



Supporting the Syrian Opposition

Lessons from the Field in the Fight Against ISIS and Assad

By Hardin Lang, Mokhtar Awad, Ken Sofer, Peter Juul, and Brian Katulis September 2014

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

This summer's events in Iraq and Syria were a wake-up call regarding the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS. The group's capture of territory and its vicious crimes against humanity prompted the Obama administration to take targeted military action in Iraq.¹ These actions achieved tangible results, but they also raised questions about the next steps for U.S. policy in both Iraq and Syria.

The problems of these two countries are now intertwined—as ISIS's destruction of border posts and declaration of a new Caliphate demonstrate. In Damascus, President Bashar al-Assad's regime remains in power more than three years after many predicted its downfall was imminent. During the past year, the regime used genocidal actions to regain limited control in certain parts of western and northern Syria. Yet, its reach is limited in large swathes of the country, particularly in the east.

The forces opposing President Assad are in an alarming state—disorganized, weak, and often at odds with one another. With the United States now more deeply engaged in addressing the threat posed by ISIS in Iraq, it faces a conundrum about what to do about ISIS in Syria. The worst-case scenario—a Syria divided between the Assad regime in Damascus and a terrorist sanctuary in parts of the north and east—has already taken shape.

The weakness of capable and reliable Syrian partners who are poised to fight ISIS and the Assad regime is a central challenge for a U.S. strategy to counter ISIS's rise. The Obama administration has indicated its willingness to increase support for such partners. In his address to the West Point cadet corps in May, President Barack Obama declared that he would increase support for those in Syria “who offer the best alternative to terrorists and brutal dictators.”² On June 26, the Obama administration announced additional assistance to vetted moderate opposition forces that are fighting both the Assad government and ISIS and asked Congress to authorize \$500 million to train and equip these fighters.³ On September 10, President Obama again called on Congress to give his administration the “additional authorities and resources” to support the Syrian opposition.⁴

But a major effort to arm, train, equip, and enable possible U.S. partners inside Syria is no easy task. The Obama administration finds itself in a catch-22. Potential U.S. partners are weak, causing the Obama administration to hold back additional meaningful support. But these “third way” forces—moderate alternatives to Assad and ISIS—remain weak because they do not have organized and well-coordinated assistance.

To better understand the challenges the United States faces as it prepares to ramp up efforts in Syria, a research team from the Center for American Progress interviewed more than 50 Syrian opposition political representatives, military commanders, activists, fighters, and Islamists in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Those interviewed included members of the Syrian National Coalition, referred to in this paper as the National Coalition; the interim Syrian government; the Supreme Military Council; the Free Syrian Army; the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood; and the Islamic Front. This research and report is part of a four-country study based on in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted in Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan on the role of Islamist actors in the Arab uprisings that began in 2011.⁵

A central conclusion of this research is that the United States still has an opportunity to build partnerships in Syria as part of the wider effort to combat ISIS and to build a foundation for a transition from the Assad regime. The Center for American Progress previously released a report detailing how a stepped-up effort to support Syria’s opposition fits with an overall regional strategy to combat ISIS.⁶ As the United States prepares to increase its role in Syria, there are five key lessons that policy-makers should keep in mind:

- **The urgency of the situation in Syria requires swifter U.S. action.** This summer’s events indicate how rapidly the situation on the ground in both Syria and Iraq can evolve. The remnants of the third-way Syrian opposition are under siege in Aleppo and elsewhere. Proposed funding mechanisms, such as the \$500 million for vetted Syrian opposition forces, must make their way through the pipeline more expeditiously to have a chance for impact on the ground.
- **Stronger regional coordination is required to make support to the opposition effective.** Competition between countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar has helped fragment the non-ISIS opposition. So long as this competition is not moderated, additional U.S. assistance to the opposition is unlikely to result in real unity of effort against ISIS. A sustained U.S. diplomatic effort in the region will be required to insulate the effort in Syria from this competition and maximize the impact of new resources.

- **Additional support to the opposition should prioritize the fight against ISIS.**

The United States should not drop its objective of removing the Assad regime from power as it pursues the defeat of ISIS. However, ISIS presents a more serious threat to the stability of the Middle East and U.S. interests in the region. The defeat of ISIS should be prioritized over the removal of Assad, though the latter should remain a long-term U.S. objective. Additional U.S. assistance to opposition groups should be designed and delivered with this sequencing in mind.

- **The effort to support a reliable and effective Syrian opposition will take time.**

Given their current lackluster state, it will take time—perhaps several years—to turn vetted opposition groups into an effective fighting force capable of taking on both ISIS and the Assad regime. Right now, these groups are unable to fully absorb all the assistance that the United States could offer. But groups within Syria’s opposition that have access to resources exert greater influence over the allegiances of the small local units that make up most of the opposition. Providing access to these resources may help U.S.-backed groups become centers of gravity and speed up the process. The effort will require navigating deep political divisions within the opposition—it should not be viewed as simply a technical security assistance program.

- **Syrian Salafi jihadists, such as the Islamic Front, will remain a long-term U.S. policy challenge.**

The Islamic Front and other Salafi jihadi groups—a self-described Syrian Taliban—will remain a policy challenge for the United States even after the end of Syria’s civil war. Although it lacks the transnational ambitions of ISIS, the Islamic Front is comprised of tens of thousands of conservative Salafi fighters. If the Islamic Front unravels in the face of pressure from ISIS and the Assad regime, these fighters may well defect to ISIS. If the Islamic Front survives, the Salafi fighters associated with it are likely to challenge moderate elements for opposition leadership as focus turns to the Assad regime.

With a little more than two years left in office, the Obama administration has an important opportunity to stabilize the heart of the Middle East through a reinvigorated and reengaged U.S. leadership role that leverages America’s unique capabilities in the military, security assistance, and intelligence arenas. The key to broadening U.S. engagement in Syria is fostering partnerships and providing support to reliable and effective partners. The Obama administration has wisely ruled out putting boots on the ground in Syria. But over the past three years, it has shied away from deeper engagement to support forces that oppose the Assad regime, and this helped create an opening for forces such as ISIS to emerge. This summer’s wake-up call is drawing U.S. policy on Syria into a new phase, and it should move forward with a more focused effort to support Syria’s opposition.

U.S. policy on Syria moves toward a new phase in 2014

As the peaceful protests in Syria turned into a multidimensional civil war characterized by localized conflict over the past three years, the United States has vocally supported the aspirations of the Syrian opposition and provided them with some resources. But the Obama administration has thus far declined to engage militarily in the conflict or provide the level of military support necessary for the opposition to defeat the Assad regime. The United States has instead preferred to combine public support for the opposition with efforts to pursue a diplomatic solution in concert with Russia, address the humanitarian toll of the conflict, and limit the threat of Syrian extremist groups to the U.S. homeland. U.S. policy on Syria has had two distinct phases since 2011, and it now appears to be shifting into a third.

Phase 1: Diplomatic support for a political transition, spring 2011 to spring 2012

During the first year of the uprising in Syria, the United States was a vocal public supporter of the peaceful protestors and led the international condemnation of the Assad regime's response. U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford was a visible supporter of the peaceful protests, and the Obama administration released statements that criticized the Assad regime.⁷ President Obama announced in August 2011, "For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."⁸ The United States also played an important role in mobilizing the international community's response to the crisis. In the first half of 2012, the United States pushed for two resolutions in the U.N. Security Council, calling for a democratic transition in Syria, both of which Russia and China vetoed despite significant support from the rest of the council.⁹

Phase 2: Limited material support to the opposition and continued focus on negotiated political transition, spring 2012 to winter 2014

The United States reportedly began to provide nonlethal assistance to the Free Syrian Army in the spring of 2012.¹⁰ It was sending small arms and anti-tank weapons directly to select rebel brigades by June 2013.¹¹ The CIA was allegedly running a small training program for rebel fighters out of Qatar by fall 2013.¹² Meanwhile, U.S. policy remained focused on preventing the Syrian civil war from destabilizing its neighbors—Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Israel. NATO deployed Patriot missile batteries on the Turkish-Syrian border to help protect Turkey, one of its member states.¹³ The United States provided \$1.7 billion in humanitarian aid, half of which went to help neighboring countries handle the refugee crisis.¹⁴

Following a large-scale chemical weapons attack in Damascus in August 2013, President Obama announced that the United States would respond with air strikes against the Assad regime.¹⁵ This threat led to an agreement that eliminated Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile by July 2014.¹⁶

Throughout this period, the Obama administration sought a negotiated political solution to the conflict through the U.S.-backed peace talks in Geneva that would keep Syrian government institutions intact during the transition but require that President Assad leave—an irreducible requirement of the opposition.¹⁷ The United States made several attempts to unite the opposition into a coherent body that could handle such a transition, replacing the dysfunctional Syrian National Council with the larger, more inclusive Syrian National Coalition and providing \$287 million to bolster the political opposition's efforts inside and outside of Syria.¹⁸

U.S.-backed efforts to bring a negotiated political settlement failed during the 2014 Geneva talks, as both the opposition and regime sharply disagreed on the future of the Assad regime.¹⁹ Furthermore, most rebel fighters inside Syria did not back the process since Assad's military offensive escalated as the talks were taking place.

