

BETWEEN AL QAEDA AND THE SYRIAN REGIME

A Path Out of the Current Crisis

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The consequences of a continuing war in Syria are costly: the creation of a safe haven for Al Qaeda, the development of a war economy, a long-term refugee population, and the destabilization of neighboring countries. Yet, current discussions are focusing solely on the destruction of chemical weapons, without offering any credible prospect of terminating the conflict. But, whatever the strategy the United States and the European Union decide to follow, whether they favor a negotiated settlement, a rebel military victory, or even an indefinite continuation of the war, the situation in Syria calls for urgent measures, including 1) directly financing local institutions and training a police force to limit the activities of military groups away from the front and lay the groundwork for a reliable partner; 2) appointing a Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in charge of coordinating all UN operations related to Syria, and lifting the ban on cross-border aid despite the Syrian regime opposition; 3) providing military support for the most organized insurgency brigades in order to break the military status quo and halt the progress of Al Qaeda; and 4) having the Turkish authorities close the Turkish-Syrian border to jihadists.

This report is the result of two weeks of field research in the governorate of Aleppo and three weeks of interviews all along the Turkish-Syrian border. This research is a follow-up on previous fieldworks in December 2012 and January 2013 in northern Syria. All together, the authors carried out more than 200 interviews with activists, local inhabitants and members of armed groups, local institutions, NGOs and international organizations.

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Introduction—Outcomes and Strategy

The recent negotiations between Russia and the United States over the use of chemical weapons have turned in favor of Bashar al-Asad. After having threatened to use force against the Syrian regime, Washington has finally agreed to a United Nations Security Council resolution which is non-binding for Syria. Indeed, if Damascus was to not comply and to use chemical weapons once more, the issue would have to be brought back to the Security Council, where Russia can veto any resolution in favor of the use of force. Indirectly, the negotiations and the ensuing resolution are strengthening the legitimacy of Bashar al-Asad, which has become again the main interlocutor of the international community. Simultaneously, they are weakening the political institutions of the insurgency, which are suffering a loss of confidence because of the recent turn of events. In the end, the negotiations and the resolution are only concerned with chemical weapons, and even if they would be applicable, they do not offer any credible prospect to terminate the conflict.

In theory, the current situation could lead to four different outcomes: a victory of the regime, a negotiated settlement, an indefinite continuation of the war and a rebel victory. While the two first possibilities are extremely unlikely, the third one is undesirable and the last, though acceptable, is full of pitfalls and requires action.

1) At the moment, a victory of the regime can be ruled out. The limited progress made by Damascus in spring and summer 2013 can only be explained by the assistance—whether in terms of arms or fighters—it received from Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah. As long as the Turkish and Jordanian borders remain open, the regime will be unable to regain control of the country. Help is rapidly increasing from the Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia's

opposition to Iran has led it to make an irrevocable commitment to the rebels. Since the spring 2013, more weapons have been coming to the insurgency from the Gulf States, with direct results: in the north, the east and the south, the insurgency has consolidated its positions.²

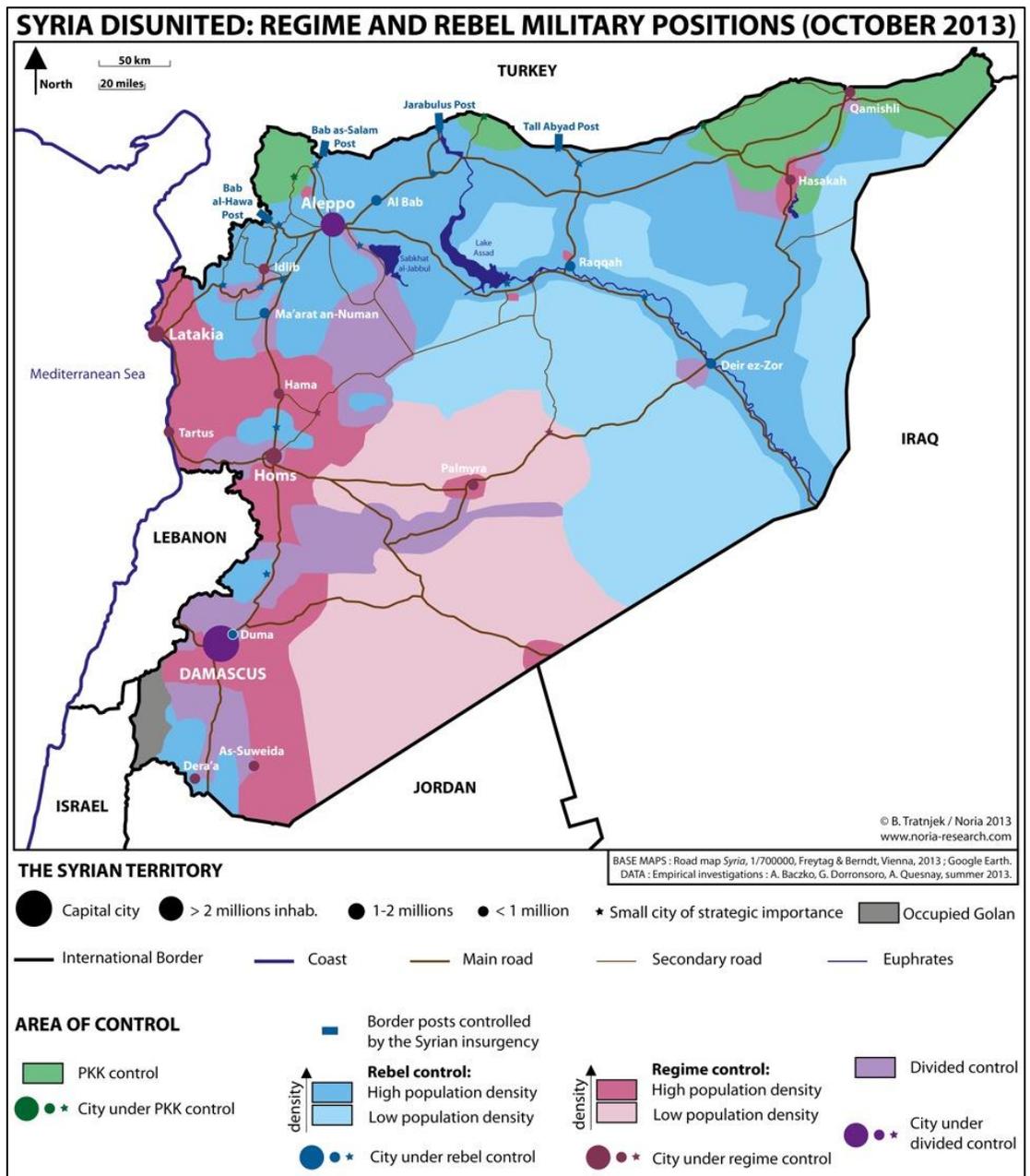
2) A negotiated settlement to the conflict is unrealistic at the moment. Even if the United States and Russia would find an agreement, Washington cannot force Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey to stop their support to the insurgency. Therefore, the current American strategy is mostly resulting in a loss of leverage over the rebels, which are depending more and more exclusively on regional powers. In addition, the Syrian regime keeps radicalizing. The security services are still arresting and torturing the very activists which might have mediated with the insurgency. The repeated use of chemical weapons is another step in the same direction. Finally, no groups fighting on the ground would currently accept to participate in a negotiation process and prominent members of the National Coalition explicitly declared that it would not be part of it. The people that expressed interest, for example the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, are totally disconnected from the insurgency inside the country. The Western pressure to force participation in the Geneva process will end up fragmenting the opposition, with all the subsequent consequences, including a weaker influence over the fighters.

