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U.S. GRAND STRATEGY: DETROYING ISIS AND AL QAEDA , REPORT FOUR

AMERICA'S WAY AHEAD IN SYRIA



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Cover: People walk along a street in Aleppo, Syria February 2, 2017.
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The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization. ISW advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. ISW is committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Defining the Problem

- The US is fighting the wrong war in the Middle East. ISIS and al Qaeda are waging population-centric insurgencies while we conduct counterterrorism operations by proxy. Defeating these groups requires the US to pursue population-centric counterinsurgency by, with, and through acceptable and viable partners in Syria's and Iraq's Sunni Arab communities.
- Current US strategy empowers al Qaeda, which has an army in Syria, is preparing to replace ISIS, and exploits a vulnerable Sunni Arab community. The US has delayed defeating al Qaeda until after it has defeated ISIS. But al Qaeda is consolidating in northwestern Syria after withdrawing from Aleppo and is preparing a counteroffensive in Syria as it simultaneously reconstitutes in Iraq.
- Current US military operations impale our local partners against the strongest points of the enemy's prepared defensive position and make little use of American asymmetric capabilities. We can and should operate in the enemy's rear areas while also attacking its front so as to disrupt its defense and confront it with multiple dilemmas to which it cannot adequately respond.
- Sunni Arabs view the US as aligned with the deepening Russo-Iranian coalition and complicit in its atrocities.
- The US must regain the initiative and drive the multinational strategy. No regional actor can or will develop the moderate Sunni Arab resistance needed to defeat the ISIS and al Qaeda insurgencies. Turkey supports the al Qaeda-penetrated Ahrar al Sham. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are embroiled in Yemen and have given up on the idea of a moderate opposition in Syria. Jordan faces a major internal Salafi-jihadi threat and has few resources.
- The US must de-escalate the underlying Turkish-Kurdish political dispute in Syria to gain leverage on both actors. Syrian Kurdish political aims threaten US interests. The US must halt these forces' progress after they secure the Tabqa Dam, the Syrian Democratic Forces' natural limit of advance.
- Russia and Iran deny the US freedom of action in Syria and the Mediterranean and can threaten three of seven major global maritime trade chokepoints—the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab al Mandab Strait—in the next five years.
- A major US-Iran conflict is likely in the next five years. Iran has developed a functioning, interoperable, and deployable coalition of its proxies with Russia's help, which will invalidate US planning assumptions. Iran seeks conventional capabilities as well. It will counter US pressure on nonnuclear issues, resist efforts to control Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, and escalate in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and elsewhere, using its own forces and its proxies.
- The US must develop a plan to achieve American interests with limited or no ability to base in Iraq. Iran and Iraqis aligned with Tehran are preparing to use the 2018 elections to replace Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al Abadi with a pro-Iranian candidate, who will likely order US and coalition forces out of Iraq or curtail their actions below levels required to destroy ISIS and other jihadists.

Operational Concept: Mission

The US, with willing and acceptable partners, seizes and secures a base of operations in southeastern Syria to expand American freedom of action in the region and build a new Syrian Sunni Arab partner by, with, and through which to conduct a population-centric counterinsurgency to destroy ISIS and al Qaeda, set conditions to prevent their reconstitution, and eventually resettle refugees.

Recommended Course of Action: Phase One in a Series of Multiphase Campaigns

The US and acceptable partners seize and secure a base in southeastern Syria, such as Abu Kamal, and create a de facto safe zone. They then recruit, train, equip, and partner with local Sunni Arab anti-ISIS forces to conduct an offensive against ISIS. This independent Sunni Arab force forms the basis of a movement to destroy ISIS and al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria over many years. Building a Sunni Arab anti-ISIS partner must be the rate-determining step in the advance along the Euphrates River Valley (ERV). American forces must fight alongside their partners to reduce the trust deficit between the US and potential Sunni allies. Potential partners must not support Salafi-jihadists, Iranian proxies, or Kurdish separatism.

An operation in southeastern Syria—instead of Raqqa—is advantageous because it would:

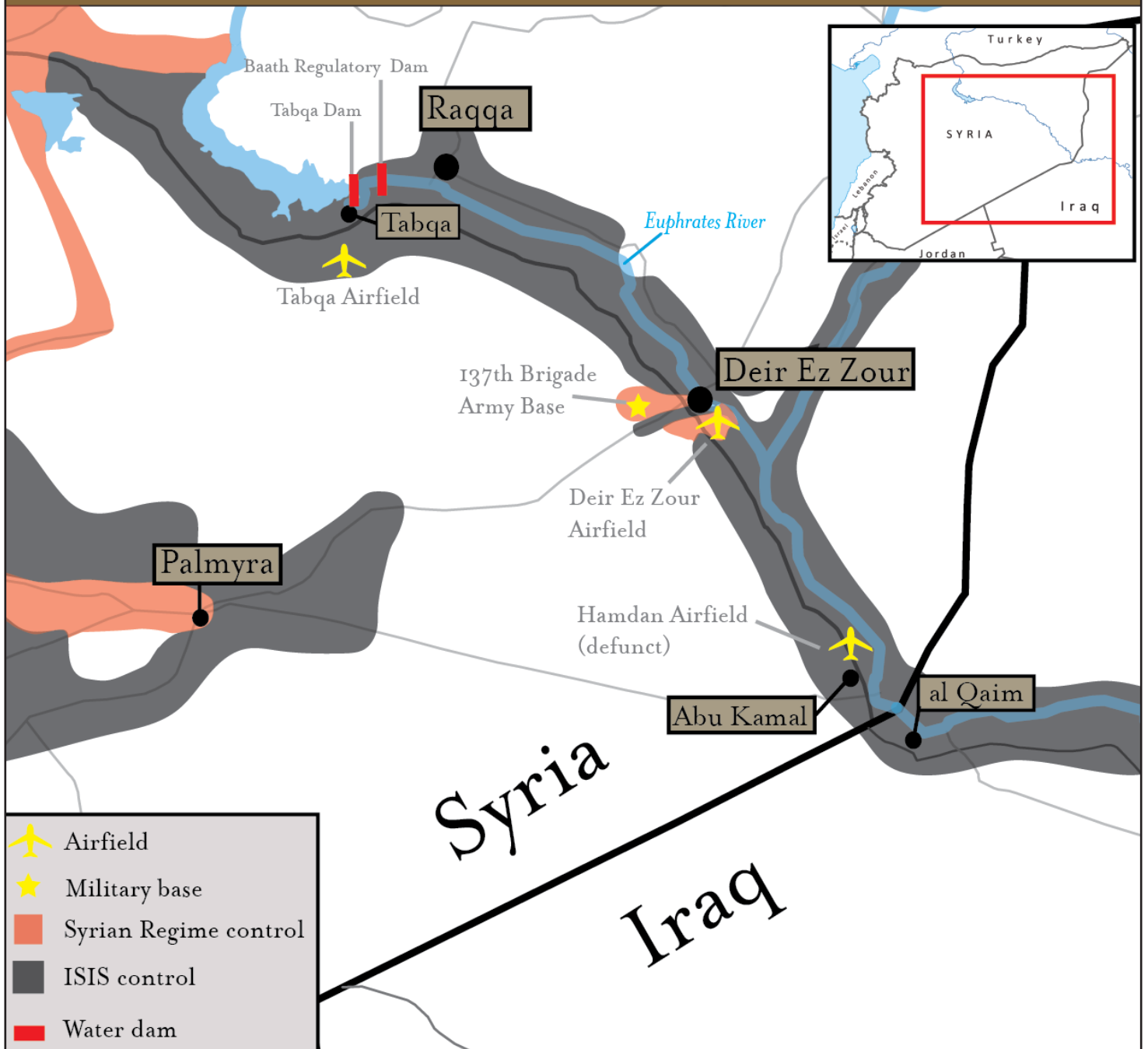
1. Reduce near-term escalation risks with Russia and Bashar al Assad by focusing on terrain not critical to either;
2. Establish a US force posture in other terrain independent of current proxies;
3. Position the US to de-escalate the Turkish-Kurdish war;
4. Mitigate the risk of losing basing privileges in Iraq;
5. Set conditions to win the urban fight in ISIS-held cities by targeting ISIS's rear area;
6. Enable the US to compete for legitimacy in Sunni Arab areas; and
7. Reduce the ISIS threat to Jordan.

Next Phases

- The US launches clearing operations along the Euphrates River Valley toward Raqqa, using US forces and the new Sunni Arab partner at Abu Kamal, and in Iraq's Anbar Province.
- The US brokers a peace deal between Turkey and the Syrian-Kurdish "People's Defense Forces" (YPG), focused on the contact line in Aleppo Province.
- The US implements a no-fly zone in Dera'a Province, demonstrating US commitment to addressing the grievances of populations under jihadist control and facilitating a local cessation of hostilities with Russia and between pro-Assad and US-backed anti-Assad forces. The US must also help partner forces in Dera'a destroy ISIS and al Qaeda, which would help facilitate a negotiated settlement of the Syrian war. The US should execute this step after the first phase and coincident with clearing operations in southeastern Syria.
- The US should try to stitch together the new force with existing US-backed fighters to create a single partner that can secure terrain from jihadists, defend against pro-Assad attacks, and uphold a settlement against the Assad regime.

These follow-on operations set conditions that favor broader US interests in Syria, but they do not achieve those interests. Subsequent phases will be necessary and will require a significant counter-Iranian component in Iraq and Syria.

This course of action is the first step in the initial campaign to achieve our overarching aims. It is a limited counteroffensive designed to regain American freedom of action and set conditions for halting and then reversing our current steady movement toward defeat.



AMERICA'S WAY AHEAD IN SYRIA: RECOMMENDED COURSES OF ACTION

By: Jennifer Cafarella, Kimberly Kagan, Frederick W. Kagan, and the ISW and CTP Teams

INTRODUCTION

America is fighting the wrong war—and losing it. The United States has been waging a counterterrorism campaign by proxy against Salafi-jihadi enemies fighting population-centric insurgencies. US allies will likely retake Mosul from the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). Other partners will probably recapture Raqqa, Syria.

But what then? ISIS has other bases in Syria and Iraq. Al Qaeda has defeated the acceptable opposition in northern Syria and is prepared to reestablish itself rapidly in areas from which ISIS withdraws.ⁱ Iran has strengthened its grip in both Syria and Iraq. The “victory” over ISIS in Mosul and Raqqa will prove not merely ephemeral, but counterproductive.

