Defeating ISIL Through Partition: A Case for Dividing Syria

By Jenna Consigli

Published October 2016
This paper focuses on evaluating ways to reach the U.S. strategic objective of destroying the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which the author argues must coincide with a political solution to the Syrian civil war. The author intends to highlight that after 400,000 causalities in Syria mainly resulting from the Assad regime’s chemical weapons attacks, barrel bombs and use of incendiary weapons against the mainly Sunni-led opposition, the likelihood of Syria’s ethno-religious groups reuniting into one country again is low. A political solution is necessary to destroy ISIL because if there is no political solution, the paper questions what is after ISIL’s defeat in eastern Syria. Following an evaluation of the history of the region and the ethno-religious dynamics, the author recommends accepting a Syrian partition as a means to destroying ISIL and diminishing its legitimacy across the world.
Table of Contents

I. Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 4
II. Background ............................................................................................................................................... 11
   Map of the Ottoman Empire beginning of 20th century ................................................................. 13
   Map Syrian civil war dynamics ........................................................................................................ 14
   Map of Syria’s ethno-religious communities 1976 ........................................................................... 17

III. U.S. Policy Recommendation, Approaching a Syrian Partition ......................................................... 29
   Map Syria’s economic resources ........................................................................................................ 44

IV. Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 49

V. Bibliography ......................................................................................................................................... 51

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this paper are solely the author’s based on independent research conducted by the author for a fellowship program funded by the Center for the National Interest. They do not represent the views of any organizations affiliated with the author.
I. Introduction

In 2011, United States President Barak Obama called for Syrian president Bashar al Assad “to face the reality of complete rejection of his regime by the Syrian people and to step aside,”\(^1\) and in 2012 made clear if Assad crossed the chemical weapons redline the United States would change its “calculus” in Syria.\(^2\) Despite these declarations, President Obama remained steadfast in his position of nonintervention in Syria providing limited support to the opposition. As the civil war intensified, the Syrian opposition composed of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SOC), including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the political opposition body, the Syrian National Council (SNC) struggled to fill the void created in opposition territory by retreating regime officials. The SOC’s inability to provide services, protection, and a force strong enough to fight Assad opened a vacuum and facilitated the rise of nefarious actors in Syria, namely ISIL.

Only after ISIL consolidated its “Islamic Caliphate” in Iraq and Syria during the summer of 2014 did the U.S. reconsider action in Syria. In September 2014, President Obama declared intent to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL.”\(^3\) However, instead of addressing the broader civil war, which led to the rise of ISIL, the U.S. targeted ISIL in eastern Syria treating it as an isolated issue not an outcome of civil war. The U.S. worked to form the international coalition against ISIL, conduct joint coalition airstrikes against its territory, and arm Kurdish militias and the FSA to fight it. Though, aligning local partners with U.S.


interests remains difficult. The Kurds, receiving the most U.S. military support, are more interested in consolidating their Rojava or Kurdish federation in northern Syria than fighting ISIL. And FSA fighters, trained by the Department of Defense (DOD) to fight ISIL, remain fixated on fighting Assad - presumed responsible for most of the civil war’s 400,000 causalities. By isolating ISIL from the civil war context, not only is the U.S. struggling to gain buy-in from local actors to fight it but also not accounting for what happens after ISIL’s destruction in eastern Syria.

Ultimately, without the return of stability through a political solution, ISIL remains a threat in Syria. Military efforts alone will not prevent it from reemerging or from spreading its radical ideology across the globe. From 2005-2007, the U.S. worked with local tribes- also known as Sons of Iraq or Sahwas- in Iraq to defeat al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). However, while the strategy succeeded to drive AQI out through military force, AQI eventually reemerged playing a major role in the rise of ISIL in Iraq and Syria. After the U.S. exited Iraq, the Shia-led Nouri al-Malki government targeted the Sunni population that partook in U.S. efforts imprisoning, marginalizing, and excluding them from society and politics, which ISIL exploited.