3) In fact, the exclusive policy focus on a negotiated settlement will result in an indefinite continuation of the war. Such a scenario would lead to the exacerbation of regional tensions, direct threats to Western security caused by the presence of foreign jihadists in Syria, and huge costs incurred by the continuous flow of refugees (already more than two million).³ Furthermore, the Damascus regime has already proven its ability to do harm, notably by manipulating terrorist groups.⁴

4) A rebel victory is then left as the only acceptable scenario. But a legitimate concern for Western countries is that Western aid would fuel the victory of radical jihadist groups, notably the ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Yet unlike the FSA, they do not depend on the West to provide them with arms, which come from Iraq. Furthermore, this Al Qaeda affiliate is still a long way from dominating the opposition, let alone Syrian society, which widely rejects its extremism. Still, without the delivery of adequate, properly targeted aid, a few thousand radical fighters could take hostage a real popular movement, further closing the political space in the Arab countries that already suffered a blow with the military coup in Egypt. The rise of radical groups and the weakening of the Free Syrian Army are directly proportionate to the distribution of foreign resources.

In the end, whatever the American strategy is, supporting the institution-building process in rebel-held areas must become a priority. Whether the United States favors a negotiated settlement, a rebel military victory or even an indefinite continuation of the war, it needs to support the building of a large police force to back the nascent civil administration and

discipline the armed groups. In a negotiation process, such institutions will be essential both to unify the insurgency inside Syria for the talks and, if a settlement is to be found, to force compliance to the groups on the ground. Similarly, if Washington decides to push for a rebel victory, it should start building early an alternative state to the Bashar al-Asad's regime in order to smooth the transition. Finally, even if the United States lets the war continues indefinitely, such institutions will be fundamental to stabilize the rebel-controlled areas and to marginalize Al Qaeda. Consequently, aid must be structured to facilitate a more



coherent approach among the institutions that grew out of the uprising. Partners exist within Syria, progress is being made in the construction of civil institutions, sometimes, as in Aleppo, to a remarkable degree.⁵

The Worsening Crisis in Syria

The situation in Syria is now growing worse, to the point of threatening Western security, particularly because of the entrenchment of Al Qaeda affiliates. The key conditions to start a negotiation process will not be fulfilled in foreseeable future and, by exclusively focusing on it, the United States is unintentionally pushing toward an indefinite continuation of the conflict.

Negotiating Towards an Indefinite War?

Given the regime's radicalization from the outset of the crisis, negotiations may be doomed to failure.⁶ Indeed, from the very beginning, Damascus has rejected any political opening and maintained broad autonomy in its internal decision-making process with respect to its allies.⁷ Going back to the first peaceful demonstrations in 2011, its very close ties with Qatar and Hezbollah's advice to embrace moderation had no influence over the regime's radical line. Since then, the Damascus regime has been showing every sign of growing radicalization. The arrest, torture and killing of peaceful protesters continue. Since the enactment of the Counter-terrorism Law in July 2012, any form of contestation has been assimilated to a terrorist act and the suspects have been judged by the counter-terrorist court. The regime has thus eliminated all figures who would be acceptable to the opposition as part of a negotiated settlement.⁸ Likewise, the use of chemical weapons against civilians shows that the regime is operating in a mindset of terror that precludes any kind of reconciliation. The hundreds of civilian victims of the gas attack on August 21, one year to the day after Obama's speech on the red line and at a time when a UN team was investigating is a provocation by the regime.⁹ Damascus is

thus sending the message that its survival rules out any limits to its use of force.

In this context, the turnaround of the United States over the use of chemical weapons and the discussions currently engaged with Damascus regime is counterproductive. The Russian-American agreement is giving legitimacy to Bashar al-Asad, who, from a relatively isolated position, is once again the main interlocutor for the international community in Syria. The attention is currently focused on the destruction of chemical weapons, a very complex process, which might take years, while the war continues. Moreover, the UN Security Council Resolution 2118 is non-binding. If Damascus refuses to comply, the matter has to be brought back to the Security Council, where Russia can veto any additional resolution authorizing the use of force.¹⁰ With no sanctions following a deliberate use of chemical weapons on civilian population, the Western stance is giving Damascus regime a free hand in repressing its population and fueling further the conflict.

By betting on negotiations, the United States is giving up the leadership over the Syrian crisis. The cancelling of the bombings twenty-four hours before schedule, strictly over domestic issues, has put America's closest allies on this issue – France, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – in disarray. From now on, Gulf States and Turkey might be more inclined to act on their own in regard to supporting insurgency.

Besides, the American reaction to the chemical attacks is deepening the divide between the insurgency and the West. The psychological trauma of the August 21 bombings and the subsequent disillusion among the Syrian opposition should not be underestimated. No actor at this point can commit itself on behalf of the opposition with the certainty of being followed on the ground. On the contrary, the pressure put on the National Coalition to engage in talks with the regime is fragmenting the opposition, along a divide between people fighting inside and people interacting outside with the supporting countries. Some of

the largest rebel brigades, including al-Tawhid and al-Islam, recently denied legitimacy to the Syrian National Coalition.¹¹ Today, the regime's atrocities and the ideological radicalization of some of the fighters make compromise impossible.

Consequently, goodwill missions and negotiations in Geneva offer no real prospects. Lakhtar Brahimi, the UN's peace envoy for Syria, who is in charge of contacts between the parties, has hardly made any progress since its appointment in August 2012. His mission was to implement a peace plan agreed upon in June 2012 in Geneva by China, the United States, Russia, Arab countries, European Union and Turkey. The roadmap, to form a transitional government with representatives from both the regime and the opposition, was a non-starter. According to the countries supporting the insurgency, the departure of Bashar al-Asad was a condition, which the Syrian president and its allies systematically rejected. Geneva 2, if actually held, will face the same hurdles. The UN's role should therefore be reconsidered in two ways. First, the ban on cross-border operations originating in Turkey is the main obstacle to assisting civilian populations and should therefore be lifted. Second, appointing a special representative of the secretary-general to coordinate all UN agencies would enhance the clarity and effectiveness of the international community's efforts.