Yet the United States is contemplating staying the course. President Donald Trump ordered his administration to develop a new plan to defeat ISIS. The Defense Department reportedly gave the White House a framework that appears to adopt the previous administration's strategy with some enhancements.¹

The options the new administration is considering will accelerate our own defeat by strengthening the forces that threaten us. The Pentagon's recommendations do not challenge the basic assumptions President Barack Obama and his team held. The strategy for Iraq will apparently remain the same. The “new” options for Syria seem to fall into two buckets: (1) Supersize the Obama administration's strategy by lifting constraints on US forces and adding a few additional resources, or (2) “Partition” Syria.

The first approach implicitly assumes that the Obama strategy was inherently sound but under-resourced and over-constrained. The second implicitly assumes that there is some partition of Syria that is reasonably stable and in accord with American interests. It aims to accelerate what its advocates think is the inevitable result of current trends. None of the assumptions of either approach are true.

Enhancing the current strategy will fail. President Trump and his team must change the strategy fundamentally. They should orient their new plan on American interests rather than starting from what the US has been doing. They must abandon the most harmful principles underlying President Obama's failed approach.

Principles of Current Strategy

The erroneous principles behind the current American strategy are:

- ISIS is the most serious threat to American security;
- ISIS will collapse when America's proxies have retaken Raqqa and Mosul;
- The US should only support allies against ISIS;
- The US must temporarily align with Russia and Iran to defeat ISIS;
- America must act primarily through proxies and airstrikes;
- The US can manage al Qaeda in Syria through targeting its leadership; and
- America can rely on others to solve Iraq's political problems.

ISIS Has Evolved

ISIS is, indeed, a dangerous threat to the US. Its control of territory and population gave it resources and capabilities far beyond what any previous terrorist organization has ever had. Its mastery of modern technology—particularly digital and social media—gave it unprecedented reach into the heart of the West, where it has conducted numerous attacks. It was on the verge of destroying the Iraqi state. It intends to destroy all Muslim states, seize power for itself, attack the US and the West, and eventually replace the current international order.

ⁱThe ISW-CTP planning team defines “acceptable” opposition as fighting forces that are willing and able to meet the following conditions: (1) Break with ISIS or al Qaeda and either expel the leaders of those groups or turn them over to the Western coalition; (2) Accept the principle that the future Syrian state will be pluralistic and unitary; (3) Agree to uphold a cessation of hostilities with pro-regime forces under suitable conditions; (4) Reject violent jihad, including against ISIS; (5) Commit to ultimately disarming to the minimum level required for them to police and defend areas in which they will continue to dominate or govern (a condition that all parties to a settlement will have to meet); and (6) Commit to eliminating the current shari'a court system by which they govern, forming new local governance structures that exclude current and recent officials of shari'a courts, and holding legitimate local elections in which shari'a court officials will not participate either as candidates or vetting authorities. The authors have adapted this list of conditions from the second report in this series and updated them to reflect the evolution of ground conditions in Syria since that report published.

The previous administration did not keep pace with the ways in which ISIS adapted. ISIS in 2017 is a different enemy from what it was in 2014, yet US strategy froze in time. Had the US helped Iraqis and Syrians retake Raqqa and Mosul quickly in 2014, ISIS might well have collapsed.² Retaking those cities three years later without a viable plan for what comes next will not have the same result.

ISIS has had three years to fortify these cities. It is now prepared for the loss of this important terrain and will survive it. The US has directed the forces it supports to impale themselves on the two strongest points of the enemy's defense. ISIS in the meantime holds other terrain in both countries. It will retain, most importantly, the ability to penetrate a Sunni Arab community that remains under siege even after its largest bases fall.

ISIS is also actively exporting its vision and capabilities to external branches and transforming its idea of a caliphate from a physical one to a virtual, organized community that carries forward ISIS's objectives independent of the ISIS organization.³ Defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria may no longer be sufficient to defeat the global ISIS organization.

Al Qaeda: The Greater Danger

Both ISIS and al Qaeda are targeting the United States, its allies, and its partners. They are fracturing nation-states, mobilizing a global Sunni insurgency, and injecting Islamist extremist ideology into communities in the Middle East and worldwide, including in the West.

Al Qaeda in Syria has amassed an army in northern Syria, exploits vulnerable Sunni populations, and is poised to capitalize on ISIS setbacks on the battlefield.

Al Qaeda, however, is more dangerous than ISIS. Al Qaeda shares the same aims as ISIS, including the intention of attacking and destroying the West. But where ISIS leaders are arrogant, brash, and brutal, al Qaeda's are sophisticated and restrained. It also has entrenched global networks that add resilience to the al Qaeda organization by providing horizontal connectivity among al Qaeda's affiliates and the ability to surge resources in response to local conditions.⁴ ISIS is still developing these networks. Al Qaeda in Syria has amassed an army in northern Syria, exploits vulnerable Sunni populations, and is poised to capitalize on ISIS setbacks on the battlefield.

Al Qaeda has adapted to US policy even better than has ISIS. Ayman al Zawahiri and his lieutenants around the world have learned how to harness the grievances

motivating populations to revolt. They have largely avoided conducting planned and directed attacks against the West since the global counter-ISIS coalition started in September 2014. Instead, al Qaeda focused resources on insinuating itself inside Sunni insurgencies by harnessing popular grievances. Al Qaeda co-opts revolutions and gradually changes their character while continuing to build capabilities that could be turned against the West in the future.

Al Qaeda also learned that imposing its own radical interpretation of shari'a (Islamic law) on local populations too quickly alienates allies it needs—so it gradually sequences the imposition of this part of its ideology until it has co-opted local populations. Al Qaeda is now implementing its vision in northwestern Syria—a dangerous sign of success.

Al Qaeda's leaders have learned from experience that governing territory prematurely is counterproductive. It costs too much money, raises the local population's expectations beyond what the group can meet, and invites counterattack by neighboring states supported by the West.⁵ They instead encourage humanitarian organizations to deliver aid and then tax it.

Al Qaeda seems less dangerous than ISIS now because it is disguising its real nature and objectives. Its argument with ISIS is entirely over timing and mechanism, never aims or end state.

The global jihadist movement is not limited to isolated groups and operatives plotting and launching attacks. Al Qaeda is preparing itself to reconsolidate control over the global Salafi-jihadi movement when ISIS is defeated. The current American strategy will help al Qaeda do so by focusing on ISIS.

Doubling Down on Failure

The Obama administration imposed excessive restraints on American operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, even within the mistaken context of its strategic approach. For example, it imposed restraints on US airstrikes that far surpass international humanitarian law. It relaxed those restraints to offset the need for American troops when the enemy began to overcome US-backed forces in Mosul. Even then, it continued to restrict targeting excessively.

It avoided sending any Americans into Iraq or Syria for as long as possible and then metered those forces in small packets, increasing American involvement gradually and almost imperceptibly. Even then it refused to let US troops near the front lines for a long time, severely limiting their ability to understand developing situations and help their partners.

The military chafed against these constraints all along. Its focus on getting them lifted as the first order of business is natural. The recommendations being leaked out of the Pentagon thus emphasize giving American pilots more latitude to strike a wider array of targets, allowing American troops to get closer to the fight, and in general providing somewhat more resources to pursue the same basic approach of retaking Raqqa and Mosul through proxy forces.

The administration should relax some of these restraints—but doing so is insufficient. It would be pursuing the same Obama strategy, only bigger. More force does not constitute a new strategy. A supersized Obama strategy will fail because its assumptions are wrong.

Chasing the External Threat Node

The Obama administration defined the al Qaeda and ISIS problems down to the groups' ability and intent to conduct global operations. President Barack Obama famously described ISIS as the "jayvee team" and dismissed it as a threat to the United States in a January 2014 interview.⁶ His administration repeatedly stated that it would only act against groups that posed an "imminent" threat to the United States. ISIS did not pose such a threat until it turned its locally developed capabilities externally. Al Qaeda in Syria is perhaps the most capable al Qaeda affiliate, but al Qaeda leadership has not turned its weapons against the United States at this point.

The American focus on the "external threat node" is misplaced, and the counterterrorism campaign to defeat the attack cells only manages the threat for a time.⁷ Both al Qaeda and ISIS rely heavily on a local support base that facilitates their operations. The Obama administration predicated the current campaign for Raqqa on the presence of an ISIS external threat node, a notion the Trump administration is carrying forward. The previous focus on Manbij, Syria, was also predicated on eliminating ISIS's external threat node, which ISIS relocated before the city fell.

The United States must recognize that eliminating the external attack capabilities temporarily reduces the threat from al Qaeda and ISIS. The groups can and will reconstitute external attack nodes so long as they have solid support bases in aggrieved local populations and access to resources. A new strategy must remove their ability to regenerate this capability, which involves focusing on the local base, as well as the external operations node.

Russia and Iran Drive Extremism

The Obama administration's actions amounted to a partnership with Moscow and Tehran. The blatant war

crimes those regimes have committed in Syria have radicalized the Sunni Arab communities that ISIS and al Qaeda prey on and control. The population critical to defeating Salafi-jihadis decisively—the Sunni Arab community—now perceives the United States as complicit in a Russo-Iranian campaign to destroy it.

The Russo-Iranian coalition the previous administration empowered has proved damaging in other ways. The Russo-Iranian military buildup and attempt to dominate the regional system and resources constrain and weaken the United States. Russia and Iran are building a regional order based on their shared near-term interests, which will not diverge any time soon.⁸ This developing system denies America the freedom to protect its own interests. The Russo-Iranian coalition will make it more difficult for the US to respond to terror threats against it, defend key allies such as Israel, and ensure unfettered access to trade routes the US economy depends on. Russia is expanding its military basing and deployments, improving its ability to conduct military operations, and transferring capabilities to Iran. Iran is extending its footprint, organizing and deploying an interoperable force of Iranian and non-Iranian proxies, developing conventional military capabilities, and hardening its nuclear program.

The population critical to defeating Salafi-jihadis decisively—the Sunni Arab community—now perceives the United States as complicit in a Russo-Iranian campaign to destroy it.

