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Defeating the Jihadists in Syria: Competition before Confrontation

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In Syria, a US-led coalition air campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has yielded limited, short-term gains, such as inflicting casualties on ISIS and cutting its oil revenues. Unfortunately, the campaign may well be harming more critical, longer-term US interests in Syria. These include the stated US goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIS and, just as importantly, preventing its replacement by the Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate. For the campaign to succeed, the United States and its allies must account for local realities and work to strengthen, rather than undermine, the Syrian nationalist opposition.

Most worryingly, the coalition air campaign has accelerated the near-collapse of nationalist rebel forces—groups formed to oppose the Syrian regime but with a record of successfully fighting ISIS in northern Syria.¹ The Nusra Front is capitalizing on that campaign's damage to its insurgent rivals in order to strengthen its presence within the north and beyond, including Syria's demographic and economic center—a chain of cities and key roads that run through central Syria. Meanwhile, ISIS retains control of the core territories of the “caliphate” in northern and eastern Syria, where it faces no serious challengers. If these trends continue, northern, central, and eastern Syria will effectively be divided among jihadist groups, various Shia and Alawite militias, and the rump regime state. Such an outcome would continue to destabilize Syria's neighbors, indefinitely prolong its refugee crisis, and attract local and foreign fighters to extremist ideology.

1 These groups are often referred to as “moderate” to distinguish them from jihadist groups such as the Nusra Front and ISIS. This is a loaded, subjective term, and the author will use the somewhat more rigorous term “nationalist” for insurgent groups that define their goals in terms of national liberation rather than a transnational, jihadist agenda, and with whom the United States could conceivably have a working relationship now and in a postwar Syria.

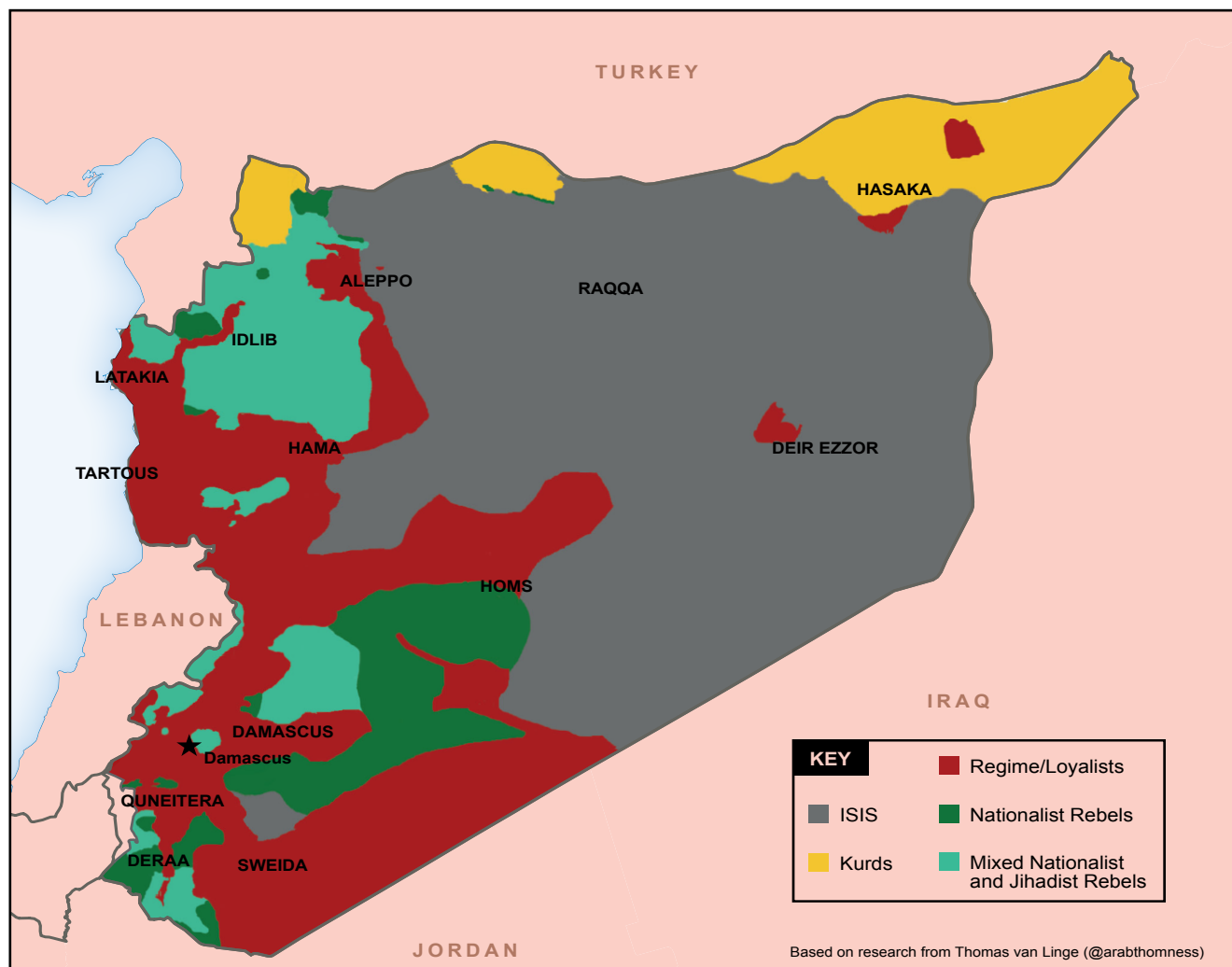
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The United States still has feasible options against the jihadists in Syria. Although these options are complicated and imperfect, they are also logical and practical because they align US and local Syrian interests. Specifically, they require that the United States enable nationalist insurgents to compete with, contain, and finally confront jihadist groups. Circumstances in southern Syria, in particular, present an opportunity to work with capable nationalists to both weaken jihadist groups and encourage a political settlement to the broader conflict that gave rise to them. The situation in northern Syria is less promising, but the United States can help prevent jihadist groups from capturing all of it and lay the groundwork for a locally led anti-jihadist ground offensive. Effective strategies in the north and south would be mutually reinforcing, establishing conditions to defeat and replace the jihadists.

