I. The Syrian and Iraqi civil wars

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The Syrian civil war

The Syrian civil war entered its fourth year in 2014. By the end of the year, and with more than 200 000 dead as a direct consequence of the war, President Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian and minority-dominated Ba'ath Party Government had improved its position, having made slow but steady progress in the key regions of Aleppo, Damascus and Homs.[1] In contrast, the anti-Assad insurgency, drawn from the country's Sunni Arab majority population—continued to fragment during 2014 (see table 2.1). The longer-term viability of President Assad's Government remained uncertain.

Major infighting among the rebels erupted on 3 January 2014, pitting the Sunni jihadist Islamic State (IS) against virtually all other anti-government forces.[2] Even though IS was expelled from north-western Syria within a few months, it was able to consolidate its hold on Raqqa—the only provincial capital controlled by the opposition—and reverse earlier setbacks in the Euphrates region (see figure 2.1).

The so-called National Coalition For Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which was established in 2012 with the aim of uniting the various exiled actors opposed to Assad's government, became increasingly divided in 2014 due to tensions between a number of factions funded by different foreign states, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In March 2014, the leadership of the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—a 'general staff' based in Turkey and intended to channel international support to fighters and gradually assume command over them—broke apart due to internal conflict, although many factions continued to receive foreign support and identify themselves as members of the FSA.[3]

[1] A 2014 United Nations report claimed to have documented 191 369 conflict-related deaths in Syria. By its own admission, this was a low estimate, but it was still more than twice the number of deaths documented a year earlier. See Price, M., Gohdes A., and Ball, P., *Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic*, Human Rights Data Analysis Group/Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Aug. 2014, <www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/HRDAGUpdatedReportAug2014.pdf>.

[2] The Islamic State was known until June 2014 variously as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). While some of these terms (and other Arabic translations) continue to be used to describe the group, this Yearbook (with the exception of chapter 3) uses the term 'the Islamic State' throughout and abbreviated as IS. However, it is also recognized that language plays an important part in shaping understanding of events, including this group's development. See e.g. Shariatmadari, D., 'Why there's no such thing as Islamic State', *The Guardian*, 1 Oct. 2014. For more on this group, see the discussion in this section.

[3] The FSA's internal convulsions in spring 2014 are chronicled in the following series: Lund, A., 'A Coup in the Supreme Military Council?', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 Feb. 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54537>; Lund, A., 'The Free Syrian

Table 2.1. Ethnic and religious demographics in Iraq and Syria

Iraq	
Ethnic groups	Arab 75–80%; Kurds 15–20%, Turcoman, Assyrian or other 5%
Religions	Muslim 99% (includes Shia 60–65% and Sunni 32–37%); Christian 0.8%, Hindu <0.1, Buddhist <0.1, Jewish <0.1, unaffiliated <0.1, other <0.1
Syria	
Ethnic groups	Arab 90.3%; Kurds, Armenians and others 9.7%
Religions	Muslim 87% (includes Sunni 74%, and Alawi, Ismaili and Twelver Shia 13%); Christian 10% (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian); Druze 3%; Jewish (few remaining in Aleppo and Damascus)

Note: Recent reporting and other sources indicate that the overall Christian population in Syria may have dropped by as much as 50%, after decades of low minority birth rates and emigration.

Sources: Index Mundi Iraq Demographics Profile 2014 <http://www.indexmundi.com/Iraq/demographics_profile.html>; and Index Mundi Syria Demographics Profile 2014 <http://www.indexmundi.com/syria/demographics_profile.html>.

However, the rebel factions inside Syria continued to receive support from, among others, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United States and France, as well as from private fundraising networks and Islamic charities. Some of the resources provided by governments were pooled through military operation centres set up in Jordan and Turkey, while other funding was supplied directly to favoured groups. Nonetheless, the opposition complained that this foreign support was too limited to change the balance of power in what had now become a two-front battle against both Assad's government and IS. In particular, opposition factions repeatedly called for the provision of portable anti-aircraft missiles to counter Assad's air superiority. However, throughout the conflict, the US administration in particular has opposed the supply of such missiles because of the fear that they might fall into the hands of extremist anti-US factions.

Despite persisting rivalries, the rebels on the ground fighting IS and government forces continued to coalesce into larger alliances—often at the urging of their foreign funders. Although the action against IS took a major toll on factions in the north, weakening many FSA-aligned and mainstream Islamist rebel groups, it also obliged some of the hardline religious groups to distance themselves more clearly from the jihadi extremists in order to secure foreign support.

Armies: Institutional Split', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 Mar 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55085>; Lund, A., 'The Free Syrian Armies: Failed Reconciliation', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 26 Mar. 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55104>; and Lund, A., 'A New Free Syrian Army Leadership', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 4 Apr. 2014, <carnegie endowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55245>.
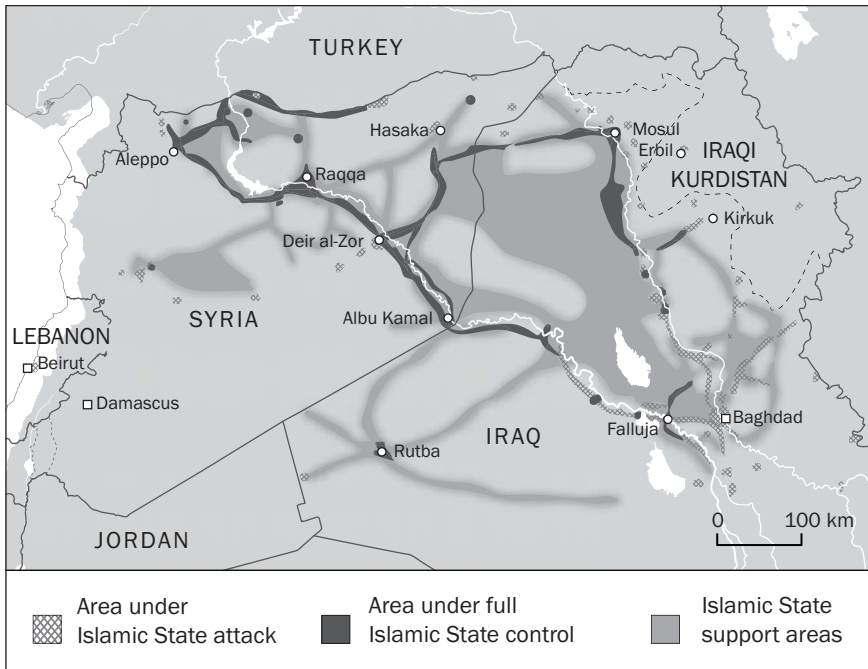
Figure 2.1. Areas in Syria and Iraq controlled by the Islamic State, December 2014

