

## LIKELY COURSES OF ACTION IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR JUNE - DECEMBER 2015

*The purpose of this intelligence forecast is to outline ISW's assessment of the courses of action available to Syrian actors and their principal benefactors over the next six months. ISW assesses that the dynamic stalemate that has defined the Syrian civil war since 2013 may be broken in this timeframe. The expansion of ISIS's maneuver campaign into Syria's central corridor is one potential inflection that could change the course of the war by shattering the Assad regime's area defense strategy in western Syria. Rebel groups and Jabhat al-Nusra are also positioned to escalate their offensives against the regime in southern and northern Syria, and their aggregate effect may force a contraction of the Syrian Arab Army in the mid-term. Alternately, the regime along with increasing Iranian support may alter its battlefield disposition to concentrate upon limited offensive operations against key rebel positions in pursuit of decisive effects, especially in Damascus. The range of actions that various actors in Syria may take generate a spectrum of possible outcomes for the Syrian war and its potential post-war environment, several of which are perilous to U.S. policy in the Middle East and current strategies to defeat ISIS in the coming year. This assessment will forecast the most likely and most dangerous contingencies that may transpire in Syria in the second half of 2015 from a U.S. policy perspective.*

The battlefield of the Syrian civil war has changed dramatically from September 2014 to June 2015. A major rebel offensive operation seized control of the provincial capital of Idlib City in northwestern Syria on March 29, 2015, marking the biggest anti-Assad victory since the seizure of Raqqa City by rebels two years earlier in March 2013. Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) played a major role in the seizure of Idlib City, signaling its continued rise in Syria. A regeneration of rebel combat power also enabled this shift in momentum after years of steady attrition and fragmentation, appearing to signal growing external assistance to various rebel brigades. Renewed rebel strength will likely lead to additional upheavals across Syria's stalemated battle lines in the near term. In particular, Islamist rebel groups contributed significantly to the victory in Idlib Province and are poised to play a dominant role in the fight for Aleppo City, which is likely to escalate in the near term with considerable involvement from JN.

Meanwhile, primarily moderate Syrian rebels have "liberated" much of southern Dera'a and Quneitra provinces with JN's support, recently seizing the

regime's largest military base in Dera'a on June 9, 2015. The strength of rebel groups in southern Syria is a notable opportunity for U.S. policies that seek to empower and embolden moderate rebels, although the continued reliance of these brigades on JN indicates that a high level of outside support would be necessary to transform these rebel contingents into an effective and suitable ground partner. Rebel gains in the south may combine with rebel gains in the north as well as ISIS gains in central Syria to achieve aggregate although unsynchronized effects against the Assad regime. If sustained, such gains could potentially cause the regime to contract to defend key positions in Damascus, Homs, Hama, and the Alawite coast.

Extremist groups have also established their own momentum in Syria that will likely affect the course of the Syrian war in the next six months. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) seized the regime stronghold of Palmyra in the central Syrian desert on May 20, 2015, positioning ISIS at the entrance to Syria's central corridor. ISIS is likely to capitalize on this gain to launch follow-on operations to penetrate

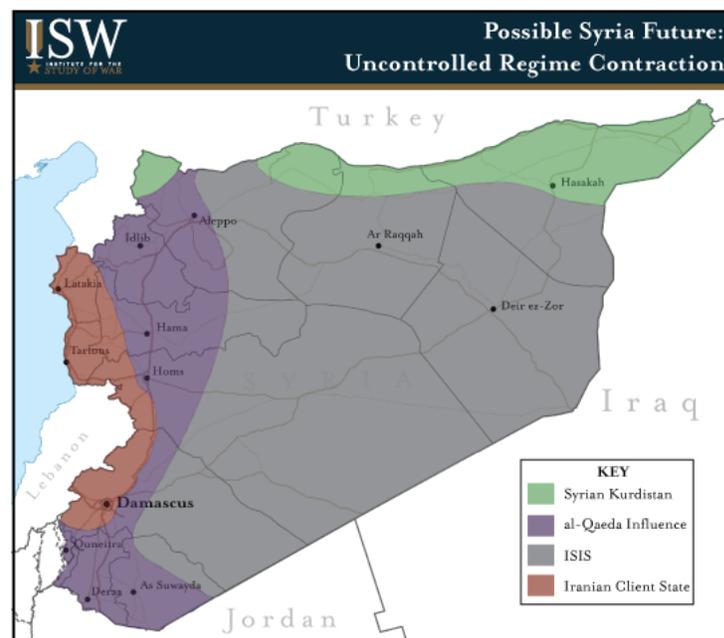
core regime-held terrain such as Homs or Hama cities, with intended consequences for both the Syrian regime and Syrian opposition forces. Meanwhile, JN is on the rise on several fronts in western Syria and is increasingly demonstrating its al-Qaeda character as it gathers strength. JN leader Abu Mohammed al-Joulani gave a two-part interview with *al-Jazeera* on May 27 and June 3 in which he clearly reaffirmed JN's allegiance to al-Qaeda, indicating that JN's success in Syria is integrated into al-Qaeda's global strategy. JN has already moved directly against two prominent U.S.-funded moderate brigades in Idlib and Aleppo Provinces in order to erode the overall strength of moderate rebels in northern Syria, displaying its ability to buffer terrain against potential threats by strong moderate forces. JN's ability to escalate against moderate rebel brigades without losing support from other rebel groups will have direct implications for U.S.-trained rebels soon to be inserted into Syria. JN and ISIS are also aligned against the U.S.-led coalition, causing further risk to rebels trained by the U.S., although the long term relationship of JN and ISIS is uncertain. It is nevertheless concerning for the U.S. that both ISIS and JN will likely gain additional momentum in the coming months, because this could result in major shifts in the war's ground conditions that render Syria increasingly impermissible for forces allied with the U.S.

The Syrian regime's manpower shortage has become acute under the combined strain produced by JN, rebel, and ISIS activity. The regime has attempted to offset this deficiency by launching widespread conscription campaigns and increasing its use of Iranian-sponsored paramilitary forces. Recent indicators suggest that this augmentation will be insufficient to disrupt the growing momentum of multiple anti-Assad actors that is likely to break the dynamic stalemate that has characterized the Syrian war for the past two years. The combined effect of the JN, rebel, and ISIS war efforts against Assad in Syria could force the regime and its international supporters to shift their calculus regarding the acceptable outcomes of the war in the second half of 2015. A dangerous but plausible scenario is direct Iranian action to forestall further regime defeat that provokes regional actors to escalate against Iranian

interests in Syria in a manner that fuels regional war. This decision may stave off JN and ISIS victories, but it would have an overall destabilizing effect upon the Middle East.