The Nusra Front and ISIS must not only be defeated but replaced with a legitimate Syrian nationalist alternative capable of securing and governing the population, including Sunnis from which these groups draw their recruits. Crucially, although jihadists threaten their Sunni coreligionists and minorities alike, it is the former who must take the lead in fighting them. Relying exclusively on Alawite militias, Shia jihadists, or other non-Sunni forces to fight Sunni groups merely reinforces a sectarian narrative of Sunni oppression at

Figure 1. Syria: Areas of Control



the hands of minorities—creating an effective recruitment tool for both ISIS and the Nusra Front.

Limited Victories against ISIS in Syria

The US-led campaign against ISIS in Syria has damaged the group's hydrocarbons infrastructure and prevented it from capturing Kobani, a Kurdish enclave on the Turkish border otherwise surrounded by hostile ISIS territory, while inflicting several hundred jihadist casualties in the process.²

The destruction of ISIS-held oil refineries and stockpiles has drastically diminished the group's oil revenues. By the latest estimates, as of December 2014 daily oil output in ISIS-controlled territory had diminished from seventy thousand to twenty thousand barrels, while daily oil revenues dropped from

\$2-3 million to \$600,000.³ Because the concept and economic infrastructure of statehood are critical to ISIS's appeal, confidence, and staying power, these are significant losses. Coalition air strikes have also targeted ISIS weapons caches, bunkers, and other military assets.⁴

In Kobani, US-led air strikes and close air support for Kurdish fighters saved the city from jihadist capture—albeit only after significant, prolonged US efforts and support from nationalist insurgent groups. Kobani's military value is limited, but it is important because ISIS chose to make it so, committing and subsequently losing hundreds of fighters. Besides these losses, ISIS

² "U.S.-led Air Strikes Have Hit 3,222 Islamic State Targets: Pentagon," Reuters, January 7, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/07/us-mideast-crisis-strikes-damage-idUSKBN0KG1ZM20150107>.

³ Mona Alami, "ISIS's Governance Crisis (Part I): Economic Governance," *MENASource* (blog), Atlantic Council, December 19, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/isis-s-governance-crisis-part-i-economic-governance>.