Iran's expansion has had second-order effects in the region. It has reinforced sectarianism and weakened the US partnership with Gulf States. These US partners blame US policies, especially the nuclear deal and inaction against the Assad regime, as having fed Iranian influence. They have pursued their own lines of effort to constrain Iran, which include backing more hardline elements of the Syrian opposition.

US Dependence on Turkey and the Kurds

The US has been hemorrhaging leverage to multiple actors in Syria. It has increased its dependence on forces that fight ISIS but bring their own problems. The Obama administration enlisted Syrian-Kurdish People's Defense Forces (YPG) fighters in its campaign against ISIS in northern Syria. These forces proved effective in expelling ISIS from some territory. However, they cannot provide the political-security structures required to make those gains durable and prevent Salafi-jihadis' resurgence.

The YPG has a long-term political vision for northern Syria that will create a more permissive environment for groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda. Its enlistment of Sunni Arabs who adhere to that vision does not improve the YPG's prospects. The YPG is also linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization conducting an insurgency in Turkey, a NATO ally now less and less responsive to American interests and requests. The YPG is implementing the PKK's socialist vision for governance in the parts of northern Syria it controls, which most Syrians—both pro- and anti-Assad—oppose. Turkey is also an unsuitable ally because President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan backs an al Qaeda-aligned Salafi-jihadi group in Syria, Ahrar al Sham.

There is no regional state or group of states that can mobilize a Sunni Arab force that is both acceptable to the United States and can deliver Salafi-jihadis a lasting defeat. The Saudis and Emiratis are pinned in Yemen, the Jordanians have few forces, and the Egyptians deployed a limited contingent in Syria on behalf of the Russians and Iranians, not the US. A new US strategy must extricate America from this dual headlock. Neither the YPG nor the Turks are the correct partners.

The Need for Strategic Reset in Iraq

President Trump must also reset America's strategy in Iraq. The US is racing against the clock to defeat ISIS in Mosul before political conditions in Baghdad collapse. This strategy is short-sighted and will fail. Success in Iraq is still possible but requires President Trump to reintroduce nonmilitary considerations into the campaign plan and accept that a big military victory is insufficient to attain long-term national security objectives.

The recapture of Mosul should not end major combat operations. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) must also clear ISIS-held cities in northern and western Iraq. They also face resurgent ISIS activity in recaptured areas. It will be years before the ISF can conduct operations without significant US and coalition assistance.⁹ A post-ISIS Sunni insurgency in Iraq is emerging, and al Qaeda and ISIS will try to hijack this political violence.¹⁰ Iranian-backed proxy militias control terrain and prevent refugee resettlement. Different Kurdish factions have begun to fight one another and Baghdad. These wars after the fall of ISIS can lead to the reemergence of the very conditions that gave rise to this group. The US must maintain and likely increase its military presence in Iraq even after Mosul's recapture to prevent ISIS from reconstituting; minimize the emerging civil, ethnic, and sectarian wars; and build the ISF's capability to conduct long-term stabilization and counterinsurgency operations.

The US requires a friendly government in Baghdad to sustain its presence in the country and continue the anti-ISIS fight. Supporting the US-friendly prime minister, Haider al Abadi, is not a political strategy. Abadi is under fire from rival Iraqi political factions and pro-Iranian elements that seek to evict the US from the region. His term expires in 14 months. It is unclear if he will seek a second term, but he is unlikely to win reelection if he does. Political conditions in Iraq will soon change abruptly, and the US is not ready to secure its interests in this new environment. The most likely scenario in Iraq is the election in 2018 of sectarian former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki or another a pro-Iranian candidate who orders the US out of the country before we have secured our national security interests.

Iran is also changing its posture in Iraq. Iran tolerated a US military presence in Iraq under the Obama administration when ISIS was at its apex and the US was docile, but it is already shifting to an anti-US posture. More dangerous possibilities include the fall of Abadi's government before 2018 and an open Iranian war against US forces in Iraq. Any of these scenarios will likely drive Sunni insurgency and disenfranchisement.

The United States needs to counter Salafi-jihadis' strategy to embed within and weaponize the Sunni Arab community.

The US must immediately reintroduce a political strategy into the campaign plan to destroy ISIS in Iraq in order to prevent these dangerous contingencies from occurring and mitigate these real political risks. The recommended course of action will not solve America's problems in Iraq, but it can help brace for contingencies should the Iraqi government fall. A separate plan to put America on a path to victory in Iraq is necessary.

The Critical Sunni Terrain

The United States has primarily waged a counterterrorism campaign via proxy forces in Syria and Iraq. That campaign has largely overlooked the human terrain where the enemy operates: the Sunni population. The approach enabled American proxy forces to seize terrain along the perimeter of ISIS's so-called caliphate but has not meaningfully challenged core ISIS-held terrain in the Sunni heartland in southeastern Syria and southwestern Iraq. Salafi-jihadi groups will retain legitimacy in the eyes of the Sunni Arab population until the US and its partners facilitate

the emergence of credible military and political structures acceptable to that population.

The US might provide enough firepower to non-Sunni Arab forces to clear ISIS from terrain by external force, but no such solution would endure. It would, in fact, allow al Qaeda to step forward as the rightful defender of the Sunni Arabs against any such externally based coalition. President Obama's fundamental failure was to ignore ISIS's and al Qaeda's population-centric strategies and their ability to exploit sectarian and political conditions for gain. His strategy to defeat ISIS therefore failed to combine the necessary political and military lines of effort to end the war consistent with American security requirements.

President Trump must broaden the aperture and break from his predecessor's narrow view. The United States needs to counter Salafi-jihadis' strategy to embed within and weaponize the Sunni Arab community. It must assist in creating a new political-security system that the Sunni Arab community will help defend against jihadists. If it does not, then any battlefield success will be temporary at best and will ultimately collapse, forcing the US once again to intervene in order to prevent ISIS, al Qaeda, or their successors from reestablishing solid bases from which to plan and conduct attacks on America and the West.

Partition

The new approach being discussed focuses on partitioning Syria. Its advocates generally assert that Syria is already partitioned de facto and that the US should recognize that fact and stop fighting to reestablish colonial-era artificial borders.

This approach is closely tied to the idea of safe zones, which the president has promised to establish. The outline for this idea is unclear, but it seems to be that the US should help its proxies secure geographic lines that the US can then freeze and protect in a way that will address the core problems. We have not yet seen or heard a coherent explanation of how this endeavor does so or precisely what problems will be addressed, but the concept is presumably that safe zones will secure stable lines that will end the hot war in Syria and thereby eliminate or at least substantially reduce support for ISIS and al Qaeda.

This approach suffers from the basic conceptual problem of substituting means for ends—the president asked for safe zones (a means), and many people think that Syria should be partitioned (also a means), and combining those things will somehow produce an end that advances American security.

Syria is Not Now Partitioned

The biggest problem with this line of argument is that its premise is false. Syria is not partitioned. Pro-regime forces, ISIS, al Qaeda, various Sunni Arab opposition groups, Kurds, Turks, Iranians, and Russians are fighting throughout the country. Ethno-sectarian enclaves persist throughout Syria. No clean lines separate the combatants into sides. Therefore, there is virtually nowhere in Syria to establish a safe zone that would be homogeneous.

Moreover, the opposing sides are not fighting to establish such homogeneous zones. Almost none of the combatants desire a partitioned Syria. Al Qaeda, ISIS, the Assad regime, and Iran virulently and vitriolically oppose such an outcome—and they are by far the most powerful armed groups on the ground. The YPG desires partition in the belief that it would provide them autonomy or even independence. That desire puts the YPG at odds with everyone else in Syria, limiting its ability recruit Sunni Arabs to fight ISIS. None of these actors show signs of abandoning their maximalist goals.

A partition would amount to the US helping Iran consolidate control over one part of Syria and al Qaeda over the other.

Partitioning Syria as it is now would, in fact, be disastrous for the United States even if it were possible. Iranian-controlled militias and allies, al Qaeda, and ISIS currently control the overwhelming majority of Syrian territory outside of the Kurdish regions. The moderate opposition was destroyed when Aleppo fell, apart from a limited set of groups in southernmost Syria that have no reach beyond their own area. A partition would amount to the US helping Iran consolidate control over one part of Syria and al Qaeda over the other. There is no way to make such an approach congruent with US interests.

Unfettering Iran in Syria Through Partition

The current administration's apparent willingness to contemplate continuing its predecessor's approach to Iran in Iraq and Syria is the most surprising aspect of current discussions about US strategy. The Obama administration saw Iran as a de facto partner in the fight against ISIS and al Qaeda and sought to turn Iran from foe to friend through the nuclear deal and other initiatives. President Obama famously refused to act against the Assad regime even after it crossed his red line, has refused to act against

it in any way since then, and forbade American partners in Syria from operating against the dictator, who was working to exterminate them, as noted above.

Supersizing the Obama strategy does not change that approach in any way. It leaves western Syria to Iran and Assad while focusing only on hitting ISIS harder. Partitioning Syria would require pushing back on the Assad regime somewhat, since the regime maintains that it rules all of Syria and retains garrisons in Kurdish areas and in southeastern Syria in the heart of ISIS country. However, any partition along current lines would leave the regime in control of Damascus, Aleppo, the 'Alawite coastline, and the strategically important cities of Homs and Hama on the Damascus-Aleppo highway. The regime and the Iranians would likely insist on regaining control of Idlib province as well, which sits between Aleppo and the coast on the Turkish border and is now the heartland of al Qaeda's affiliates, since that terrain threatens core 'Alawite terrain and would keep fighting in western Syria alive indefinitely.

Allowing the "regime" to retain all of those territories would give Iran and Russia everything they actually need in Syria. Russia would keep its permanent air and naval base on the Mediterranean, and Iran would have the base and strategic depth it needs to support Hezbollah in Lebanon and its own operations on the Golan Heights against Israel. The fact that Tehran rejects the idea of partitioning Syria and will fight against it does not, in fact, mean it would not benefit enormously from such an outcome.

