

## FORECASTING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

*The trajectory of the Syrian Civil War may fundamentally shift within the 90 day timeframe. Russia escalated its military assistance on behalf of the Syrian regime in early September 2015, deploying armored vehicles and hundreds of personnel to the Syrian Coast in preparation for the establishment of at least one forward air operations base. Rebel factions led by Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) continue to pressure the regime's stronghold along the Alawite Coast following a several-month campaign to expel regime forces from Idlib Province. Turkey and the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition intend to establish an "ISIS-free" zone in northern Syria along the Turkish border with the assistance of moderate rebel forces. There a number of ways that the actors driving conditions on the ground could respond to these events or generate new conditions. The interplay between these developments and their courses of action could create numerous different outcomes in Syria over the next 12 weeks. A number of these divergent pathways could generate negative effects that intensify the conflict, spread regional disorder, and threaten U.S. interests in Syria.*

*It is possible to forecast these trajectories to provide policy-makers and analysts with a key tool to anticipate the actions of adversaries such as ISIS and avert the potential pathways that could be most damaging to the U.S. or its allies. The following forecast applies the traditional techniques of intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) to actors and conditions in Syria. 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. IPB involves analysis of the possible courses of action of the primary actors on the ground, given existing knowledge about their 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 this 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.*

*The forecasts presented in this paper are undergirded by several fundamental assumptions. First, the recent deployment of Russian military forces to Syria will maintain a defensive posture to prevent the collapse of the Syrian regime rather than a direct offensive posture to seize territory from anti-regime actors. Second, the Iranian nuclear accord and its corresponding sanctions relief for the Iranian government will be implemented in full. Third, the U.S. and Turkey will succeed in organizing and launching some form of offensive by rebel forces on the ground in an attempt to implement an "ISIS-free" zone in northern Syria. Fourth, Turkey will not take hostile action against the Syrian Kurdish YPG due to pressure on both parties by the U.S. Fifth, neighboring states — particularly Lebanon — will remain relatively stable. Sixth, the Iraqi Security Forces will continue their current pace and scale of anti-ISIS operations in Iraq with a prioritization of Anbar Province. If one or more of these assumptions prove false over the 90 day timeframe, this forecast will need to be adjusted to account for a significant inflection in the Syrian Civil War.*

*Based upon the assessed courses of action available to actors on the ground in Syria, ISW anticipates a spectrum of possible developments in the Syrian Civil War over the 90 day timeframe.*

*These outcomes have been characterized through analysis of the most likely courses of action (MLCOAs) and most dangerous courses of action (MDCOAs) for three primary actors: ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Syrian regime with its allies.*

## Interaction within Most Likely Courses of Action

Syrian Civil War MLCOAs for 90 Days	
September 16, 2015	
Actor	MLCOA
ISIS	Conduct offensive operations and spectacular attacks against anti-ISIS forces along the Turkish border; escalate assassination campaign against Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies; set conditions for future operations against the Syrian regime
Jabhat al-Nusra	Secure a defensible perimeter in Idlib Province against both the Syrian regime and ISIS while expanding its influence within rebel governance and military structures
Syrian Regime	Secure a defensible perimeter around core terrain in Latakia Province and the Syrian central corridor while clearing pockets of remaining rebel presence near Damascus

The assessed most likely courses of action (MLCOAs) for the Syrian regime, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS tend to favor defense and consolidation over offense and maneuver. This observation holds particularly true for the Syrian regime, which suffered a series of prominent battlefield defeats over the past six months that highlighted its limited ability to sustain offensive operations across multiple fronts. Russia and Iran recently increased their direct support to the Syrian regime in response to these setbacks, although their mobilization thus far appears insufficient to enable large-scale operations by regime forces. The conflict between the Syrian regime and Jabhat al-Nusra will thus likely settle into relatively stable front lines as both parties continue to contest the boundary between Latakia and Hama Provinces. Russian personnel and equipment will likely enable regime forces to secure a buffer zone in southwestern Idlib Province, potentially including the city of Jisr al-Shughour, but will not empower the Syrian regime to conduct major offensives beyond the clearing operations ongoing in Damascus and its vicinity.