The Aftermath of Continuing the War

There are three major risks to letting the war continue. First, this conflict directly affects the security of NATO countries (the United States, Europe and Turkey). The more Syria gets entrenched in the war, the more that country becomes a hub of foreign jihadists. Several thousands are fighting in Syria with local groups, or in groups specifically composed of foreigners. Depending mostly on non-Syrians, the ISIL—which calls for global jihad—is by far the main beneficiary of this influx. Political instability in Libya, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq is fueling the transnational movement, which is rapidly gaining influence

in northern Syria. The situation is all the more troubling in that Syria is easily accessible from Turkey, just a few hours from European capitals. The ISIL has systematically seized control of the cities located near the Turkish border, which enables them to take direct charge of foreign volunteers. Yet Turkey has not developed any border control procedures with Syria. The border crossings are open, and international fighters can come and go freely.

Second, continuing the war widens the fault line between Sunnis and Shiites. Although historically secular, the Baath regime is part of the Shiite crescent (Iran, Iraq, and the Lebanese Hezbollah), while the rebels are turning to the Gulf States for help. Al Qaeda, which overcame the effects of the 2007 surge in Iraq, has taken advantage of this situation to spread to Syria. Benefiting from the American withdrawal from Iraq and the disarmament of Sunni tribal militias by the al-Maliki regime, Al Qaeda is once again one of the main components of the anti-government/Shiite rebellion in Iraq.¹² From that sanctuary, in January 2012 it created a Syrian branch, Jabhat al-Nusra, part of which became the ISIL during the merger of the Syrian and Iraqi branches in April 2013. The Damascus regime facilitated the formation of this movement by releasing all Islamist prisoners in 2011 in order to radicalize the opposition, which was peaceful at the time. In addition, the involvement of Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militiamen on the side of the Syrian regime is aggravating the sectarian aspect of the conflict and eliciting calls for jihad by the most radical Sunni preachers (such as Sheikh Yusuf al-Qardawi on Al Jazeera on June 1).

Third, the increase in the number of refugees (2 million) and displaced persons (between 4 and 5 million) is destabilizing neighboring countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq).¹³ There are officially 700,000 refugees in Lebanon, but the real number is probably closer to a million, in a population of a little more than 4 million. The humanitarian cost of the crisis will be several billion dollars per year—probably between \$5 and \$10 billion—for years to come. Turkey has already spent \$1 billion on the refugees,

barely \$130 million of which was covered by the international community.¹⁴

In the final analysis, the worsening and prolongation of the Syrian crisis cannot be ignored. Apart from the use of chemical weapons, the West cannot accept the existence of an Al Qaeda sanctuary on Europe's doorstep. If it does not act now, the United States will therefore have to intervene in the near future directly or through its local allies in the Syrian insurgency. If it has lost its local allies, the Administration will find itself facing impossible choices: intervening on the ground or employing drones or Special Forces. A troop intervention against jihadist groups would undoubtedly be counterproductive in Syria and so unpopular in the United States that it is ruled out barring exceptional circumstances. However the use of drones and Special Forces could also arouse strong hostility in the region and assumes a level of intelligence that would be difficult to obtain without local allies. Indeed, the targeted elimination programs in Pakistan and Yemen presume government support. And drones have demonstrated their limitations in Pakistan and would be even less effective if factions influenced by Al Qaeda gain the upper hand in northern Syria.¹⁵

The (Resistable) Rise of the Takfiris in the North

The Syrian crisis is potentially more dangerous than Afghanistan when it served as an Al Qaeda sanctuary prior to September 11, 2001. Indeed, the ISIL already has a sanctuary in northern Syria due to the area's porous border with Iraq. The danger now is that this group will attract fighters belonging to the transnational movement that stretches from the Sahel to Afghanistan. Indeed, the dynamic in rebel-controlled areas has been altered by the reorganization of Al Qaeda in Syria. The Iraqi branch has seized control of most of the Syrian branch, and particularly of the foreign fighters.¹⁶ The ISIL has launched a remarkably effective effort to take over northern Syria,

threatening in the long run to deeply change the political dynamic in the liberated areas.

The ISIL's Foreign Base

The ISIL is the result of a merger between the ISI (Islamic State of Iraq) and part of Jabhat al-Nusra. Most of the foreigners and the most radical elements of Jabhat al-Nusra joined the ISIL when differences erupted between Jabhat al-Nusra's Syrian base and the international jihadists in the organization. The current Jabhat al-Nusra is focusing on fighting the regime, while the ISIL's priority is the fight against Shiism and the creation of an Islamic emirate incorporating Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.¹⁷ The integration of the Iraqi and Syrian branches enabled Al Qaeda to expand, but the movement formed by that merger is deeply alien to Syrian society from the standpoint of ideology, recruitment and resources.

From an ideological perspective, Al Qaeda is viewed by inhabitants and other groups of rebel fighters as a foreign movement. Indeed, while jihad is now the dominant language of the uprising, it refers to realities that have little to do with the doctrine of Al Qaeda. The terms "Salafism" and "Jihadism" inadequately reflect the complexity of political and religious factors, and the ISIL's particularity in Syria resides in its frequent practice of takfir (excommunication). Inspired by Sayyid Qutb, takfirist groups claim the right to declare a practicing Muslim an apostate, which is punishable by death.¹⁸ That is how members of Al Qaeda justify eliminating their political opponents. This practice is professed by the group, notably by imams of the few mosques they control in Aleppo. Such an ideology is profoundly foreign to the population, which is worried by the rise of this movement. Al Qaeda's condemnation of the cult of saints, popular in Syria, also illustrates the distance between the transnational organization and most Syrians. The distribution of food in Raqqah this past August shows that the movement is beginning to worry about its lack of a popular base. Its radical nature is also reflected by its treatment of minorities

and notably the execution of many Alawite civilians, exacerbating the sectarian turn taken by the conflict.

The ISIL's recruits and organization are also foreign. The majority of its fighters are international and most of its leaders are not Syrian. Iraqis are particularly numerous in the chain of command, beginning with its emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the regional emirs, including those of Latakia, Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor. In Aleppo, a Moroccan and a Chechen are amongst the main commanders. Several groups composed of exclusively foreign fighters have also sworn allegiance to the emir, including the Army of Emigrants and Helpers (Jeish al-Muhajeerin wal-Ansar), composed of Caucasian fighters, and the Battalion of Emigrants (Katibat al-Mahijeerin), composed of Libyans.