Phase 3: Combating the ISIS threat, spring 2014 to present

U.S. policy on Syria has begun to steadily shift its focus to counterterrorism during the past five months. In May, President Obama proposed a \$5 billion Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund to build up the Middle East's counterterror capacity to fight threats such as ISIS, including \$500 million to ramp up the effort to train

and arm the Syrian opposition. On September 10, President Obama announced a new strategy to degrade and defeat ISIS, including an effort to strengthen the Syrian opposition as a counterweight to ISIS.²⁰ It is unclear whether the expanded support for the opposition is focused on turning the tide against President Assad, fighting ISIS in Syria, or both. But the United States' actions signal the beginning of a third phase in U.S. policy—one that is more-directly engaged in eliminating extremist elements such as ISIS along the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Recent events in Iraq and Syria, particularly the rise of ISIS, are likely to draw the United States more deeply into Syria. The president recently authorized surveillance flights over Syria to collect intelligence on ISIS targets, laying the groundwork for potential airstrikes there in the future.²¹ The Obama administration has stated it wants President Assad to leave power while avoiding a failed state in Syria. However, it now sees the opposite: Assad is still in power and a failed state has emerged.

Current snapshot of the Syrian conflict

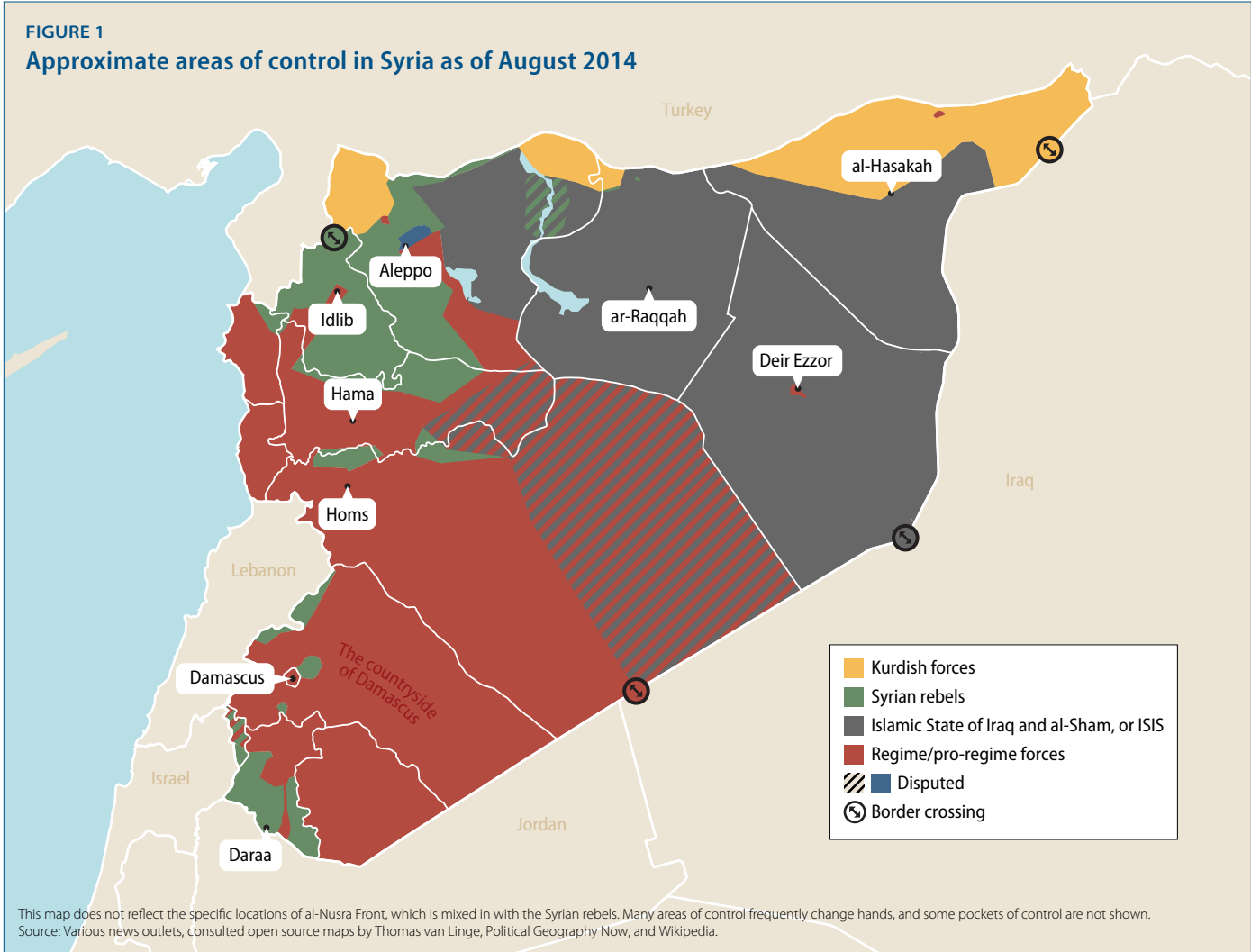
During the past year, the Assad regime has made a series of gains against opposition forces in the western half of the country. Although these gains should not be underestimated, they have not yet produced the strategic shift necessary for the regime to regain full control of Syria's territory and quell the armed insurgency. Fighting continues, primarily in the northern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib, the southern countryside of Damascus, and Daraa. Although regime defeat looks less likely than at any point in the past three years, victory remains elusive. Since June, ISIS's Iraq campaign has altered the strategic equation in Syria to the detriment of both the regime and the opposition.

Military situation

Prior to the ISIS offensive, Assad regime forces took control of the city of Homs, following an evacuation deal that allowed opposition fighters to flee, and also encircled opposition-held Aleppo.²² While the regime slowly advances against rebel-held regions in the west, ISIS has made significant gains against the opposition forces in the east. Coming off recent successes in Iraq, ISIS captured a gas field, two major military bases, and a strategic airbase from the regime; these fights left hundreds dead and the entire eastern province of ar-Raqqah with no regime military presence.²³ ISIS is also rapidly advancing westward with its sights set on rebel-held villages and recapturing positions in Aleppo and Idlib lost to the rebels earlier this year.²⁴ Both Islamist and non-Islamist rebel factions are now cooperating more closely than ever before, as they share the same grave threat from ISIS. Rebel factions in the south, mainly the Islamic Front's Jaish al-Islam, have largely eliminated the ISIS presence in their areas. They continue to cooperate with the Al Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front in anti-regime military operations in the southern theater, recently capturing Syria's only border crossing with Israel.²⁵

At the same time, the regime has completed the transfer of its known chemical weapon stockpiles for destruction by the international community.²⁶ Despite the stockpile transfer, the regime used chlorine gas this year prior to the deadline for weapons destruction.²⁷ It remains unclear if the regime may still possess less sophisticated precursors to chemical weapons agents.

Syria appears to be settling into a four-way de facto partition between the regime, a politically inchoate opposition, ISIS, and the Democratic Union Party, or PYD—a Kurdish secessionist movement that controls three enclaves in the north. The lines



Forces on the ground

The Assad regime has an estimated 125,000 regular military forces at its disposal, taking into account defections and casualties.²⁹ However, the number of loyal troops may be closer to 50,000.³⁰ These regular forces are supplemented by roughly 100,000 fighters in the paramilitary National Defense Forces, as well as 4,000 to 5,000 Hezbollah fighters and 2,000 to 5,000 fighters from Iraqi Shia militias, many of whom retreated to Iraq to fight ISIS there.³¹ In addition, Iran's Revolutionary Guard provides an estimated several hundred to 1,500 fighters on the ground in Syria.³²

The anti-Assad opposition remains factionalized. In February, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper estimated that the Syrian insurgency numbered between 75,000 and 115,000 combatants organized into 1,500 separate groups.³³ Clapper also estimated that jihadi fighters from ISIS, al-Nusra Front, and Salafi extremist group Ahrar al-Sham numbered more than 20,000, with more than 7,500 foreign fighters from approximately 50 countries joining the conflict.³⁴ A more recent estimate from the National Counterterrorism Center put the number of foreign fighters at 12,000.³⁵ The Islamic Front, a group of ultraconservative Syrian Salafi brigades, is estimated to number anywhere between 40,000 and 60,000 fighters.³⁶

of this partition fluctuate with the military situation, such as ISIS's recent offensive against the regime in the east. No party is poised to achieve a major breakthrough that alters the strategic balance without significant external intervention. Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate. The Assad regime is likely to extend its policy of "starve or kneel."²⁸ Ongoing fighting will continue to drive both displacement and the need for humanitarian aid.

