be launched from its territory. It also strongly resisted pressure to allow military assistance to be delivered across its border to Kurdish forces fighting the Islamic State in the besieged border town of Kobane. NATO's only Muslim member state, Turkey agreed to fight IS at the Western military alliance's September 2014 summit in Wales, but it did not sign a subsequent declaration arranged in Jeddah by the United States with Gulf countries plus Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq.

These decisions echo Turkey's refusal in 2003 to allow US troops to use its territory for ground or air invasions of Iraq. That decision reflected widespread popular opposition to a US foreign policy choice in the region, but Ankara's stance on IS and other jihadi groups in Syria is harder to fathom. The country's border with Syria and Iraq is long and porous. Fighters setting off in one direction can easily return the way they came, and when they do, they will be changed, radicalised people.

How far did Turkey go in backing extremist groups in Syria, and what are the government's calculations regarding the Salafi jihadi threat? The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government, like those in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, took a gamble in 2012 on extremist groups as the way to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whose regime had proved more resilient than expected. From an early stage, the government allowed the unhindered flow of Salafi jihadis through Turkey. Turkey developed ties to Islamist branches of the Free Syrian Army, Ahrar al-Sham, the Tawheed Brigades (linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood), and, to an unclear degree, Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), al-Qaeda's official arm in Syria. For a time, Turkey argued vociferously behind the scenes that JAN should not be proscribed as a terrorist organisation, even sending a senior foreign ministry official to Washington to argue the point in 2012.

Western diplomats in Turkey caution that complaints about their country's demurral on IS are somewhat out of place. Washington worked closely with Ankara, Riyadh, and Doha to organise the insurgency out of war rooms in Turkey. Turkey and Jordan provided land channels for military equipment funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar in plans drawn up with full American involvement. And US operations against IS are now being co-ordinated out of Reyhanli in Turkey's Hatay province.

The AKP government under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – who became president after an August 2014 election – had cited IS's holding of 49 Turkish hostages, seized from its diplomatic mission in Mosul when IS took the city in June last year, as the main reason for its cautious approach to US plans to combat the group. In its effort to ensure their eventual release, Turkey imposed a domestic media blackout on the issue. Turkey refrained from helping the Kurds in Iraq after the Mosul surge precisely because of this ambition. The hostages' release almost three months later raised suspicions that Erdoğan had done a deal with IS. They returned home to a hero's welcome but behind state-backed media praise for the government's performance there was little information on how the release had been effected.

The release came just days before the onset of US air strikes on IS and JAN positions in which Turkey conspicuously refused to play a role. Public positions remained carefully calibrated not to shift too far towards the US war camp. "Bombarding terrorist organisations with airstrikes does not yield effective results. A more comprehensive plan should be established to ensure regional stability", Erdoğan said in a speech in New York.[1] Erdoğan's emergence from the hostage crisis unscathed was in many ways typical of his ability to weather all manner of scandals and setbacks. But the fact remains that there would be political consequences if the Turkish government's IS policies were to go awry that most Arab countries, lacking serious electoral processes, do not face. With parliamentary elections approaching next year, the AKP will need to maintain enough support if it is to approve constitutional changes meant to shift Turkey towards a more presidential system.

The AKP approach is partly informed by a neo-Ottoman belief that Turkey is the ultimate arbiter in world Islamic affairs and that its Islamist government gives

it the prestige and credibility to tolerate a degree of Salafi activism and absorb jihadi impulses on its own turf. AKP public discourse has presented the war on IS as another US intervention with dubious motives, like Iraq and Libya, and it is apparently responding to a concern among the Sunni Islamist public: one opinion poll found that 62.5 percent of AKP supporters consider IS a terrorist group, a surprisingly low figure, while another survey showed 57 percent of Turks disapprove of US foreign policy, four percent higher than the previous year. The failure of the US to help remove Assad accounts for much of that ill feeling.