States such as Qatar and Turkey, which have tended to fund Islamist groups, increased their influence over some of the northern Islamist rebels, when these groups scrambled for support to fight a war on two fronts. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on the other hand, typically favoured non-Islamist factions and sought to marginalize groups tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. Increased spending on non-Islamist factions by pro-opposition states through the Military Operations Centre in Jordan seems to have been one reason for the relatively stronger position of nationalist groups fighting under the FSA banner in the south of Syria.

The powerful al-Qaeda-aligned insurgent faction known as the Nusra Front did not follow the more pragmatic approach taken by other groups, and instead attempted to seize territory from rival rebel forces. This move was perhaps designed to shore up support from hardline jihadists and stem a flow of defections to IS.[4] From June 2014 the Nusra Front began to consolidate control in north-west Syria, initially by targeting small and often unpopular militias accused of criminality, some of which were linked to

[4] Lund, A., 'Not our kind of Caliph: Syrian Islamists and the Islamic State', Middle East Institute, 7 Aug. 2014, <www.mei.edu/content/at/not-our-kind-caliph-syrian-islamists-and-islamic-state>; and Lund, A., 'Al-Qaeda's bid for power in northwest Syria', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 Nov. 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=57107>.

commanders backed by Saudi Arabia or the USA. After several of its positions were hit by US airstrikes on 22 September 2014, the Nusra Front increased pressure on its rivals, seeking to destroy or dominate those local FSA factions that it believed were likely to become part of a larger anti-jihadi force. In late October, a Nusra Front-led coalition defeated the FSA-aligned forces of Jamal Maarouf, the main recipient of Saudi Arabia's funding in northern Syria, who had also received some recognition and support from the USA.[5] Throughout these events, a number of Islamist rebel factions—some of them closely affiliated with Qatar, Turkey or both—refused to come to the aid of the targeted groups and continued to participate alongside the Nusra Front in action against Syrian government forces. However, towards the end of 2014 some of these Islamist rebels expressed concern over the Nusra Front's increasingly aggressive strategy and the implications of its conflict with the USA. There was a flurry of activity during the autumn, aiming to create new alliances and pacts among such groups. These new alliances pointedly excluded the Nusra Front, indicating the potential for further intra-rebel conflict in the future.

Opposition infighting allowed the government to push forward from spring onwards, particularly in the strongly contested Aleppo region, one of Syria's most heavily populated and economically important areas. The western half of Aleppo City remained in government hands but it had long been under threat of siege by the rebels that controlled the city's east and most of the surrounding countryside. Government aerial bombardment of the city's rebel-held eastern neighbourhoods had already begun in late 2013, forcing hundreds of thousands of civilians out of the city. The army then moved northwards, relying on a newly cleared supply line from Hama through rural towns such as Sfeira and Khanaser. By the end of 2014, government forces had fought their way around eastern Aleppo and were trying to encircle the city and cut rebel supply lines from Turkey.

Further south, the government and its Lebanese Shia ally, Hezbollah, broke up several rebel strongholds in the Qalamoun region between Damascus and Homs, cutting rebel supplies from Lebanon. In April and May 2014 government forces made a key breakthrough when local rebels agreed to evacuate the besieged Old Town of Homs in a United Nations-mediated ceasefire agreement.[6] The opposition had promoted Homs as 'the capital of the revolution' and the rebel defeat there was widely celebrated on the government side.

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[5] Khodr, Z., 'What are al-Nusra Front's plans in Syria?', Aljazeera, 15 Nov. 2014, <blogs.aljazeera.com/blog/middle-east/what-are-al-nusra-fronts-plans-syria>; and Sly, L., 'The rise and ugly fall of a moderate Syrian rebel offers lessons for the West', *Washington Post*, 5 Jan. 2015.

[6] 'Syria conflict: Rebels evacuated from Old City of Homs', BBC News, 7 May 2014, <www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27306525>.

   The ceasefire in Homs exemplified a strategy pursued by the government in several areas of Syria since 2013, which focused on exploiting the fragmentation of the opposition armed forces. By laying siege to rebel strongholds and blocking access to food and humanitarian aid for months, the government sought to force isolated rebel enclaves to surrender or to neutralize them by way of local non-aggression pacts. Such agreements were concluded in several Damascus suburbs during 2014. Although the ceasefires are typically fragile and reflect rebel and civilian exhaustion due to military setbacks, constant shelling and imposed starvation, rather than renewed faith in Assad's Government, state media have presented these 'reconciliations' (*musalahat*) as a model for the piecemeal pacification of Syria.[7]

   Having thus largely reasserted its control over Damascus and Homs and made considerable progress in Aleppo, the Syrian Government ended the year with a clear military advantage over the rebel forces. However, the latter had advanced in the southern Daraa and Quneitra governorates and were strengthening their positions around the city of Idleb in the northwest. IS also turned its guns against the government at the end of 2014 after defeating rebel competitors in the east. It overran isolated army bases along the Euphrates and made repeated attempts to seize the important Shaer gas fields east of Homs.