Political situation

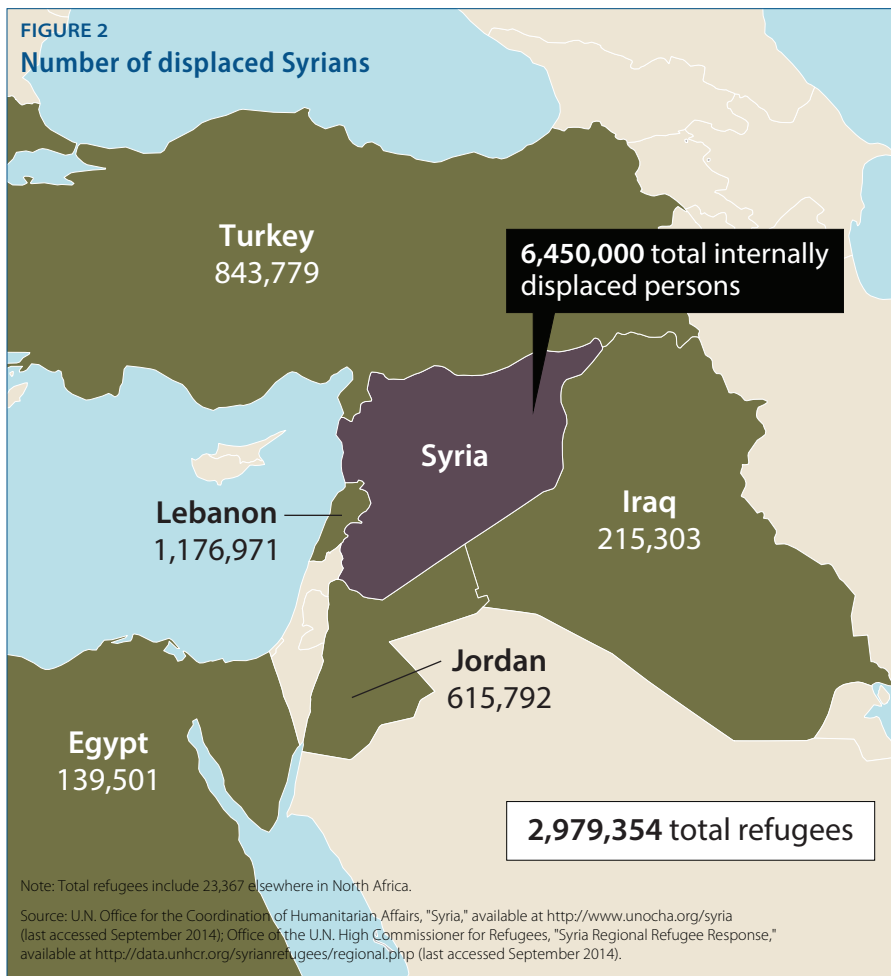
There is a manifest asymmetry between the Assad regime and the opposition when it comes to their respective political situations. On the surface, the embattled regime presents itself as more internally cohesive and, to this end, held a sham presidential election this spring in which President Assad won 88.7 percent of the vote.³⁷ The opposition, in contrast, is openly factionalized, is politically disorganized, and operates largely as an exile organization. The National Coalition—ini-

tially formed to replace the unrepresentative and dysfunctional Syrian National Council, or SNC, which is now simply a member of the new umbrella National Coalition—has suffered from similar challenges. These bodies’ failure to deliver on military assistance from the West weakened their position in the eyes of many Syrians who hoped to see Assad’s quick removal from power. Furthermore, recent reports that the National Coalition has dissolved the existing interim government for political reasons only reinforce this sense of political dysfunction.³⁸

The opposition suffers from a lack of stable leadership, a problem exacerbated by the competition for influence among regional actors. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have led this competition by backing opposing candidates for leadership positions within the National Coalition, most recently demonstrated by the re-election of Saudi-backed National Coalition President Hadi al-Bahra and former President Ahmad al-Jarba before him.³⁹ The Qatar-backed faction pulled out of the National Coalition, and one of its leading members threatened to form a new political body with the commander of the Islamic Front.⁴⁰

This internal political discord has undercut the opposition’s military and diplomatic work. Strained personal relations between the then-head of the Supreme Military Council—Gen. Salim Idriss, viewed as part of the Qatar bloc—and then-President Jarba—viewed as part of the Saudi bloc—led to Idriss’ removal and replacement with Gen. Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir al-Noeimi, a Jarba ally who is similarly seen as close to Saudi Arabia.⁴¹ Moreover, the Qatar-backed faction boycotted the National Coalition’s vote on participation in the Geneva peace talks.⁴²

A significant disconnect remains between the National Coalition—based in Istanbul, Turkey—and those in Syria.⁴³ As one U.S. government official in Gaziantep, Turkey, told CAP, the National Coalition has mishandled many of its relationships with the local councils established inside Syria since 2011.⁴⁴ One National Coalition member who coordinates with internal actors said that the organization prevents local councils “from selecting their own representatives to the coalition.”⁴⁵ The same National Coalition member explained that this is largely due to the fact that Qatari-backed members founded and financed the local councils, which the new Saudi-backed leadership sought to change.⁴⁶ This disconnect between the National Coalition and activists within Syria itself remains a major stumbling block for the opposition as a whole.



Humanitarian situation

Syria's humanitarian situation grows increasingly dire the longer the conflict drags on. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, has registered more than 2.9 million Syrians as refugees in neighboring countries.⁴⁷ Although the United States has pledged more than \$2 billion in humanitarian aid to Syria and its neighbors since 2011, the United Nations has received just one-quarter of the \$2.28 billion in humanitarian donations it requested for 2014.⁴⁸

Geographically, the humanitarian situation appears worst in and around Aleppo and Damascus, according to U.N. data. The United Nations states that there are 2.4 million people in Aleppo in need of humanitarian aid and nearly 1.55 million people in and around Damascus.⁴⁹

Making matters worse, the Assad regime's consolidation of its military position within Syria has made it more recalcitrant on humanitarian access to Syrian civilians. U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos said in mid-June that providing humanitarian aid "has actually become more difficult, not easier."⁵⁰ Prior to the regime's June 3 sham election, aid agencies were able to negotiate for access with provincial governors, but the regime now says that "everything has to be centralized through Damascus."⁵¹ In response, the U.N. Security Council unanimously passed a resolution in July authorizing the delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria without prior approval from Damascus.⁵²

In addition to conducting large-scale military attacks on civilians, the Assad regime has used hunger as a weapon against large numbers of innocent civilians.⁵³ At the same time, the disintegration of the country has opened the space for radical groups such as ISIS to commit large-scale atrocities and crimes against humanity.

The National Coalition and the interim government

Syria's main political opposition remains a work in progress and largely in exile. It is hamstrung by internal fragmentation, a lack of contact with those who remain inside Syria, and regional competition. These factors have served to prevent the opposition from cohering into a unified entity capable of either overthrowing the Assad regime or governing Syria after its fall.