Another factor in Ankara's thinking is the Kurdish movement in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey itself. One of the innovations of foreign policy under Erdoğan has been the development of close ties with the Kurdish government in northern Iraq as well as a rapprochement and peace process with the Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey. Iraqi Kurdistan has been transformed into an economic hinterland for Turkey, while sensitive talks are ongoing with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan aimed at a historic resolution of the Turkish state's problem with the Kurds. Some of the Western weapons to Kurdish fighters in Iraq and Syria could easily end up in PKK hands, which Ankara fears would strengthen the group's position in negotiations. Turkey's leadership is trying to ensure that in cooperating with Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraq in the fight against IS, it does not jeopardise talks with the PKK. There is an additional fear among the Turkish political elite that the People's Protection Units (known by its Kurdish acronym YPG), the military arm of the PKK's Syrian off-shoot, the Democratic Union Party, could be radicalised against Turkey's interests – hence, in part, the unwillingness to support them in Kobane.

The exodus of up to 70,000 Syrian Kurds who fled Kobane into Turkey in September 2014 highlighted how exposed Turkey is to the vicissitudes of the conflict. Turkey's position also led to a wave of protests around the country in early October against the government's hands-off approach. Erdoğan's calculation remains that noisy opposition does not reflect majority opinion in the country. He is able to play to both Islamist and right-wing Kemalist sentiment, most of which sees little interest in enabling Kurds or putting down anti-Assad fighters.

The Islamist government's position remains that Assad is the true threat and any action against IS must be seen in terms of that wider goal. Ankara is trying to chip away at the Obama administration to win approval for more international military action inside Syria to that end, such as establishing some kind of protected buffer zone (which could have the added advantage of allowing some

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1 David Barchard, "The inevitable: Erdogan supports the anti-IS alliance", *Middle East Eye*, 24 September 2014, available at http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/inevitable-erdogan-comes-out-support-anti-alliance-321248724

of the 1.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey to return). Behind this is the fear that rebel strongholds in Aleppo could soon collapse and the regime could retake the city. The potential survival of the Assad regime is perhaps more problematic for Turkey than for Saudi Arabia and Qatar in that Turkey is a direct neighbour.

However these various calculations played out in policymakers' minds, Turkey seems to now be entering new territory. Evidence has mounted that IS has been raising funds via religious centres, charitable organisations, and associations, and recruiting fighters online from impoverished districts of Istanbul and outlying parts of the country, especially the Kurdish east. Turkish media has reported up to 3,000 in total going to fight, though analysts think that this figure is exaggerated. There are indications that IS does not look at all favourably on Turkey, such as press reports in which IS fighters tell hostages that Turkey is next. Officials have said that IS militants killed a Turkish soldier, a police officer, and another civilian when they were stopped in a car en route to Istanbul in March, possibly on their way to carry out a major attack as revenge for Turkey targeting IS fighters after they surrounded the Ottoman Suleiman Shah shrine inside Syria near the Turkish border, which is protected by 25 Turkish soldiers. It is also clear that Turkish policy is going to be under much more scrutiny than before, as Washington and its Western allies press issues of border security, monitoring, and oil sales.

The threat to Turkey, in its worst scenario, is that its complex and heterogeneous religious culture could face pressure, for the first time, from Salafism, in both its soft and violent iterations. Despite the Kemalist republic's modernist project of homogenisation, Turkey remains a country with not only a large Kurdish population but also a large population of Alevi Muslims. The Islamist movement that Erdoğan's AKP is built upon is Sufi in origin, and Sufi orders, although technically banned, remain a vital element of Turkish political and religious culture. Syncretic practices are widespread, particularly in rural areas of Anatolia, and extend across sectarian boundaries to mainstream Turkish Sunni Islam. And that is not to mention the modern secular heritage that makes Istanbul, Izmir, and other cities such cosmopolitan urban spaces.

There is, in other words, a wealth of reasons for Salafi activists, jihadi or otherwise, to turn their attentions to Turkey, with potentially disastrous consequences. The Turkish state under Islamist tutelage since 2002 has succeeded in managing an impressive range of political and social challenges and placating an array of forces at home and abroad. IS is perhaps its biggest challenge to date. How long it can maintain the juggling act without taking tough decisions remains to be

seen. Erdoğan has said that Turkey could create a buffer zone along the country's border with Syria and Iran. But for a buffer zone to be truly effective against IS, a wide net would have to be cast against men and arms crossing the border. Then Turkey would have clearly come off the fence on which it has been sitting for so long.