---

As the U.S. abstained from intervening in Syria from 2011-2014 to help the Syrian opposition, and exited Iraq in 2011, ISIL took advantage of the vacuum capturing territory, creating a governance framework, and establishing a fighting force. In 2015, a manual leaked of ISIL’s state building ambitions. The document entitled “Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State” provides guidance to ISIL fighters on matters such as foreign relations, propaganda operations, economic initiatives, military training, service provision, education, civil service, and government operations. Amid chaos, ISIL’s strategy of offering services, structure, and relative protection to Syrians residing in its territory allows it to exercise control more effectively than any other terrorist organization operating in Syria, or elsewhere. The alternatives in Syria– flee to Assad controlled areas to face execution; flee to FSA controlled areas to encounter incessant regime barrel bombs; or flee to Kurdish areas to suffer persecution, provide little motivation for civilians to resist ISIL rule. Civilians living under ISIL’s control need promise of safety, international support, and hope of a better future to fight ISIL.

Without a political solution, Syria’s death toll will continue to rise and Assad’s increasingly sectarian offensive against the Sunni-led opposition will generate more support for ISIL and its affiliates because they are the strongest forces in Syria protecting the Sunni community. Failure by the international community to support the opposition left the Sunni community, which constitutes 74 percent of Syria’s population, with no alternative force strong enough to steer the community away from ISIL or other extremist groups claiming

---

8 Rick Brennan. “Withdrawal Symptoms.”
to champion the Sunni cause.\textsuperscript{10} Escalation of violence also pushes more civilians to exit Syria, which exacerbates the global refugee crisis, threatens the stability of surrounding countries, and diminishes the relationship between host communities and refugee populations. As a result of ISIL-inspired attacks around the world, Arabs- naturalized, immigrants, or refugees residing or seeking refuge in western countries are increasingly perceived as outsiders regardless if they were born in the host country or not. This adversarial community-level relationship sparks a sense of lost identity and belonging among Arab populations in host countries feeling marginalized and unwelcome. And diminished sense of belonging lessens the community’s connection to the host country and leads them to seek identity and belonging elsewhere- a feeling ISIL exploits to radicalize, recruit and inspire people to conduct attacks in its name such as those in California, Florida, New Jersey and New York.

With the necessity of finding a political solution increasing, and efforts to negotiate a transitional government failing, an alternative political solution is crucial. In July 2016, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director John Brennan stated that he was not optimistic Syria could be put back together, and in February 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry hinted towards a so-called “Plan B” for Syria involving partition if peace talks failed.\textsuperscript{11} Accepting the reality reflected on the ground- that Syria will not be one country again, as Brennan and Kerry alluded to needs to be incorporated into a broader U.S. political and

military strategy. A break-up of Syria has already started. The Kurds declared a Kurdish Rojava or federation in northern Syria, which went unchallenged militarily by the Assad regime, ISIL holds territory in eastern Syria, Assad holds territory around Damascus, Latakia, and Hama, and the Sunni opposition holds territory in the north and south. The opposition also declared intent to fight Assad to the end making clear they would not accept a future with Assad in it. And Assad, with Russian and Iranian support, is unlikely to step down in the near future. As such, the forthcoming administration needs to consider alternative options in Syria, which likely involve re-envisioning Syria’s borders.

Many will express skepticism that Assad while in a position of power would accept dividing Syria. However, just before Russian intervention in July 2015 Assad admitted his forces were strained and needed to focus on securing territory it controlled.12 This changed with Russia’s intervention in September 2015. Assad’s recapture of all of Syria is not in Russia’s best interest. Russia gains a strategic geo-political advantage by having military bases and a regime favorable to it in Syria. However, both do not necessitate Assad’s control of all of Syria. If Assad reconquers Syria, reconstruction efforts will be needed, which Russia is unlikely to fund. Russia’s support for Assad currently costs a small percentage of the Russian military budget; however reconstruction, which cost the U.S. $109 billion dollars in Afghanistan,13 is unlikely to be paid by Russia currently facing a

---

$23.7 billion dollar budget deficit at home.\textsuperscript{14} Assad is desperate for Russian support now; however, if he reconquers Syria, then he will be desperate for reconstruction funds. If Russia is unable to provides this, Assad will look elsewhere opening the potential to shift the balance of power yet again and diminish Russia’s influence- especially if western powers seek to fill this void. Thus, presented with the right terms, Russia may not immediately dismiss a partition proposal, and Assad currently dependent on Russia for support, might find it in his best interest. In return, the Syrian opposition receives needed relief from barrel bombs, chemical weapons attacks, and airstrikes, as well as international support and self-determination in territories it controls.