Rather than increasing the likelihood of a renewed peace process, a shift away from the multi-year stalemate between pro-Assad forces and Syrian rebels will foster higher levels of violence and regional destabilization, regardless of which side gains an upper hand. Both JN and ISIS favor protracted war as an enabling condition for their long term objectives in Syria. The Syrian opposition, meanwhile, does not appear prepared to unite behind either a comprehensive military plan or a united political program. Syrian rebel groups nonetheless remain committed to continuing their war effort in order to force the Syrian regime to abandon Assad. This combination of intents and capabilities makes protraction and escalation likely, though in new ways that present greater dangers for civilians, neighboring states, and the U.S. than the previous stalemate. A protracted and violent partition is one possibility, which would leave an ungoverned space dominated by jihadist elements, including ISIS and JN.

While it is unclear which of these scenarios will transpire, it appears likely that the status quo in Syria is about to change. Each of the possible trajectories



This graphic depicts one possible contraction scenario out of a range of possibilities.

of the Syrian war, including those not outlined here, produces direct ramifications for the likelihood of success of the priority U.S. mission to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIS in the region. It is therefore vital to track the next phases of the Syrian war carefully so that U.S. policymakers can develop effective counter-ISIS strategies. It is also likely that the evolution of the Syrian war in the next six months will challenge U.S. attempts to fight against ISIS, to eliminate non-ISIS jihadist threats to the U.S. homeland, and to mitigate the devastating humanitarian cost of the ongoing war. This report will parse the most dangerous and most likely combinations of actions that rebels, JN, and pro-regime forces could take in Syria in the next six months. This analysis will inform policy discussions that explore options to defeat ISIS and to contain and diminish the wider threat of global jihadism, including the al-Qaeda network.

## INTENT AND CAPABILITIES OF ACTORS WITHIN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

### *Syrian Rebels*

Recent rebel victories against pro-regime forces in northern and southern Syria position Syrian opposition groups to inflict critical damage to the Assad regime in the near term. The effective seizure of the entirety of Idlib Province positions JN-led rebels to launch a follow-on campaign against the regime from this consolidated terrain. This could involve targeting the Alawite coastal province of Latakia or regime-held terrain in Aleppo, Syria's second largest city. Rebels in southern Syria, meanwhile, have made steady gains against the regime in Quneitra and Dera'a Provinces that could enable a major operation to "liberate" remaining regime-held terrain south of Damascus. These recent developments indicate a noteworthy rise in rebel strength, which constitutes an overall change in the balance of power within the Syrian war. It remains unclear whether Syrian rebels are currently capable of meaningfully challenging core regime terrain, such as Damascus; however, recent events likely indicate further battlefield changes to come.

The combat power exhibited by Syrian rebels in the first half of 2015 likely indicates that rebels are capable of sustaining such escalation. In northern Syria, the formation of new joint military operations rooms (command centers) enabled major gains against the regime by allowing a spectrum of rebel groups at a local level to achieve unity of effort alongside JN. The Idlib operations rooms have powerful military capability that they could utilize in additional offensives to expand their territorial control after "liberating" a majority of the province. The Idlib-based structures also provide an effective model for rebels in Aleppo, who are likely to learn from the successes of their Idlib counterparts. It is possible that this interaction could lead to cross-front rebel structures in Idlib and Aleppo Provinces, although not unless rebels achieve victory in Aleppo. In southern Syria, increasing coordination facilitated similar successes by largely moderate rebel groups assisted by JN beginning in October 2014. Similar to Idlib, these gains indicate that rebel forces may have sufficient combat power to deliver a decisive blow to remaining regime strongholds in Dera'a Province after months of condition setting. Syrian rebel groups in both northern and southern Syria therefore appear poised for further escalation, the form and function of which will affect the trajectory of the conflict in coming months.

As a result of this newly acquired strength and momentum, Syrian rebels are overall unlikely to engage in a political process to end the war. Rebel responses to recent attempts to foster even limited negotiated settlements such as freeze zones indicate that rebels overall do not trust the prospects of negotiations with the regime for a number of reasons. These include disbelief that the regime will actually agree to acceptable terms; a desire to capitalize on increasing momentum to gain more strength before coming to the negotiating table; and likely distrust of the international community to guarantee a political solution that protects Syrians and prevents future escalation by the regime. Syrian rebels are also incapable, however, of winning the war against Assad outright. Overall, Syrian rebels will therefore likely pursue a military strategy that seeks to force interim political outcomes such as the contraction

of the Syrian regime or the removal of Assad. The persistent internal tensions among opposition groups will likely continue to render attempts at cross-front unification unlikely above the operational level in the second half of 2015, indicating that even significant rebel military gains will not necessarily result in the regime's defeat or the emergence of a credible alternative to the regime. Syrian rebels consequently are also unlikely capable of achieving stability across a post-Assad Syrian state without considerable international support, given that they would still contend with JN's strong position within rebel ranks in a post-war period. Rebels are nonetheless likely to capitalize on their current momentum to execute additional offensive operations against the Assad regime in the next six months.

#### *Al-Qaeda in Syria: Jabhat al-Nusra*

Gains by Syrian rebel forces in early 2015 were in large measure enabled by JN's direct and sustained military support. Al-Qaeda is approaching peak strength in Syria as a product of JN-led rebel gains and JN's overall careful positioning in the war. JN's contributions to the Syrian revolution have succeeded in enabling JN to pursue its true strategic objective in Syria: to mold the Syrian uprising into an Islamic revolution that culminates in the declaration of an Islamic Emirate as a component of the envisioned global al-Qaeda caliphate. In particular, JN has succeeded in cultivating the support and dependence of Syrian rebel groups and Syrian civilian populations that JN intends to leverage in pursuit of a slow transformation of Syrian society into its own image. It is in JN's interest for the war to protract long enough to allow this transformational period to take root. JN is likely to pursue courses of action that prolong and potentially escalate violence and sectarianism in order to create conditions favorable to JN's rise in Syria and to the overall reemergence of al-Qaeda as a "revolutionary" Sunni force. JN will also likely act to undermine the possibilities for a partition as an end to the war. Finally, repeated statements by JN leadership also indicate that JN is committed to fighting the anti-ISIS coalition in Syria as a representation of U.S. and Western hegemony. JN will therefore likely pursue courses of action that neutralize opportunities for the

U.S. in Syria, potentially bringing JN into strategic alignment with ISIS.

The scope of JN's battlefield contributions to rebel offensive operations since late 2014 indicates that JN has considerable combat power that it can bring to bear against the Syrian regime in the second half of 2015. JN will likely do so from within wider rebel coalitions in order to maximize JN's prestige within rebel ranks and obscure themselves from targeting by the U.S. JN could, however, choose to conduct independent operations against pro-regime forces in the form of spectacular attacks meant to achieve effects that can boost rebel forces on other fronts. JN likely possesses a reserve capability to conduct high-impact attacks through the use of suicide bombers, a strategic military resource that JN employs selectively on the battlefield. Previous instances of JN's infiltration deep into regime-held terrain indicate that JN may also have good intelligence in certain areas of regime control to facilitate such attacks. JN is the most powerful cross-front actor among anti-Assad forces, and it can likely be expected to designate and pursue phased military objectives in the absence of competing cross-front rebel structures. In this way, JN may provide cohesion to disparate Syrian rebel military campaigns that increases their combined effectiveness against the Syrian regime.