Jabhat al-Nusra will likely seek to preserve its momentum in northwestern Syria through follow-on offensives against regime forces in Latakia and Hama Provinces. Nonetheless, the arrival of increasing amounts of Russian assistance to the Syrian regime may eventually neutralize the immediate threat posed to the regime heartland and place Jabhat al-Nusra on the defensive. Jabhat al-Nusra will also seek to balance its constraints against the need to consolidate its recent gains in Idlib Province, particularly given the potential for an escalating ISIS-directed campaign of assassinations and spectacular attacks targeting Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies in Idlib Province. Jabhat al-Nusra will prioritize its efforts to embed itself within the structures of the Syrian opposition, although the expansion of its influence over the 90 day timeframe may be slowed by a corresponding decrease in

major victories over newly-reinforced regime forces as fighting moves into increasingly pro-regime terrain.

ISIS is the actor most likely to destabilize the current equilibrium. ISIS will act to evade the pressure of outside actors, to satisfy its need to maintain a narrative of expansion, and to accommodate its organizational inclination towards offensive action. ISIS will achieve limited gains in the eastern Homs countryside, including the likely seizure of regime forward positions at the T4 (Tiyas) Airbase and the regime-held strategic oil and gas fields in central Syria over the medium-term. Further advances by ISIS will likely be dictated by the status of the balance between the Syrian regime and Jabhat al-Nusra; ISIS will leverage its opportunities to undermine the party perceived as the most vulnerable. ISIS may nonetheless seek to prioritize operations against the Syrian regime in order to promote its image as an anti-regime actor and cleave other rebel factions away from both Jabhat al-Nusra and the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. Although the seizure of the remaining regime positions in Deir ez-Zour City remains an operational objective for ISIS, a major offensive against the enclave appears less likely over the next twelve weeks due to the strength of the regime's garrison and competing resource demands from ISIS's fronts in northern Syria and western Iraq.

ISIS's forces in Aleppo and ar-Raqqa Provinces may shift based upon the success experienced by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in organizing and implementing ground operations against ISIS in conjunction with moderate Syrian rebel fighters. The ability of the coalition to secure sufficient numbers of fighters for an operation targeting ar-Raqqa City appears suspect, particularly given pressure for Syrian Kurdish forces to be excluded from the fighting. In the event of such an offensive, ISIS will likely mount fierce resistance to any coalition effort to seize ar-Raqqa

City and seek to draw their opponents into urban fighting which neutralizes the advantages of coalition air power. ISIS thus remains unlikely to lose ar-Raqqa City in the 90 day timeframe. Nonetheless, ISIS will likely be forced to cede ground to rebel forces supported by Turkey and the U.S. in northern Aleppo Province. These losses may incentivize ISIS to further escalate its activities against Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebels in Idlib Province or otherwise pursue new courses of action to preserve its status quo. Some of these reactions have the potential to generate disruptive effects on the Syrian Civil War on a whole.

Overall, these assessed most likely courses of action (MLCOAs) under current conditions may drive the Syrian Civil War towards a state of relative equilibrium over the next three months. The dynamics detailed above suggest that no one actor will be able to force a strategic shift in the conflict through military means over the next three months. The multilateral nature of the Syrian Civil War provides motivation for actors on the ground to preserve this balance. In this environment, conflict between any two actors generates exploitable opportunities for the third. The primary actors on the ground are thus incentivized to exercise restraint as they anticipate the moves of other actors. Most often, they act to create conditions that neutralize the moves of other players in order to preserve themselves and avoid creating advantages for other parties. This dynamic equilibrium is characteristic of the Syrian Civil War as all sides attempt to achieve optimal positioning against their adversaries.