We have added quotation marks around "regime" advisedly, for much of the strategic discussion proceeds from yet another false premise—that there is an actual Assad regime and some sort of Syrian army. There is neither. Iran and Russia, but primarily Iran, have penetrated the Syrian government so thoroughly that it can no longer exist on its own.¹¹ The pro-regime coalition is a house of cards that consists of a small core of Syrian Arab Army forces concentrated around Damascus, a group of Syrian militias paid for and controlled by various individuals in the Syrian elite, many thousands of Lebanese Hezbollah fighters who report to their commander and the Iranians, tens of thousands of Iraq Shi'a militias paid for and controlled directly by Iran, and many thousands of Afghan and Pakistani troops provided by Iran. The Iranians have also periodically deployed their own conventional ground forces, while the Russians have provided limited contingents of special forces troops.

Assad would not survive the departure of Iran's forces. Left to his own devices, he could not defend his capital or even his palace, let alone the lands the pro-regime forces now control. Partitioning Syria in any way thus entails permanently establishing Iranian troops and their proxies

from across the region as the defenders of whatever remains of the Assad regime. Any attempt to partition Syria is thus incompatible with a regional strategy to contain or roll back Iranian power.

OBJECTIVES

What Is to Be Done?

The United States needs a new strategy in Syria and Iraq. Tweaking the Obama approach is not enough, and partitioning Syria is not possible. The new strategy must be based on the real situation on the ground and real American security requirements. These include:

- Defeating al Qaeda, as well as ISIS;
- Expelling Iranian military forces and most of Iran's proxy forces from Syria;
- Limiting Iranian control over the Syrian government and territory;
- Facilitating the emergence of a Sunni Arab armed force and governance structures seen as legitimate by the Sunni Arab communities in Syria and Iraq and willing and able to expel ISIS and al Qaeda and keep them out;
- Bringing the wars in Syria and Iraq to stable and enduring outcomes to prevent the recurrence of conditions that would permit Salafi-jihadi groups or Iranian-controlled military forces to reconstitute in either country;
- De-escalating the competition among Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the Gulf States that is helping tear Syria apart; and
- Resettling Syrian refugees.

The US can accomplish these goals only by ending the wars across Syria and Iraq that are creating a ripe base for Salafi-jihadists. It must stabilize these countries under the right—not most expedient—conditions.

The US must ultimately strengthen effective and acceptable partners within the Syrian opposition who are willing to negotiate with the Assad regime. A viable settlement between the Assad regime and its opponents should facilitate regime change amenable to all Syrians, security institution reforms and disarmament, foreign military forces' withdrawal, and refugee and internally displaced persons' resettlement. The agreement must be enforceable, be accepted in the region, and help advance Syria's reconstruction.

Requirements for a stable outcome in Iraq include a sovereign government that is acceptable and responsive to all Iraq's communities and that commands a professional, nonsectarian security apparatus that has a monopoly over the use of force and can secure the country effectively. Iraq, too, must be set on a path toward economic reconstruction and long-term viability.

Helping the Sunni Reject the Salafi-Jihadi Movement

The most important component of the correct approach stems from a single big idea—the fight against the Salafi-jihadi movement must be fought and won within the Sunni community itself. Al Qaeda and ISIS are manifestations of a global insurgency within Sunni Islam seeking to dismantle the current rulers of Sunni-majority states, destroy those states, and establish their own new governments in their stead.

Counterinsurgency does not necessarily mean deploying hundreds of thousands of US troops.

The US is bringing a counterterrorism strategy to a counterinsurgency fight. That must end. Counterinsurgency does not necessarily mean deploying hundreds of thousands of US troops. The surge of US forces into Iraq was vital, but only because it supported a new approach of population-centric counterinsurgency, as General David Petraeus has repeatedly said. The US must first reorient on a population-centric counterinsurgency strategy in Syria and Iraq and can then consider what American forces might be required to implement it—expecting that the numbers will be substantially smaller than what was needed in Iraq or Afghanistan during those surges.

The new approach must recognize that our current strategy is inadvertently fueling the global Salafi-jihadi insurgency. Sunni around the world see America in de facto alliance with Iran, Russia, Shi'a, 'Alawites, and Kurds attempting to re-subjugate Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq to Persian-controlled Shi'a regimes (naturally ignoring the distinction between 'Alawites and Shi'a). They are not wrong—that has been our de facto strategy. We have a reality problem, not a narrative problem.

Both ISIS and al Qaeda benefit from this perception by portraying themselves as the only defenders of the Sunni community against an existential threat. Al Qaeda further benefits from the brutality of ISIS. It now portrays itself as the “moderate” Salafi-jihadi group, the reasonable

group that does not enforce its ideology on unwilling populations and does not behead people or burn captives alive—is acceptable, in sum, to populations desperate for skilled fighters against enemies they believe to be intent on their destruction.

This perception above all poses the gravest possible threat to the United States. It is radicalizing Sunni populations across the globe and creating the most fertile environment for al Qaeda and ISIS recruiting that has ever existed.

It is imperative, therefore, that the US change course. We must stop attacking the Sunni Arab community from the outside through proxies and instead embed ourselves within that population as its defenders. We must show once again that we are willing to fight and die with Sunni Arabs against their enemies and ours—al Qaeda, ISIS, and Iran. We must realign the Sunni Arab states behind US leadership. Only then can we have any hope of securing our vital national interests and reducing the global appetite for supporting organizations bent on our destruction.

From Grand Strategy to Attainable Tasks

Designing any course of action that can achieve these objectives in a single campaign is impossible. We cannot replicate the experience of 2007 in Iraq, when a change in strategy and approach supported by additional US combat forces generated a decisive transformation in the conflict. The situation in both Iraq and Syria is now too complex and too dire for any such rapid transformation.

Many people have forgotten that even the Iraq surge took the form of multiple campaigns conducted over the course of two years. The first additional forces went into the “belts” around Baghdad to disrupt enemy support zones. The next ones went into Baghdad itself. The Anbar Awakening flowered fully alongside these undertakings and aided by them. Subsequent campaigns cleared Diyala Province to the northeast of Baghdad and then Mosul. Even then, the situation was not stabilized until mid-2008 after an additional series of fierce battles against Shi'a militias in southern Iraq. We cannot expect to do more than lay out the initial campaign in the current conflict in Syria, which was all that we could do in the case of Iraq in 2006.¹²

It is impossible to lay out with any specificity the series of subsequent campaigns required to move from the initial undertaking described below to overall success. There are too many contingencies and unknowns to predict the course of operations beyond a certain point. The US has played such a restricted role in the war to date, in contrast to the role it played in Iraq from 2003 to 2006, that we simply cannot know precisely what will happen when it begins to engage more deeply and seriously in the conflict.

We hypothesize that Sunni Arab tribes, pressed on all sides, will fight alongside American forces against ISIS and even al Qaeda in southeastern Syria in return for the promise of support against those enemies and against the Assad regime. But we cannot validate or invalidate that hypothesis without trying it. If it proves false, the operation proposed below will still disrupt the rear areas of ISIS and facilitate the recapture of Raqqa and the Euphrates River Valley (ERV), but it will not have the larger systemic effect needed to transform the conflict.

The scale of the course of action proposed here is limited for other reasons as well. The US would not benefit from getting into a hot war with Russia or Iran now. We considered and discarded larger campaigns that would have brought down the Assad regime rapidly for several reasons: They would have led to immediate war with those two states; they would also have empowered al Qaeda in the current environment; the collapse might lead to genocide

We must stop attacking the Sunni Arab community from the outside through proxies and instead embed ourselves within that population as its defenders.

of Syria's 'Alawite population; and the force requirements for the US kept growing. We likewise considered and rejected establishing safe zones for several reasons: Safe zones near Damascus could lead quickly to hot war with Russia; the acceptable opposition in Aleppo collapsed; the US needs to protect the opposition against not only pro-regime forces but also al Qaeda, which is eliminating moderate groups; and the risks and force requirements again grew. We have therefore opted for a course of action that minimizes the likelihood of direct conflict with Russia and Iran while positioning the US on a more solid basis to operate more freely in Syria and Iraq over time.

We must recognize, finally, that every major actor who has entered this conflict thinking that a single sharp blow would transform it has found the task much more difficult than expected. The Assad regime tried several times to mass forces and crush the opposition in 2011 and 2012, only to find that it could not both hold ground and continue to make gains. Iran went through several stages of committing additional forces—Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militias, and its own conventional ground forces—expecting a decisive result each time that it never attained. The Russians intervened in 2015 similarly hoping to transform the battlefield rapidly, but even their brutal air campaign took nearly six months just to capture Aleppo—and still the situation remains fluid and partially stalemated. Turkish military intervention has had a similarly limited effect.

The US should not assume our intervention will be different. The momentum of this conflict is so great that it cannot be quickly diverted with a single sharp blow. We must be prepared to exert sustained pressure for years to drive it toward an acceptable outcome. The approach recommended here is therefore calibrated in scale to something that can be sustained rather than a surge that must be drawn down relatively quickly.

For all these reasons, the course of action presented below is merely the first step in the initial campaign to achieve our overarching aims. It is a limited counteroffensive designed to regain American freedom of action and set conditions for halting and then reversing our current steady movement toward defeat. It lays out briefly some of the subsequent campaigns that will likely be required, but it does not attempt the impossible task of describing them in any detail.

RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION

The Task

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project (CTP) recommend the course of action outlined in this report as the first phase of a strategic reset in the Middle East. This course of action does not fix all of America's challenges in the region, nor does it present a comprehensive solution to the war in Syria. It represents the building block for a way forward. It addresses the most immediate risks, exploits the biggest opportunities, sets favorable conditions for future phases, and minimizes costs to the United States and the local population in Syria.

The course of action asserts American presence in the theater, independent of other actors and with the intent to begin building a long-term Sunni Arab partner force with which to eventually destroy Salafi-jihadis, prevent their return, and resettle refugees. The course of action focuses initially on establishing a secure US base of operations in southeastern Syria and attacking ISIS's rear area along the ERV in eastern Syria. This movement will help mitigate the growing risk that the US will have to diminish its presence in—or withdraw entirely from—Iraq.

The course of action does not include an immediate plan to retake Raqqa's dense urban terrain. The two options currently on offer for retaking Raqqa strengthen either an al Qaeda-aligned force or a YPG-dominated force, which would worsen the conditions fueling Salafi-jihadist support. Neither option is acceptable for the United States. The course of action halts YPG and partnered

Arab fighters' advance after they isolate Raqqa in order to de-escalate the war between Turkey and US partners and preserve territorial gains.