JN also possesses soft power capability to influence public perceptions of the U.S. and its allies in a manner that enables JN to shape the overall narrative in Syria. This is a strategic victory for al-Qaeda in Syria that will likely provide staying power for the organization in the long term. JN will likely maintain its soft power campaign and leverage its influence to set conditions against U.S.-trained rebels and to shape rebel governance according to JN's vision for Syria in the next six months. Joulani's recent reaffirmation of JN's allegiance to al-Qaeda and to a state building project that a majority of Syrians do not yet support is a dangerous sign of JN's strength in Syria. The interview indicated that JN does not perceive that it must break with al-Qaeda in order to secure its gains or enable future success. JN's increasingly overt al-Qaeda affiliation appears not to have generated sufficient antagonism among rebels to jeopardize

JN's popularity in Syria. JN's reassertion of its status as an al-Qaeda affiliate likely also indicates that al-Qaeda's central leadership is invested in JN's progress as a strategic model for the organization as a whole. JN's success in Syria is a strategic investment and long term win for al-Qaeda, with effects that will remain regardless of what happens to ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

JN is also likely capable of producing major disruptive effects against the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition once U.S.-trained rebels enter Syria to begin ground operations against ISIS. JN's coercive power over Syrian rebels jeopardizes the U.S.'s attempt to build a moderate rebel force as a ground partner for the fight against ISIS by creating vulnerability for those forces. JN could decide to escalate directly against U.S.-trained rebels as they enter Syria to combat ISIS. JN's past success in neutralizing moderate rebel brigades supported by the U.S. in Idlib and Aleppo Provinces indicates that JN may be able to do so without facing repercussions from its rebel allies. Short of this, JN could likely deny certain terrain to U.S.-trained rebels, limiting the ability of these forces to combat ISIS in western Syria. JN could punish Syrian rebel brigades that work with or enable the operations of U.S.-trained rebels, potentially even escalating against civilian populations accused of supporting the "crusading" forces.

#### *The Syrian Regime and its External Backers*

Recent rebel gains have placed the Syrian regime on the defensive to an extent similar to the peak of moderate rebel power in the summer of 2013. The credible threat to the regime's staying power in 2013 prompted the regime's use of Sarin gas against Syrian civilian populations in the rebel-held outskirts of the capital, allowing the regime to regain the upper hand. If the current momentum of rebel operations continues, it is possible that the regime could resort to similar tactics out of desperation. One possible response by the regime to additional severe losses in late 2015 could be sectarian cleansing within a limited geographic area of the regime's core strength through which regime forces "clear" rebel and rebel-supportive populations using violent and indiscriminate tactics. The loss of a major regime

stronghold such as Homs City that severs the regime's control of the central corridor could provoke such a reactive response by the regime.

The likely courses of action the regime will undertake in the second half of 2015 are not, however, solely defined by the calculus of Assad and his closest advisors. Iran's military support to the Assad regime seeks to keep Assad in power, however Iran does not necessarily define its objectives in Syria according to the priorities of the regime. Iran may therefore leverage its influence in Syria to shift the Syrian war in other directions. Although the regime's strategy to date pursues ultimate territorial control over all of Syria, the growing deficiencies in the regime's military capabilities could force both Iran and the regime to consider alternate acceptable end states that still achieve the overall strategic objectives of both parties.

The Syrian regime retains a number of elite military units that it can still deploy to individual front lines, although these units are likely insufficient on their own to change the momentum of the war or secure remaining regime-held terrain against multiple threats. Recent reports of a major increase in the deployment of Iranian-sponsored paramilitary forces to Syria appear to confirm that the regime is incapable of maintaining the status quo on its own. It is possible that this transfer of military capabilities is contingent upon changes in Assad's strategy that minimize risk and set the conditions for a sustainable defense of the Alawite heartland and its connectivity to Damascus. One such possibility is a partition, which if carefully pursued could achieve the primary strategic objective of the regime and its outside backers to preserve a Syrian state ruled by Bashar al-Assad that has territorial integrity and ground access to Hezbollah in Lebanon. If Assad becomes willing to pursue this more limited objective, the increase in support provided through Iranian-sponsored paramilitary forces is likely sufficient to enable success by the regime. Alternately, if Iran were to escalate its direct military support to Assad beyond current levels, for example with equipment and Iranian ground troops, it is possible that the regime could regain the capability to launch offensive operations.

### *The Effect of ISIS*

ISIS, meanwhile, has entered a new phase of maneuver warfare in its Syrian theater that will likely challenge the current strategy pursued by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in coming months. ISIS is increasingly departing from its sanctuary in eastern Syria to engage both regime and rebel forces in western Syria and other areas unreachable by the U.S.-led coalition in the near term. This shift in operations provides ISIS with opportunities to inflict exponential damage to the Syrian regime and break the dynamic stalemate of the Syrian civil war. ISIS is likely to do so in order to absorb both additional terrain and Syrian rebel fighters. If successful, such an offensive could ultimately force the regime to abandon the most remote outposts of its ‘army in all corners’ strategy – including Aleppo, Deir ez-Zour, and Hasaka – and contract into the core terrain of a rump state in a manner that enables ISIS’s consolidation and expansion against positions held by the regime and rebel forces. While the regime may choose this course of action in an attempt to minimize risk in Syria, the overall result would likely facilitate a buildup in jihadist strength that could eventually enable those forces to escalate against the Alawite heartland. It therefore risks emboldening and empowering jihadist actors as well as increasing the extent of the human cost of the war in Syria.

ISIS could also seek to alter its relationship with JN in the next six months. JN’s success rivals ISIS’s campaign, potentially allowing al-Qaeda to compete with ISIS for leadership of the global jihad. JN has nonetheless been careful to avoid a costly war with ISIS that would detract from JN’s efforts against the regime. This détente has created a tense standoff between the two organizations, but ISIS could choose to change this condition in a number of ways. ISIS could launch an offensive against the regime in Aleppo City in order to align with JN and rebels to help them take the city. Alternately, ISIS could launch an offensive to seize JN-controlled terrain such as the Jabal al-Zawiya area in southern Idlib Province in order to deflate JN’s superiority within rebel ranks. This would force JN into a decision point about the price it is willing to pay for continued de-confliction.

Finally, ISIS could capitalize on its shared strategic alignment with JN against the West in order to pursue parallel operations in Syria that undermine U.S. influence while delaying a confrontation between the two groups in the near term. In each of these cases, ISIS’s actions toward JN in the second half of 2015 will likely define patterns of violence in Syria and constrain the avenues of approach for U.S.-trained rebels in their effort to combat ISIS.