⁴ "U.S.-Led Air Strikes Have Hit 3,222 Islamic State Targets: Pentagon," Reuters, January 7, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/07/us-mideast-crisis-strikes-damage-idUSKBN0KG1ZM20150107>.

incurred reputational costs from the Kobani fight, temporarily weakening allies' and rivals' perceptions of its unstoppable momentum. This has practical implications, since fighters might be less inclined to join a fallible, beatable ISIS.⁵ Kobani also showed that sustained US air power combined with well-armed and motivated local ground forces could stop ISIS, but it also demonstrated ISIS's resilience and determination in the face of overwhelming firepower.

PRESENTLY, A US TRAIN-AND-EQUIP PROGRAM AIMS TO RECRUIT SEVERAL THOUSAND SYRIANS TO FIGHT ISIS BUT APPARENTLY NOT THE REGIME. THUS CONSTRAINED, THESE FIGHTERS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE SEEN AS AMERICAN MERCENARIES THAN CHAMPIONS OF THE SYRIAN PEOPLE.

Shortcomings of the Coalition Campaign in Syria

Weakening ISIS's oil infrastructure and defeating its forces in Kobani are significant achievements, but they are neither decisive nor sufficient to seriously degrade, much less destroy, ISIS. The air campaign itself has flaws: so far, coalition air strikes have focused on ISIS targets away from the frontlines between ISIS and the nationalist insurgency in Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Damascus provinces. Instead, air strikes have concentrated on Raqqa province, where ISIS faces little competition, and on Deir Ezzor province, where the party most likely to benefit is the regime, at the expense of the population currently living under ISIS.

The US tendency to steer clear of areas where ISIS is fighting the nationalist insurgency has proven costly. From the start of coalition air strikes in August 2014 until ISIS's January 2015 defeat in Kobani, ISIS expanded its control in Syria, gaining ground in Hasaka, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Deraa provinces. According

⁵ Western governments are probably capable of disrupting foreign fighter flows to Syria somewhat, though ISIS can continue to draw on Arab and Syrian recruits.

to some US intelligence sources, ISIS is able to recruit fighters at a sufficient rate to offset casualties from air strikes—though the data are unreliable, given the difficulty of determining casualties with few partners on the ground.⁶

ISIS now appears positioned to attempt to make gains in Hasaka, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Deraa provinces and may try to recapture territory lost to nationalists in early 2014. This will force the United States to decide whether to risk allowing ISIS to expand or resist it, in cooperation with (and to the benefit of) either the regime or its rivals. Although the Obama administration has repeatedly ruled out partnering with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad against ISIS, how the air campaign is fought inevitably affects the fortunes and calculus of the nationalists, jihadists, and regime, not necessarily to the benefit of the United States.

The current coalition strategy does not address what or who would replace ISIS if indeed it is degraded and defeated. A lasting solution to the jihadist problem would require building national alternatives with broad, cross-sectarian support—including Syrian Sunnis, whose politics and grievances ISIS and the Nusra Front have hijacked. These forces would need to safeguard the population against both jihadists and the radicalizing effects of regime violence. Presently, a US train-and-equip program aims to recruit several thousand Syrians to fight ISIS but apparently not the regime.⁷ Thus constrained, these fighters are more likely to be seen as American mercenaries than champions of the Syrian people, even if they somehow manage to defeat ISIS while taking heavy regime fire.

Finally, whatever its victories against ISIS thus far, a coalition strategy that weakens ISIS only to empower other, equally unsavory groups would be unwise. Therefore, it is worrying that, even as it forces ISIS to adapt to new constraints, the US-led campaign has set off a series of local developments that are inadvertently empowering the Nusra Front at the expense of its nationalist rivals.

Drawback of the Campaign: Empowering the Nusra Front

In November 2014, nationalist groups suffered a serious defeat in Idlib province in northern Syria, an area they previously dominated. The Nusra Front captured several key towns from the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF)

⁶ Eli Lake and Josh Rogin, "U.S. Exaggerates Islamic State Casualties," *Bloomberg View*, March 13, 2015, <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-03-13/did-kerry-exaggerate-islamic-state-casualties->

⁷ "Turkey Says it's Reached Accord with U.S. on Training Syrian rebels, but Not on Who Enemy Is," *McClatchy*, February 17, 2015, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2015/02/17/256930/turkey-says-its-reached-accord.html>.

and US-backed Harakat Hazm. Some fighters defected to the Nusra Front, which is now increasingly powerful in Idlib. The SRF and other nationalist brigades played a key role in driving ISIS out of Idlib and much of Aleppo province in early 2014. The Nusra Front's Idlib offensive therefore constituted a major blow to ISIS's nationalist rivals in northern Syria. The former is now applying pressure on nationalists in Aleppo province while consolidating its presence in Idlib. The Nusra Front now commands at least six thousand fighters against an estimated twenty to thirty thousand ISIS fighters.⁸

A GROWING NUMBER OF SYRIANS APPEAR TO BE LEARNING TO LIVE WITH ISIS AND THE NUSRA FRONT, AT LEAST WHILE REGIME VIOLENCE CONTINUES UNABATED.