   The Syrian Government's military progress was hampered by limited manpower. Its reliance on locally recruited militias and pro-Iranian Shia fighters from Iraq and Lebanon brought problems of oversight and control.[8] In addition, the war was taking a heavy toll on Syria's small Alawite community, from which come many leading members of the government and military, including Assad himself. Nonetheless, by the end of 2014 Assad's grip on the state apparatus, or what was left of it, appeared strong and there were no reports of internal challenges to his rule. Despite the sectarian aspect of the civil war in Syria, many Sunni Muslims continue to serve in the government and with the armed forces.

   Notwithstanding its military successes in 2014, the Syrian Government faced growing economic pressures during the year. Global oil prices began to fall precipitously from summer 2014. This, coupled with Western sanctions and the rising cost of the Syrian, Iraqi and Ukrainian conflicts, led to financial distress in Iran, Iraq and Russia—Assad's three primary allies. Presumably as a reflection of the government's reduced international support and fears of further reductions in the future, the systemic weaknesses

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[7] See e.g. 'National reconciliations indispensable to combat terrorism and enhance national dialogue', *Syria Times*, 17 Feb. 2015, <syriatimes.sy/index.php/don-t-miss/16714-national-reconciliations-indispensable-to-combat-terrorism-enhance-national-dialogue>.

[8] Lund, A., 'Who are the Pro-Assad militias?', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 Mar. 2015, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59215>.

in Syria's economy began to surface in new ways. Prices of basic goods increased and fuel shortages worsened as winter neared and the Syrian pound depreciated. Despite counter-measures, such as lifting the state monopoly on fuel imports and cutting subsidies on oil products, bread and other basic goods, the economy continued to worsen through winter 2014.[9]

International reaction

In 2014 a shift in international attitudes to the Syrian war took place. In January 2014, the first direct peace talks were held in Switzerland between the Syrian Government and a delegation from the exiled National Coalition. The so-called Geneva II process was based on a UN-sponsored document from 2012 that called for a government of national unity in Syria, a demand supported in principle by both Russia and the USA. However, the two sides seemed unwilling or unable to engage in meaningful peace talks. The government refused to discuss any restrictions on the president's powers and insisted that a peace deal should follow Syria's crushing of rebel 'terrorism'. The opposition delegation also refused to compromise on its core demand of Assad's removal. Furthermore, it could not credibly claim to represent the forces on the ground in Syria, considering that most armed rebels had denounced both the talks and the National Coalition. When the UN and Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, ended the talks in February, nothing had been agreed.

The Geneva II process ended with no clear alternatives in place, and rising tensions over the crisis in Ukraine soon diminished the prospects of renewed US–Russian cooperation in Syria. In May, Brahimi resigned and in the ensuing diplomatic vacuum the Syrian Government forged on with plans to unilaterally organize presidential elections. Held on 3 June, rival candidates were for the first time in five decades allowed on the ballot, but the process was fully government-controlled. Assad was declared the winner with 88.7 per cent of the votes.[10] When, a week later, Sunni rebels captured the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, Western attention quickly shifted away from Assad to IS atrocities against religious minorities and the threat of jihadi extremism.

Extending a bombing campaign that began in Iraq in early August, the USA and several allies commenced aerial attacks on the IS in Syria on 22 September; unlike its allies, the USA also conducted strikes against the

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[9] See e.g. Lund, A., 'Cold winter coming: Syria's fuel crisis', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 Oct. 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=56917>; and Martínez, J. C., and Eng, B., 'Assad's bread problem', *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 Feb. 2015, <carnegieendowment.org/sada/2015/02/03/syria-s-bread-problem/i12r>.

[10] 'Dr. Bashar Hafez al-Assad wins post of President of Syria with sweeping majority of votes at 88.7%', Syrian Arab News Agency, 5 June 2014, <http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=2857>; and Lund, A., 'Syria's phony election: False numbers and real victory', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 June 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55863>.

Nusra Front. Although Turkey and some leaders of Arab states of the Gulf sought to retain a focus on overthrowing Assad, by the latter half of 2014 the US administration appeared to be primarily interested in containing the violence in Syria in order to concentrate on salvaging Iraq from state collapse, with Assad's removal put off to some unspecified date in the future.

This US approach dovetailed with the strategy presented by the new UN Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, who was appointed in July 2014. Noting the failure of the 'top-down' approach embodied by the Geneva II conference, de Mistura shifted the emphasis away from the formation of a transitional government towards local stabilizing efforts in the hope that this could change the dynamics of the conflict over the long term. De Mistura developed a plan for a local 'freeze of hostilities' in the Aleppo region and quickly gained the support of the UN Security Council. However, as 2014 came to a close he was still trying to convince the warring parties and their respective regional backers of the merits of his plan.[11]

The Iraqi civil war

Ever since the start of large-scale Sunni Arab protests in December 2012 against Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia Islamist, Iraq had been sliding towards civil war. Among the drivers of the conflict were: (*a*) Maliki's favouritism of his own mostly Shia allies and a resulting upsurge in Sunni resentment; (*b*) persistent attempts at sectarian provocation by IS and other Sunni extremists; and (*c*) contagion from the conflict raging in neighbouring Syria. These drivers were all unfolding against a background of unresolved political conflicts and socio-economic grievances dating back to the US occupation (2003–11) or the Ba'ath Party dictatorship (1968–2003).