The course of action avoids immediate American intervention in northern Syria. A major operation in northern Syria, including establishing safe zones along the Turkish border, would further increase US dependence on existing partners or benefit Salafi-jihadist groups, depending on the area in which it is undertaken. It could also escalate conflict with Russia before the US has the leverage and force posture necessary to manage escalation. A credible no-fly zone (NFZ), for instance, would require a force posture in theater sufficient to deter Russian violations and the willingness to shoot down Russian aircraft. The US has also not set the conditions to attack into northwestern Syria, apart from the Russia factor. Al Qaeda and its forces have set deep roots in the population there, and an initial US forced entry into that area would likely prove counterproductive. The course of action similarly avoids immediate intervention in southern Syria, which would risk rapid escalation by threatening terrain critical to Russia and the Assad regime.

This recommended course of action represents the best possible path forward for the United States that the ISW-CTP team could identify based on evaluating American interests, the current political-security dynamics, and forecasts of various actors' plans. It is informed by an ongoing planning exercise that began in November 2015. That exercise has tested potential American options to confront ISIS and al Qaeda in Syria amid escalating local, regional, and global conflicts.

The ISW-CTP team has tested 15 different courses of action to destroy both ISIS and al Qaeda without jeopardizing wider American interests or accepting undue cost or risk. We did not prejudge the necessary end state in Syria. The courses of action pursued different possible outcomes, including a negotiated settlement, a partition, and a long-term, narrow counterterrorism mission. They also used different possible sets of partners in Syria, including Russia and Iran, in addition to myriad local armed groups.

Every other iteration failed. ISW and CTP tested combinations of different courses of action as well. Those also failed or produced even greater challenges. Most failed because they bolstered Salafi-jihadists, undermined US allies, strengthened Russia and Iran at America's expense, or prolonged and expanded the Syrian war in ways that endangered American security. Inaction and a retreat to "fortress America" proved to be the most dangerous options.

President Trump cannot quickly end the war in Syria while protecting American interests. He should instead

set out to extricate the United States from the constraints imposed by our reliance on unreliable partners who do not share our interests, establish an independent American position, and set attainable near-term objectives. Those objectives should include preparing to defeat the broader Salafi-jihadist network, expanding American freedom of maneuver, and enhancing US leverage over partners, allies, and enemies. The course of action presented here will overhaul US strategy and enable President Trump to approach the conflict on America's terms.

Recommended Near-Term Objectives

The following objectives are attainable within one year and would, if achieved, reset trends in the region toward American national security requirements. They focus on Syria, where the US is relatively less constrained than in Iraq, in order to reset the Middle Eastern theater and position the US to act decisively in Iraq. They also focus on reorienting America's strategy to fight al Qaeda in addition to ISIS. Finally, they sidestep traps laid by Russia, Iran, and Turkey and instead assert American independence to strengthen President Trump's hand in future negotiations.

No Syria strategy, no matter how brilliant, can end the civil war or extricate it quickly from regional and global wars. It is imperative, however, to shift the current trajectory of that conflict away from the most dangerous possibilities of escalating regional or even global war. These objectives offer a way to do so at the lowest possible risk and cost.

1. Integrate strategies against ISIS and al Qaeda to set the US on a path to defeating the broader Salafi-jihadi threat.
2. Retain and expand American freedom of maneuver.
 - a) Contain and reduce the spread of anti-access area denial capabilities in the region, particularly to Iran.
 - b) Establish a more independent force posture that can support operations in Syria and Iraq.
 - c) Strengthen the Iraqi government's institutions.
 - d) Block further expansion of and set conditions to roll back Iranian malign means and methods, including its proxy network, conventional military capabilities, advanced training and expertise, weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapon capabilities, and delivery systems.
 - e) De-escalate the Turkish-Kurdish war.
3. Gain leverage over Iraq, Turkey, Russia, the Assad regime, Iran, and the YPG.

4. Regain freedom of action.
 - a) End dependence on the YPG.
 - b) Mitigate the impact of a potential loss of basing privileges in Iraq.

Recommended Course of Action

The US and acceptable partners seize and secure a base in southeastern Syria, such as Abu Kamal, and create a de facto safe zone. They then recruit, train, equip, and partner with local Sunni Arab anti-ISIS forces to conduct an offensive against ISIS. This independent Sunni Arab force forms the basis of a movement to destroy ISIS and al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria over many years. Building a Sunni Arab anti-ISIS partner must be the rate-determining step in the advance along the ERV. American forces must fight alongside their partners to reduce the trust deficit between the US and potential Sunni allies. Potential partners must not support Salafi-jihadists, Iranian proxies, or Kurdish separatism.

A focus on a near-term military objective in southeastern Syria—instead of Raqqa—is advantageous for seven reasons. It would:

1. Reduce near-term escalation risks with Russia and Assad by focusing on terrain not critical to either;
2. Establish a US force posture in terrain independent of current proxies;
3. Position the US to de-escalate the Turkish-Kurdish war;
4. Mitigate the risk of losing basing privileges in Iraq;
5. Set conditions to win the urban fight in ISIS-held cities by targeting ISIS's rear area;
6. Enable the US to compete for legitimacy in Sunni Arab areas; and
7. Reduce the ISIS threat to Jordan.

The ISIS-held town of Abu Kamal near the Syrian-Iraqi border is a desirable target for this operation because it is core ISIS-held terrain that the US-led anti-ISIS effort, Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), has not directly challenged in the ground campaign to date. The Combined Joint Task Force assessed in June 2016 that seizing Abu Kamal would “limit high speed routes for reinforcements, resupply and foreign fighters flowing between [Iraq and Syria], thereby increasing the pressure across the so-called caliphate.”¹³ If the US and willing allied forces seized Abu Kamal in early 2017, it would produce the same effect.

It would also position the US to disrupt ISIS leadership, which relocated to al Qaim before the ongoing battle for Mosul, according to open source reports.¹⁴

There are multiple options for how to execute this concept of operations. The first is to seize and secure the entirety of Abu Kamal and the nearby airfield. US forces would need to seize, secure, and expand the Hamdan Military Airfield north of Abu Kamal to turn it into a base of operations. US Special Mission Units can conduct an airborne assault onto the airfield or establish a nearby lodgment before advancing to seize the field by ground movement. The US must then build necessary field-expedient facilities to support transport fixed- and rotary-wing operations, as well as a significant Special Operations Forces presence secured by the requisite conventional forces. US forces should consider using Osprey-equipped Marine units during the initial phase to increase the base's operational radius so that it could support Special Mission Units and other targeting operations in Iraq's Anbar and western Ninawah, in addition to ISIS-held eastern Syria. The base will ultimately need to support forward operating bases (FOBs) along the ERV toward Deir ez Zour and possibly into Iraq's Anbar province.

US forces can alternatively establish a large operating base in northeastern Jordan to host the logistics and headquarters elements that would otherwise need to deploy into Syria. The US could also execute direct action raids from within Jordan or from a base in western Iraq. The US would reduce the number of US military forces necessary to seize and secure Abu Kamal by removing the requirement to seize and expand the airbase and drawing more heavily on Jordanian support and resources currently allocated to US Central Command Forward-Jordan. This alternative approach could also position and enable the US, with Jordanian help, to establish a safe zone surrounding the refugee camps along Jordan's northeastern border with Syria, which are increasingly an ISIS target for recruitment and attack.

Troop-to-Task

The ISW-CTP planning team did not complete a formal troop-to-task analysis of this mission and defers to professional military planners regarding the kind and amount of force required.

Supporting Efforts and Phase-Zero Operations

After executing this course of action, US forces must then launch follow-on clearing operations in both directions along the ERV using American forces supporting partnered Syrian opposition, Syrian tribal forces, Iraqi tribal forces, and ISF. The US should undertake 12 supporting efforts to enable the recommended course of action and set conditions for follow-on operations. These supporting efforts include both lethal and non-lethal operations to help the mission in Syria succeed and to position and enable the U.S. to exploit its outcome.

Lethal

1. Counter Iran in Iraq.ⁱⁱ
2. Increase direct action raids to disrupt ISIS in both Syria and Iraq, focusing on the ERV.
3. Sustain the Mosul operation and transition into a more robust effort to recruit, train, and equip a Mosul police force under the Iraqi government's authority that can prevent ISIS from resurging in Mosul.
4. Halt the forward progress of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) around Raqqa after isolating the city and adopt a defensive posture in that area. Use the SDF to retake the Tabqa Dam from ISIS if necessary, but ensure that Sunni Arab elements of the SDF obtain control of the dam rather than the YPG. Retain current force posture in northern Syria.
5. Sustain covert lethal aid to acceptable opposition groups operating in southern and northwestern Syria in order to delay al Qaeda's consolidation and preserve options for anti-al Qaeda operations in future phases.
6. Sustain increased Joint Special Operations Command operational tempo against al Qaeda targets in Syria to disrupt al Qaeda's freedom of movement and command and control. Be prepared to launch direct action raids against al Qaeda targets.
7. Be prepared to support Jordan's King Abdullah to secure Jordan against Salafi-jihadi attacks and Iranian military activity and retain the legitimacy of Jordan's government.
8. Be prepared to defend US and coalition forces in Iraq against attack from Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

ⁱⁱA subsequent ISW-CTP report will recommend a strategy to counter Iran in Iraq as part of a regional American strategy to contain and reduce Iran's military buildup across the region.

Nonlethal

9. Set phase-zero diplomatic conditions as necessary.
10. Conduct an appropriately tailored information operation.
11. Conduct increased humanitarian operations in areas where US ground forces operate.
12. Sustain nonlethal aid to surviving civil society elements in opposition-held areas and to vetted opposition groups in southern Syria to provide sustained incentive for them to remain as independent from al Qaeda as possible.

Desired Near-Term Outcomes

The US will have succeeded at executing this course of action if the US:

- Controls Abu Kamal and prevents Salafi-jihadi groups from (re)infiltrating;
- Can conduct high-tempo combat operations from the Hamdan Military Airfield, including fixed- and rotary-wing operations;
- Transitions to a subsequent phase wherein the US recruits, trains, equips, and partners with local anti-ISIS forces to expand the area of control along the ERV;
- Can facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Abu Kamal and in the vicinity; and
- Rebuilds Abu Kamal, including restoring services.