The Nusra Front's recent assertiveness and success are rooted in the interplay between the coalition air campaign and local political and military realities. These relate to the local population, the Nusra Front's reading of US and US-aligned nationalists' intentions, and the local balance of power between fighting groups. Those living in liberated areas generally consider the regime the major threat to their safety and interests.⁹ While many Syrians likely oppose or are ambivalent toward the Nusra Front's jihadist ideology, most care mainly about protecting themselves from regime violence and the depredations of undisciplined local militia and criminals. In this context, they tolerate the Nusra Front as a potent regime rival and a capable guarantor of local order.¹⁰

Against this backdrop, while the official US goal in Syria is a political transition based on mutual consent between the regime and opposition (which would

presumably exclude Assad), a growing number of Syrians see US intentions differently.

They observe:

- The United States failing to respond to large-scale regime violence, including alleged chemical weapon attacks and constant bombardment of population zones.¹¹
- The White House reportedly assuring Iran's Supreme Leader that US military operations will not target the Syrian regime, even as the United States and Iran fight the same enemy, ISIS, in Iraq.¹²
- The US President publicly deriding the nationalist insurgency, while also insisting it is receiving US support.¹³
- The United States launching air strikes, some of which have killed Syrian civilians, on ISIS and the Nusra Front's Khorasan cell but not against the regime.¹⁴
- Senior US officials demanding that rebels prioritize fighting US enemies (the jihadists) but not their own (the regime), while failing to give nationalists enough support to do so effectively.¹⁵

Thus, a growing number of Syrians appear to be learning to live with ISIS and the Nusra Front, at least while regime violence continues unabated. They are also losing faith in or turning against the United States. This has, by association, tainted US-aligned nationalist groups in many Syrians' eyes, some of whom are increasingly seen as US agents and mercenaries rather than liberators and protectors. The US-led train-and-equip program, apparently aimed at supporting a Syrian force to fight jihadists rather than the regime, might be

8 Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War* (RAND Corporation, January 2014), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND_PE115.pdf; Department of Defense Press Briefing by Rear Adm. John Kirby in the Pentagon Briefing Room," US Department of Defense, January 23, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5575>.

9 Regime violence continues to account for the vast majority of civilian casualties in Syria.

10 The Nusra Front faces sporadic, hostile protests in its territories, indicating that it is not always popular as such, but tolerated and/or feared.

11 A United Nations investigation did not accuse the Syrian government, claiming the evidence was not conclusive, but a Human Rights Watch report later indicated that the evidence "strongly [suggested] regime complicity," a conclusion supported by various foreign intelligence agencies. See UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, *Report on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus on 21 August 2013* (Hague: September 13, 2013); Human Rights Watch, *Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria* (September 10, 2013), <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/09/10/attacks-ghouta>.

12 Parisa Hafezi, Louis Charbonneau, and Arshad Mohammed, "Exclusive: U.S. Told Iran of Intent to Strike Islamic State in Syria—Source," Reuters, September 23, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/23/us-syria-crisis-usa-iran-idUSKCN0H12F220140923>.

13 Nick Gass, "Barack Obama Rebukes Syrian 'Fantasy,'" *Politico*, August 10, 2014, <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/08/barack-obama-rebukes-syrian-fantasy-109890.html>.

14 "U.S. Airstrikes Target al-Qaeda Faction in Syria," *Washington Post*, November 6, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2014/11/06/d860ef47-40fa-4f85-8753-0d9de0a6830b_story.html.

15 "Syrian Rebels: We'll Use U.S. Weapons to Fight Assad, Whether Obama Likes It or Not," *Daily Beast*, September 12, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/09/11/syrian-rebels-we-ll-use-u-s-weapons-to-fight-assad-whether-obama-likes-it-or-not.html>.