In January 2014, Sunni Arab rebels led mainly by IS and ex-Ba'athist forces captured Falluja, a centre of Sunni Arab popular opposition. Maliki's militarily overstretched and dysfunctional government failed to respond effectively, resorting instead to shelling and bombing of rebel-held Sunni areas. Parliamentary elections in April did nothing to assuage Sunni anger, with Maliki cruising to victory at the helm of a broad Shia coalition and reaffirming the dominance of his Iran-supported new order.[12]

In June 2014, IS sent fighters from Syria into the Sunni-majority town of Mosul, where the group was already well established. The Iraqi army was poorly prepared and failed to coordinate with forces from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), an autonomous region in Iraq's north. Dis-

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[11] Agence France-Presse, 'De Mistura, Syria rebels haggle over scope of Aleppo cease-fire plan', *Daily Star* (Beirut), 9 Dec. 2014.

[12] 'Iraq elections: Maliki's State of Law "wins most seats"', BBC News, 19 May 2014, <www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27474518>.

orderly retreat turned into panicked flight as several army divisions simply collapsed. IS swept onwards as local rebellions erupted all across the Sunni north. Cities such as Tikrit and Tal Afar quickly fell to the Sunni rebels, initially in a disorganized fashion but with IS moving swiftly to gain control over minor factions.

Meanwhile, as the Iraqi army was abandoning Kirkuk, a disputed and oil-rich city that the Kurds had claimed for decades, Kurdish forces moved into the city. The Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani vowed to organize a referendum on Kurdish independence within months. In response to the rout of their forces in the north, Shia leaders in Baghdad and the south began to arm pro-government Shia civilians and Iran-backed Islamist militias that had fought the Sunni rebellion in 2003–11 (and in many cases, since then, had been volunteering their services to Assad in Syria). The Iraqi Government and the KRG also called for international assistance, particularly from Iran and the USA.[13] Even though the IS-led offensive petered out at the limits of Sunni-majority territory, the capture of Mosul had cut the country in half geographically, while religious polarization risked tearing Iraq apart politically.

In early August, IS-led Sunni forces struck the Yezidi-populated Mount Sinjar region and the Nineveh Plains, both controlled by Kurdish forces. This hastened Western intervention and brought direct US military involvement. On 7 August, the USA began airstrikes against IS positions outside of Erbil, the Kurdish capital, and on Mount Sinjar. The USA also sought to engineer Maliki's resignation in order to create a unity government less tainted by anti-Sunni discrimination and to improve cooperation between Baghdad and Erbil.

With Baghdad and Erbil desperate for foreign assistance and Iran seemingly accepting that its ally Maliki had to be sacrificed, international pressure proved effective. Kurdish leaders put a halt to talk of independence and Shia politicians and religious leaders withdrew support for Maliki. On 15 August, the prime minister reluctantly stepped down to be replaced by Haider al-Abadi, another Shia Muslim (and, like Maliki, a member of the Islamic Dawa Party). As had been requested by the USA, Abadi vowed to create a unity government and to set up a National Guard able to absorb Sunni tribal fighters, who were reluctant to join the Shia-run armed forces.[14]

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[13] Dehghanpisheh, B., 'Special Report: The fighters of Iraq who answer to Iran', Reuters, 12 Nov. 2014.

[14] Gearan A. and Morris, L., 'U.S. plan to fight Islamic State depends on new Iraq leadership, Kerry says during visit', *Washington Post*, 10 Sep. 2014; and Wehrey, F. and Ahram, A. I., 'The National Guard in Iraq: A risky strategy to combat the Islamic State', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 Sep. 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/2014/09/23/national-guard-in-iraq-risky-strategy-to-combat-islamic-state/hppn>.

Iraqi Government policy and the Shia militias

Over the following months to the end of the year, the political dys-functionality and rampant sectarianism in Baghdad, along with the sect-arian massacres staged by IS, prevented an effective application of the strategy for Sunni re-inclusion launched by Abadi and promoted by the US administration as a condition for support. Many Shia politicians resisted plans to arm Sunni tribal factions and the National Guard plan quickly stalled in parliament. Meanwhile, Abadi's rule was undermined by internal rivalries and by his predecessor, Maliki, who remained a powerful influ-ence in his new role as vice president.[15] When Abadi's new 'unity cabinet' was revealed in September, it was, despite being portrayed as a 'fresh start' by the USA and other governments, very similar to Maliki's government. Dominated by the same powerful Shia Islamist factions and the Kurds, with a weak and mostly unrepresentative cast of Sunni Arab politicians, it held little appeal to those Sunnis who had aligned with IS or otherwise rebelled against the central government, and it seemed an unlikely vehicle for national reconciliation.

A major challenge to reconciliation was posed by the growing role of pro-Iranian Shia Islamist armed groups, such as the Badr Organization or Asaib Ahl al-Haqq, infamous for their abuses against Sunni communities. Having taken the lead in combating IS, they now overshadowed (and in many cases apparently controlled) the regular Iraqi armed forces. Many militias were linked to parties in Abadi's governing coalition and had proven themselves indispensable in the fight against IS. The Iraqi Government consequently continued to support and fund them, even though in many cases they responded to the Government of Iran rather than Iraq. The Badr Organiza-tion, which was established in Iran during the Iran–Iraq War, 1980–88, has made no secret of its pro-Iran agenda and it is widely feared and distrusted by Iraqi Sunni Arabs. Nonetheless, Abadi was compelled to appoint a member of the group as minister of the interior, while the Badr Organiza-tion's leader Hadi al-Ameri (who held no formal position in the Iraqi mili-tary) was entrusted with overall command of militia and government forces north-east of Baghdad.[16]

The prominent role of the Badr Organization and other such groups fur-ther alienated Sunni Arabs from the Iraqi Government and helped IS rally support by presenting itself as the Sunnis' only defence against Iran and the Shia militias. With the Iraqi Government unable or unwilling to exert con-trol over the Shia militias, and while IS engaged in genocidal massacres

[15] Mansour, R., 'Can Abadi move out of Maliki's shadow?', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 Dec. 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=57427>.