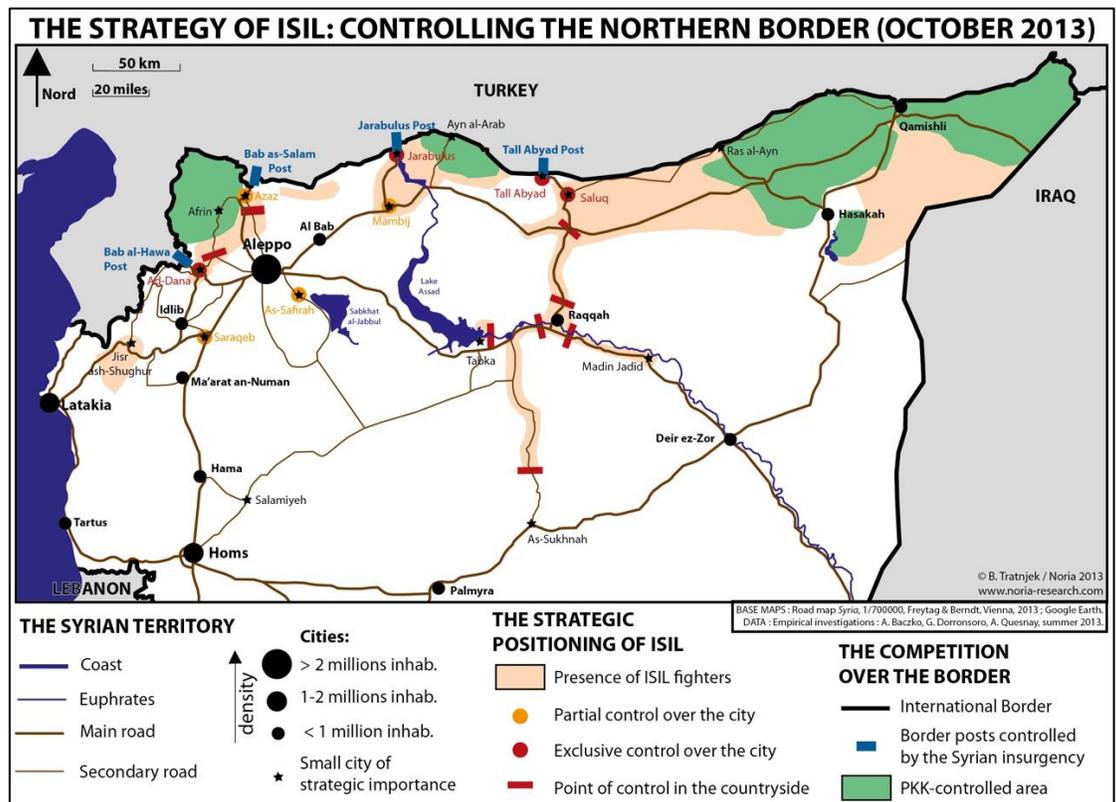
The ISIL operates in a closed environment, independent of the general dynamic of the uprising, and has very limited relations with the rebels. FSA fighters and civilians are not very familiar with the group and all describe having difficult experiences with it.¹⁹ While fighters belonging to rebel units, including Jabhat al-Nusra, are relatively free to leave the organization, ISIL fighters swear an oath (bayat) to submit to the emirs, who control their personal lives (family visits are rare, for example). The fighters are constantly being moved among different units to limit the forging of personal ties. In the end, the ISIL is isolated from the rest of the Syrian armed groups, and its growth does not reflect great popularity—to the contrary.

Finally, as far as resources—men, money, weapons, capabilities—are concerned, the ISIL operates according

to a different logic from all of the other rebel groups. It relies on a logistical flow that goes from east to west, from its sanctuary in Iraq toward the Mediterranean. Iraq offers a place to train, to pass on military skills, and to finance the movement. The FSA, on the other hand, works along a north-south axis, descending from its sanctuary in Turkey toward the fronts at Hama, Homs and Damascus. As the map suggests, these two axes intersect in northern Syria, whose control is crucial to the two movements and cannot be shared. Securing flows of men, arms, and money is a potential source of conflict between the groups.

The Movement's Strategy

The ISIL's strategy does not revolve around fighting the Damascus regime. The number of its fighters, probably a few thousand, is much smaller than that of the other brigades. The clashes in which the ISIL participates—the capture of the Menagh airport, the Al-Safira weapons factory, the Division 17 base in Raqqah province—are mopping-up operations to get rid of the government's last outposts in the north. They have received ample media



coverage and are politically important, but without much military impact and do not require mobilizing troops for a long period of time. The only front the ISIL is involved in is north of Latakia, where the Alawite presence lends a sectarian aspect to the fighting. In the same manner, the movement participated to a raid on the Ismaili villages east of Salamiya in September 2013.

In reality, the ISIL is pursuing the control of resources in the liberated areas of northern Syria. For now, it is not seeking to administer those territories, which would require considerable resources, but just to hold onto strategic areas. In recent months it has focused on controlling roads leading to Turkey, each time capturing the town closest to the border that remains in the hands of the FSA. It is indeed probable that capturing a border crossing would spark a Turkish response and would represent a *casus belli* for the FSA. The ISIL has captured the following towns, often by force: Al-Dana, near the border crossing of Bab al-Hawa; Azaz, near that of Bab al-Salam; and the towns of Jarabulus and Saluq about a dozen kilometers from Tal Abyad. Within a few months, the group was in a position to cut off supplies to the FSA from Turkey.

From this standpoint, fighting against the PKK in the provinces of Aleppo and Hasakah is first and foremost a battle for the control of border regions. The Kurdish organization, whose strategy focuses on Turkey, controls a series of territories along the border. In the north, the ISIL is blockading the enclave of Afrin and Kurdish villages on the Turkish border, notably Duweidan, and encircling Kobane. In Jezireh, Sarakano and the countryside around Qamishli, the ISIL has for several months been conducting violent offensives with the support of Jabhat al-Nusra and certain FSA brigades, almost seizing from PKK the border post with Iraqi Kurdistan. These attacks are specifically aimed at eliminating the PKK in Syria, but are leading to a generalized confrontation with the Kurds. Many homes have been looted and civilians abducted, increasing the number of Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq.

Similarly, the ISIL is taking over manufacturing and storage facilities: grain silos, factories, telephone towers, and gas or bread distribution points. In the Hanano area of Aleppo, it is demanding money from the South African mobile telecommunications company, MTN, to allow their operations to continue. More generally, by overseeing the transport of certain commodities and establishing checkpoints at strategic locations, the ISIL is putting pressure on other rebel groups by controlling their supplies.