ISIS could alternately seek to maintain its military détente with JN in favor of competing with JN for the allegiance of Syrian rebel brigades. ISIS has already attempted to coerce Syrian rebel brigades into pledging allegiance to ISIS, and could expand its engagement across Syria to incentivize rebel allegiance to avoid conflict. Many Syrian rebel brigades currently regard ISIS’s encroachment in the southeastern Homs countryside as a threat, prompting a number of rebel operations attempting to clear ISIS from this area. Most recently, prominent Damascus-based Islamist brigade Jaysh al-Islam announced a new campaign to clear ISIS forces from a region of the Eastern Qalamoun mountains southwest of Palmyra on June 9 and has claimed initial successes. ISIS could choose to leverage a major assault on regime-held terrain in the central corridor in order to appeal to Syrian rebels as an effective counter-Assad force. An ISIS campaign to earn the favor of Syrian rebels without acting directly against JN could allow ISIS to compete with JN for influence without intentionally provoking a bloody and spiraling war. It would furthermore boost ISIS’s manpower on fronts where ISIS is not currently the dominant military actor, such as Qalamoun. ISIS could pursue this course of action on certain battlefronts in order to set conditions for an ISIS offensive or to capitalize on rifts within Syrian rebel ranks to extend ISIS control.

To determine which of these forecasted objectives ISIS and other actors in Syria may attempt, ISW used the traditional techniques of intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB). IPB is a process of analyzing enemy forces, terrain, weather, and civilian considerations in order to anticipate their effects upon friendly forces and their planned or ongoing operations. In the context of a known

and cogent adversary, IPB involves analysis of the adversary's possible courses of action, given existing knowledge about the adversary's capabilities, tactics, and intent. Courses of action are ranked from most to least likely and evaluated for the dangers that they potentially pose to friendly force operations. The purpose of enemy course of action projection is to inform decision-makers with accurate forecasts that adequately account for a range of possibilities as well as the outside risk of most dangerous courses of action. Most dangerous courses of action are designated as such because they are not most likely, but they are nevertheless plausible. Illuminating them allows commanders to mitigate risk while planning in the context of most likely courses of action.

## **MOST LIKELY COURSES OF ACTION (MLCOA)**

The regime is likely to use new reinforcements from Iran to consolidate the defense of its core terrain and to undertake limited offensive action to establish buffer zones that provide defense-in-depth against future attacks. The regime is likely calculating its defense against a spectrum of anti-Assad forces inclusive of JN, ISIS and the Syrian opposition. The regime will likely prioritize blocking JN and rebel forces in southwestern Idlib Province in order to protect the Alawite heartland of Latakia Province. The regime will likely also secure the Syrian capital of Damascus and possibly clear it of rebel, JN, and ISIS presence. Meanwhile, Syrian opposition groups supported by JN have spent months setting conditions in Aleppo and Dera'a Provinces for likely upcoming operations against Aleppo and Dera'a cities. Indicators of mobilization in Aleppo and of intent in Dera'a likely signal the start of such operations in the next three months. Regime consolidation in Latakia and Damascus Provinces will likely facilitate victory by rebel forces in Aleppo and Dera'a. Possible near term ISIS offensives against the regime could also accelerate this timetable by adding additional stress to the Syrian regime's defenses that could overwhelm the regime and force it to collapse back into the Syrian central corridor. Together these trajectories set the conditions for widening kinetic engagement between a variety of actors that renders political settlement

unlikely and that integrates the anti-ISIS fight within the Syrian Civil War itself.

### *Anti-Assad Forces Launch Offensives in Dera'a and Aleppo*

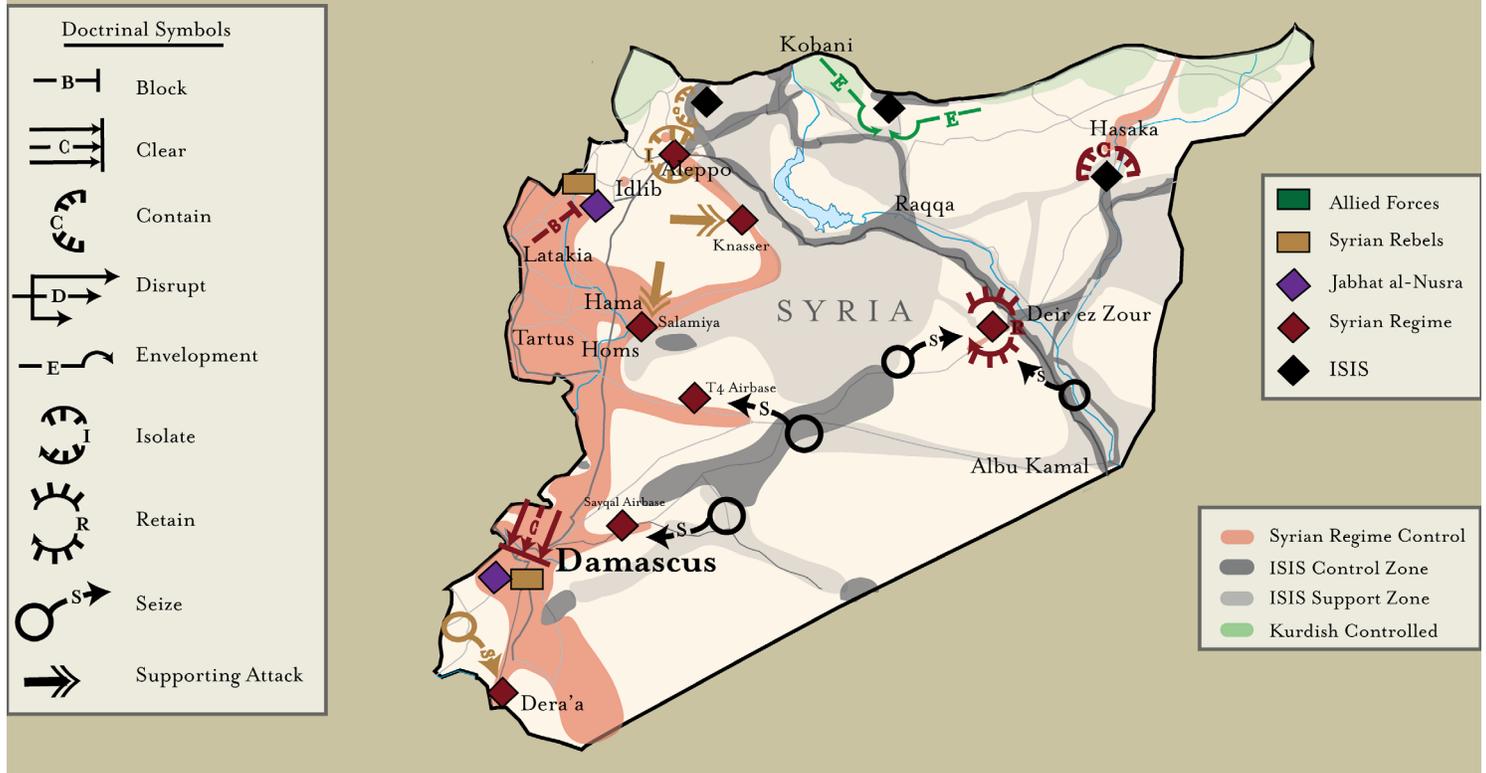
Syrian rebels are likely to launch two major offensives that could alter the trajectory of the Syrian war in the next six months. Opposition forces supported by JN are likely to capitalize on recent gains in northern and southern Syria to set the conditions for an eventual attack on Damascus. First, Syrian rebels supported by JN in Aleppo Province are likely to launch an offensive to contain the Syrian regime within Aleppo City. JN and rebel forces are likely to launch supporting attacks at critical nodes on the regime's supply line to Aleppo City from Hama, likely targeting the towns of Knasser or Salamiya. A disruption of the regime's supply line could enable JN and rebel forces to encircle and besiege regime forces in Aleppo City. A number of indicators of this offensive have already occurred, including reports of the renegotiation of rebel command-and-control relationships in the city, initial staging and conditions-setting operations in the southern outskirts of the city, and rumors of increased support from regional actors such as Turkey in preparation for a major offensive. Syrian rebels and JN will also attempt to contain ISIS to the northeastern countryside of Aleppo as a critical supporting effort in order to prevent ISIS from attacking the opposition flank as the Battle for Aleppo begins.