A Nusra Front fighter searches a boy at the Karaj al-Hajez crossing, a passageway separating Aleppo's Bustan al-Qasr neighborhood, which is under the rebels' control, and al-Masharqa neighborhood, an area controlled by the regime, November 2013. *Photo credit: Reuters/Molhem Barakat.*

seen similarly, and participants may struggle to gain local support or even acceptance.

The coalition air campaign, amid broader Syrian disappointments in US policy, has also demoralized and alienated nationalist groups that hoped to be US partners in the anti-ISIS effort but found themselves marginalized at strategic, tactical, and operational levels. These groups also claim, not unreasonably, that US failure to pressure Assad, and repeated public assurances that the United States seeks no conflict with him, are encouraging regime violence. Groups such as Harakat Hazm, once aligned closely with the United States, recognized that their standing among the local population had suffered considerably.¹⁶ Harakat Hazm eventually disbanded and its nationalist fighters were absorbed by an Islamist coalition.¹⁷

Increasingly, nationalist fighters in northern Syria have come to regret their decision to align with the United

16 To be sure, Harakat Hazm and several other nationalist brigades have also been accused by locals of corruption, warlordism, and profiteering—pathologies that fragmented, incoherent foreign funding flows into northern Syria have greatly enabled.

17 "U.S.-Backed Rebel Group in Syria Disbands," *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/usbacked-rebel-group-in-syria-disbands-1425253180>.

States. Some are dropping out of the insurgency. Others are defecting to the Nusra Front to take advantage of its military prowess, sense of purpose and confidence, higher salaries, and better resources—and many will embrace its ideology as well. This has accelerated a perverse, vicious cycle that undermines US interests: the US strategy inadvertently weakens nationalist insurgents, who are either defeated or defect to the Nusra Front. This, in turn, deepens US distrust toward the nationalist insurgents, leading to further reductions in US support and the weakening of nationalists, and so on.

As a result of US actions, threats, and public pronouncements about its plans for the insurgency, and judging from its recent offensive against nationalists in Idlib province, the Nusra Front has apparently concluded that US pressure on rebel groups to confront it—coupled with direct US attacks on the Khorasan cell—pose a potential local threat. The Nusra Front also recognizes that these under-resourced, US-aligned rebel groups are not yet in a position to challenge it, but worries this might change as the US train-and-equip program comes online. Thus, the al-Qaeda affiliate had calculated that the sooner it attacked its rivals in Idlib, the better. One US-aligned nationalist fighter explained, "We walk

RATHER THAN PUSH NATIONALIST INSURGENTS TO CONFRONT AMERICAN ENEMIES AND IGNORE THEIR OWN, AGAINST UNREALISTIC ODDS, THE UNITED STATES WOULD BENEFIT MORE FROM HELPING THE NATIONALISTS COMPETE WITH THE NUSRA FRONT FOR CONTROL OF THE INSURGENCY AND POPULAR SUPPORT, CONTAIN ISIS, AND BUILD CAPACITY FOR AN EVENTUAL OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE JIHADISTS.

around Syria with a huge American flag planted on our backs, but we don't have enough AK-47s in our hands to protect ourselves."¹⁸

The Nusra Front has effectively capitalized on popular and rebel disillusionment with the United States and its local allies, building influence with the insurgency and population, and facilitating its jihadist project. It has been less brutal with the local population than ISIS, and, unlike ISIS, it sustains working relationships with many insurgent groups. The Nusra Front has embedded itself within, rather than come out in outright opposition to, much of the insurgency and population. Its strategy is more subtle and sophisticated than that of ISIS, which could make it more sustainable, with negative implications for US security.