The ISIL's strategy frequently leads to clashes with FSA brigades, although fighting among other rebel units is rare and very local in nature. The ISIL, on the other hand, is pursuing an aggressive, comprehensive strategy that gives it a decisive advantage over fragmented rebel movements. While the FSA is considering the local stakes, the ISIL is pursuing a global strategy. It is directly attacking FSA groups to prevent them from forming a common front. For example, in order to seize control of the road leading to the Bab al-Hawa border crossing, the ISIL launched an offensive in the town of al-Dana on July 6. The fighting left nearly 30 FSA members dead, and Al Qaeda gained control of the city by allying itself with other local groups. Similarly, the ISIL increased its influence in Raqqah by taking on FSA brigades one by one (see text box). Finally, the ISIL did not hesitate to attack Al-Tawhid, one of the north's largest brigades, on its home turf, Marra, in order to take over a grain silo. In this case, the confrontation did not lead to fighting because the ISIL withdrew following the mobilization of Al-Tawhid battalions. In the long run, the ISIL's increasingly aggressive stance toward the rest of the rebels and the latter's need to secure the flow of men, arms and money from Turkey may lead to open conflict. Furthermore, the ISIL is eliminating the activists that are publicly opposing it and assassinating the members of institutions that refuse to submit to it. Thus the imam of the Grand Mosque of Manbij and a judge in Azaz were killed by Al Qaeda this past August.

Finally, the ISIL is seeking to keep Westerners out of northern Syria. The many kidnappings that have occurred in recent months make northern Syria more dangerous than Iraq at its worst.²⁰ Who is behind each of these kidnappings cannot be determined, but it is certain that the ISIL is directly responsible for most of the disappearances this past summer in Raqqah and Aleppo. The group has also seized several Westerners working for NGOs in Aleppo province and confiscated the goods of a Western NGO in Raqqah province. Yet while the ISIL wants to keep out Westerners entirely, it is still acceptable for Syrians to work for NGOs. This is reminiscent of the Taliban's policy in Afghanistan; it accepts humanitarian aid in order to legitimize itself in the eyes of the population while keeping

Westerners out. Finally, the number of targeted abductions of Syrian activists and journalists—particular the fixers who work for the Western press—has skyrocketed. Al Qaeda seems to be seeking to limit information by this method, as it did in the Sunni regions of Iraq and the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Giving New Momentum to the Opposition

Without heavy weapons to capture the regime's fortified positions and integrated command structures, some FSA fighters, unpaid, searching for means of subsistence, no longer go to the front and participate in the war economy

The Conflict in Raqqah

The clashes in Raqqah are emblematic of the ISIL's recent progress. The ISIL is now in control of all the accesses to the city and has several hundred fighters inside. They still are not able to manage the city, which remain under the control of the other groups.

The first provincial capital to fall into rebel hands in March 2013, Raqqah is located on the Aleppo-Deir ez-Zor road. The city was captured by the FSA and Jabhat al-Nusra, allowing it to position itself at the city gates. Local institutions were established after the fall of the city, notably a city council (Majlis al-Madani) and a legal committee (Hayya Shariyya) with the support of brigades from the FSA, Al Farouq, Ahrar al-Sham and Ahfad al-Rasul. A local brigade, Umana Raqqah, emerged, seeking to become a local police force and to thus push the other brigades out of town.

The progress made by the ISIL within a few months in Raqqah can largely be explained by the lack of unity among the brigades. It clashed successively with Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Farouq brigade, Umana Raqqah and then Ahfad al-Rasul. Furthermore, Ahrar al-Sham, the largest armed group in Raqqah, did not provide support for any of the brigades that were attacked, itself having fought alongside the ISIL against the al-Farouq brigade. The ISIL always uses a similar strategy, assassinating the leader and a few top staffers to provoke the dispersion of the brigade. Jabhat al-Nusra withdrew to Tabka, in the western part of the province; the al-Farouq fighters were dispersed and some sought refuge in Turkey. Umana Raqqah, whose leader, Abu Taif, was kidnapped by the ISIL, is no longer a decisive force in the city. Finally, Ahfad al-Rasul lost its leader in a suicide attack organized by the ISIL.

Yet the ISIL does not control the town itself, and women, for example, are rarely veiled. The movement has only a few dozen fighters in the city, and its checkpoints are on the city's outskirts. It is only just beginning to invest its efforts in building a popular base, having recently distributed food. Following the same strategy as in Iraq, the ISIL is establishing alliances with local tribes, particularly the al-Fadila. But their influence remains limited, unlike that of Ahrar al-Sham, which remains the province's most powerful force.

that is developing in the north. This demobilization and the divisions within the FSA help explain Al Qaeda's staggering progress. Yet the formation of a police force and accurately targeted aid to civilian institutions—whose progresses are generally underestimated—and to the FSA, could isolate the ISIL and restore the rebels' momentum.

Marginalizing the ISIL

So far, the FSA is not yet ready to fight the ISIL; its brigades are mobilized at the front, they lack coordination, and launching a concerted attack on a group that is participating in the fight against the regime remains anathema to the rebels. There are three problems with forming a front against the ISIL. First, the rebels are caught between the Damascus regime and the ISIL. For now, the most effective brigades are fighting on the front and their presence is necessary to contain the government army. And while certain brigades such as Al-Tawhid are much larger than the ISIL, the lack of a unified command leaves the initiative to the Al Qaeda affiliate.

Second, the porous relationship between armed groups makes it impossible to radically exclude a group. Many Syrian fighters and activists still have a hard time publicly expressing their opposition to the ISIL, because the latter is participating in the fight against the regime.²¹ The desire to eschew divisions between believers (*fitna*) paralyzes many fighters and can work on behalf of the ISIL. Thus, after the capture of Menagh airport, the head of the Aleppo Military Council, General al-Ogaidi, appeared in a video alongside ISIL commanders.²² Similarly, in its confrontation with the PKK north of Aleppo and in eastern Syria, the ISIL is cooperating militarily with other FSA brigades and with Jabhat al-Nusra. The PKK's past collaboration with the regime makes it difficult for FSA fighters, including Kurds, to refuse to participate. What's more, the unpopularity of the Western countries, at least as long as aid levels remain low, would make an operation against the ISIL look like external manipulation.

Furthermore, Al Qaeda's methods terrify many rebels. Fighters and activists who might decide to confront it are taking a significant risk. Benefiting from their experience in Iraq, the group is particularly experienced in suicide attacks, while Syrian groups are generally rather open and little inclined to carry out security controls. Few activists dare to demonstrate openly against Al Qaeda, and marches in front of their headquarters in central Aleppo this past August drew only about 60 activists.

Finally, despite a real fear of seeing the ISIL continue to expand, rebel movements are too fragmented to respond adequately to the threat. Yet the ISIL is still militarily weak—it numbers no more than a few thousand fighters—and remains unpopular. In the event of a generalized confrontation against the ISIL, Umana Raqqah in Raqqah, the Tajamua Fistaqim Kama Umart in Aleppo, Ahrar al-Sham in the north, and Ahfad al-Rasul in the east would be important allies. More broadly, the ISIL could be marginalized by the restoration of a military dynamic among the rebels, which would presume greater collaboration among the groups, and by the development of a civil administration.