If destroying ISIL is truly the stated goal, then the U.S. needs to take an active role to help return stability in Syria, disband ISIL in eastern Syria, and end the civil war. Before coming to the conclusions of this paper, which suggest it is in the U.S. best interest to accept a Syrian partition as a means to destroy ISIL through a Sahwa style movement, this paper will evaluate the history of the Ottoman empire to illuminate ways the Ottomans governed multiple ethno-religious communities, the impact of the 1918 Sykes-Picot agreement on the population in the Levant, the Assad dynasty’s rule, the demands made during the Arab Spring, and the lessons learned from Iraq to inform a policy recommendation. Ultimately, the paper recommends the U.S. advance a resolution at the United Nations (UN) to designate ISIL territory an international terrorist entity in Iraq and Syria, which sanctions

any and all military actions against it. Simultaneously the paper recommends pursuing a ceasefire between the Assad regime, opposition, and Kurds based on the potential for negotiating a partition. Once these efforts are underway, the paper suggests engaging Sunni tribal leaders under ISIL control in eastern Syria to start a *Sahwa* style movement, similar to the one in Iraq, to disband ISIL. After nascent political bodies emerge with the help of western powers—namely the United States, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and European Nations and ISIL is disbanded, the paper argues two options are possible. Either all sides continue on full path to partition or negotiate a federal style government, which allows for autonomy in the different federations—politically, culturally, and religiously.
II. Background

Familial, tribal, ethnic, and sectarian identities dating back to 600 A.D. play a powerful role in communities throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). For 400 years, the Ottoman Empire successfully embraced these ethno-religious identities allowing for communities to retain historical ties, cultural autonomy, and community-level rule while contributing to a central government.¹⁵ Today these historical identities often trump nationalistic identities, which only emerged at the beginning of the 20th century with the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and establishment of the Sykes-Picot divisions. The 1918 Sykes-Picot agreement, which divided the MENA region into British and French mandates for 23 years, did not account for the region’s long history or diverse populations. The Sykes-Picot failed to introduce a governance solution that allowed for peaceful coexistence between different ethno-religious groups. It is important to reflect on Ottoman successes governing different these communities to inform potential partition solutions for a future Syria.

Ottoman Rule

The Ottoman Empire spanned the Balkans, North Africa, Horn of Africa, and Middle East. To gain support from the different ethno-religious populations, the Ottomans instituted the millet system of governance. They divided the empire into individual millets or mini states, which were ruled by local religious leaders from the Empire’s main sects – Islam, Judaism,

and Christianity.\textsuperscript{16} The Ottoman millets were constructed based on ethno-religious identity allowing individuals, families, and tribes to decide which millet represented them.\textsuperscript{17} The millet evolved as a system of management of diverse groups, which successfully addressed personal autonomy, cultural autonomy, and political representation.\textsuperscript{18} In return for self-rule, the Ottomans expected to receive taxes, soldiers, and loyalty from the millets.\textsuperscript{19} Religious leaders, with buy-in from local tribal leaders, held extensive civil authority over internal matters within each community, which included religious, charitable, and educational affairs as well as issues of personal status such as divorce.\textsuperscript{20}

The system respected local traditions, cultures, and tribal populations while simultaneously pulling them into a vast empire. In the 1860’s, the Ottomans introduced “vilayets” or provinces, which brought together millets into a regional government to provide collective security, public works, tax collection, and commerce.\textsuperscript{21} Remarkably, the Ottoman’s anticipated and mitigated conflict by enforcing a law stipulating that the vilayets consisted of two Muslim and two non-Muslim representatives in order to accommodate the empire’s diversity. The Ottoman’s started a trend towards representative democracy, which can inform solutions to the current day conflict in Syria by taking into account the importance of allowing populations autonomy and self-determination. The Syrian regime of Hafez and