Planning Assumptions

For the purposes of this report, a planning assumption is an assumption that, if invalid, would negate the viability of the course of action. The most crucial assumptions are:

1. Russia will not attempt to shoot down American aircraft.
2. US and coalition forces will not be ejected rapidly from Iraq in a manner that forces a retrograde under fire.
3. The US intervention in southeastern Syria will incentivize local Sunni Arabs to accept American training, and they will fight alongside the US against ISIS.
4. Jordan's King Abdullah will support the operation.

5. The US will not accept restrictions on US activities as a component of international negotiations for a settlement of the Syrian war.
6. Iran will not launch a full regional war against Saudi Arabia or Israel.

Risks and Mitigations

Possible countermoves by other actors in Syria could create unacceptable risk to American personnel and to the success of the recommended course of action. Most importantly, some possible countermoves risk provoking the US into over- or underreacting. The largest risks are:

Russia attempts to shoot down American aircraft in southeastern Syria. The ISW-CTP planning team assesses that a Russian escalation is least likely in the terrain southeast of the city of Deir ez Zour because it is not strategically critical for the Syrian regime. We have therefore assumed that Russia will not attempt to shoot down an American aircraft. Nonetheless, it is possible and is dangerous enough to require contingency planning.

The US must be prepared to conduct a full suppression of enemy air defense if necessary and to use alternative sources of leverage over Putin to deter him from attacking US forces. The US must position a joint package of strike and air defense assets in theater before beginning this course of action to strengthen this deterrence. The package must be obviously able to attain air supremacy throughout the theater and maritime supremacy in the Mediterranean if required.ⁱⁱⁱ

Russian forces in the area cannot survive in the face of a fully resourced American air campaign. Moreover, Putin cannot afford to replace the air and sea assets he has deployed to the Middle East. The challenge to the US is therefore not fighting the Russians, but rather persuading Putin that we will fight and fully defeat him if necessary to obtain freedom of action without engaging in a direct military conflict with Russia.

The YPG attacks Turkey above current thresholds of violence. The US priority must be to de-escalate the Turkish-YPG war whenever possible, but certain thresholds of that conflict are more dangerous than others. Direct YPG involvement in attacks against Turkish government installations and security forces would be a step change in the conflict war that would likely drive massive escalation. The US must be prepared to use sources of leverage over the YPG, such as continued air support against ISIS, to

deter it from escalating inside Turkey, even if in retaliation for Turkish aggression in Syria.

The next section of this report identifies the US requirement to broker a deal between Turkey and the YPG/PKK as a phase 2 priority. The US should accelerate the timeline of a diplomatic engagement with Turkey on this issue if an escalation in northern Syria appears imminent.

ISIS launches a major operation to seize Deir ez Zour from regime forces. ISIS has launched numerous failed offensives to seize control of remaining regime-held areas of Deir ez Zour and two nearby regime military bases. It has thus far failed, but will likely try again. The US must avoid supporting pro-regime forces against ISIS in eastern Syria, even to defend against an ISIS attack. Any support to pro-regime forces will strengthen ISIS and al Qaeda by appearing to “prove” their narrative that the US is already allied with Russia, Iran, and Assad. At maximum, the US should be prepared to allow the pro-regime coalition to evacuate personnel and equipment from Deir ez Zour.

The Assad regime attacks US forces. It is unlikely but possible that the Assad regime will attack US forces in southeastern Syria or in YPG-held areas using the Syrian Arab Air Force. The US must establish a credible threat of airstrikes against pro-regime military positions as a deterrent.

The following risks could affect the overall troop requirement of this course of action or the time required to advance beyond Abu Kamal:

Al Qaeda deploys to Deir ez Zour to fight the US. Al Qaeda desires a reunification of the global jihadist movement and therefore remains amenable to negotiations with ISIS. Additionally, al Qaeda condemns OIR as a war against Sunni Islam, despite the current schism between al Qaeda and ISIS.¹⁵ Al Qaeda may seek to fight US forces in southeastern Syria alongside ISIS. This possibility endangers the success of the course of action because al Qaeda has high local support in western Syria and could rally support against the US, thereby undermining the US ability to recruit a new partnered force. The US must be prepared to increase its resource allocation to anti-al Qaeda air operations and—if necessary—direct action raids to prevent al Qaeda from launching a coherent offensive against the US in southeastern Syria.

Salafi-jihadi elements infiltrate US partner forces in Deir ez Zour. It is more likely that both al Qaeda and ISIS will attempt to infiltrate or subvert US partner forces in Deir ez Zour when the US moves forward with subsequent operations. This risk has been present in all US training missions in Syria, but will increase when the US scales up the training effort. The US must return to strict vetting

ⁱⁱⁱUS Air Force doctrine defines air supremacy as “that degree of air superiority wherein the opposing force is incapable of effective interference within the operational area using air and missile threats.” See Joint Publication 3-01: Countering Air and Missile Threats, March 23, 2012, 187, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_01.pdf.

protocols for *individual* prospective anti-ISIS fighters—rather than vetting only the commander of a unit—to mitigate against this risk.¹⁶

ISIS sustains a major insurgency in US-held Abu Kamal. ISIS could designate a main effort against US forces in Abu Kamal, possibly de-prioritizing Mosul's or Raqqa's defense to do so. The US must have enough conventional forces, air assets, and combat service support to defend Abu Kamal against a sustained ISIS assault or insurgency. It must be prepared to reinforce its troop commitment to Abu Kamal if ISIS is able to sustain an insurgency. The US should prioritize building partner capacity quickly to create and support a capable Syrian holding force that can relieve US forces and legitimize US presence.

Iran attacks US forces in Iraq. Iranian-backed elements could escalate against the US in Iraq before this course of action or in retaliation for it. Kata'ib Hezbollah spokesperson Jaffar al Hussaini demonstrated this risk on February 5, 2017, stating: "We look at America as our first enemy, the source of all evil on the Earth." He continued, "American interests in Iraq are within our sights and our fire range. . . . We can target their bases whenever we want."¹⁷ The US must be prepared to defend US and coalition troops against attack and develop a contingency plan for continuing to operate in a contested Iraq (not undertaken here).

Iranian-backed militias attack the government of Iraq. Iranian-backed militias could alternatively attack Iraqi government institutions to force the collapse of the Abadi government. The recommended course of action is relatively less likely to trigger this response than are other possible US policies against Iran in the region. It is nonetheless dangerous enough to warrant contingency planning upfront. The US must be prepared to support ISF operations to defend terrain against Iranian-backed militias, including the Iraqi parliament and the Green Zone.

Iran or Russia retaliates globally. Both Iran and Russia could escalate against the US or US allies and partners globally in retaliation against the recommended US actions in Syria. Iran is most likely to escalate in the Persian Gulf or Yemen. Russia is most likely to escalate in Ukraine or the Baltics. The US must develop branch plans that account for the possibility that Iranian and Russian responses globally require a significant allocation of US resources or change in strategy in the Middle East (not undertaken here).

Follow-On Operations

The US must then build on its intervention, which would not be durable in isolation. The US must conduct clearing operations against ISIS along the ERV from the new base in Abu Kamal but must also undertake lines of effort that accomplish mid-term objectives in western Syria, including:

- Expand US freedom of action in Syria;
- Preserve and strengthen acceptable elements of the Syrian armed opposition;
- Contain and destroy al Qaeda and ISIS in southwestern Syria; and
- De-escalate the Turkish-Kurdish war.

US and willing allied military forces should undertake the following operations after completing the course of action to seize and secure Abu Kamal.

Next Steps Against ISIS

ERV Clearing Operations: Iraq. The US should work with the Iraqi government to redeploy ISF units to Anbar after the recapture of Mosul and should partner with those ISF units to retake al Qaim and remaining ISIS-held areas of the ERV. Shaping operations for a future operation to clear the ERV appear to be underway in March 2017. If basing privileges in Iraq are revoked and the government of Iraq is unwilling or unable to partner with the US to clear the ERV, the US must adopt a branch plan (not undertaken here).

ERV Clearing Operations: Syria. The US should recruit, train, and equip anti-ISIS forces in Deir ez Zour province only after seizing and securing Abu Kamal to avoid providing the enemy with advanced warning of the operation. The US should then partner with those forces to extend the area of control outward from Abu Kamal toward Raqqa. However, the US must not rush the tactical operations. Building the Sunni Arab partner must be the rate-determining step for the advance. As the zone of ISIS-free terrain increases, the US should establish one or more FOBs northwest of Abu Kamal along the ERV to sustain forward operations toward Raqqa.

Develop Branch Plans for Defeating ISIS in Deir ez Zour (not undertaken here). The requirements of the follow-on operation to defeat ISIS in Deir ez Zour will depend on the situation in Deir ez Zour upon retaking Abu Kamal and the outcome of the American course of action, including the behavior of other actors in the battle space.

Broker a Deal Between Erdoğan and the PKK/YPG. The US should broker a deal between Erdoğan and the PKK/YPG after establishing independent US basing in Abu Kamal. The US should offer an international observer force or multilateral monitoring mission such as the tripartite US, Iraqi, and Kurdish force used along Iraq's disputed internal boundaries in 2009. The US must also ultimately incentivize Erdoğan to end his use of Salafi-jihadi groups as partners in Syria. The US must require that Salafi-jihadi groups such as Ahrar al Sham withdraw from Turkish-held terrain as a condition of any deal.

Defeating ISIS along the ERV in Syria will not destroy the entire organization. ISIS controls terrain southwest of Raqqa and Deir ez Zour cities, including in Damascus, and is conducting offensive operations against pro-regime forces north of Damascus. However, defeating ISIS along the ERV would significantly reduce the group's combat capability. Subsequent phases—some of which are detailed below—will need to strengthen the new local partnered force in southeastern Syria and connect it to other acceptable elements in western Syria to build a larger and more capable partner against both ISIS and al Qaeda.

Next Steps in Southern Syria

US forces should establish a full, enforced NFZ along the Syrian-Jordanian border¹⁸ to:

- Demonstrate US commitment to addressing the grievances of populations under jihadist control;
- Incentivize and enable friendly opposition groups to defeat al Qaeda and ISIS in the area;
- Block a refocus south by pro-regime coalition;
- Block the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' buildup on the Golan;
- Resettle refugees from Jordan into Syria; and
- Broker and enforce a true cessation of hostilities in southern Syria as a conditions-setting measure to support an ultimate negotiated settlement of the war in the long term.