In addition, JN and rebel forces are likely to launch a major operation to seize control of Dera'a City in southern Syria. Steady gains by JN and rebel forces beginning in the fall of 2014 have degraded the regime's military capabilities in southern Syria and left the city vulnerable to a major offensive by anti-Assad forces. Civilian populations in Dera'a City launched multiple protests in May 2015 calling for the liberation of Dera'a City, indicating that pro-opposition civilian populations expect that the opposition is capable of launching a major offensive in Dera'a and are frustrated with a perceived delay. Although anti-Assad forces do not design military campaigns in response to popular demands, the steady elimination of regime military bases in the province



# Syrian Conflict Most Likely Courses of Action

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beginning in the fall of 2014 indicates the existence of a phased campaign plan that will likely culminate in a major final offensive against the provincial capital to oust the regime from the province. The rebel seizure of the Brigade 52 base in eastern Dera'a Province on June 9, 2015, suggests that final preparation for a Dera'a City offensive may be underway.

If successful, rebel attacks on Aleppo and Damascus Cities would eliminate remaining regime positions that previously constituted rear vulnerabilities for rebel forces, thereby setting the conditions for a possible future attack on Damascus. A number of recent indicators could signal emerging rebel preparation for a Damascus phase of the war. Unconfirmed reports indicate that prominent Damascus military commander Zahran Alloush, the leader of Saudi-funded Islamist group Jaysh al-Islam, is abdicating his operational role as the commander of the unified rebel military command in the Eastern Ghouta suburbs of Damascus in order to play a greater role

in opposition strategy and external politics. Ongoing rumors meanwhile suggest that negotiations are underway between Alloush and the governments of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, and possibly the U.S. regarding options for defeating both Assad and ISIS in Syria while sidelining JN in the capital. Although ISW cannot independently validate these reports, Alloush is a natural political leader in Damascus as a consequence of his skill as a military commander, his demonstrated commitment to combatting ISIS, and the overall strength of his brigade in Damascus which is effective in constraining JN behavior in Syria.

In addition, the Southern Front, an umbrella group for dozens of moderate rebel brigades in Dera'a and Quneitra provinces, recently declared a new joint military command that placed Damascus-based rebel commanders in leadership positions. The Southern Front's declared strategic objective is to leverage gains in the south to advance on Damascus and force the surrender of the Assad regime. This restructuring

could therefore indicate that the Southern Front is already preparing for this final phase of its war effort. Leveraging Alloush to lead a military operation involving the Southern Front and Damascus-based brigades could enable Syrian rebels to sideline JN while challenging the regime in the capital.

Expected efforts by ISIS to expand its territorial control and influence in both northern and southern Syria could fundamentally change the conditions on the ground in ways that either assist or threaten planned rebel offensives. In Aleppo Province, ISIS likely seeks to disrupt the planned JN and rebel offensive against Aleppo City in order to set necessary conditions to exploit any destabilization in the stalemated fight for the city. Recent ISIS advances north of Aleppo have forced JN and rebels to deploy reinforcements away from Aleppo City, likely delaying the start of any major combat operations in the city itself. Continued pressure by ISIS on opposition supply lines in northern Aleppo could impose a limiting factor on opposition combat power in Aleppo, thereby constraining their objectives. ISIS efforts to penetrate southern Syria through both maneuver offensives and sleeper cells pose a similar risk of disrupting an opposition advance against Dera'a City. Nonetheless, ISIS's expected actions against the Syrian regime in central Syria could also open exploitable opportunities for JN and rebel offensives in Aleppo and Dera'a by forcing a regime contraction away from these strategic but peripheral areas towards core regime terrain along the Syrian central corridor. Meanwhile, Syrian Kurdish forces may force ISIS to contract away from the Syrian-Turkish Border in northern Raqqa Province; however this would not likely disrupt ISIS's consolidation and disruption elsewhere.

#### *Syrian Regime Reestablishes Defensive Perimeter*

The Syrian regime is most likely to attempt to maintain the status quo in the next six months. Under current conditions, this requires an increased augmentation of the regime's defense-in-depth in Damascus, the central corridor, and the Syrian Coast in order to protect core regime-held terrain from likely upcoming assaults by a variety of anti-Assad

forces. Syrian diplomatic sources have indicated that recent losses in northern, central, and southern Syria have pushed the regime to prioritize areas of western Syria that the regime can best defend at the expense of the rest of the country, possibly under Iranian advisement. If true, such reports likely confirm that the regime will prioritize augmenting its defenses in western Syria as its main line of effort in the next six months. The regime will also likely maintain its satellite outposts in Hasaka and Deir ez-Zour as long as possible but is unlikely to dedicate significant resources to the defense of this terrain. Reports that Iran has increased its direct military support to the regime indicate that the regime likely has sufficient manpower to accomplish both objectives in the second half of 2015.

The Syrian regime will most likely attempt to launch limited offensive operations in order to disrupt current opposition momentum, reestablish defensible perimeters around its core terrain, and deny anti-Assad forces opportunities to open new battlefronts within previously-secure regime-held provinces. The first likely target of a counterattack by the regime is Jisr al-Shughour City, which lies at the seam between Idlib and Aleppo Provinces. The fall of Jisr al-Shughour positioned anti-Assad forces to penetrate into the coastal Alawite stronghold of Latakia Province and it is therefore crucial for the regime to eliminate this staging area in order to defend Latakia. Multiple indicators of preparation for major operations in southwestern Idlib Province have occurred since April 2015, including an alleged visit by Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps – Qods Force (IRGC-QF) leader Qassem Suleimani to a regime military position south of Jisr al-Shughour, the reported arrival of over a thousand IRGC fighters to the area, and reports of pro-regime forces digging a set of trenches in the northeastern countryside of Latakia.