Shaping a New Strategy: Competing with the Nusra Front, Containing ISIS

The United States is rightly concerned about ISIS and the Nusra Front, but, as currently conceived and executed, the US-led anti-jihadist strategy in Syria cannot achieve its goals because it does not adequately account for local realities. Its main weakness is an apparent disconnect between US and Syrian priorities, and here the United States faces a conundrum. The Nusra Front and ISIS are a more immediate threat to US

security than is the Assad regime, which is too weak and focused on survival to threaten the United States. On the other hand, only a local ground force accepted by Sunni Syrians can defeat and replace the jihadists, and for the Sunni-led insurgency, the more immediate threat is the regime, not the jihadists. For the population writ large, the salient question is not "What is a particular group's ideology?" but "Can it protect us?" or, more simply, "Can we live with it?"¹⁹

The nationalist insurgents' assessment of their current situation vis-à-vis the Nusra Front is correct: the group ultimately threatens them, but it is neither as powerful nor as hostile as the regime. In any case, the nationalists cannot defeat the Nusra Front while simultaneously fighting ISIS and the regime, unless they receive a dramatic (and thus far absent) increase in international support. Rather than push nationalist insurgents to confront American enemies and ignore their own, against unrealistic odds, the United States would benefit more from helping the nationalists compete with the Nusra Front for control of the insurgency and popular support, contain ISIS, and build capacity for an eventual offensive against the jihadists.

Until nationalists are better placed to confront the Nusra Front, heavy US pressure on them to do so only discredits and isolates them, provoking a fight they cannot win—as do US air strikes on the Nusra Front in the absence of a meaningful strategy for addressing regime violence. Until its nationalist rivals are better placed to defeat the Assad regime, the best way to weaken the Nusra Front in Syria is not through direct or proxy confrontation, but by enabling nationalists to compete effectively with it. In doing so, the nationalist insurgents would improve their military position, popular standing, and appeal to disillusioned fighters who would otherwise join the Nusra Front.

ISIS presents a different challenge. It shares the Nusra Front's ideology but not its priorities. The Nusra Front sees the caliphate as a long-term project, best served by a short-term emphasis on fighting the regime, and alternately cooperating and competing with insurgent groups. ISIS's immediate and long-term priorities are one and the same: to establish and expand the caliphate by controlling territory and eliminating opposition. Through co-option, bribery, patronage, and violence, ISIS has all but ended organized resistance in its core territory in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa provinces.

It is tempting to think that ISIS's ideology and behavior will doom it to failure, but these are less important

18 Adam Entous, "Covert CIA Mission to Arm Syrian Rebels Goes Awry," *Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/covert-cia-mission-to-arm-syrian-rebels-goes-awry-1422329582>.

19 That does not, of course, preclude that a generation growing up under jihadist rule will not increasingly internalize ISIS's or the Nusra Front's ideology.

than the conquered populations' perception of their own interests. Syrians who submit to ISIS benefit from protection and order. Those who resist are killed, or find they have traded ISIS's violence for that of the regime. Thus, while sporadic guerilla attacks on ISIS fighters continue, as long as local populations calculate that rebellion is unlikely to improve their lives, they have no incentive to confront ISIS.

Insurgent competition with ISIS in its core geography is therefore unrealistic in the short term. Focusing on containing ISIS, disrupting its lines of communication where possible, and preventing it from expanding in other key provinces including Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Deraa is more realistic, at least until nationalist insurgents are better placed to apply pressure on ISIS strongholds. That in turn would strain ISIS resources, and help change the calculus of the population it controls. Local resistance would then become a rational choice because it would have a chance of succeeding, and because Syrians would no longer be forced to choose between ISIS and the regime.

A Two-Pronged, Local Approach

It is difficult to generalize about the geography of Syria's civil war or the balance of power between various fighting groups. It is possible and useful, however, to map out the war's distinct trends and trajectories in different parts of Syria. This can inform an anti-jihadist strategy that accounts for the strengths, weaknesses, and incentives of fighting groups and populations, enabling local competition with the Nusra Front and containment of ISIS, and establishing conditions for eventually confronting and defeating both.

Building on Results in the South

Presently, southern Syria offers the circumstances most favorable to establishing an effective, legitimate, and sustainable alternative to ISIS and the Nusra Front. In Damascus, Quneitera, and Deraa provinces, insurgents have made substantial territorial gains against the regime, largely kept ISIS out, and competed strongly with the Nusra Front, thanks in part to a well-conceived covert US support program for nationalist groups. By tightly controlling weapons and funding flows, establishing direct contact with vetted insurgent commanders, and providing guidance on military strategy and tactics, the covert program has helped the insurgency avoid the fragmentation and dysfunction that plagued the rebellion and indirectly empowered ISIS and the Nusra Front in northern Syria. More generally, the southern insurgency's qualified successes offer lessons and opportunities for building effective, legitimate, long-term counterparts to the

Nusra Front and ISIS, in which the United States can play a valuable role.