The international face of Syrian opposition is the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, commonly referred to as the National Coalition.⁵⁴ Formed in November 2012 from a coalition of opposition groups during meetings in Doha, Qatar, it is the main Syrian opposition group in exile. The United States considers it to be the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.⁵⁵ The coalition is organized around a council led by President Hadi al-Bahra. Bahra was the National Coalition's chief negotiator at the Geneva peace talks and has close links to Saudi Arabia.⁵⁶

The National Coalition seeks to unite the Syrian political opposition around a provisional government that would lead Syria following the collapse of the Assad regime. It aims to provide international donors with a legitimate, unified channel for all aid to the rebellion. But the National Coalition lacks a developed political program. As one senior member underscored, "The coalition isn't a political party, it's a coalition. We represent the mosaic of Syrian political life, that's why we can't say: Here's the political agenda we'll put forward."⁵⁷

The National Coalition formed an interim Syrian government in March 2013.⁵⁸ Based in Gaziantep, Turkey, the interim government is charged with channeling assistance to rebels inside Syria and presenting an alternative to the Assad regime in rebel-held territories. The interim government has struggled with this mandate. Qatar gave the interim government \$55 million to help meet needs inside of Syria, but limited funding and presence inside of Syria have complicated the interim government's ability to deliver significant assistance.⁵⁹

Political infighting and competition

Relations between the interim government and the National Coalition have been rocky. As one activist observed, “The most difficult thing within the opposition was the level of distrust between them.”⁶⁰ Members of each institution are openly critical of their counterparts in the other. Some members of the interim government, usually those supported by Qatar, seek to portray themselves as a response to the inadequacies of the Saudi-engineered National Coalition leadership. As one of the highest-ranking members of the interim government put it, “The opposition has largely failed to put the revolution on the right track. The interim government has the opportunity to give citizens basic services. This is essential. The National Coalition could not do this.”⁶¹

The January 2014 Geneva conference became a major source of division inside the political opposition. Advocates of participating in the Geneva peace talks were accused of pursuing reconciliation with the regime.⁶² This split between pro- and anti-Geneva coalition members occurred at the same time that the international community was demanding unity among the opposition. The pro-Geneva faction proved incapable of developing a dialogue with those opposed to the peace talks. “The question of going to Geneva should have been decided by a majority of the coalition because this was a big turning point,” said one prominent member of the SNC.⁶³ The collapse of the talks in early 2014 left the National Coalition deeply divided and, in many cases, discredited those associated with Geneva.

Lack of presence inside Syria

The lack of presence inside Syria hinders the ability of the National Coalition and the interim government to meet the needs of Syrians living in opposition-controlled territory. It also undercuts the political legitimacy of the institution in the eyes of many Syrians. As one senior U.S. government official based in Turkey observed, “In a nutshell, this has been the problem of the external opposition. People don’t have much faith and don’t see much effectiveness.”⁶⁴

This lack of presence complicates attempts by the National Coalition and the interim government to unify the patchwork of local actors who are opposed to the Assad regime. “Part of the problem is that there is so much disunity in the liberated areas. You have all these rivalries going on. It’s very hard for them to deal with disagreements,” said one U.S. diplomat.⁶⁵ Detractors claim the National Coalition

failed to invest the time and resources required to navigate this patchwork. Instead, it adopted shortcuts, appointing allies to positions on local councils. As one activist deeply involved with civil society groups on the ground noted:

*The National Coalition didn't map out the situation on the ground or who are the major councils. What they did is nepotism. They named people close to them; they'd say you are the head of councils. They received \$8 million from Qatar and gave it to them in cash to establish legitimacy. Since then, the [National Coalition] has been struggling to give legitimacy to the people they appointed.*⁶⁶

As a result, some argue that the political opposition in exile derives its legitimacy from its international recognition. One activist observed, “The opposition has failed miserably to root itself in the ground. It’s a floating virtual opposition [that is] focused on international relations” and “delegitimized on the ground.”⁶⁷ He added, “In the last eight months, [the National Coalition] has been undermined by the Islamic Front. They can no longer serve as representatives on the ground. They failed to have any authority over the people on the ground.”⁶⁸

The generational divide

The National Coalition is also divided along generational lines. The original protests in Syria were largely led by youth activists with few political affiliations. A National Coalition leader reflected, “The youth movement wasn’t ideologically based, they just wanted freedom.”⁶⁹ These activists had few ties to the small-but-established class of traditional opposition figures who were linked to political parties with well-known ideologies and had struggled against the Assad regime for decades. Activists differentiate between this traditional “opposition” and the “revolution.” As one activist put it, “The opposition has been battling the regime for a long time but failed to start a revolution.”⁷⁰

However, members of the traditional opposition have since come to dominate the National Coalition. They were given prominence and accepted into the revolution, as one activist put it, “because we hoped to follow the Libya model and thought that an external opposition could bring in international support. People thought they’d get a no fly zone the day after the National Coalition was formed.”⁷¹ But the inability of these leaders to deliver greater military support from the international community calls into question their support among the younger class of Syrian activists who found their voice in 2011.⁷²

Regional and international influence

Regional and international actors continue to exercise a heavy degree of influence over the politics of the Syrian opposition. The relationship between different groups—even individuals—and their foreign backers has contributed to divisions within the opposition and weakened its effectiveness. As one senior activist and founding member of the SNC put it, “We would not have what we see now without international dynamics and foreign funding. Everyone picks a partner and starts supporting it without coordination. This basically led to this disintegration.”⁷³ In reaction to this dynamic, some rebel groups on the ground began to present themselves in ways that meet the interest of funders, usually Salafists from the Gulf. The competing political agendas of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in particular, have been a major issue driving disintegration on the ground. “You have two wealthy countries throwing money at the opposition and telling them to annihilate each other,” continued the activist.⁷⁴

The current leadership of the National Coalition is strongly perceived as aligned with Saudi Arabia. Former President Ahmad al-Jarba’s links to Saudi Arabia are widely known and understood to be an indicator of his allegiance and that of the immediate leadership group around him. One U.S. official noted that President Jarba is a member of the prominent Shammar tribe and is related by marriage to a branch of the Saudi royal family.⁷⁵ Jarba’s Saudi ties were a source of tension with some opposition members who believed that Saudi Arabia used its influence to help establish and then direct the National Coalition. Current President Bahra, who was elected to the presidency in July when Jarba hit his one-year term limit, is seen as similarly close to the Saudi camp.⁷⁶

Absence of strategy

The failure of the 2014 Geneva peace process undercut any hope of achieving a negotiated end to the crisis for the immediate future. In the words of a senior Geneva negotiator for the National Coalition, “There is no solution but a political solution,” but now the “political solution is in a coma.”⁷⁷ Some senior opposition figures acknowledge that the National Coalition—and indeed the opposition more broadly—does not have a strategy for the future, nor would they be prepared to take charge if the regime fell. A SNC leader said, “I was dreaming of the regime collapsing. Now it’s a nightmare scenario. If you wake up and you find [Assad] on a plane, it will be catastrophic.”⁷⁸

Supreme Military Council

The Supreme Military Council ostensibly serves as the command structure of the Free Syrian Army, or FSA. Its primary goal is to unite the various armed groups in the rebellion and eventually establish a national army. The SMC is comprised of a 30-person council of leaders from various armed opposition groups across Syria. It receives financial and material support from the United States and several European and Gulf countries. Some of its members also receive limited weapons and ammunition from these countries; however, the SMC itself is not a conduit for U.S. military assistance.⁷⁹

Relations between the SMC and its political counterparts have been difficult. Members of the National Coalition complain that the SMC leadership operates as an independent body. The SMC has also suffered from a crisis of leadership. Its first leader, Gen. Salim Idriss, was sacked in February and replaced by Gen. Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir al-Noeimi—a former brigadier general in the Syrian Army and a close personal ally of then-National Coalition President Jarba.⁸⁰

In interviews, members of the political opposition, the SMC regional commands, and FSA fighters inside Syria were deeply divided about the replacement of Gen. Idriss and President Jarba's authority to do so. One FSA fighter aligned with the Idriss camp said, "The SMC was pressured by Jarba to push out Idriss. ... In general, the FSA still looks to the old SMC leadership and structure because the changes were not legal."⁸¹

To date, the SMC has largely been limited to a coordination and representation role with little ability to exercise command and control over FSA forces on the ground. As with the National Coalition and the interim government, the SMC has failed to establish a significant presence inside Syria. Nor has the SMC been able to fulfill its aspiration to serve as a central clearing house for assistance to the armed opposition. One member of the political opposition said:

We were hoping the SMC would be a base of operations, but they weren't able to effectively distribute aid. ... Today, we don't have a military council that is unified. The SMC in both its old and new forms can't gain the trust of the Syrian people.⁸²

The future of the SMC remains in question. In June, nine regional SMC commanders resigned in protest of the reorganization, dealing a major blow to Gen. Bashir's efforts to consolidate authority over the organization.⁸³ Soon after, the interim government announced the dissolution of the SMC and called for a replacement body staffed by rebel commanders on the ground.⁸⁴ However, then-President Jarba stepped in to dismiss the decree and insist on the continuation of the SMC in its current configuration.⁸⁵ This sort of political jockeying has repeatedly undermined the ability of the opposition's most senior military body to deliver on its mandate.