Nick Witney

Europe and the Islamic State: venturing down the wrong track

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Europeans, it seems, have a knack for picking the wrong fights. Criticised for their sluggish and ineffectual response to the recent crises in Mali and the Central African Republic, five European Union member states – first France, and then Britain, Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands – have elected to join the United States-led air campaign against the Islamic State (IS). Fortunately, others have stayed away. In a manner both predictable and predicted, the military option has not only proved costly and ineffective, but has actually increased the threat to Europe – while making it impossible to deploy more intelligent policy responses. It has not helped that the danger represented by IS has been grossly over-hyped. Back in August of last year, a degree of Western panic was understandable. The jihadis scored a spectacular success with the capture of Mosul and their subsequent advance on the areas controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government. Black flags streaming from their vehicles, they no doubt felt themselves the direct descendants of the holy warriors who exploded out of the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, carrying all before them.

But Martin Dempsey, America's top general, really should have known better than to lend credibility to the group's fantasy of taking over Lebanon and Israel by pronouncing that "if they achieve that vision, it would fundamentally alter the face of the Middle East".[1] French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius similarly contributed to the group's own propaganda by declaring, "It's a threat to the whole region, to Europe, and to the world."[2]

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1 John Lyons, "Jihadists pose dire threat: Hagel", *The Australian*, 23 August 2014, available at
http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/jihadists-pose-dire-threat-hagel/story-e6frg6so-1227033723476
2 "Foreign Minister stresses danger from Islamic State", Embassy of France in London, 22 August 2014, available
at http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Foreign-Minister-stresses-danger

British Prime Minister David Cameron joined the chorus, announcing that "ISIL poses a direct and deadly threat to Britain".[3] He noted the "thousands of square miles of territory" that IS controls, "sweeping aside much of the boundary between Iraq and Syria". Yet anyone who has travelled the region knows that the thousands of square miles of territory between Damascus and Baghdad are mainly stony wilderness, except for a few impoverished towns strung out along the Euphrates (Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor in Syria, Ramadi and Fallujah in Iraq) and that the boundary between Syria and Iraq was largely a geographer's figment even before the two states started falling apart.

Of course, the group is well funded and armed, especially after the terrorised Iraqi army gifted IS its own inventory along with Mosul. But some determined resistance by Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and Iraqi Shia militias, with the help of a handful of US airstrikes, stopped IS's dramatic advance in its tracks. Since then, the battle for Kobani – an otherwise insignificant town on the Syrian/ Turkish border – has further deflated the IS aura of invincibility. And the ferocity and fanaticism of IS members have now left them surrounded by enemies on every hand. There was no justification for David Cameron to conjure the spectre of "a terrorist caliphate on the shores of the Mediterranean" in the British parliamentary debate.[4]

Some perspective is needed, even while the dangers that IS presents are acknowledged. Neither Iraq nor Syria can be whole again until the group is defeated. But its main threat is ideological: the group's self-proclaimed role as champion of Islam is enormously attractive for psychopaths, extremists, opportunists, and those who harbour resentments against the West and/or the West's perceived allies in the region.

For European countries, the risk is that their own Muslim citizens may be recruited and trained by IS, and then return home to carry out terrorist acts. The Saudis (uncomfortably aware of their own ideological vulnerability as "Guardians of the Two Holy Mosques") have naturally urged the West to worry and to get involved. But US President Barack Obama has rightly pointed out that

the US cannot "take the place of Arab partners in securing their region".[5] The Americans did well to obtain the participation of five Arab states in the first wave of air attacks on IS in Syria. As others have stepped forward, Europeans should have had the sense to hold back.

The European reflex to act as America's wingman is deeply ingrained. But Afghanistan should serve as a reminder that to have Europe tagging along uncritically behind the US may ultimately benefit neither party. And it is not as though the US has any shortage of military capability in the Iraqi theatre (to which Europeans are so far confining themselves) – by mid-November 2014, the European contribution to the campaign in Iraq was a marginal 15 percent of the 500-odd airstrikes. Europeans should not have felt bound to contribute in the same currency as the US.

The US, after all, has different domestic politics, and fewer vulnerabilities. Americans may be glad to be out of debilitating land wars in Asia, but they still dislike the feeling that there are limits to American power. They expect their presidents to lead, and to kill America's enemies. Recognising this, Obama has dropped the title "Global War on Terror" but not the substance. If this enflames Muslim sentiment, too bad: America is secure behind its oceans.