[16] Morris, L., 'Appointment of Iraq's new interior minister opens door to militia and Iranian influ-ence', *Washington Post*, 18 Oct. 2014; and [President of the Republic receives Hadi al-Ameri], Iraqi Presidency, 30 Nov. 2014, <http://presidency.iq>.

against captured Shia Muslims and Yezidis, Abadi's continued talk of reform and religious inclusivity appeared to do little to reverse Iraq's sectarian polarization.

Kurdish politics in Iraq and Syria

By summer 2014, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), had already received hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons from Sunni Arab areas of Iraq, in addition to Syrian Kurds. The refugee crisis in northern Iraq worsened with the fall of Mosul in June and reached catastrophic proportions when the jihadis moved into Kurdish areas in August.

The KRG administration, which is dominated by KRG President Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the north-west of Iraq and by former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in the north-east, initially tried to keep out of the war with IS. The Kurdish forces, collectively known in Iraq as the *Peshmerga*, assumed a defensive posture once PUK troops had seized Kirkuk in the confusion following the collapse of the Iraqi army in June.

Barzani announced in early July that the KRG would soon hold a referendum on independence, since in his opinion Iraq had effectively become partitioned.[17] This followed the first unilateral oil exports from KRG-controlled territory through Turkey in June, as part of an attempt to create an economic basis for independence. The Iraqi Government's objections to the oil exports were ignored. However, few states wanted to encourage the idea of Kurdish statehood by purchasing oil from the KRG, particularly at a time when Iraq seemed to be falling apart. Barzani's referendum bid also floundered since it had not been coordinated with the PUK, and met with strong resistance from the USA, Iran and the EU. It also infuriated the Iraqi Government, which had already delayed budget payments owed to the KRG for several months over the oil dispute.[18]

In August 2014, IS attacked Kurdistan, massacring minority Yezidis in Mount Sinjar and sending ancient Christian communities fleeing from the Nineveh Plain. As IS forces moved towards the Kurdish capital Erbil, Barzani quickly acquiesced to US demands to postpone the planned referendum and, instead, send Kurdish ministers to join the Iraqi Government in Baghdad. A new oil-sharing arrangement between the KRG and the Iraqi Government was eventually negotiated in December 2014.[19]

[17] 'Iraq Kurdistan independence referendum planned', BBC News, 1 July 2014, <www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28103124>.

[18] PUK officials claimed to have been taken by surprise by Barzani's announcement and, while voicing strong principled support for Kurdish self-determination, criticized it as a self-serving and poorly timed move. Interviews with author in Suleimania and Erbil, Aug. 2014.

[19] 'Iraq government reaches oil deal with Kurds', Aljazeera, 2 Dec. 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/12/iraq-government-reaches-oil-deal-with-kurds-2014122161914107109.html>.

The US aerial intervention began on 7 August, with numerous other countries announcing support missions for the Kurds in the following weeks and months. The airstrikes played a major role in shoring up Kurdish morale and put IS on the defensive in northern Iraq as the Kurds counter-attacked.

The events of June, July and August had significant repercussions on KRG politics. While the PUK *Peshmerga* remained in practically unchallenged control of Kirkuk, the KDP *Peshmerga* had performed poorly in Mount Sinjar and on the Nineveh Plain. The KDP's position was further undermined by the refusal of its main ally Turkey to intervene against IS, while the PUK's ally Iran provided support immediately.

In addition, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish-nationalist and leftist group that has long fought the Turkish Government from bases in KRG territory, raised its profile in Iraqi–Kurdish politics as well as internationally during 2014.[20] The PKK, which also drew on forces sent across the border by its Syrian affiliate, the Popular Protection Units (YPG), has good relations with the PUK but not with the KDP, partly due to the latter's alliance with Turkey. The fact that the PKK/YPG outperformed the KDP *Peshmerga* in the battles to retake Mount Sinjar was a source of embarrassment for Barzani. While he publicly praised the PKK/YPG intervention, the KRG President was clearly concerned by this turn of events. A stronger PKK role in Iraq could easily upset the balance of power in the KRG, and Barzani also feared that the PKK loyalists would try to retain their new foothold among the Yezidis of Mount Sinjar, a geographically isolated Kurdish-speaking region that had been controlled by the KDP until the IS attack.

Syria: the Rojava Cantons and the battle for Kobane

Since mid-2012 pro-PKK organizations control all three Kurdish-majority enclaves in northern Syria: Efrin, north of Aleppo; Kobane, north of Raqqa; and large areas of the Qamishli-Hassakeh region. Pro-PKK groups, such as the YPG, had organized these three areas, collectively dubbed 'Rojava' (Western Kurdistan) by the Kurds, into three autonomous 'cantons', each with its own local government.

All three cantons followed the same political model, drawn from the PKK's secular-leftist ideology, and claimed that it was based on a direct, democratic system of governance. In practice, smaller Kurdish groups deemed hostile to the PKK/YPG or linked to the KDP in Iraq have been systematically repressed. Nonetheless, with Syrian Kurds largely support-

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[20] Zaman, A., 'Fight against IS helps PKK gain global legitimacy', al-Monitor, 16 Sep. 2014, <www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/turkey-kurdistan-iraq-syria-us-isis-pkk-global-legitimacy.html>.

ive of the YPG as their only credible military defence, the Rojava autonomy system faced no serious internal threats.

Since seizing these areas in mid-2012, the YPG has tolerated or tacitly cooperated with remaining Syrian government institutions and armed forces to counter the joint threat from IS and other hostile Sunni Arab rebels, but clashes between the YPG and Syrian government forces would still sporadically occur.