The recent formation of a Revolutionary Command Council, or RCC, in early August by armed factions inside Syria has further diminished the SMC's relevance. The RCC now boasts a membership of almost 40 armed groups.⁸⁶ The council includes key FSA factions and the major factions of the Islamic Front, which had refused SMC leadership and even seized SMC resources and supplies inside Syria. If the Syria-based RCC proves a success, it may effectively replace the largely exiled SMC.

Free Syrian Army fighters on the ground

The limitations of the political and military leadership in exile will continue to present obstacles for a reliable and effective opposition to President Assad and ISIS. But a review of those groups directly involved in the fighting in Syria surfaces key dynamics that U.S. policymakers will face as they increase funding to the armed opposition.

Localized fighting groups

The vast majority of opposition fighters operate in highly localized groups, often defending their hometowns and neighborhoods. One senior official in the National Coalition asserted that these units form the backbone of the opposition: “These units may be very small—maybe 250 people—but they represent the majority of the opposition.”⁸⁷ A number of Syrians interviewed believe that these smaller formations actually constitute some of the most capable entities in the opposition. “The most effective fighting forces are the local forces who are effective at defending their home towns,”⁸⁸ said one Syrian National Council member.

The larger opposition groups reportedly outsource the actual fighting to these smaller units. According to a senior Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader:

*The big names you hear about, they come to areas and make deals. They say, ‘We’ll give you ammunition and supplies in exchange for handling this area or that checkpoint.’ So these smaller groups are really the ones operating on the ground.*⁸⁹

Fighters from different groups often join forces at the tactical level in order to carry out specific operations. Operation rooms have been established in urban areas and other localities to facilitate tactical coordination against specific regime targets. As a senior Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader put it:

*The people all operate from the same operating room. There's a call for action and then people volunteer to implement the action. If it's a big operation, these larger groups control the strategy.*⁹⁰

The Syrian Revolutionaries' Front and Harakat Hazm

Perhaps the best known of the major Free Syrian Army groups is the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front, or SRF. The SRF is a collection of 14 opposition factions with 10,000 to 15,000 fighters combined.⁹¹ These groups joined forces at the end of 2013 under the leadership of Jamal Maarouf, a former construction worker from Idlib province.⁹² SRF was established to counter the Islamic Front and was one of the first groups to take on ISIS. In addition to support from the United States, SRF reportedly receives extensive support from Saudi Arabia.⁹³

A second group—Harakat Hazm, or “Steadfast Movement”—was the subject of media attention earlier this year after videos surfaced of its fighters employing U.S.-made anti-tank missiles.⁹⁴ Formed in January, Harakat Hazm claims to have some 5,000 fighters drawn from 22 different opposition units.⁹⁵ The group describes itself as a “revolutionary, political organization with a military wing ... working to bring down the regime in Syria.”⁹⁶ In interviews with CAP this spring, Harakat Hazm representatives described in some detail the nature and scope of assistance it has received via a covert U.S. train-and-equip program, which is aimed at increasing the capabilities of vetted opposition forces.

The nonideological nature of these groups, specifically with regard to political Islam, distinguishes them from other rebel groups. Like many other states in the Middle East, Syria lacks a liberal political culture. Instead, the dominant ideological currents—whether communist, pan-Arab nationalist, or Islamist—are illiberal and offer weak commitments to or outright rejection of pluralistic democracy. In this environment, nonideological brigades such as SRF and Harakat Hazm claim to fight on behalf of the popular demands of the initial uprising, such as civil liberties and democratic elections, instead of defining an ideology that transcends the current conflict.

The other larger formations of opposition fighters currently appear to be organized around ultraorthodox Salafi or jihadi ideologies. Some groups, such as al-Nusra Front and ISIS, harbor transnational aspirations, which have been embedded into the Syrian conflict. Others, such as the Salafi brigades of the Islamic Front, have

national objectives but view the civil war as a battle for Syria's Sunni Muslim identity and the implementation of Sharia, or Islamic law, rather than democracy. The nonideological nature of SRF and Harakat Hazm makes them comparatively more moderate than these Salafi groups. At the same time, nonideological fighters are susceptible to the rising influence of Salafism in the absence of an overarching narrative to guide their struggle.

Organizations such as Harakat Hazm attempt to compensate for this lack of ideology by describing themselves in terms akin to a social movement. Harakat Hazm representatives describe a three-stage strategy. The first and current stage is a military effort to topple the regime. Once President Assad falls, Harakat Hazm would divide its efforts between the traditional security and political tasks of post-conflict transition. In the final stage, Harakat Hazm would re-establish itself as a political or social movement after key transition benchmarks have been met, including drafting a new constitution and holding elections.⁹⁷ Harakat Hazm differentiates itself from rebel groups that are engaged in predatory behavior. It also presents itself as modest in ambition with no designs on a post-Assad throne. At the same time, Harakat Hazm representatives present their organization as distinct from existing opposition political structures with little interest in integration.

Disconnect from the Supreme Military Council and the National Coalition

Both the SRF and Harakat Hazm show some degree of deference to the National Coalition and the SMC but remain skeptical of their utility. As one senior SRF representative observed, "When it comes to the SMC ... we want to see something on the ground. Those outside the borders of Syria are the complete opposite from those inside."⁹⁸ SRF representatives went on to underscore that the group had received little financial support from the SMC and insisted that SRF units did not take orders from the SMC chain of command. Senior representatives of Harakat Hazm were more respectful in their tone but disagreed with the decision to replace Gen. Idriss with Gen. Bashir.⁹⁹ When pressed, Harakat Hazm's representatives acknowledged that the SMC played little role in their organization's decisions—a position made all the more striking by the presence of Harakat Hazm commanders on the SMC's leadership council.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, or SMB, is the only group with prior historical experience of organized, violent confrontations with the Assad regime. A 1970s resistance campaign ended in abject failure when the SMB formed a military arm and confronted the regime, resulting in the infamous Hama massacre of 1982.¹⁰⁰ Since then, SMB membership has been a capital offense in Syria. Today, the SMB is largely an exile organization. A senior leader estimated that the SMB has between 7,000 to 10,000 members inside Syria, many of whom remain clandestine.¹⁰¹ But the SMB appears to be using the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict to re-establish itself inside the country. As the same senior SMB leader put it:

*Every faction tries to plant its roots in the current environment in Syria. It's not just jihadis building schools but seculars and nationalists too. After 50 years of absence of political thought, everyone is trying to create an environment for themselves.*¹⁰²

As part of this effort, the SMB is working to expand its influence through a series of avenues ranging from the National Coalition to a patchwork of small, armed groups.

The SMB was more influential during the initial stages of exile opposition politics, and critics often accused it of dominating these structures overtly or by proxy.¹⁰³ Indeed, the SMB leveraged support from Qatar to play kingmaker in the early days of the National Coalition but suffered a setback when Saudi Arabia took on a more prominent role in 2013.¹⁰⁴ Saudi Arabia has been deeply suspicious of the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere in the region and has clashed with Qatar over the latter's support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia.¹⁰⁵ Despite personal assurances from Riyadh that Saudi Arabia's regional anti-Brotherhood policies do not apply to Syria, SMB activity and influence in opposition politics appears to have receded.¹⁰⁶

The SMB is also active on the humanitarian front, and its members fund several charities. Due to political sensitivities, the SMB tends to adopt a low profile in its support of specific charity groups. Critics accuse it of giving covert support to such groups as a means to extend its political influence on the ground in Syria, pointing to groups such as Watan, or “Homeland,” as evidence of this strategy.¹⁰⁷ But this reflex against self-identification may well be a byproduct of the decades of repression that SMB members experienced.