\textsuperscript{20}Roderic H. Davidson, 13.
\textsuperscript{21}Roderic H. Davidson, 150.
Bashar al Assad failed to respect these religious, cultural, and political differences, instead choosing to force a national identity over the population. However, as civil war has shown, force failed to diminish the importance of these historical ties. Below is a map of provinces or “vilayets” under the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 20th century. When compared to the map of the Syria conflict today, Syria’s ethno-religious communities have divided in ways that mirror the 20th century Ottoman provinces.

Source: Forbes: 7 Maps That Explain the Middle East

---

With some exceptions, the Assad regime areas in red reflect the Ottoman province of Damascus; the Sunni opposition controlled areas in forest green reflect the Ottoman province of Aleppo; the Kurdish controlled areas in bright green reflects the lower portion of the Ottoman province of Diyarbakir, which was a Kurdish province under the Ottomans; and the ISIL controlled area reflects the Ottoman province of Dayr al Zawr. The Ottoman Empire empowered religious, tribal, and ethnic communities with self-rule overcoming sectarian animosity by allowing communities the right to self-determination. The

Source: University of Texas Maps Online

governance style of the Ottoman Empire allowed the ethno-religious communities to co-exist for over 400 years. 

Sykes-Picot, French Mandate, Sunni-Shia Division

During WWI, the Ottoman Empire deteriorated rapidly. After the Europeans defeated the Ottomans in 1918, the British and French partitioned the Middle East into mandates. Syria became a French mandate under the Sykes-Picot agreement. It came to include the Alawi population residing in the mountains of Latakia; the Druze population living in Mount Druze; the Kurds, which spanned Syria, Iraq and Turkey; and the Sunnis spanning eastern Syria and Iraq; as well as Christian, Ismaili, Shia, and other minority populations. The ethno-religious diversity of Syria presented a challenge for the French because local populations held different historical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. The French, seeking to impose European style nation states on the Middle East lacked awareness of the complex ethno-religious communities residing in Syria.

Fearing persecution by the Sunni majority in French mandated Syria, both the Alawi and Kurdish communities lobbied the French for independent states. The Alawis believed a unified Syria based on French and British borders would result in their enslavement by the Sunni majority. 

Animosity between the Shia and Sunni communities dates back to the 7th century. Following the death of Prophet Mohammad in 632 AD, a schism erupted over the correct succession of the Islamic Caliphs. The schism resulted in the permanent division of

---

Islam into two main sects – Shia and Sunni Islam.\textsuperscript{26} The Alawis are an offshoot of Shia Islam. In the centuries since the schism, many battles between Shia and Sunni communities erupted during the time of the Umayyad, Abbisid, Ottoman and Safavid dynasties.\textsuperscript{27} The Levant hosts a majority Sunni population while the territory formerly known as Persia hosts a large Shia population. The Alawis in the Levant long experienced exploitation by their Sunni neighbors, which pushed them to seek refuge in the mountains of Latakia along Syria’s coast.

Despite pleas for self-rule, the French coalesced the Alaw, Christian, Druze, Ismaili, Kurdish, Shia, and Sunni communities into one nation, Syria. The French divided Syria into states, offering safeguard to Syria’s minorities.\textsuperscript{28} However, French protection exacerbated tensions between Syria’s vast ethno-religious communities. The Sunni population particularly resented the French for attempting to diminish Sunni influence in Syria and advancing minority interests. Upon independence in 1946, Syrians lacked unity. The below map from 1976 highlights the diverse communities the French attempted to fuse together. The pink areas show the Kurdish population, beige the Sunnis, light green the Alawis, yellow the Christian, emerald green the Druze, pine green the Ismailis, and white stripes the mixed populations.

Today, according to the CIA World Factbook, the ruling Alawi, Shia, and Ismaili communities represent 13 percent of Syria’s population while the Sunni majority represents 74 percent of the population. Other minority communities— the Christians and Druze represent 10 and three percent of the population, respectively. Syria’s demographics have not change significantly since 1976. The Sykes-Picot and French mandate pulled together a diverse population expecting a nation-state with strong nationalistic sentiment to arise. However, neither the French nor the Assad family were able to unite the country.