In September 2014, IS launched a surprise offensive against the Kobane enclave and brought YPG forces close to defeat. The US intervention on 22 September slowly helped turn the tide. The USA began to focus a very large proportion of its airstrikes in Syria on the Kobane enclave in support of the YPG, seeing this as an opportunity to inflict damage on IS and deal it a symbolic defeat.[21]

Despite the influx of tens of thousands of Kurdish refugees from Kobane and strongly negative media portrayals in the West, Turkey resisted US pressure to participate in the anti-IS intervention. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan rejected demands that he should aid the PKK-linked YPG in Kobane, not least because other PKK militants were sporadically fighting with government forces inside Turkey. He also repeatedly criticized the US refusal to strike at what he considered the root problem, namely Assad's rule in Syria. In November 2014, however, Turkey agreed to escort a small force of Iraqi *Peshmerga*—rather than PKK loyalists—into Kobane.

Towards the end of the year, the momentum of the conflict in Kobane appeared to have swung away from IS. The hard-fought Kurdish defence— and the popular juxtaposition of secular Kurdish fighters, including women, with the intolerant fundamentalism and graphic brutality of IS— attracted highly sympathetic media coverage in the USA and Europe, further helping the PKK/YPG rehabilitate its political standing. The Kobane conflict also served to establish an apparently effective working relationship between the YPG and the US military, even though the US administration classifies its parent organization, the PKK, as a terrorist organization. Whether this relationship can be sustained or expanded, particularly given Turkish objections, remains to be seen.[22]

The Islamic State

IS was originally established as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006 by the local wing of al-Qaeda and several smaller Sunni jihadi groups in Iraq.

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[21] More than 80% of the US airstrikes in Syria between Sep. 2014 and Jan. 2015 reportedly targeted the Kobane enclave. Karam, Z., 'IS militants nearly pushed out of Kobane, Syria by Kurds and US-led airstrikes', *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 Jan. 2015.

[22] US Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, 'Foreign terrorist organizations', Press release, [n.d.], <www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

ISI infiltrated Syrian rebel ranks from 2011 onwards, and ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced in April 2013 that his group would henceforth fight in both countries and be known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This was criticized by al-Qaeda's international leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who gave his blessing to the Syria-based breakaway faction of ISI, the Nusra Front.[23] In January 2014, the dispute between the groups escalated when ISIL entered into armed conflict with nearly all the other Syrian rebel groups, including the Nusra Front.

Having thus severed its ties with al-Qaeda, ISIL began to redefine its identity and radicalized even further.[24] The group managed to capture headlines by distributing shocking images showing mass executions and video footage of murders of Iraqi Shia prisoners, Syrian Alawites and US hostages. Following the capture of Mosul in June 2014, it shortened its name to simply 'the Islamic State' (IS) and declared itself a caliphate claiming sovereignty over the entire Islamic world. This claim drew criticism and denunciation from across the Muslim world, and finalized the schism between IS and local Islamist groups.[25]

IS also threatened attacks abroad and began trying to co-opt foreign militant networks in order to displace al-Qaeda as the central organizing force behind global jihadism. With the international media now focused almost exclusively on IS and its exploits in Iraq and Syria, al-Qaeda began to lose some of its influence over jihadist movements.

While the older generation of fighters and senior jihadi scholars remained true to al-Qaeda's traditional line—which called for pragmatic cooperation with likeminded factions, sought to rally Sunni Muslim public opinion and was more selective about targets—most of the young foreign fighters streaming into Iraq and Syria sided with the 'total war' extremism embodied by IS. US intelligence has put the number of Sunni Islamist foreign fighters passing through Syria since 2011 at more than 20 000 individuals; most are from the Middle East, but around 3400 are

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[23] The Nusra Front was originally organized in 2011–12 as a covert front organization for al-Qaeda and IS (then called ISI) in Syria, but did not publicly affiliate itself with al-Qaeda until it split from IS (then called ISIL) in Apr. 2013. For further details, see Katz, R. and Raisman, A., 'Special report on the power struggle between al-Qaeda branches and leadership', SITE Institute, Jan. 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Articles-Analysis/special-report-on-the-power-struggle-between-al-qaeda-branches-and-leadership-al-qaeda-in-iraq-vs-al-nusra-front-and-zawahiri.html>. On IS more generally, see Lister, C., *Profiling the Islamic State*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper no. 13 (Brookings Institution: Doha Nov. 2014), <www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2014/12/profiling-islamic-state-lister>.

[24] Bunzel, C., *From paper state to caliphate: The ideology of the Islamic State*, Brookings Institution Analysis Paper no. 19 (Brookings Institution: Washington, DC, Mar. 2015), <www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state>.

[25] Lund, A., 'Not Our Kind of Caliph: Syrian Islamists and the Islamic State' (note 4).

from Europe and North America, highlighting the risk that some will return to commit attacks in their countries of origin.[26]

Nonetheless, a large majority of IS fighters in the region appear to be local Iraqis and Syrians, many of them recruited en bloc by the absorption of smaller Sunni rebel factions.[27] A January 2015 estimate by US officials put the number of core IS fighters at between 9000 and 18 000, many of whom are likely to be foreigners, but added that thousands more could be mobilized in support of the group.[28] Earlier, in September 2014, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimated that IS could mobilize a total of between 20 000 and 31 500 fighters in Iraq and Syria. This represented a two- or threefold increase in the space of a few months. The rapid expansion of IS during summer 2014 is thought to have been a result of absorbing smaller factions and gaining sympathizers in captured territories.[29]