In addition to its humanitarian activities, the SMB has launched a concerted effort to extend its reach by funding a network of small rebel groups. This strategy is partly informed by the SMB-funded Syrian Center of Research and Studies, which tracks rebel groups and analyzes battlefield dynamics.¹⁰⁸ A SMB leader and the center’s president, cynically observed:

[The rebels] are ready to accept support from anyone but do not give loyalty to the funder. Their loyalty is to the support you give them—the money and resources. ... A fighter can work with you for a year and take orders, but after a year, he’ll leave you [when the funding stops].¹⁰⁹

The SMB funds these groups through its own vetting procedure independent of the Supreme Military Council. It uses mechanisms such as the Committee to Protect Civilians, or CPC, which “make[s] contact with existing militias and link[s] them to the Brotherhood through financial and logistical support.”¹¹⁰ The SMB financed the consolidation of small local armed groups under umbrella of the Shields of the Revolutionary Council in 2012. This group self-identifies as part of the Free Syrian Army but maintains direct operational linkages with the SMB.¹¹¹ Members of the SMB report extensive travel across rebel-held territory and meet and recruit armed groups:

We meet them, vet them, and then nominate them to friendly countries for support. ... The SMC has no presence, no control over what happens on the ground. They are simply aid distributors. ... There hasn’t been a group who has been formed without our consultation. The rebel groups know they need our help to get anything from the outside.¹¹²

The SMB, however, has had limited success in penetrating the larger armed opposition groups, as well as those with robust ideological programs. One senior SMB leader claimed that the group had links to some 200 fighters operating inside the Al Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front and that al-Nusra and the hardline Ahrar

al-Sham could be convinced to accept elections at the end of war.¹¹³ But there is little to suggest that the SMB can exercise influence over these more hardline organizations. Members of the Islamic Front were outspoken in their mistrust of the SMB and disdain for its school of political Islam.¹¹⁴

The overall impact of the SMB on the national direction of the rebellion remains marginal. The SMB appears to be playing a long game with a focus on local actors—one based on an assumption that the war will not be over anytime soon.¹¹⁵ Its wait-and-see strategy is rooted in the hard lessons of past experience in which it overplayed its military hand with Assad regime. Instead, the SMB seeks to diversify its investments across the rebel landscape and then leverage these investments to strengthen its political position both within the opposition and with donors who wish to support forces that offer an alternative to ISIS and Assad.

The Islamic Front: Salafists opposed to ISIS and Assad

Any effort to invest in a reliable and effective force that opposes both Assad and ISIS faces a political and military challenge from a coalition of Islamist militant groups known as the Islamic Front. Largely Salafi in its political-religious ideology, the Islamic Front appears far more capable than other groups on the battlefield due to both its large size and its ideological cohesion, even though it has faced cuts in funding and support in recent months. Combined with the Islamic Front's exclusionary ideology, this relative cohesion represents a challenge not only to the third-way opposition, but also to the prospect of an inclusive post-Assad political system in Syria.

The Islamic Front has become the largest coalition of armed Islamist opposition groups in Syria over the past year. Founded in November 2013, the Islamic Front is estimated to control between 40,000 to 60,000 fighters.¹¹⁶ The Islamic Front was born out the merger of two older alliances: the Syrian Islamic Front, composed of Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Haqq, and Ansar al-Sham, and the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, composed of Suqour al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, and Liwa al-Tawhid.¹¹⁷ The much smaller Kurdish Islamic Front also joined later.¹¹⁸ Pressure resulting from limited access to resources and strategic disagreements between the two major blocs may eventually result in the formal breakup of the group along its two older alliances. However, these groups still pose the same challenge whether they are united or not. In fact, a fractured and weakened Islamic Front may be even more challenging because its tens of thousands of Salafi fighters are the top recruits for ISIS as it confronts Islamic Front troops with either death or allegiance.

The formation of the Islamic Front marked an attempt by the main Salafi fighting forces to gain influence over the ideological direction of the opposition. Islamic Front factions felt underrepresented in both the SMC and the National Coalition, which failed to unite disparate opposition factions under a national banner.¹¹⁹ The Islamic Front has managed to overcome some geographical divides that have prevented national-level action and also provided an ideological project to unify its fighters.

Leaders of the Islamic Front agreed to divide leadership positions evenly between the two older alliances—Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam. Ahrar al-Sham effectively dominates the leadership of the Islamic Front and controls its key positions, including the political committee and the Sharia committee. Control of the political committee includes the authority to designate enemies and gives Ahrar al-Sham disproportionate influence over the Islamic Front’s overall military strategy. Moreover, Ahrar al-Sham’s control of the Sharia committee gives it the authority to issue religious opinions that are, in theory, binding for all members of the Islamic Front.¹²⁰ This seems to have been a major driver behind recent disagreements between Ahrar al-Sham and factions outside its older alliance, namely Jaish al-Islam and its ambitious leader Zahran Alloush, who has resented the strong exercise of control by Ahrar al-Sham.

The Islamic Front’s ideology

The Islamic Front’s factions hew to an ultraconservative Salafi interpretation of Islam that aims, according to its initial charter, to construct an “Islamic society in Syria ruled by the law of God.”¹²¹ In interviews, Islamic Front representatives struggled to expand on the meaning of an Islamic society or provide more clarity on a vision for post-war Syria. This is, in part, a product of Syria’s nearly nonexistent pre-war Islamist political environment, as well as the Islamic Front’s ambitious desire to present itself as a big tent for Syria’s Islamist currents, specifically the ideology-obsessed Ahrar al-Sham.

One Islamic Front Sharia committee member from Ahrar al-Sham suggested that his group is best compared to the Taliban in Afghanistan.¹²² Many Islamists believe the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate successfully founded a local base of support in war-torn Afghanistan from which it was able to enforce Sharia law. Senior religious authorities in the Islamic Front believe their movement is similarly poised to lead Syria to embrace its true Islamic nature.¹²³ In so doing, the Islamic Front aims to distance itself from the tactics of transnational jihadists such as Al Qaeda and ISIS and signal to outsiders that their intention is not to pursue an agenda outside of Syria.

The Islamic Front is the potential swing vote among the fragmented anti-Assad Islamist forces in Syria: Its Salafi fighters could identify either with their Syrian national identity or, facing certain conditions, subscribe to the more-extreme views of ISIS. This is different from the group’s leadership, which has practical reasons for rejecting the transnational jihadism of ISIS and Al Qaeda. Its leaders

believe these groups have failed at their objectives. As Islamic Front Sharia committee member Abu Yehiya al-Hamawi observed in an essay titled “Toward an Enlightened Creed”:

*The most prominent failure of Salafi-Jihadism is its inability to unite with the Ummah [Muslim community]. What happened in many cases is that Salafi-Jihadism failed to convince people of its project and so it transformed [itself] into a fundamentalist pariah in its communities.*¹²⁴

Competition and confrontation with ISIS informed the organization’s founding charter and its categorical rejection of democracy. According to a senior member of the Islamic Front’s political committee from Ahrar al-Sham, the document’s rejection of democracy and appeal to ultraconservative Islamist principles were rooted in a political imperative to provide an Islamist vision to compete with that of ISIS.¹²⁵ The charter was short on specifics and led to some internal complaints.

One member of the Islamic Front political committee from Suqour al-Sham reflected, “[The declaration] is too vague. Don’t just say you don’t want democracy, but rather say what you want instead.”¹²⁶ A senior member in the Islamic Front military committee from Jaish al-Islam said, “The declaration is still not a clear vision yet.”¹²⁷ A political committee member from Jaish al-Islam added, “An Islamic state is a dream, not an objective.”¹²⁸

In an apparent effort to clarify and broaden its appeal, the Islamic Front joined with other Islamist factions to sign the Covenant of Revolutionary Honor in May.¹²⁹ The document made no reference to an Islamic state and instead called for a “state of law, freedom, and justice.”¹³⁰ Its signatories rejected extremism and committed themselves to Syria’s “diverse multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian social fabric.”¹³¹ The declaration marked an attempt reach out to non-Salafi brigades in the fight against ISIS. It remains to be seen if this effort will be successful, but it signals a level of tactical pragmatism that may set the Islamic Front apart from the transnational jihadists of ISIS.