30 “The World Factbook, Syria.”
under one identity seen in Syria’s civil war today. After civil war erupted, boiling ethnic tensions quickly turned the conflict into a sectarian struggle, which ISIL and other nefarious actors took advantage. For centuries, tribes, families, and religious sects drove communities together under the Ottomans. Allowing these identities to play a role in the future of Syria will be a key for success.

*Baathist Rule and the Assads*

In the 1950s, the Baathist movement emerged in Syria. Baathists advanced a vision for Syria that combined socialism, secularism, and anti-imperialism.\(^{31}\) Taking from the French model, Baathists attempted to overcome ethnic and religious divides by advancing a national identity to unify the country, which eventually failed. Baathists came to power though a *coup d’état* in 1963 after Syria’s brief experiment with Pan-Arabism from 1958-1961 with Egypt. Pan-Arab initiatives were favored by Syria’s Sunni communities; however, the Sunni led initial threatened minority rights, and marginalized their position in Syria. Specifically, after the French mandate ended, the Sunni-led government abolished the Alawi state created by the French.\(^{32}\) In response, the Alawi and Druze populations sought ways to gain influence in the country and transition Syria into a secular nation. Upon independence in 1946, Syria’s minorities, and specifically the Alawis, rose to power through the military. Alawis viewed military service as an opportunity to advance in Syria. Their presence in the army positioned the community to seize control, and in 1963, Hafez

---


\(^{32}\) Ayse Tekdal Fildis. “Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria | Middle East Policy Council.”
al Assad, an Alawi and champion of Baathist ideology, came to power through a military coup.

With Assad in power, the Sunni community quickly became skeptical of secularism as the Baathists attempted to establish a national identity. Animosity between Syria’s ethno-religious communities permeated society. Syria’s Sunni community mistrusted Alawi rule as they were the main victims of Hafez al Assad’s repressive tactics, which included violations of civil and political rights, and unconstitutional arrests, torture, and killings.33 The Kurds, also attempting to retain their language and cultural traditions became targets of the regime’s repressive tactics. Hafez al Assad’s government regularly monitored the Kurds, closing bookstores and cultural centers; and in 1992, passed a decree prohibiting parents from registering their children with Kurdish first names.34 In March 2004, after calling on Bashar al Assad to "remove the barriers imposed on the Kurdish language and culture and recognize the existence of the Kurdish nationality within the unity of the country," the Kurds led the largest riot in Syria’s history.35 While the regime violently crushed rioters, it was unable to suppresses Kurdish ambitions completely. Despite attempting to impose a new identity over the population, Syrians held tight to historical tribal, familial, and sectarian ties. Learning from the Ottoman experience, it is important to incorporate not ignore these identities in order to successfully govern.

Hafez and Bashar al Assad took the opposite approach forcing Syrians to adopt Baathist ideology instead of respecting existing ethno-religious identities. Within the Sunni community, the Sunni tribes of eastern Syria and Muslim Brotherhood in Hama posed the greatest challenges to the Assad regime. Sunni tribes were often feared by the Assads. Tribes spanned large swaths of territory in Syria from Homs, Hama, and Qalamoun to Palymra, Raqqa, Hasakah, Dayr al Zawr, and the Iraqi border. They held significant influence over local populations, and despite attempts by the state to intervene in local affairs, the tribes continued to implement tribal law instead of state law. To gain buy-in from the tribal communities, the Assads used relationships of patronage and clientelism with tribal leaders to ensure loyalty, and by doing so, allowed tribes to operate a parallel state within a state. Their influence in Syria was highlighted when Assad turned to the tribes to quell the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1982 by asking them to check the flow of guns from Iraq to Hama and to prevent the desert from being refugee for Brotherhood members- something the regime felt it could not accomplish alone. By the 1980s, animosity between the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood located in Hama and the Assad regime intensified. The Muslim Brotherhood not only rebelled against the Hafez al Assad regime but also attempted to assassinate Hafez. In response, Assad deployed the military to bulldoze Hama, which resulted in the killing of an estimated 20,000 civilians and the

flattening of the city.\textsuperscript{41} Accounts of the massacre went largely unreported for years as the Assad regime prevented journalists from entering Hama warning they could face life-threatening injury if they entered.\textsuperscript{42} The massacre, hailed as a success for Alawi rule in Syria, ignited even stronger sectarian division in Syria.