However, the Islamic State's strength ends where non-Sunni territory begins. Wherever the group has attempted to attack non-Sunni Arab territory (such as in the Kurdish Kobane region) it has either failed to penetrate local defences or been caught in defensive positions susceptible to US air-strikes. Even in Sunni territory, IS faces major problems. It is an effective guerrilla army and has a proven record of stabilizing captured terrain by strictly applying sharia law to prevent chaos; it has also been able to finance its operations by exploiting captured oil fields and controlling trade. But IS lacks the expertise, financial resources and secure environment on the ground necessary to maintain the normal functioning of urban societies in former middle-income countries such as Iraq and Syria. Mosul, Raqqa and other IS-controlled cities now suffer from chronic power outages and collapsing services.[30]

The success of IS has primarily been due to the divisions among its enemies and a lack of effective Sunni Arab resistance to the group either in Iraq or in eastern Syria (in north-western Syria, Sunni Arab rebels, including Western-backed factions, various Islamist groups backed by Arab states of the Gulf or Turkey, and al-Qaeda's Nusra Front, were collectively strong enough to fight and expel IS forces in spring 2014). Even as they suffer hardship under IS control, many local Sunni Arabs seem to prefer it

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[26] Rasmussen, N. J., 'Current terrorist threat to the United States', Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 12 Feb. 2015, <http://www.nctc.gov/docs/Current_Terrorist_Threat_to_the_United_States.pdf>. On foreign terrorist fighters returning to Europe, see chapter 6, section III, in this volume.

[27] Lund, A., 'Who Are the Soldiers of the Islamic State?', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 24 Oct. 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=57021>.

[28] Starr, B., 'US officials say 6,000 ISIS fighters killed in battles', CNN, 22 Jan. 2015, <edition.cnn.com/2015/01/22/politics/us-officials-say-6000-isis-fighters-killed-in-battles>.

[29] 'IS fighter estimate triples—CIA', BBC News, 12 Sep. 2014, <www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29169914>; and Lund (note 27).

[30] Sly, L., 'The Islamic State is failing at being a state', *Washington Post*, 25 Dec. 2014.

over Shia, Kurdish or Syrian Ba'athist rule, which they associate with per-secution, historical injustices and humiliation.

In addition, those that might choose to resist are understandably fearful of IS retribution in case of a failed rebellion. While IS fighters seem to be very thinly spread over Sunni Arab areas, excepting major cities and front-lines, its leaders have used their ability to concentrate forces to put down incipient Sunni uprisings with extreme brutality. Examples include an August 2014 massacre of hundreds of Shaitat tribal members in eastern Syria, after attacks on IS loyalists, and similar mass killings in October and November 2014 of Iraqi members of the Al-Bou Nimr tribe who supported the Iraqi Government.[31]

Even though IS is likely to be significantly weakened over time by inter-national intervention and the structural flaws of its own politico-military model, it may be able to retain control over key constituencies for lack of other options. It is likely that opportunistic Sunni Arab rebels and local militia will rally behind the group to oppose Iraqi Shia, Kurdish, Syrian Ba'athist or US attacks. Other Sunni Arabs are likely to tolerate IS rule or even passively support the group, as long as: (*a*) they have no reliable allies that could help them withstand an IS counter-attack; (*b*) they lack trust in the Iraqi Government; and (*c*) there is no rival Sunni Arab leadership capable of uniting disparate factions against IS.

The US-led military intervention

In a speech on 10 September 2014, just over a month after resuming the US military intervention in Iraq, President Barack Obama unveiled a strategy to 'degrade and ultimately destroy' IS through airstrikes in Iraq and Syria.[32] But Obama also made it clear that he did not believe that airstrikes alone could solve the problem, saying that the USA must anchor military efforts in a broad regional coalition and empower local forces on the ground. In particular, he highlighted the need for Sunni Arab participation, stating that the Iraqi National Guard project (see above) should 'help Sunni com-munities secure their own freedom' in Iraq, while also proposing increased funding for rebels in Syria, since Assad's government 'will never regain the legitimacy it has lost'.[33] A week later, the US Congress approved Obama's $500 million plan to train Syrian rebels, although the training effort had yet

[31] Sly, L., 'Syria tribal revolt against Islamic State ignored, fueling resentment', *Washington Post*, 20 Oct. 2014; and Guerin, O., 'Iraq: Sunni tribe "left for slaughter" by Islamic State', BBC News, 10 Nov. 2014, <www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29984668>.

[32] White House, 'President Obama: "We will degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL"', 10 Sep. 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil>.

[33] White House (note 32).

to begin by the end of the year.[34] In addition, on 22 September the air campaign was expanded to include Syria, with Kobane soon becoming the main focus (as discussed above). By early 2015, the US military claimed to have killed more than 6000 enemy fighters in both countries.[35]

The US strategy is one of 'Iraq first', aiming to contain IS and gradually re-unify Iraq under a reformed central government in Baghdad.[36] The airstrikes in Syria are in service of this goal and the US administration has reportedly assured Assad through third parties that it will not target his government. The Syrian Air Force has in turn allowed the USA the freedom of the air during the strikes.[37]

Some 60 states eventually joined the anti-IS efforts. Some, like France and the United Kingdom, actively participated in the airstrikes. Others, like Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, also took part in strikes but mainly played a supporting role by allowing the use of bases and offering funds, and perhaps most importantly by adding a veneer of Sunni Islamic and Arab legitimacy to what remains an essentially US effort.[38] Among US allies in the region, Turkey stands out for refusing to commit forces to the coalition, demanding that the USA must first prove that it will act to topple Assad.[39]

In Syria, the USA has launched a separate programme of airstrikes, involving no allied states, which targets the al-Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front. The USA has claimed that a special cell of veteran al-Qaeda operatives, which it dubs 'the Khorasan Group', is using Nusra Front camps as bases for its preparations for attacks on US or European civilian air traffic.[40]

In both Iraq and Syria, the USA finds itself in the difficult position of inadvertently supporting organizations and regimes against which it has traditionally been opposed. It is also caught in the middle of the sectarian rift that extends into the wider Middle East region. The USA is now carrying out airstrikes against Sunni extremists while sharing both enemies

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[34] 'Obama hails Congress backing for Syria plan', BBC News, 18 Sep. 2014, <www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-29263937>.