Remobilizing the Fighters

Insufficient aid to Syrian rebels stabilized the front and weakened moderate groups. The argument about “weapons falling into the wrong hands” should be reconsidered, as the most radical fighters get their weapons directly from Iraq. It is the FSA groups that are paying for the lack of Western aid.

As we wrote in our previous report, with sufficient support, the FSA could make major progress. Contrary to the popular perception, the military situation is dynamic in Syria, and the effect of the Saudi weapons deliveries, both in the south and the north, is being felt. The Syrian regime is now slowly pressured on two fronts. Indeed, their gains Deir ez-Zor and south of Aleppo (which has received little press coverage) show that the rebel areas in the north are

largely unified (see map). Capturing Aleppo and Idlib and mopping up the few bases the government maintains in the north could be achieved at little cost. Control over half the country, in particular the city of Aleppo, would give the opposition the room it needs to consolidate its civil institutions and establish a new military dynamic on the Aleppo-Damascus road. In addition, in the south, the insurgency has regained its losses from the spring and progressed both in the Dera'a province and around the Damascus-Homs road, which is now few kilometers from the frontline.

Yet, at the moment, without heavy weapons, the FSA is blocked in front of the military bases in which the forces of a regime are fortified. The front has therefore become largely stable in the north, and entire brigades remain confined in the rear, where they live off of trafficking. Their participation in the wartime economy undermines the cohesion of the brigades by establishing networks that run parallel to the military hierarchies. Thus the largest brigade in Aleppo, al-Tawhid, plays a smaller role in the fighting. Brigade leaders also profit from large subsidies they receive for controlling the border post of Bab al-Salam.

The transportation of basic necessities is particularly lucrative. As the distribution of humanitarian aid is generally unsupervised, due to the lack of security, and is not coordinated with local institutions, certain groups are able to set themselves up as middlemen. In this situation, accusations of corruption, warranted or not, undermine the rebels' credibility and strengthen support for groups affiliated with Al Qaeda.

With units operating independently of their hierarchies, the population has to contend with rising crime. There are two distinct components to this predatory behavior. First, certain battalions are taking advantage of the lack of security to loot and rob individuals. Car theft is now rampant and kidnappings for ransom are proliferating. Second, on the pretext of confiscating goods that belonged to regime collaborators, some battalions are seizing control

of factories in the industrial zone of Sheikh Najjar (where 20 percent of factories are still operating, according to the city and provincial government).²³ Several factories spared by the fighting have been looted.

This criminal activity is possible because there is no operational police force. The Legal Committee's police force numbers only a few hundred men, while the civil police, under the authority of the provincial government, only has 600 men for the entire city and as many for the rest of the province. They are lacking in weapons and equipment: only one police car was still working in August 2013.²⁴ There is therefore practically no police presence on the street.

Reforming the Police

The demobilization of certain brigades could be offset by establishing a military police force that would be explicitly distinguished from the FSA's brigades. The top priority is to secure the city of Aleppo, particularly the neighborhoods of Sheikh Najjar and Shahar, where civilian and legal institutions are located. The police could also gradually eliminate roadblocks and progressively expand their presence to the entire city. The second priority, hardly less urgent, is to secure the roads leading from the Turkish border to the large cities in the north, in order to guarantee the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian and military assistance. The roads between Bab al-Salam/Aleppo and Tal Abyad/Raqqah in particular must be swiftly secured by police stations, in order to prevent kidnappings and remove ISIL roadblocks.

A start has been made. Indeed, a \$3.5 million aid program for the civil police in Aleppo has begun but is slated to continue for only four months and will be inadequate to build a force capable of maintaining security in the long run.²⁵ Such a program should be designed for the long term and result in the hiring of 5,000 to 10,000 officers, including policewomen, with the city of Aleppo as a priority. The establishment of a police force would have two advantages. First, it would send fighters back to the front or

dissolve non-combatant armed groups. Second, it would create a unified force capable of resisting Al Qaeda's expansion or even reversing the trend by returning control of strategic points to the FSA.

In addition, a legal system is becoming established in the north to provide a legal framework for police actions. In conjunction with the support program Aleppo's civil police, a conference was held in Istanbul in early August to standardize procedures at the provincial courts of Deir ez-Zor, Raqqah, Idlib and Latakia.²⁶ The system established by the Unified Court of the Judiciary Council (al-Mahkama al-Majlis al-Qadai Muwahad) of Aleppo must be adopted by all courts, particularly the Unified Arab Code (al-Qanoon al-Arabi al-Muwahad) and the requirement for a law degree, Islamic or not. Thus, in each province, a new police force could refer suspects to the court.

Finally, a police force could benefit from the support of the brigades, which continue to fight the regime. For example, a coalition was created in June 2013, the Union of Straight Path Brigades (Tajamua Fistaqim Kama Umart), bringing together brigades consisting primarily of Aleppo residents. It is commanded by a council of brigade leaders and takes orders from the FSA military command under the authority of Salim Idriss. It notably initiated the attack on the military academy and holds the city's southern front. It numbers about a thousand men and, although involved chiefly in military operations, could provide support for the police against uncontrolled armed groups.