The regime will also likely launch an offensive to clear the rebel-held outskirts of Damascus City. An indicator for this course of action occurred on June 3, 2015, with reports that over 7,000 Iraqi Shi'a militia and Iranian IRGC fighters arrived in Damascus. The regime will likely prioritize the

southern and southwestern outskirts of Damascus while maintaining pressure on the mostly-encircled Eastern Ghouta suburbs of the capital. The regime is likely also seeking to buffer Damascus and harden its defenses in the event of a major ISIS attack on the capital following the ISIS seizure of Palmyra in central Syria. The arrival of these forces could also constitute a conditions-setting effort to enable pro-regime forces to reinforce their supply line between Damascus and Dera'a City.

The regime would likely compliment this defensive consolidation in western Syria with secondary efforts to contain ISIS south of Hasaka City and to retain regime-held terrain in western Deir ez-Zour Province. ISIS likely intends to seize the regime's military positions in western Deir ez-Zour, however, and will probably succeed. ISIS could also disrupt the regime's likely efforts to consolidate the Syrian central corridor in the next six months through a likely offensive to seize control of a major urban center along the M5 highway such as Homs or Hama Cities. If they occur, such ISIS advances may force the regime and its foreign supporters to curtail limited offensive operations in Jisr al-Shughour and Damascus in order to reinforce the Homs front. If successful, an ISIS advance on Homs could ultimately catalyze the regime's collapse into a partitioned rump state centered on Damascus and the Syrian coast. Alternatively, an ISIS offensive on the central corridor that poses a perceived existential threat to the Syrian regime could prompt direct Iranian intervention in Syria, potentially including the insertion of IRGC combat units.

## **MOST DANGEROUS COURSE OF ACTION (MDCOA)**

JN and Iran could both escalate in game-changing ways in the next three months. JN could launch an independent campaign in Syria and Lebanon that uses spectacular attacks to punish pro-regime populations and disrupt pro-regime alliances. JN may choose to escalate its activities in Syria during Ramadan, beginning on June 17, in order to add religious significance to its campaign and potentially to compete with ISIS for visibility and military prestige

inside of Syria at a time when ISIS is likely to escalate. This course of action would likely prompt increasing sectarian violence in Syria and Lebanon that would further destabilize the region and protract the Syrian war to JN's advantage. Iran, meanwhile, may leverage increased support to the Assad regime to coerce the regime into pursuing Iranian regional objectives above and beyond new operational victories against the Syrian opposition. Iran could direct a pro-regime counter-offensive to oust JN and rebel forces from the the Syrian side of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights in order to position Iranian forces in close proximity to Israel. The regional tension such a move would produce could inflame the ongoing standoff between Israel and Iran and spark destabilizing interactions within the Iran-Saudi Arabia competition for regional influence. These courses of action are less likely, but still plausible.

### *Jabhat al-Nusra Launches Spectacular Attacks against Regime Supporters and Iranian Proxy Forces*

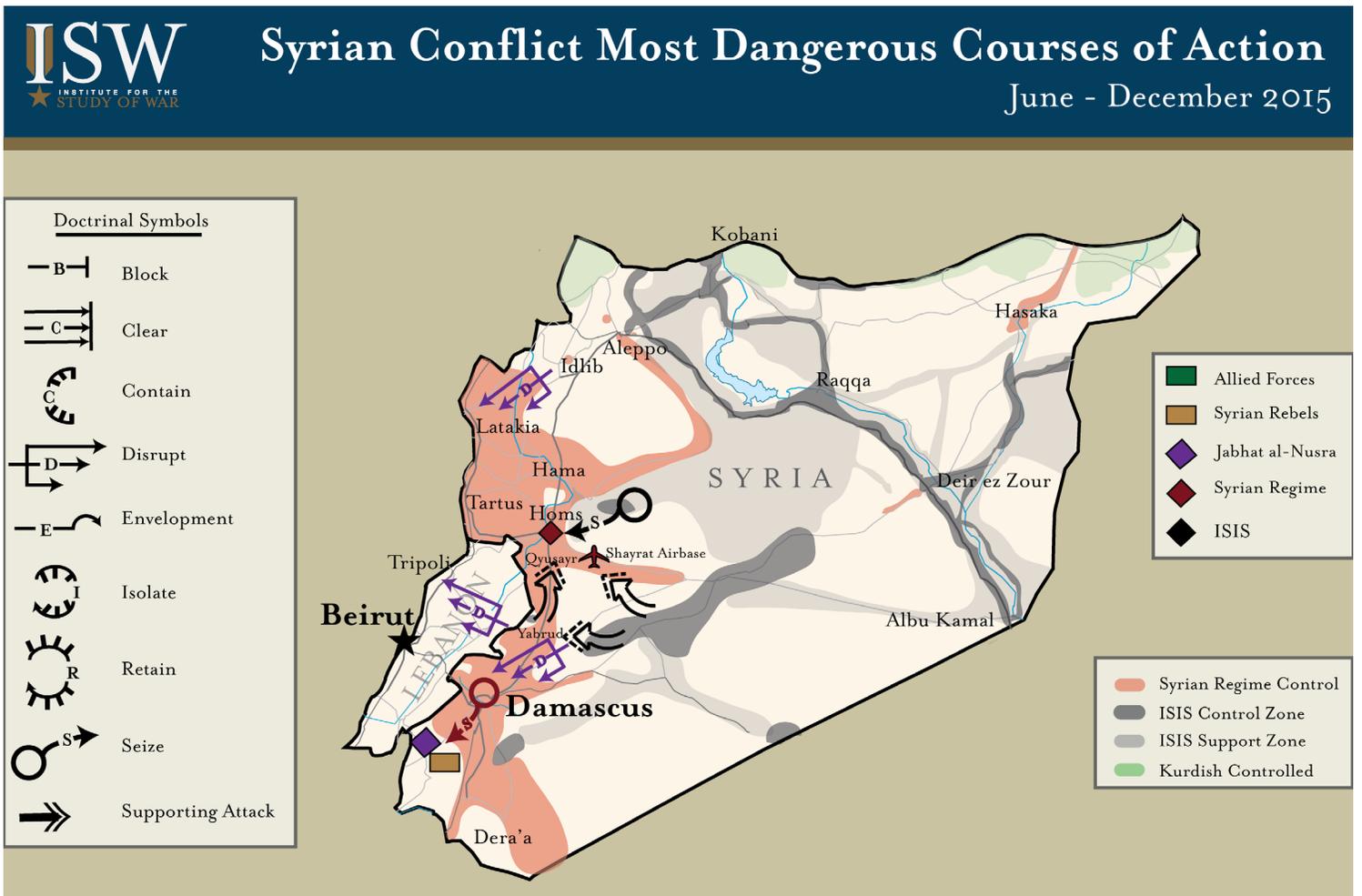
JN's most dangerous course of action in the next six months is to launch major spectacular attacks against pro-regime forces and populations in order to undercut the regime's support base and to exploit the vulnerabilities of the pro-regime alliance that includes Iran and Hezbollah. JN's rhetoric in early 2015 indicated that JN likely intends to focus on Iranian support to the Assad regime as a defining aspect of its war effort in the second half of 2015. JN will likely leverage the growing dismay within the Syrian opposition regarding a perceived Iranian "occupation" of Syria to justify an escalation against regime supporters that broadens the scope of the Syrian war to one intended to counter Iran in Syria. Historically, Syrian rebels have only cared about removing Assad. A campaign of spectacular attacks in Syria and Lebanon could demonstrate to rebels that the Iranian "axis of resistance" can be targeted indirectly to create fissures between the regime and its supporters, especially Hezbollah, which is likely concerned about Lebanese security first. If successful, such a diversion of Hezbollah's attention from Assad's best interests could create opportunities that JN and rebel forces could exploit in Syria. This course of action could therefore enable JN to undermine