The Islamic Front’s strategy

The Islamic Front is positioning itself to challenge the legitimacy of the National Coalition, Supreme Military Council, and other structures associated with the opposition. It dismisses these institutions as ineffective, unrepresentative, and

corrupt. A member of the political committee from Suqour al-Sham explained that the committee is an alternative to the failed political work of the National Coalition.¹³² Another senior member of the Islamic Front's military committee from Jaish al-Islam stressed, "The Syrian revolution must have political representation" from people inside Syria who are "forming a body for the revolution."¹³³ After rejecting the authority of the SMC late last year, the Islamic Front seized control of the main SMC weapons depots in northern Syria along the Turkish border.¹³⁴ As a senior member of Suqour al-Sham explained:

*The interim government cannot implement projects on the ground. But our work is building towards an [Islamic state]. ... The [Islamic Front] is still new and it cannot quickly form a state. ... To build a state correctly, the foundations must be strong.*¹³⁵

The Islamic Front has also established a legal system to govern the areas under its control. Rather than defaulting to rudimentary Sharia courts, Islamic Front interlocutors spoke of unifying a liberated Syria under the Arab League's Unified Arab Law with modified Syrian law.¹³⁶ A member of the Islamic Front political committee from Suqour al-Sham confirmed, "We use [Unified Arab Law] in courts. There are those who accept that and those who are against it ... [but] because there is chaos, there must be a law."¹³⁷

Despite this progress, the Islamic Front has also begun to suffer from significant reductions in external support. A number of observers claim that funds from the Gulf states may have dried up in response to U.S. pressure to restrict financing of Islamist groups. Tensions between its larger members, including Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham, have also strained the group. When the Revolutionary Command Council was formed, the initial inclusion of Jaish al-Islam and exclusion of Ahrar al-Sham suggested that the groups may no longer be working together.¹³⁸ Although deep disagreements exist between the two groups, Ahrar al-Sham later joined the RCC, and both groups have thus far abstained from explicitly stating their intent to dissolve the union between their alliances. Before this, Jaish al-Islam's leader Zahran Alloush publicly criticized the Covenant of Revolutionary Honor signed by the Islamic Front's political committee, indicating that he found its language too soft, taking a more orthodox stance than Ahrar al-Sham.¹³⁹

But there are signs that the ongoing assault on Aleppo from both the Assad regime and ISIS may have convinced elements of the Islamic Front to set aside their differences and complete their merger. The Islamic Front declared in July that

groups fighting under its banner in Aleppo would cease using their individual names and come under the command of a military leader from Liwa al-Tawhid. Jaish al-Islam has also indicated its full merger with Suqour al-Sham, a group that was in its previous alliance.¹⁴⁰ This comes eight months after the founding of the Islamic Front. These full mergers, along with how the alliance responds to the recent death of Ahrar al-Sham leader Hassan Aboud, will serve as a litmus test for the long-term viability of the Islamic Front.¹⁴¹

Al-Nusra Front and ISIS

The two major jihadi forces are al-Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda affiliate, and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, a former Al Qaeda affiliate that began referring to itself as simply the Islamic State in June. The superior fighting capabilities and experience of these two groups have made them a major factor in the rebel landscape. Al-Nusra Front was founded in late 2011 when the Islamic State in Iraq, or ISI—predecessor of today's ISIS—specifically tasked al-Nusra Front leader Muhammad al-Jawlani with overthrowing the Assad regime and imposing jihadi rule in Syria.¹⁴² The United States designated al-Nusra Front as a foreign terrorist organization in December 2012 on the grounds that a hierarchical relationship existed between it and ISI, which the U.S. State Department also referred to as Al Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI, at the time.¹⁴³

While ISI did play a crucial role in establishing al-Nusra Front, friction between the two terrorist organizations emerged in the months following the State Department's designation.

ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of ISIS, a merger between ISI and al-Nusra Front, in April 2013.¹⁴⁴ However, Jawlani issued his own statement disavowing the merger and pledging allegiance to Al Qaeda central leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹⁴⁵ Zawahiri attempted to mediate between the two groups. He stated that Baghdadi had not consulted with Al Qaeda's central leadership and that al-Nusra Front was an independent organization. Baghdadi responded by rejecting Zawahiri's authority.¹⁴⁶ Zawahiri ultimately disowned ISIS and declared al-Nusra Front the sole Al Qaeda franchise in Syria.¹⁴⁷

In addition to this leadership struggle, ISIS and al-Nusra Front initially differed in their tactics. Since the split, al-Nusra Front has been less brutal in its treatment of local populations than ISIS and cooperated with other rebel groups, including the Islamic Front and the Free Syrian Army.¹⁴⁸ A member of the Aleppo Military Council, for instance, spoke freely about operational cooperation with al-Nusra Front in the field.¹⁴⁹ Al-Nusra Front's approach appeared more closely aligned with Al Qaeda's new strategy of building constituencies in host countries. In so

doing, Al Qaeda hopes to avoid the group's mistakes in Iraq, where its affiliates instigated a civil war that consumed the Sunni community they purported to defend and led to its expulsion at the hands of Sunni tribes. However, al-Nusra Front has largely fallen out of favor in rebel Syria due to its increased aggressiveness as it struggles to be an alternative to ISIS.

ISIS's rapid advance in Syria and Iraq and its self-proclaimed founding of the Caliphate in June have significantly weakened al-Nusra Front.¹⁵⁰ Al-Nusra's most prized territory was along the Iraqi border and in the province of Deir Ezzor, where it produced some 10,000 barrels of oil a day.¹⁵¹ ISIS recently captured multiple border towns and compelled tribal leaders to pledge allegiance to the group, enhancing its control of Syria's border region with Iraq.¹⁵² This projection of strength compelled al-Nusra Front fighters and other rebels to either defect or surrender.¹⁵³

The defection of al-Nusra fighters to ISIS has complicated al-Nusra Front's relationship with other rebel groups. In an apparent attempt to assert its jihadi credentials, al-Nusra Front has adopted a more confrontational posture toward the Syrian opposition. For example, al-Nusra Front aggressively turned against the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front in Idlib province in July.¹⁵⁴ These attacks are threatening to escalate into a full-blown confrontation between al-Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army. That same month, al-Nusra Front leader Jawlani announced his intention to found an emirate in Syria, an attempt to persuade disillusioned fighters from defecting to ISIS.¹⁵⁵

Lessons from the field

This summer's events in Iraq and Syria have prompted the Obama administration to become more deeply engaged in both countries, representing a new phase in U.S. policy. The current trajectory of the conflict in Syria is particularly worrisome, and targeted U.S. air strikes in Iraq and, going forward, in Syria are not likely to change the fundamental nature of the ISIS threat or alter the basic architecture of the Syrian civil war on their own. As the Obama administration prepares to implement ramped up support for a third-way alternative to the Assad regime and ISIS, five overarching lessons from this field research will help shape a smarter overall strategy for U.S. engagement in Syria.

1. The urgency of the situation in Syria requires swifter U.S. action

President Obama first proposed \$500 million in additional assistance to the Syrian opposition in June. It will have been at least three months before Congress takes action on this request. In the interim, battlefield dynamics have changed significantly, and they have not favored those opposition forces that the United States seeks to back.

In the short term, the United States should bolster its efforts to work directly with vetted armed groups on the ground to strengthen their capacity and build their command structures. As part of this effort, the United States will need to immediately reinforce elements of the third-way opposition forces that are currently fighting a rear-guard battle for survival against both the regime and ISIS in Aleppo and Idlib. If these pockets of non-Islamist Free Syrian Army fighters can hold on, they could serve as the building blocks of a Syrian partner against ISIS. But time is of the essence, and their situation deteriorates by the day. If these elements are defeated, the United States and its regional partners will have to start from scratch.

In addition, there is an urgent need to reach out to local Sunni tribes in Syria's eastern region. These tribes will play an important role in any long-term effort to combat ISIS and deny it safe haven. Some of these tribes have demonstrated a

willingness to fight ISIS and have already lost hundreds in combat.¹⁵⁶ The United States should engage these tribes directly or through partners in the region to reinforce their position and ensure that they have an alternative to the Assad regime in building alliances against ISIS.

2. Stronger regional coordination is required to make support to the opposition effective

The wave of political change that swept the Middle East in 2011 set in motion an intense regional competition for power. This competition goes beyond the traditional Sunni-Shia divide into an intra-Sunni fight for legitimacy between regional blocs.¹⁵⁷ The Syrian opposition has become a casualty of this struggle. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and others in the region have backed different proxies in the Syrian opposition who depend on foreign resources to fight. In addition, private donors, mainly from the Gulf, have provided an independent source of funding to extremist groups. This competition has exacerbated the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition forces. Any serious effort to galvanize the Syrian opposition to push back against ISIS and to mount a real challenge to the Assad regime must manage this regional competition. To this end, the United States will need to undertake a sustained and vigorous diplomatic effort in the region.

3. Additional support to the opposition should prioritize the fight against ISIS

Any effort to bolster assistance to the Syrian opposition must be based on a clear understanding of U.S. priorities in the region. In this new, third phase of U.S. policy, the defeat of ISIS is a higher priority than the transition of power from President Assad.

The Obama administration's policy is that President Assad must go, and there is good reason for it. There is no question that Assad is largely responsible for the bloodshed and hardship that his people have endured over the past three years, as repression sparked the first uprising and then degenerated into a vicious civil war. He has committed war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons on his own people, and created the largest refugee crisis in the history of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.¹⁵⁸ But it is also clear that, while the United States had already begun to ramp up its support for the Syrian opposition, it was the rise of ISIS and specifically its destabilization of Iraq that spurred the Obama administration to act.