Supporting the Nascent Civil Administration

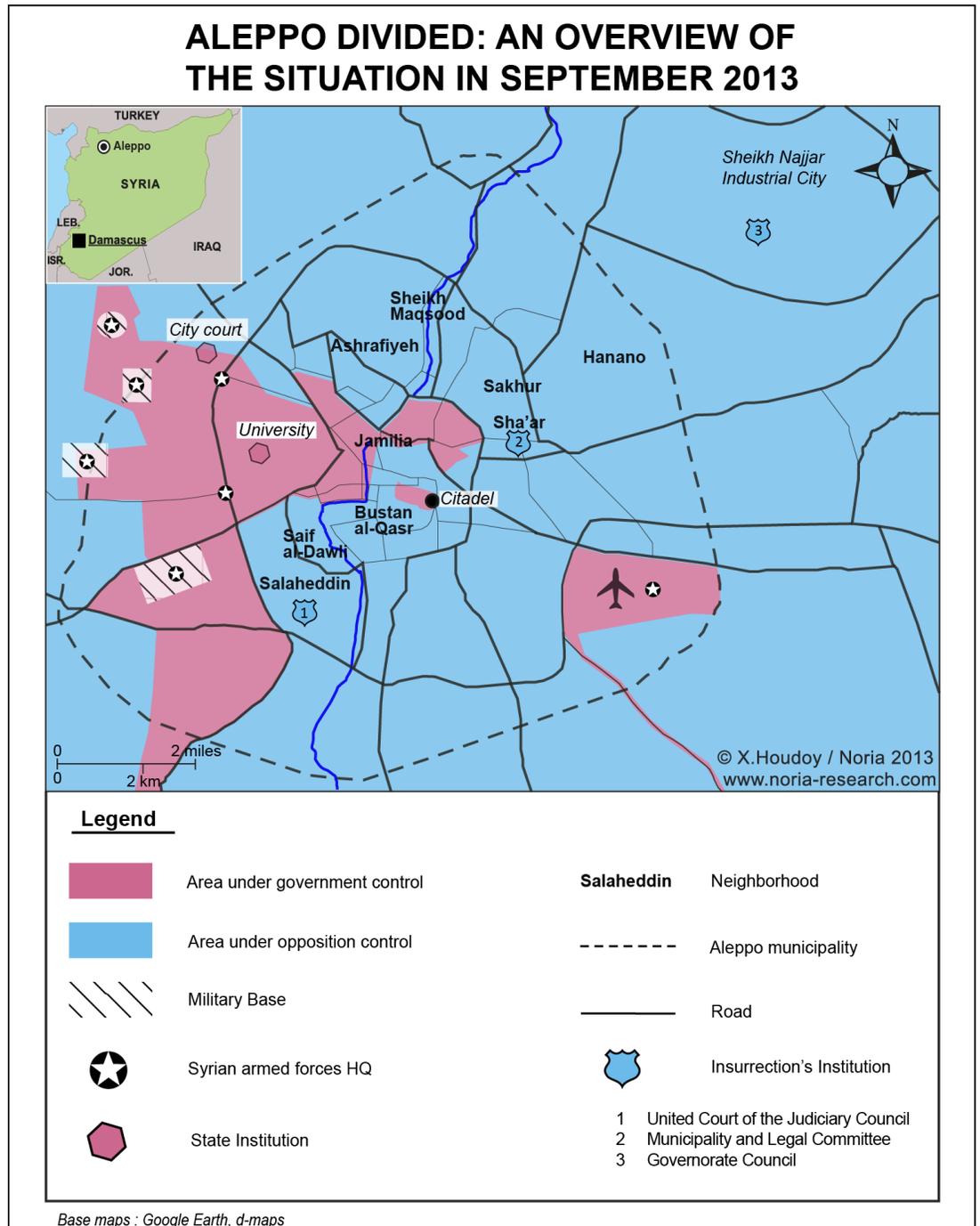
To keep the police from becoming a new military brigade, they must be supervised by a civil administration. Institutional foundations exist in most northern towns and provinces, a rebel success underreported in the press. Despite limited human and financial resources, civil institutions in northern Syria have managed to expand in the past few months. Life is to some extent returning to normal in the rebel-held areas, while refugees are beginning to return to certain neighborhoods of Aleppo. Major progress has been made in restoring public services. Shops, schools and hospitals have reopened and the food supply is generally secure. This local administration was established through limited aid, its employees are volunteers or receive very low salaries—\$25 month for teachers—and it has strong potential, provided that it receives effective support and becomes the focal point for humanitarian aid.²⁷

The Aleppo City Council, the largest and most organized of the civil councils, employs thousands of workers to pick up trash, restore water and electricity, and keep schools and hospitals operating. The mayor, elected in balloting in Gaziantep in March 2013, heads a team of about 100 men and women. An administrative hierarchy is emerging. Indeed, the city of Aleppo has been holding elections since April to establish 65 neighborhood councils (Majlis al-Hay). Incidentally, in one of the neighborhood, a woman has been elected at the head of the council.²⁸ And the province's municipalities defer to the Provincial Council, which are under the direct authority of the National Coalition (al-Italif al-Watani al-Suri).

However, the lack of funding means that the activities of these institutions are still limited. It would take only \$200,000 per month to keep the city of Aleppo clean, but that amount is sometimes unavailable, reducing garbage collection. In addition, much of the aid provided to the National Coalition by foreign donors does not reach local institutions. The specialized bodies created by the National Coalition, the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) and Local Administration Coordination Unit (LACU), are ridden by internal strife and staffed by people who are not in regular contact with the provincial councils and the municipalities. ACU and LACU never made funding the local administration a priority and the proposals sent to them by the provincial councils and municipalities have not been distributed to the relevant funders.²⁹ Consequently, the civil administration has no stable source of funding, and punctual donations from individuals help pay some salaries. It is therefore important to fund them directly, to the degree that they can offer guarantees.

Without additional aid, civil institutions could lose the support of the people or competitors could emerge. Indeed, the weakness of Raqqah's Civil Council played a decisive role in the ISIL's rise in power.³⁰ A similar situation could arise

in Aleppo and Idlib province. Furthermore, an alternate Islamist system competed with the nascent administration for a few months. In early 2013, four armed groups, Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Suqur al-Sham and al-Tawhid, supported the establishment of a court rivaling the Unified Court: the Legal Committee (Hayya al-Shariyya). Unlike the Unified Court, the Legal Committee has its own police force and erects roadblocks in Aleppo. More radical than



the Unified Court, this tribunal refuses to implement the Unified Arab Code, controls the way women dress, and makes it a legal obligation to observe Ramadan. There are constant tensions between these two courts and in August, the men of the Legal Committee occupied the Unified Court for a full day before FSA fighters forced them to withdraw.

The Legal Committee is also attempting to compete with National Coalition institutions, which they accuse of being “secular” or even “non-believing,” and is involved in the establishment of public services. It is organizing some schools and a hospital and taking a marginal part in garbage collection and in the restoration of water and electricity. The Legal Committee also appointed most of the new imams. In April, during the split between the ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra, the latter left the Legal Committee, severely weakening it. A large part of the Legal Committee’s administrative services joined the ISIL, calling itself the Islamic Administration (Idariyya al-Islamiyya), but without resources their activities were soon limited. In the end, these divisions considerably weakened the Legal Committee, which is now engaged in talks to merge with National Coalition institutions. The municipality of Aleppo therefore has the upper hand on public services once again.

Conclusion

If the conflict continues unimpeded, it will extend to a regional dimension and last for decades. Its dire consequences will then become unavoidable: the creation of a safe haven for terrorist groups, the development of a war economy, a long-term refugee population, and the destabilization of neighboring countries. The Europeans are directly confronted to a civil war, which is taking place on its borders and threatening its internal security.

A negotiated settlement would be at best a long-term solution and does not answer the current dangers. Currently, the parties in conflict keep polarizing. While the regime is radicalizing its repression and giving a larger role

to its security apparatus, the rebels will refuse any compromise which keeps Bashar al-Asad and its security services in place. To impose a peace in such a context would require the full consensus of all the international and regional players. It seems especially unlikely that Turkey and the Gulf States would stop their support for the insurgents, considering the loss of American leadership and the high stakes for them. Furthermore, the promising contacts between Iran and the United States do not per se imply a compromising stance from the Iranians on this issue.