For Europeans, the calculus is very different. They cannot be sanguine about a "clash of civilisations", not least since Islam is an integral part of their own societies. And if they are smart, they will also realise that it is not the much-discussed "ungoverned spaces" that sustain Islamic extremists – alas, there are enough of those already across the Middle East – but rather the narrative of revenge for Western oppression. Western intervention is a great recruiting sergeant; as the head of the FBI has duly confirmed, IS has been attracting new fighters since the US began its airstrikes.[6] The effect is being amplified as the Europeans join in.

Intemperate domestic reaction in Western societies will have a similar negative effect – such as when a prominent British politician casually called for the reversal of the centuries-old "presumption of innocence" in English law in

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3 David Cameron, "David Cameron: Isil poses a direct and deadly threat to Britain", *The Telegraph*, 16 August 2014, available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/11038121/David-Cameron-Isil-poses-a-direct-and-deadly-threat-to-Britain.html
4 Ian Evans, "Cameron urges UK Parliament to back intervention against Islamic State", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 26 September 2014, available at http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0926/Cameron-urges-UK-Parliament-to-back-intervention-against-Islamic-State

5 "Statement by the President on ISIL", The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 10 September 2014, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1
6 Doina Chiacu, "U.S. airstrikes boost Islamic State, more hostages possible – FBI", Reuters, 17 September 2014, available at http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/09/17/usa-security-homeland-idINKBN0HC1KL20140917

the case of British citizens returning from Syria.[7] Assuming that those who have been to Syria to provide aid, or even to fight Bashar al-Assad, must be a security threat to the United Kingdom only feeds the extremists' propaganda. Even security officials have doubts: in the words of one former MI6 intelligence director, "a one size fits all, throw everyone in jail approach is perhaps not wise".[8] The threat needs taking very seriously, but European countries have survived a range of terrorist campaigns over the years without such a counter-productive over-reaction.

What is done is done, and the involvement, albeit peripheral, of a number of European governments in the air campaign will be hard to end. But those involved should hasten slowly, limiting their action both in scope and time, and leaving the conspicuous military action to the US and to those regional states that are much more nearly affected. There are plenty of other things that they can do. Germany, for example, has settled for arming the Kurds. IS has exacerbated what was already a humanitarian crisis accompanying the Syrian civil war, and although Europeans have been generous in their aid, they have failed to exploit this fact in the critical propaganda war. Though Italian and French leaders have made the trip in recent weeks, it beggars belief that no EU leader has presented himself, or herself, in Erbil with further help for the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by IS.

Diplomatically, too, there is much to be done. IS is an ill wind, but it has already blown good in Baghdad, sweeping out Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and in the wider region, encouraging a cautious Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. IS's unique ability to bring everyone else together might even hold out hope for Syria too. Since no solution there is possible without the Iranians, and since the US will not openly engage them, there is an important gap there that European diplomacy might be able to fill.

At the end of October 2014, the British Foreign Office issue a generalised warning of a heightened terrorist threat to Britons anywhere in the world. Thus, in the terms in which the UK government and their European partners in the air campaign have chosen to frame the crisis – the "fight against terrorism" –

military intervention has been a spectacular own-goal. IS, and the wider chaos in the Middle East, cannot be handled except by the regional powers. The best that Europeans can do is to work to get them to realise and accept their responsibility. The military gestures of outsiders only blur that reality and endanger their own citizens.

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7 "Boris Johnson calls for 'guilty until proven innocent' for suspected terrorists", *The Guardian*, 25 August 2014, available at http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/aug/25/boris-johnson-britons-visiting-iraq-syria-presumed-terrorists

8 Nicholas Watt, Richard Norton-Taylor, and Josh Halliday, "Isis beheading video brings calls for rethink of UK domestic terrorism fight", *The Guardian*, 21 August 2014, available at http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/aug/21/james-foley-isis-beheading-uk-counterterrorist-fight-in-crisis

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Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank the authors for their engagement and insightful contributions to this volume. We are also grateful to colleagues within ECFR, particularly Matteo Mencarelli and Helen Gale, for their assistance and advice on this project.

ECFR extends its thanks to the governments of Norway and Sweden for their ongoing support of ECFR's Middle East and North Africa programme.

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