A NFZ is a necessary but likely insufficient condition to incentivize and enable acceptable opposition groups in southern Syria to destroy ISIS and al Qaeda in the area. The US should also provide increased weapons and training to such groups to enable them to succeed against both jihadist groups while defending against possible regime ground attack. The US should condition its support to acceptable opposition groups on their willingness to uphold a cessation of hostilities with pro-regime forces.

The US should try to stitch together the new force at Abu Kamal with existing US-backed fighters in southern Syria to create a single partner that can secure terrain from jihadists, defend against pro-Assad attacks, and uphold a settlement against the Assad regime.

The US should also identify and exploit opportunities as in-theater actors reset. Pro-regime forces or al Qaeda may present opportunities for the US to exploit as they respond and recalibrate after the American seizure of Abu Kamal. Such opportunities could include al Qaeda high-value targets or regime vulnerabilities, which could allow the US to pressure Syrian President Bashar al Assad to negotiate. The US should be prepared to exploit those opportunities, which will likely be limited in duration.

End State

American operations must aim at reaching a political resolution to this conflict. We must reject and oppose the efforts of the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran to impose a settlement by force on an unwilling opposition. Any such solution can only be temporary and will moreover further fuel the global Sunni perception of an existential assault on the Sunni community, creating even more fertile ground for al Qaeda and ISIS recruitment around the world.

Finding a political resolution implies that negotiations will ultimately need to occur. But negotiations can succeed only when conditions—especially military conditions—are correctly set. Examining successes and failures in efforts to resolve other such seemingly intractable conflicts has yielded a body of lessons learned that should guide our approach to setting those conditions and to the negotiations themselves. We therefore articulated in an earlier report of this series the minimum requirements for resolving the conflict congruent with our security and interests:

- Destroy ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra, and foreign Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria.
- Identify and strengthen effective interlocutors that represent the (predominantly Sunni) Syrian opposition.
- Facilitate the negotiation of a settlement between the Syrian regime and its opponents that includes:
 - Fundamental reform of the Syrian security services;
 - Full regime change acceptable to all major population subgroups;
 - Mutually agreed upon measures for accountability and amnesty;

- Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) mechanisms;
- The withdrawal, replacement, or regularization of foreign military forces; and
- Resettlement of refugees.
- Obtain regional acceptance of the negotiated settlement and its outcome.
- Establish peace enforcement mechanisms.
- Reconstruct state institutions, including effective security services.¹⁹

The minimum requirements for a stable outcome in Iraq are:

- Ensure the ISF are large enough, capable enough, and motivated enough to ensure a safe and secure environment in Iraq, operating under the command and control of the official Iraqi chain of command.
- Subject the PMF to a DDR process, bring their components under Iraqi government control, and neutralize efforts to deploy them as an Iranian proxy, sectarian, ethnic, partisan, or criminal armed force.
- Facilitate the formation of a representative, legitimate, and effective government in upcoming provincial and parliamentary elections that is neutral or responsive to US influence and resistant to Iranian malign interference.
- Ensure that Iraq reaches a minimal threshold of economic viability to support legitimate and representative governance.
- Facilitate sufficient reconstruction and reconciliation to permit refugee return.

The course of action proposed here focuses first on the most important requirement—finding and strengthening Sunni interlocutors with whom we can work to negotiate and sustain an acceptable settlement. This requirement has received the least attention from American strategy hitherto and has been the least successful of our efforts, yet it is by far the most important. Until and unless a Sunni leadership arises that the Sunni Arab community sees as legitimate and that rejects both ISIS and al Qaeda, the US will be unable to achieve its objectives or secure its people.

CONCLUSION

American decision-making must keep pace with the rate of global change. Developing and implementing sound policies grows ever more difficult as American enemies accelerate the breakdown of the world order. America's leaders must rise to the challenge. The US cannot allow the momentum of current trends to propel us forward. Neither can we let old ways of thinking nor political differences cloud debate about what is truly required to secure the American people, their prosperity, and their way of life. The current American strategy will fail on all three counts. The consequences of that failure may not be immediate, but they will endure.

The cost of managing that failure will far surpass the cost of immediate corrective action. Change is necessary, but opportunities for change will continue to vanish the longer the US waits to act. It will be hard. The path to victory in Syria and the Middle East will not be linear. It will require frequent reevaluation and adaptation. There will be losses and setbacks. But success is possible.

The United States is the only actor that can secure its interests. It is also the only actor that can provide the required leadership to reverse the negative trends in the region. Only America has the necessary resources and capabilities to set the Middle East on a path to stability and to create partners in areas we now face enemies. It is time we found the will.

APPENDIX

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ACRONYMS USED IN THIS REPORT