near term attempts by the international community to foster political negotiations between regime and opposition forces, instead expanding the scope of the war and possibly generating further momentum for Syrian rebel forces.

JN has consistently condemned ISIS's use of violence against civilian installations and attacks on religious sites, causing JN to focus previous spectacular campaigns on targets that JN could justify as military targets. Spectacular attacks against military locations alone were insufficient, however, to generate asymmetric effects against the regime on previous occasions. Hezbollah's ability to withstand a considerable JN-linked VBIED campaign in Lebanon in late 2013 and early 2014 that attempted to force Hezbollah to downgrade its involvement in Syria indicates Hezbollah may be sufficiently resilient to absorb a similar volley of attacks in 2015. JN may therefore change its tactics and complement attacks on pro-regime military targets with similar attacks on

civilian areas in the Alawite coast and pro-regime and pro-Hezbollah populations in Lebanon in order to inflict maximum psychological effects on the regime and its support base. JN's suicide attacks against pro-regime populations in Tripoli and against Shi'a pilgrims in Damascus in the first half of 2015 indicate that JN will likely justify attacks against Alawite and Shi'a civilians as a necessary military component of the war against the Assad regime.

JN could chose to initiate a spectacular campaign targeting Shi'a during the Ramadan holy month in order to compete with ISIS and to impart religious significance to a war against Iran. Primary expected targets would include Alawite neighborhoods in Tripoli; Hezbollah strongholds in Beirut; Hezbollah positions in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley; Assad's hometown of Qardaha in Latakia; Hezbollah infrastructure in Latakia City; and the headquarters of Iranian and Iranian-sponsored paramilitary forces in Aleppo, Hama, and Damascus Provinces. If JN



initiates the campaign during Ramadan, Shi'a holy sites such as the Sayyida Zaineb Shrine in southern Damascus will likely be primary targets, though the shrine is heavily fortified. Iranian-sponsored paramilitary forces prioritize the protection of these shrines, rendering them valuable military targets regardless of the Ramadan holy month.

An escalating campaign of JN spectacular attacks would be highly dangerous because it would likely provoke sectarian reprisals by Hezbollah against Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon that could ignite sectarian tensions in Lebanon and spark widespread violence in the country. Increased sectarianism in the Syrian Civil War also jeopardizes the long term prospects for a negotiated settlement to the conflict, creating further protraction that would likely translate into increased influence for JN, ISIS, and other Salafi-jihadist actors in Syria. In addition to prolonging the war, JN likely intends to promote increased sectarianism that could facilitate future ethnic cleansing by JN to set the conditions for a homogeneous, Sunni post-Assad Syrian state. An attempt by JN to redirect the focus of the Syrian revolution against the Iranian "axis of resistance" as an avenue to combat the Assad regime could also provide Saudi Arabia with an avenue to accelerate its regional competition for influence with Iran, further destabilizing the region.

Meanwhile, expected offensives by ISIS targeting the Syrian central corridor over the next six months could play into JN's own campaign. Regardless of whether JN and ISIS cooperate or compete, gains made by ISIS against the regime in the central corridor accelerate the military campaign that JN intends. There is a potential exception that may drive JN to accelerate its own activities against the regime; JN does not support the partition of Syria, and if it perceives that ISIS's attacks are causing the regime to contract into a defensible rump state, JN will likely target regime positions in Latakia, Homs, Hama, the Qalamoun, and Damascus with greater vigor to ensure Assad cannot hold them without contest. JN could also attempt to coopt ISIS into participating in a campaign of spectacular attacks to maximize the sectarian spin of the conflict and to drive the regime out of more

territory in western Syria. Past coordination between JN and ISIS cells to conduct a VBIED campaign in Lebanon indicate this possibility, though it is unlikely. The interaction between dangerous JN and ISIS courses of action therefore risks fueling an escalating violent contest between JN and ISIS over control of terrain and leadership of the jihad in Syria. Rather than resulting in an attrition of both JN and ISIS, this direct competition would likely provoke spiraling infighting between the various anti-Assad actors in Syria as Syrian rebel groups will likely assist JN in combatting ISIS. Open warfare between ISIS against JN supported by the Syrian opposition could limit the ability of the U.S. and its allies to engage with ground partners in Syria in a manner that allows the U.S. to defeat ISIS without directly supporting JN.

The limiting factor for this course of action is JN's capability to conduct a sufficiently high volume of attacks. Hezbollah and Lebanese security forces succeeded in disrupting the JN-linked VBIED campaign in Lebanon that began in late 2013 and have since taken measures to neutralize JN's capabilities in the Syrian-Lebanese border region. A Hezbollah offensive in the Qalamoun border region is ongoing in June 2015 alongside a Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) crackdown on the Lebanese side of the border. Together, these operations may have sufficiently disrupted the JN network in the border region to prevent JN from reactivating its VBIED networks in Lebanon in the next one to three months. The lack of significant resistance by JN in the border region, however, could also indicate that JN has chosen to preserve its military capabilities in preparation for a future confrontation. Furthermore, the ongoing Hezbollah and LAF clearing operations on both sides of the border do not disrupt JN contingents in other parts of Syria that are capable of launching attacks against Hezbollah positions and pro-regime populations. Former patterns of JN penetration into highly secured regime terrain indicate that JN may have prepared for such a campaign by emplacing sleeper cells proximate to high-value targets prior to recent reported mobilizations of Iranian-sponsored forces in Syria.