Going forward, the Obama administration will need to be clear with Congress, the American people, and its partners in the region that U.S. efforts in Syria will focus first and foremost on containing and degrading ISIS. This is not to suggest that the administration should change its policy with regard to Assad or, as some have suggested, make common cause with his regime in the fight against ISIS. In Syria, the enemy of our enemy is not our friend—but nor is his removal our top priority. To suggest otherwise could risk both the efficacy and credibility of the effort. The diplomacy, politics, and kinetics of a campaign against a rising terrorist force in Syria’s north and east will differ from one designed to dislodge President Assad. The latter remains an important objective critical to the long-term stability of Syria but should be set aside in the near term in favor of defeating ISIS.

4. The effort to support a reliable and effective Syrian opposition will take years

The current state of disarray among Syria’s opposition forces suggests that a long-term effort to support more cohesion is required. This process may take several years. The Syrian opposition remains fragmented and gripped by internal competition. Most opposition fighters are organized into relatively small units that are defending their locality with no strategic objective or inherent ideology. There is little sense of how these units fit together into a wider strategy. The situation is no better on the political front. The National Coalition and its interim government exist only in exile and are deeply divided. These divisions extend to the Supreme Military Council, which continues to suffer from leadership contests. In their most honest moments, senior opposition figures acknowledge their deficiencies. “The Syrian opposition and our allies don’t have a strategy. If Assad is toppled tonight, I’d be scared because we don’t have a plan,”¹⁵⁹ observed a National Coalition member.

Given the opposition’s current state, there is a limit to the speed with which opposition fighters can absorb external resources. As representatives of Harakat Hazm underscored, “We’re not asking for an unlimited flow of [weapons] or anything unrealistic like that. ...We lack a stabilized flow of weapons and qualitative training [that] allows for future planning to pursue new ground or take on more fighters.”¹⁶⁰ The United States and its regional partners will need to calibrate their assistance to the absorptive capacity of the fighters they are attempting to empower. Duration and predictability of supply will be as important as the volume of the flow of weapons, ammunition, and equipment if third-way factions are to compete in the marketplace of opposition fighters.

5. The Islamic Front and Syria's Salafi jihadists will remain a long-term U.S. policy challenge

One particularly thorny challenge is how the United States will deal with hardline Islamists that oppose ISIS, including those fighting with the Islamic Front. Clashes with the Assad regime and ISIS, a crippling attack against its leadership, and the reported reduction in funding from state sponsors have put significant pressure on the Islamic Front. This has taken a toll on the cohesion of the Islamic Front, but the 40,000 to 60,000 so-called “Syrian Taliban” who fight under the Islamic Front’s banner remain greater in number and capability than the Free Syrian Army elements that are receiving U.S. assistance. As one senior moderate activist observed, “The Islamic Front has a national-level objective and can mobilize and deploy fighters across [areas of responsibility] and localities.”¹⁶¹ As the United States increases support for the Syrian opposition, policymakers must decide what role they see for these Salafi jihadi fighters. If the Islamic Front were to implode as an umbrella organization, there is a very real risk that many of its fighters will join ISIS. If it survives, a U.S.-backed moderate opposition may find itself in conflict with elements of the Islamic Front.

Conclusion

Syria's civil war began with the same spark as the other popular uprisings that swept through the Middle East in 2011. The Assad regime responded to peaceful protests with vicious force, committing atrocities that created incentives for regime opponents to use force to change Syria's government. Despite hundreds of millions of dollars of support and training flowing to the Syrian opposition from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the United States, among others, the lack of cohesion among the Syrian opposition has contributed to the Assad regime's ability to remain in control of certain parts of the country. The weakness of the Syrian opposition, combined with the Assad regime's brutality, created a vacuum in many parts of Syria, which ISIS had now filled.

More than three years of conflict in Syria have been devastating: Nearly 200,000 people are dead, 9 million are displaced, and the regional spillover is affecting Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq.¹⁶² ISIS's blitzkrieg into northern Iraq this summer was a wake-up call, prompting the Obama administration to take targeted military action and heighten diplomatic engagement with Iraq's political leaders. The thrust of U.S. engagement has wisely focused on working with reliable and capable partners inside Iraq using carefully calibrated military action and security support. These initial actions are steps in the right direction, representing a judicious use of limited and principled force linked to clear political and security objectives. While these moves are necessary, they are also incomplete without heightened measures inside Syria as well.

ISIS's actions this summer demonstrate that the Iraq-Syria border is no longer functional and that the two countries' problems have merged into a single theater of operation. The challenge for the Obama administration is to treat Iraq and Syria as an integrated problem set with coordinated action and without resorting to oversimplified measures that redraw borders. The United States is now poised to work with partners in Iraq to apply additional force and pressure against ISIS. One risk in doing this, however, is that ISIS might well redeploy its center of gravity back into Syria.

As weak and divided as the non-jihadi Syrian opposition is now, the United States needs to take measured steps to increase the opposition force's capacity to counter the rise of ISIS in the short term while maintaining a long-term goal of a political transition in the Syrian government. The most immediate and urgent threat for U.S. interests is the rise of ISIS, and its defeat is paramount.

Increased support to build a third-way Syrian opposition is one important pillar to degrade ISIS. But in the process of providing this assistance and training, the United States should remain focused on the longer-term objectives of an end to the Syrian conflict and a peaceful government transition that keeps the country's institutions intact. Part of this process involves providing a regular, reliable, and organized stream of assistance to the Syrian opposition.

Unlike Iraq, there are no good options when it comes to the fight against ISIS or the Assad regime in Syria. Factions of the Free Syrian Army face an uphill struggle and most are preparing for a long war. Larger groups such as the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front have highly localized bases of support and are restricted in their ability to project force. The ability to act at the national level remains an aspiration. Beneficiaries of U.S. assistance inside the third-way armed opposition acknowledge that there are limitations on the speed with which they can absorb external support and the pace at which they can effectively grow.

Nevertheless, it is unacceptable and a clear and credible threat to American interests for ISIS to control large swaths of ungoverned territory in Iraq and Syria. ISIS poses a serious threat to Middle East stability; its vicious crimes against humanity have devastated thousands. Gulf state competition, religious divisions, and political instability in the region continue to threaten to undermine the fight against ISIS.

The United States cannot meet this threat alone—it needs key actors in the region to pull their weight and take constructive steps toward stability. ISIS can only be defeated by determined action from an international and regional coalition, and Syria's civil war will only come to an end after a broad range of countries decide that enough is enough. Reinvigorated U.S. leadership and engagement on Syria in the next two years represents an opportunity to help stabilize the heart of the Middle East.

About the authors

Hardin Lang is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, where he focuses on U.S. national security and multilateral affairs, Middle East policy, and the role of Islamists in the region. He comes to CAP with 18 years of experience in peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and stabilization, including a 12-year career with the United Nations. Most recently, Lang was a senior fellow in the international security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Mokhtar Awad is a Research Associate with the National Security and International Policy team at the Center for American Progress. His work focuses on Islamist groups, Middle Eastern politics, and U.S. foreign policy toward the region. Prior to joining CAP, he was a junior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He has been published in *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Post*, and is the author of “The Salafi Dawa of Alexandria: The Politics of A Religious Movement,” in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*.

Ken Sofer is the Associate Director for the National Security and International Policy team at the Center for American Progress, where his work focuses on U.S. national security strategy and U.S. policy in the Middle East. Sofer graduated with a bachelor’s degree from the University of Southern California, where he studied political science and international relations with a focus on U.S. foreign policy. He studied Arabic and Middle East politics in both Cairo, Egypt, and Amman, Jordan.

Peter Juul is a Policy Analyst at the Center for American Progress with a focus on U.S. policy in the Middle East and South Asia. A six-and-a-half-year CAP veteran, Juul holds an undergraduate degree in international relations and political science from Carleton College in his native Minnesota and a master’s degree in security studies from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He is the co-author of *Serving America’s Veterans*, a reference book on veteran’s affairs, and has published commentary in *U.S. News and World Report*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and the *Foreign Policy* blog network. He has also appeared on radio and television news programs including Alhurra and Al Jazeera English.

Brian Katulis is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, where his work focuses on U.S. national security policy in the Middle East and South Asia. Katulis has served as a consultant to numerous U.S. government agencies, private corporations, and nongovernmental organizations on projects in more than two dozen countries, including Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Egypt, and Colombia. From 1995 to 1998, he lived and worked in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Egypt for the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.

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