In southern Syria, the United States can take advantage of:

- The valuable experience of the Jordanian-based, US-led covert Military Operations Command (MOC), which has helped the United States build a deeper understanding of and influence over the insurgent landscape in southern Syria.
 - Proximity to a competent and generally dependable ally, Jordan, which shares the US interest in defeating the jihadists, and has extensive outreach to and knowledge of local fighting groups.
 - A border that is easier to control than the Turkish-Syrian border, and an ally that appears more committed to controlling it, which has helped restrict foreign jihadist fighter flows in southern Syria.
 - Local tribal structures in Deraa province which lend themselves to organized collective action, are responsive to financial patronage, and can be incentivized to fight the jihadists.
 - A large, cohesive Druze population that would be open to alliances that secure the community's, rather than the regime's, interests.²⁰
 - A weak ISIS presence.
 - The MOC's centralized decision-making over funding and supply streams to insurgent groups, discouraging the infighting that seriously weakened rebel groups in northern Syria.
 - Local insurgent groups' apparent willingness and ability to cooperate with, and cede governance authority to, local coordination committees.
 - Proximity to Damascus, the regime's center of gravity and a useful pressure point for enabling a political settlement to the Syrian conflict and its radicalizing effects.
- Southern Syria also presents challenges that the US strategy must consider, including:
- The Nusra Front's sophisticated outreach to, and coexistence with, local insurgent groups.
 - Unopposed regime air and artillery bombardment that weakens potential allies against the jihadists.

²⁰ There are indications that Druze-regime tensions are increasing, in part due to aggressive regime conscription efforts among the population, though so far the Druze have shown little inclination to confront the regime.



Members of the Nusra Front pose for a picture at a checkpoint at the Karaj al-Hajez crossing, November 2013. *Photo credit:* Reuters/Molhem Barakat.

- The Nusra Front’s superior funding, allowing it to pay fighters several hundred dollars a month, compared with the nationalist insurgent groups’ reported \$50-100 per month.²¹

- ISIS’s apparent attempts to infiltrate southern Syria, particularly Damascus, and the possibility that the Syrian regime would facilitate this to weaken the nationalist opposition.

These opportunities and threats suggest US interests would be best served by:

- Substantially increasing direct financial support for vetted nationalist groups in the south, allowing them to offer fighters competitive salaries and benefits, provide for the local population, and cooperate effectively with local civilian institutions.

- Technical and parts support and training to nationalist rebels, enabling them to fully utilize captured regime and jihadist material.

- Adjusting strategy from merely helping nationalist groups hold territory to enabling them to expand it. The

²¹ This is according to Syrians in close contact with southern insurgent groups.

alternative is ceding this terrain to either the regime—thereby undermining the insurgency’s position to the ultimate benefit of the jihadists—or to the Nusra Front and ISIS themselves.

- Helping allied insurgents apply military pressure on the capital, which would make a political settlement that marginalizes the jihadists more likely.

- Establishing an air exclusion zone over insurgent-controlled territory in the south, and/or providing anti-aircraft weapons to vetted nationalist groups, with technical provisions in place that limit risks from more sophisticated weapons such as man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) from falling into hostile hands.²² Even simple anti-aircraft artillery, which poses fewer proliferation risks, would complicate regime air operations, helping local allies protect and thereby increase their standing among the population, and build military capability against the jihadists.

²² John Reed, “Tracking Chips and Kill Switches for MANPADS,” *The Complex* (blog), *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/19/tracking-chips-and-kill-switches-for-manpads/>; Anthony Cordesman, “Syria, U.S. Power Projection, and the Search for an ‘Equalizer,’” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 9, 2012, <http://csis.org/publication/syria-us-power-projection-and-search-equalizer>.

- Aggressively reaching out, politically and financially, to Druze communities in Sweida province. These patronage networks, if combined with demonstrations of military success and staying power by nationalist insurgent groups, offer a potential incentive for Sunni-Druze cooperation.

- In keeping with a “competition before confrontation” approach to the Nusra Front, ceasing to condition support for nationalists on their immediately taking the offensive against the group. A pushback against the Nusra Front can follow once nationalist insurgents are able to successfully defend and govern territory.