COA: Course of Action

CTP: Critical Threats Project

DDR: Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

ERV: Euphrates River Valley

FOBs: Forward Operating Bases

ISF: Iraqi Security Forces

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham

ISW: Institute for the Study of War

NFZ: No Fly Zone

OIR: Operation Inherent Resolve

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party

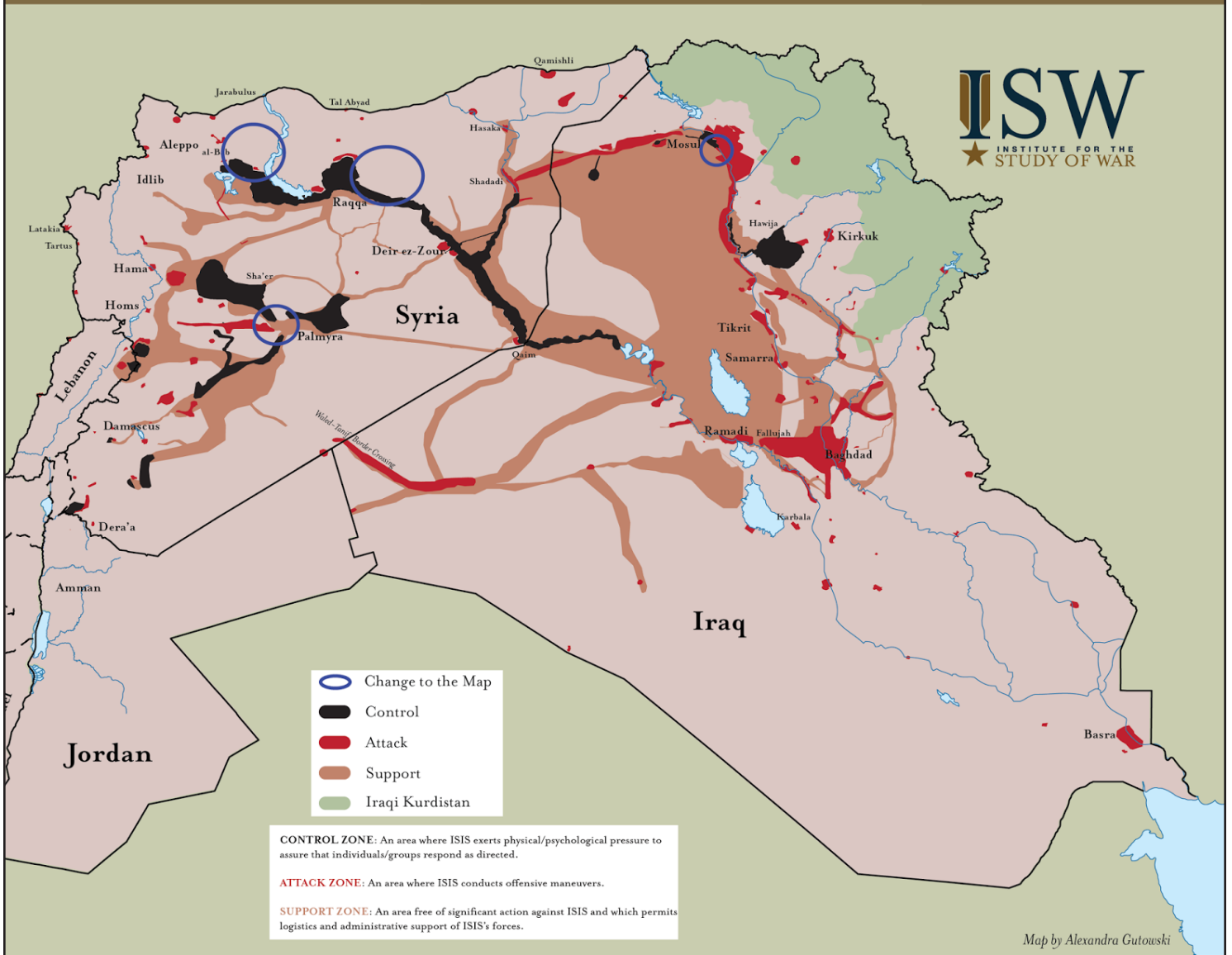
PMF: Popular Mobilization Forces

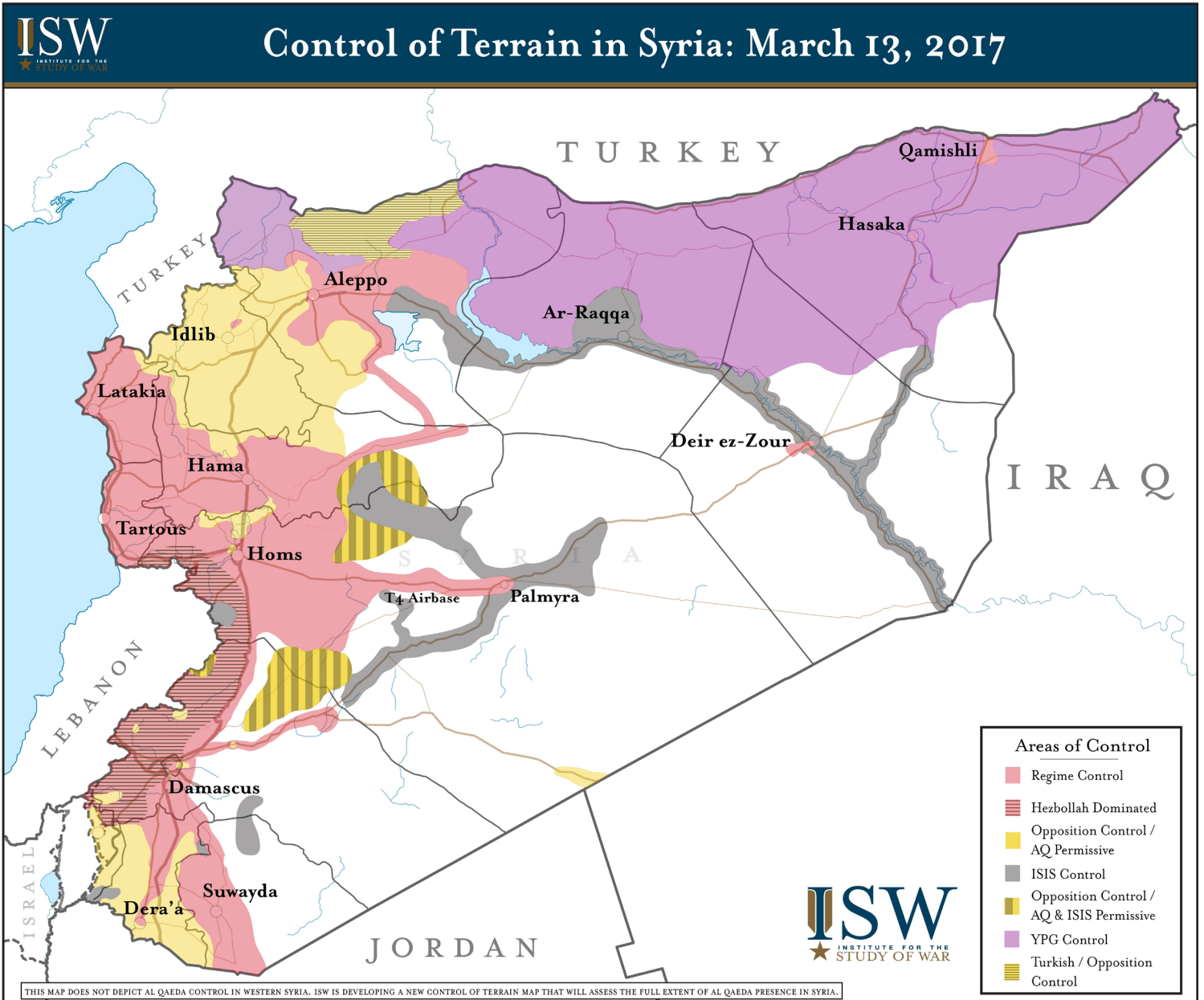
SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

YPG: Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units



ISIS Sanctuary: March 9, 2017





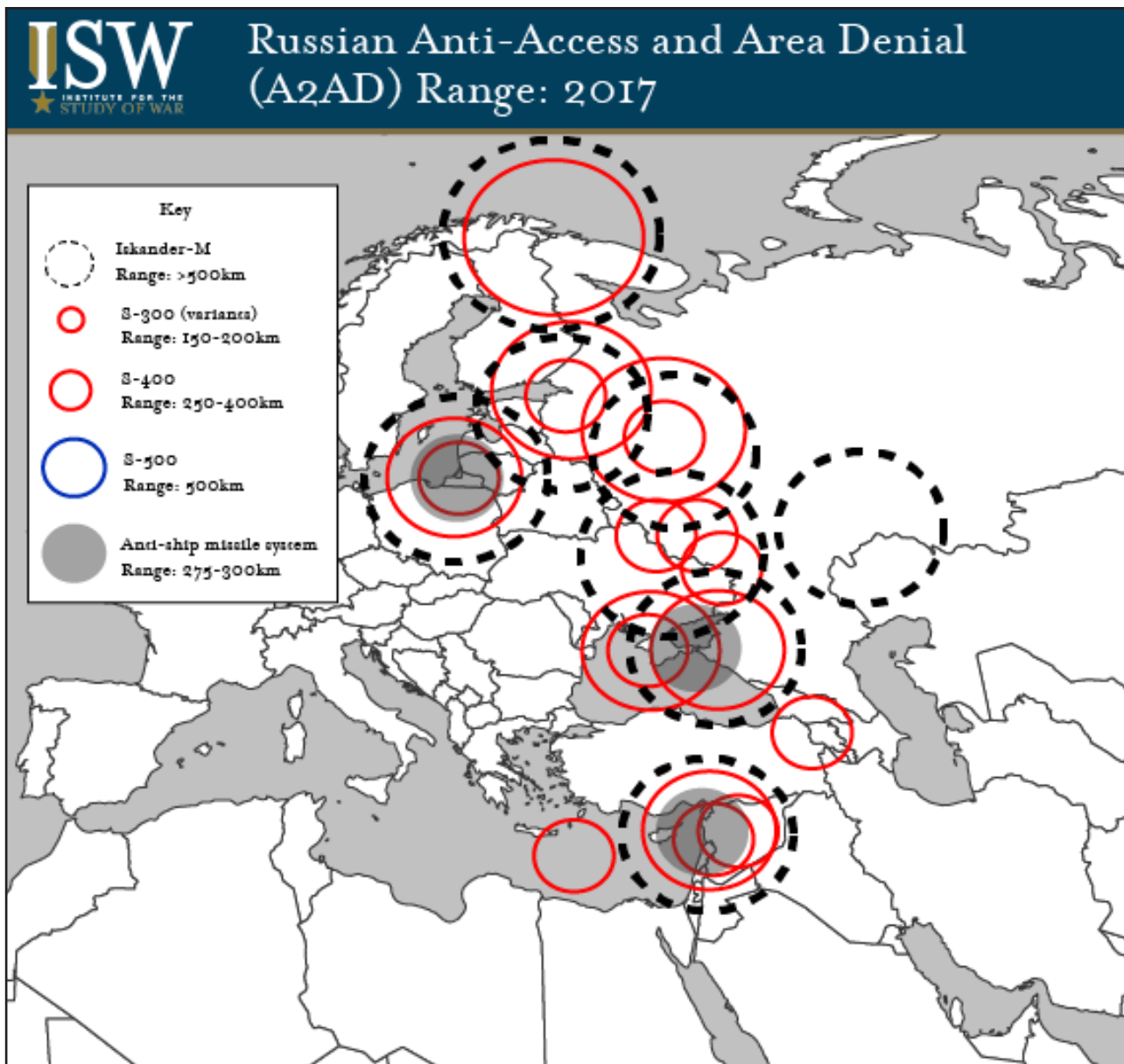


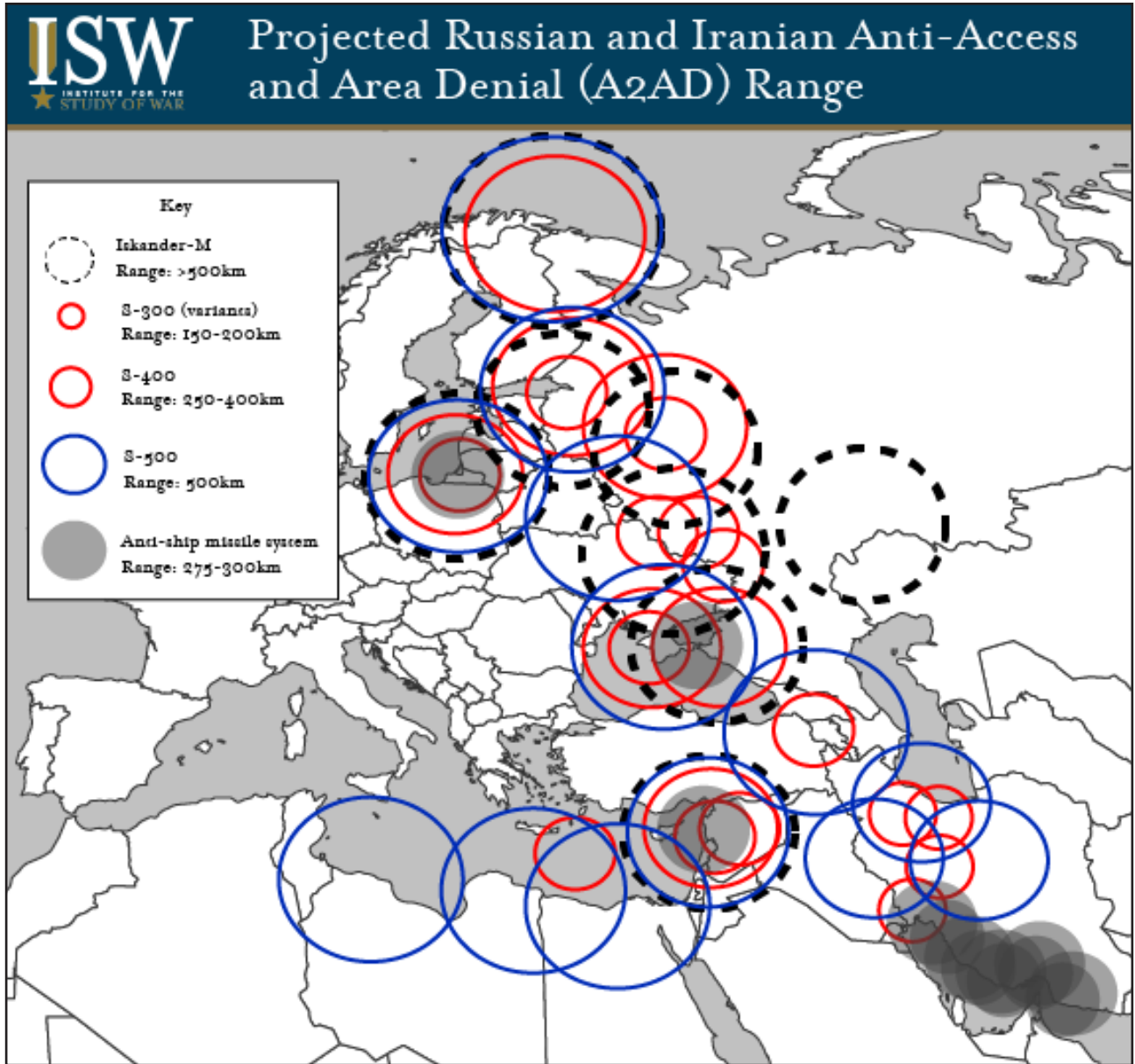
Iraq Control of Terrain Map: March 9, 2017



100km

Graphics: ISW Iraq Team
Content: ISW Iraq Team
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