Any equilibrium in Syria remains unstable. Several actors possess the ability to disrupt the balance and drive the Syrian Civil War along hazardous alternate pathways.

Several actors can also pursue courses of action to alter the balance in ways that are most dangerous to U.S. interests. Namely, both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra are poised as of September 16, 2015 to force the uncontrolled collapse of the Syrian regime or the direct intervention of an outside actor. A decision by one or more actors to pursue their assessed most dangerous courses of action (MDCOAs) in Syria would thus result in a sharp inflection in the trajectory of the war in Syria. In some cases, an actor may pursue one of the above MDCOAs if the equilibrium is temporarily disrupted by other conditions, such as MLCOAs that have unexpected consequences. A rapid series of effective limited offensives by ISIS in eastern Homs Province, for example, could overwhelm regime defenses and precipitate MDCOA responses from other actors; alternately, the inability of ISIS to prevent advances by anti-ISIS forces in northern Syria could cause ISIS to pursue an MDCOA against the Syrian regime near Homs City to compensate for its losses. ISIS remains the actor most likely to pursue its most dangerous course of action and the actor best positioned to exploit follow-on opportunities from such a disruptive action. Successful U.S.-led coalition operations to contest ISIS in northern Aleppo Province or ar-Raqqa City could inadvertently incentivize ISIS to pursue these courses of action in order to secure additional urban terrain or border access in western Syria. This forecast seeks to illuminate this risk in order to avert near-term surprise.

The implementation of one MDCOA by any actor in Syria generates compounding incentives for other actors to pursue their own MDCOAs. For example, a successful large-scale offensive against the Syrian regime by ISIS in Homs Province or Jabhat al-Nusra in Latakia Province would likely spur the regime into a dangerous and uncontrolled contraction. This development would likely spur direct engagement by military

### Interaction within Most Dangerous Courses of Action

Syrian Civil War MDCOAs for 90 Days	
September 16, 2015	
Actor	MLCOA
ISIS	MDCOA #1: Offensive against Syrian regime in Homs City or Qusayr
	MDCOA #2: Offensive against Jabhat al-Nusra and allies in Idlib
Jabhat al-Nusra	MDCOA #1: Ground offensive targeting Alawites in Latakia Province
Syrian Regime	MDCOA #1: Uncontrolled regime contraction to a 'rump state'
	MDCOA #2: Iranian-backed offensive along Golan Heights border

forces from Russia or Iran that would inflame regional tensions and provide fuel for recruitment efforts by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and extremist groups. At the same time, a major operation by Jabhat al-Nusra targeting the Syrian Coast could incentivize ISIS to conduct its own offensive into Idlib Province while Jabhat al-Nusra and its allied rebel forces are distracted elsewhere. ISIS may actually seek to leverage the cascading effects generated by the pursuit of one of its MDCOAs in order to provoke a wider destabilization of the Syrian conflict under the rationale that it is the best-positioned actor to take advantage of this disorder.

Any and all of these dangerous courses of action will produce heightened levels of disorder in Syria which will undermine regional security, expand the influence of malign actors, and limit the options available to U.S. policymakers. The prospect of expanded influence for ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, or Iranian proxy forces within Syria will motivate other foreign actors in the Syrian Civil War – including Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia – to further intensify their direct and indirect assistance to factions on the ground in a manner that prolongs the conflict and further reduces the space for political compromise. At the same time, continuing violence provides both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra with optimal conditions to export their militant ideologies, expand their recruitment efforts, and dictate the terms of a generational conflict. These courses of action and their predicted outcomes will ultimately develop too rapidly for the U.S. to generate a coherent response to an even greater and more complex threat environment. The avoidance, neutralization, and prevention of these most dangerous courses of action should therefore remain at the forefront any discussion of U.S. policy towards the anti-ISIS campaign or the Syrian Civil War as a whole.

*Christopher Kozak is a Syria Research Analyst at ISW*