[35] Starr, B., 'US officials say 6,000 ISIS fighters killed in battles', CNN, 22 Jan. 2015, <edition.cnn.com/2015/01/22/politics/us-officials-say-6000-isis-fighters-killed-in-battles>.

[36] Dempsey, M. E., 'Gen. Dempsey's Remarks and Q&A at the Defense One Summit', US Joint Chiefs of Staff, 19 Nov. 2014, <www.jcs.mil/Media/Speeches/tabid/3890/Article/571979/gen-dempseys-remarks-and-qa-at-the-defense-one-summit.aspx>.

[37] Hafezi, P., Charbonneau L. and Mohammed, A., 'Exclusive: U.S. told Iran of intent to strike Islamic State in Syria—source', Reuters, 23 Sep. 2014; and 'Assad says Syria is informed on anti-IS air campaign', BBC News, 10 Feb. 2015, <www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31312414>.

[38] In Syria, US forces have been responsible for 90% of the strikes, and 75% in Iraq, according to Pavgi, K., '5 months of air strikes in Iraq and Syria in 4 charts', Defense One, 8 Jan. 2015, <www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/01/5-months-air-strikes-iraq-and-syria-4-charts/102495>.

[39] Freeman, C., 'Who is in the anti-Islamic State coalition and what they are contributing?', *The Telegraph*, 26 Sep. 2014; and Yetkin, M., 'Erdoğan furious with US, adds al-Assad condition', *Hürriyet Daily News*, 20 Oct. 2014.

[40] Lund, A., 'What is the 'Khorasan Group' and why is the U.S. bombing it in Syria?', *Syria in Crisis*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 Sep. 2014, <carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=56707>.

and airspace with Assad and Iran, and effectively providing air cover for groups that it has long branded as 'terrorists', such as the PKK and some of the Shia militias in Iraq. For Saudi Arabia and other US allies in the region, who are wedded to an anti-Iran and anti-Assad agenda, and are perceived to be part of a 'Sunni' regional bloc, this is deeply disconcerting. Saudi Arabia and others in this bloc see these developments—along with the Obama administration's willingness to accept some level of Iranian nuclear development and its decision to resume direct contacts with the Iranian Government after a boycott lasting from 1979 to 2013—as a precursor for broader Western reconciliation with their regional enemies.[41]

The prevailing sectarian narratives in Arab politics (and in both Arab and Western media) help give currency to a feeling of Sunni Arab victimhood and accusations of Western collusion with Iran. This latter narrative is supported by the fact that Sunni Arabs are among the worst afflicted communities in Iraq and Syria, but have received no Western military assistance similar to that of Kobane's Kurds or the Shia of Baghdad. Many Sunnis in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and the Arab States of the Gulf now deeply resent what they perceive to be the West's anti-Sunni bias. Yet, Assad, Hezbollah, Iran and other ostensibly 'Shia' actors remain staunchly opposed to US influence in the region. The result is a growing dilemma for the USA as it seeks to retain its dominant role in Middle Eastern politics, while also adapting to the changes wrought by the Arab Spring.

Conclusions

Even as IS attracted affiliate groups in areas as far away as Egypt and Libya, the expansion in its core areas of Iraq and Syria appeared to have been checked by late 2014 by a combination of foreign intervention and the group's own structural weaknesses. In the meantime, however, US and European debate had turned towards combating jihadism and saving Iraq from state failure, with the Syrian war seen less as a conflict to be won and more as a disaster to be contained.

On a purely political level, this has benefited Assad, whose immediate overthrow is now widely seen as undesirable by European and US policy-makers, although none will publicly advocate the maintenance of his regime in Syria. However, Assad's Government has shown little political flexibility and may turn out to be incapable of the type of concessions—such as the curtailing of presidential powers—that could plausibly reintegrate it with the international community.

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[41] Carter, C. J., 'It's a three-decade first: Presidents of U.S., Iran talk directly, if only by phone', CNN, 28 Sep. 2013, <edition.cnn.com/2013/09/27/politics/us-iran/>.

In Iraq, the government in Baghdad has seemingly stabilized and a full-scale breakdown has been averted, but its structural problems run deep. Abadi's government remains in thrall to foreign actors and sectarian dynamics, and it suffers from a profound crisis of legitimacy among Iraq's Sunni Arabs. Meanwhile, Kurdish groups in northern Iraq and Syria are faced with resurgent internal rivalries and hard political choices relating to the quest for independence and territorial expansion, while also dealing with a very serious refugee crisis.

Numerous uncertainties remain that could suddenly move either or both conflicts in unforeseen directions, in no less dramatic a fashion than the violent breakthrough by IS in Mosul in June 2014. For example, stability in Lebanon continues to be incrementally undermined by the Syrian war, and major conflict could flare up between Israel and Hezbollah or Iran, or both. In addition, the 2014 fall in global oil prices is likely to continue to weaken both Iran and Russia, and by association Assad. It will also undermine the economy of the Iraqi Government and the KRG and perhaps, to some extent, IS too, with unpredictable consequences.

With the international anti-IS campaign now inextricably conflated with the multi-sided conflicts in Iraq and Syria, it must be appreciated that the rise of IS in 2014 was a result of these conflicts and not their cause. IS or groups like it will continue to thrive in this environment of state failure, sectarian polarization and exploitative foreign interventions, and only long-term efforts for stabilization and conflict resolution are likely to be able to return peace to Iraq and Syria.