### *Under Iranian Pressure, Assad Regime Launches Major Campaign for Quneitra Province*

The Assad regime has an opportunity to embrace the current shift in momentum that breaks the longstanding stalemate of the Syrian war to its advantage. If the regime could attack its adversaries where they are vulnerable while JN, rebels, and ISIS attack the regime where indicated, the regime could gain new ground rather than losing and contracting slowly. For example, the regime could launch a surprise offensive against ISIS in Deir ez-Zour. This course of action would risk sacrificing Homs, a regime stronghold, which ISIS may attack, but could grant a major strategic victory to the regime in Deir ez-Zour that forestalls a regime contraction and upsets ISIS's current momentum. Similarly, the regime could be willing to suffer a loss in Aleppo if this could enable pro-regime forces to capitalize on vulnerabilities in rebel rear areas such as the Sahel al-Ghab area of southern Idlib and northern Hama Provinces. While the regime is unlikely capable of doing so under its current resource strain, it is possible that additional Iranian infusion of direct military support, possibly in the form of Iranian ground units, could enable this course of action. The most dangerous course of action that pro-regime actors are likely to undertake in the next six months is an Iranian effort to leverage pro-regime forces in pursuit of an Iranian regional objective separate from the overall scope of the Syrian war itself.

Iran may set as a condition for an increase in support on the ability to designate the target that specifically promotes Iranian strategic interests. Quneitra Province is a likely choice because it could allow pro-regime forces to take advantage of JN and rebel focus on southern Dera'a Province in coming months to attack while anti-Assad forces are engaged farther south. A successful advance in Quneitra would place Iranian-allied forces in close proximity to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, a strategic priority for Iran. Due to Quneitra's location on the outskirts of regime control in southwestern Damascus, it is possible that only a limited infusion of Iranian capabilities would be required to clear JN and rebel forces from the northernmost sections of the Golan Heights

border crossing. An exchange of terrain with JN and rebel forces that essentially cedes control of Dera'a Province in favor of extending the regime's control southwest from Damascus could also constitute a strategic victory for the regime by consolidating a more defensible swath of terrain.

Multiple indicators of Iranian interest in gaining a foothold along the Golan Heights occurred in early 2015. An Israeli airstrike in northern Quneitra Province in January 2015 killed IRGC-QF Brigadier General Ali Allahdadi, prominent Hezbollah commander Jihad Mughniyeh, and four other senior Hezbollah officials. In addition, Iranian and Hezbollah advisors reportedly played a major role in a regime offensive in February 2015 that sought to secure the southwestern countryside of Damascus but fell short of recapturing major terrain from JN and opposition forces. Unconfirmed social media reports indicated that IRGC-QF commander Qassem Suleimani personally visited the front lines during this offensive, underscoring the high degree of Iranian oversight for the operation. Finally, a number of Iranian-linked attacks along the Golan Heights border have also occurred in 2015, including several attempted IED emplacements likely attributable to Hezbollah.

This course of action is highly dangerous because of the regional escalation it would likely provoke between Iran and Israel. Iran and the Syrian regime could attempt to portray such an offensive as a necessary measure to eliminate the threat ISIS, JN, and other "terrorist groups" pose to neighboring states, an argument which could find traction amidst continued ISIS efforts to garner support and pledges of allegiance from rebel factions in southern Syria. If successful, however, the most important consequence of this offensive would be the positioning of Iranian "axis of resistance" forces in close proximity to Israel. The Israeli Defense Forces have undertaken limited offensive action in Syria to disrupt Hezbollah and Iranian activities to date, and a buildup of Iranian combat power near Israeli-held terrain would likely provoke further escalation. If Iran attempted to utilize the pro-regime offensive to create a base of operations for Hezbollah and the IRGC in Quneitra, a severe Israeli escalation appears even more likely.

## CONCLUSION

The status quo in Syria will likely allow jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS to gain considerable influence and power while providing increasing incentives for Iran and Saudi Arabia to escalate their current regional standoff in Syria. Meanwhile, Syria's humanitarian catastrophe continues to go unchecked, threatening to fuel additional regional destabilization in an absence of an end to the Syrian war. The likely evolution of the war in the next six months will exacerbate these trends, leading to increased kinetic engagement by all sides and likely escalation of the war overall. The influence of al-Qaeda will continue to go unchecked, potentially allowing al-Qaeda to embed itself irretrievably within the surviving Syrian populace. ISIS will only gain more territory within Syria's interior, though Syrian Kurds are currently threatening ISIS along the Syrian-Turkish border. A negotiated settlement to the war seems a far distant possibility, whereas uncontrolled and violent regime contraction appears increasingly likely, leaving behind terrain dominated by ISIS and al-Qaeda. In the worst case, dangerous courses of action chosen by multiple actors could produce a highly unstable outcome that escalates a spiraling war between global jihadist elements and regional actors.

The U.S. is ill positioned to achieve U.S. national security objectives within the status quo of the Syrian war, let alone under the threat of new contingencies. Current U.S. efforts to build a ground partner against ISIS already fall short of achieving their goals in Syria. The air support provided by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition to Syrian Kurdish fighters has enabled important successes against ISIS along the Turkish border; however, this success is unlikely to translate into effective penetration of core ISIS terrain along the Euphrates River because Kurdish forces are unable and likely unwilling to project power deeper into the Syrian interior. Current U.S. strategy furthermore fails to contain al-Qaeda's influence in Syria and shows little prospect of reversing al-Qaeda's gains in the future, even with the rebel train and assist mission. The war's progression toward its most likely outcome in the next six months appears likely to neutralize the U.S.'s ability to achieve national security objectives

without departing from current policy constraints. Evaluating the most dangerous outcomes of the war furthermore illustrates that the U.S. is currently not in position to prevent such outcomes.

It remains possible to achieve U.S. objectives in Syria and in the region, likely even under most dangerous scenarios, if the U.S. can shift its current paradigm for countering the threat of global jihadism. There are opportunities for the U.S. to facilitate rebel victory against Assad in order to generate opportunities to build a stable post-Assad Syrian state capable of taking over the fight against jihadist elements. These opportunities demand, however, a higher level of aggressive and sustained U.S. leadership and require the U.S. to reconsider its current threshold for dealing only with "moderate" rebel allies. For example, the U.S. could consider opportunities to stitch together coalitions of rebel partners that include moderates where they have strength but also powerful Islamist brigades that are achieving victories against the Assad regime. Current trends point to growing momentum by rebel forces across the ideological spectrum in both northern and southern Syria, presenting an opportunity for the U.S. and its allies in the anti-ISIS coalition to apply leadership to unite these forces to achieve an end to the Syrian war while generating the structures necessary to create and sustain peace. Leveraging strong Islamist allies in this effort would enable the establishment of a post-Assad Syrian state with sufficient buy-in from Syria's armed opposition to achieve a unity of purpose and potentially sufficient military and social strength to counter al-Qaeda's influence. This course of action would require, however, a complex and multifaceted engagement in Syria that pursues disruptive effects against JN and ISIS through counterterrorism measures while building up an alternative to the Syrian regime and navigating the complexities of international responses to a fundamental overhaul of conditions in Syria. Syria must also be rebuilt in order to legitimize a post-Assad state and to remove the conditions of destruction and disorder that favor jihadist actors. The effort required to achieve these objectives would be significant, but it could likely succeed.

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