Neither the southern insurgents themselves nor the MOC’s strategy are perfect, but they present an opportunity for a strategically sound policy against ISIS and the Nusra Front. The results thus far, despite the limited scale of MOC support and objectives, contradict the belief among some policymakers that the United States cannot play a useful role or secure its interests in Syria.

Parallel Efforts in the North

The north’s political and military landscape differs from that in the south, but the two regions’ futures are intertwined and will shape the environment in Syria’s central, demographic heartland and cities. Despite having the regime as their common enemy, the jihadists and the nationalist insurgency are ultimately in a zero-sum struggle for control of Syria. That common fight complicates matters, but both ISIS’s “caliphate” and the Nusra Front’s “emirate” exist and expand at the nationalists’ expense.

The jihadists’ relative success—and the nationalists’ losses—in northern Syria obviously bode ill for the balance of power in Syria writ large, including in the south and in major cities. If the Nusra Front and ISIS grow stronger in Hasaka, Aleppo, Idlib, or Hama provinces, they would be able to project power more effectively elsewhere, driving recruitment by (and fighters’ defection to) the jihadists. What is needed is not a “south first” strategy but a parallel north-south effort that accounts for local differences.

The north presents the United States with the following options against ISIS and the Nusra Front:

- Provide sufficient material support, in cooperation with Turkey where suitable, to prevent the collapse of nationalist forces in Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama. The current balance of power in the north is such that, if these groups are defeated, many of their fighters, resources, and territory would very likely be absorbed

A PUSHBACK AGAINST THE NUSRA FRONT CAN FOLLOW ONCE NATIONALIST INSURGENTS ARE ABLE TO SUCCESSFULLY DEFEND AND GOVERN TERRITORY.

by a combination of the Nusra Front, ISIS, and the regime and its militias.

- Expand coalition air strikes to target ISIS’s frontlines with the nationalist insurgency, helping the latter block ISIS advances. This would likely require excluding regime aircraft from northwestern Syria.

- Use US financial and material support to promote cooperation among Kurds, Sunni Arab rebels, and Sunni Arab tribes against jihadists. Kurdish-Arab cooperation is a potentially valuable tool, albeit one hamstrung by the Kurds’ parochial agenda, resistance from Turkey, and many Arab tribes’ historically fraught relationship with Syrian Kurds.

Compared to the south, northern Syria offers fewer “raw materials” that the United States can deploy against the jihadists. The nationalist insurgency there has been seriously weakened over the last six months, but it has not been destroyed. Most likely, the insurgency can survive long enough to expand and consolidate rebel gains in other areas of Syria, apply serious external pressure on ISIS and the Nusra Front, and offer locals a means of protecting themselves that does not require them to join or depend on the jihadists.

Conclusion

The current US-led coalition campaign in Syria cannot destroy ISIS without effective, legitimate Syrian ground forces. The campaign, which targets jihadists, ignores the regime, and marginalizes potential local partners, constrains but does not existentially threaten ISIS. Meanwhile, it is inadvertently radicalizing Syrians and empowering the Nusra Front. Even as the US-led air strikes kill ISIS fighters and weaken the group’s economic infrastructure, on its current path the campaign’s most likely outcomes are an entrenched ISIS and a strengthened Nusra Front.

An effective counter-jihadist strategy in Syria must instead center on working with capable local partners

to both destroy and replace ISIS and the Nusra Front. In the south, US-aided rebels have made important gains that the United States can build on, at the Nusra Front's expense. Further north, nationalist insurgent groups should not be left to collapse, as this would substantially benefit both ISIS and the Nusra Front and deprive the United States of much-needed partners against them. With greater US support, the nationalist insurgency in Syria can eventually go on the offensive against the jihadists—but pushing for this prematurely would destroy any prospect of success.

A locally driven approach to fighting the jihadists would also have positive implications for the broader Syrian conflict, and its radicalizing effects. By helping establish legitimate, capable opposition forces in Syria, the United States would also fulfill a key requirement for any political settlement to the Syrian conflict that gave rise to the jihadists: the existence of strong local partners able to fight and negotiate on behalf of Syria's opposition. These partners will have their flaws, but they will hardly be worse than the current US partners against ISIS in Iraq, and they are preferable to a Syria controlled by ISIS, the regime, Hezbollah, and the Nusra Front.

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