Therefore the current American policy, essentially focused on the chemical weapons and a negotiated settlement, is disconnected from the realities on the ground. Whatever is the strategy followed in the long term, a peace process or a military solution, a shift in Western policy is urgent to limit the costs of the Syrian conflict.

First, the United States and the European Union must support the rapid building of a police in northern Syria, supported by civilian institutions. Such a policy would stabilize the rebel-held territories and marginalize Al Qaeda. To that end, the Western countries, mainly the Europeans, must ask Turkey to stop at their borders foreign jihadists who want to fight in Syria.

Second, aid mechanisms need to be reviewed. The West must finance local institutions directly, because the National Coalition cannot, for the time being, effectively coordinate aid in this area. While civil institutions are being rebuilt in the liberated areas, UN agencies are paralyzed by the ban on providing cross-border assistance via neighboring countries. Appointing a special envoy along the lines of the Afghan model could remedy the current lack of a comprehensive vision. The restoration of public services in the various rebel-held cities has already made it possible for some of the refugees to return home. However, their return remains precarious as long as the regime has the means to bomb the entire territory. To that end, a no-fly zone or anti-aircraft weapons for the rebels could stem the

tide of refugees to neighboring countries and, in the long term, return them to Syria.

Notes

¹ "NORIA: Network of Researchers in International Affairs," <http://www.noria-research.com/>.

² Thomas Pierret. "External support and the Syrian insurgency," Middle East Channel, August 9, 2013. http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/08/09/external_support_and_the_syrian_insurgency.

³ Edward Luttwak in particular would like to prolong the civil war indefinitely by arming the rebels just enough to allow them to survive, but without enabling them to win. See Edward N. Luttwak, "In Syria, America Loses if Either Side Wins," New York Times, August 24, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/25/opinion/sunday/in-syria-america-loses-if-either-side-wins.html>.

⁴ In the past, the Syrian regime has supported various terrorist organizations affiliated to Al Qaeda, including Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon and jihadists fighting the United States in Iraq.

⁵ The authors wrote about the construction of civil institutions in the winter of 2012-2013. See Adam Baczko, Gilles Dorronsoro, and Arthur Quesnay, "Building a Syrian State in a Time of Civil War," Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, April 16, 2013. http://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian_state.pdf.

⁶ International Crisis Group. "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-Motion Suicide," Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°109, July 13, 2011. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/109%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VII%20-->

[%20The%20Syrian%20Regimes%20Slow-motion%20Suicide.pdf](#).

⁷ Even in the 2000s, most of the opening measures by the regime were in fact very marginal. See Baudoin Dupret, Zouhair Ghazzal, Youssef Courbage et Moahmmmed Al-Dbiyat (Eds.), "La Syrie au présent, reflets d'une société," Actes Sud, Paris 2007; and Fred Lawson (Ed.), *Demystifying Syria* (London: Saqi Books, 2010).

⁸ See Human Right Watch reports since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, including "By All Means Necessary! Individual and Command Responsibility for Crimes against Humanity in Syria," December 15, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2011/12/15/all-means-necessary>; "Syria: Torture Centers Revealed," July 3, 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/03/syria-torture-centers-revealed>; and "Syria: Political Detainees Tortured, Killed", October 3, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/10/03/syria-political-detainees-tortured-killed>. Human Right Watch has also launched "Lost in Syria's Black Hole for Doing Their Jobs," a campaign to track the stories of activists who have disappeared or been tortured, <http://www.hrw.org/lost-in-syrias-black-hole>.

⁹ Doctors Without Borders confirmed that a chemical attack had occurred. See " Syria: Thousands Suffering Neurotoxic Symptoms Treated in Hospitals Supported by MSF, August 24, 2013, <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/press/release.cfm?id=7029&cat=press-release>; and Peter Beaumont and Ian Sample, "Chemical weapons experts say strike near Damascus fits with lethal toxin use," Guardian, August 21, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/21/syria-chemicals-weapons-experts-lethal-toxin>.

¹⁰ Department of Public Information, News and Media Division, "Security Council Requires Scheduled Destruction of Syria's Chemical Weapons, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2118 (2013)," September 27, 2013, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/sc1135.doc.htm>.

¹¹ Aron Lund, "Islamist Groups Declare Opposition to National Coalition and US Strategy [updated]," Syria Comment, September 24, 2013, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/major-rebel-factions-drop-exiles-go-full-islamist/>.

¹² Interviews in Kirkuk, Iraq, Spring 2013.

¹³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal," <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

¹⁴ Interviews with Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs personnel in Gaziantep, Turkey, August 2013.

¹⁵ Peter Bergen, "Drone Wars: The Constitutional and Counterterrorism Implications of Targeted Killing", Testimony presented before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, April 23, 2013, http://newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/articles/TESTIMONY_BERGEN_DRONES.pdf.

¹⁶ Interview with Romain Caillet, "Syrie: querelle de légitimité pour la direction du jihad entre Jabhat an-Nusra et l'Etat Islamique d'Irak et du Levant," Religioscope, July 4 2013, http://religion.info/french/entretiens/article_617.shtml#.UlJybiOHhhc.

¹⁷ In that sense, the common use of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) instead of ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant) loses the encompassing of Lebanon and Palestine in the objectives the movement.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Various interviews in Aleppo, Syria and Turkey, August/September 2013.

²⁰ Interviews with members of Reporters Without Borders, August 2013.

²¹ Various interviews in Aleppo, Syria, August 2013. In private, most of the fighters and activists asserted their conviction that a general confrontation with ISIL is inevitable.

²² Free Syria 2011 Syrian Revolution, "Colonel Abdul word Jabbar Aqidi of the heart Meng military airport after its liberation 06/08/2013," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCDTuGvljY>.

²³ Interviews with victims of car robberies and factory looting, Aleppo, Syria, August 2013.

²⁴ Interviews with police officers, Aleppo, Syria, August 2013.

²⁵ Interviews with the head of the Aleppo police, Aleppo, Syria, August 2013; and implementers, Istanbul, Turkey, September 2013.

²⁶ Interviews with judges and lawyers who participated in the conference, Aleppo, Syria, and Antakya, Turkey, August 2013.

²⁷ Personal observations in the city of Aleppo, Syria and interviews with Aleppo municipality members, August 2013. The improvement described can be compared with the last time the authors were in Aleppo, in December 2012 and January 2013.

²⁸ Interview with the newly appointed chairwomen of the district council, Aleppo, Syria, August 2013.

²⁹ Interviews with Aleppo municipality members and representatives from state and non-state donor organizations, Aleppo, Syria and Gaziantep and Antakya, Turkey, August 2013.

³⁰ Interviews with activists, rebel fighters and civil institutions from Raqqah, in Aleppo, Syria and Gaziantep and Urfa, Turkey, August 2013.



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