After the massacre, Assad increasingly used repressive tactics rather than patronage to quell dissent among the Sunni community, especially through the feared security apparatus. Composed of four major intelligence agencies including the military intelligence, air force intelligence, the political security directorate, and general intelligence directorate, it had a reputation of torturing, imprisoning and terrorizing those suspected of being disloyal to the regime.\textsuperscript{43} All four held autonomy to arbitrarily detain, torture, and arrest anyone.\textsuperscript{44} With limited oversight and blatant disregard for laws and human rights, the agencies terrorized the population into submission.\textsuperscript{45} When signs of dissent emerged, especially in the eastern provinces, the Assad regime used detention tactics and dependence on state services to regain control of regions. They often shut off electricity and water flows, which negatively affected local agricultural economies.\textsuperscript{46}

In Syria’s eastern provinces of Raqqa and Dayr al Zawr local tribes spanned the Syria-Iraq borders. Members of different tribes resided in both countries- from Raqqa in eastern Syria

\textsuperscript{41}David Kenner. “Massacre City.” Foreign Policy, August 5, 2011.  
\textsuperscript{42} David Kenner. “Massacre City.” Foreign Policy, August 5, 2011.  
\textsuperscript{46} Personal interview with member of the opposition.
to Anbar province in western Iraq, which now constitutes ISIL’s proclaimed “Caliphate.” Outside of tribal leaders, the regime was unable to penetrate local tribal populations, which instilled fear in the regime—Hafez never entered eastern Syria. Limited engagement from the central government in Damascus left many residing in the area to feel more connected with Sunni-led Baghdad than Shia-led Damascus.47

In 2000, Bashar al Assad came to power promising economic liberalization and instilling hope for a better future. He gave Syrians the impression he would transition away from tactics used by his father, Hafez al Assad. However, economic liberalization often accompanies an opening for civil society and democratic practices—and those surrounding Assad rejected social liberalization because it lessened the regime’s control over society, and the economy.48 As a result, Assad, influenced by top intelligence and military leaders, halted economic liberalization programs, and once he stopped, many demanded he stay true to his promises. Those expressing dissent were met by force from the vast intelligence apparatus and quieted.49 Assad’s overpromise of economic liberalization may have hurt his long-term chances for recovering from the 2011 protests.

When protests erupted in 2011, Bashar al Assad struggled to maintain the status quo patronage system. His brief attempt with economic liberalization accompanied by one of the largest droughts in the history of the Middle East, left Assad unable to maintain his large subsidy for loyalty program, especially to the tribes of eastern Syria. According the

47 Discussion with member of the Syrian opposition
National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the eastern Mediterranean region, which includes Syria, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Cyprus, faces one of the worst droughts in 900 years. In Syria, the drought affected farmers, especially those dependent on agriculture for survival. The largest agricultural areas lay along the Euphrates River and include areas such as Raqqa, ISIL’s de facto capital, and Dayr al Zawr, also under ISIL control. In 2009, the Assad regime responded to the drought by distributing food to households most severely affected. Tellingly, the main recipients of these stipends were in Raqqa, Dayr al Zawr, and Hasakah composed largely of Sunni tribal populations, with the exception of Hasakah. At the same time, the drought pushed many farmers to seek employment in Syria’s industrial cities but Assad’s failed economic liberalization program was unable to generate enough jobs for those migrating to the cities. The drought also diminished Assad’s influence over tribes since he could no longer deliver on established patronage. The economic crises combined with eruption of civil war and animosity towards the regime and intelligence apparatus helped ISIL fill the vacuum. Hafez and Bashar al Assad failed to govern eastern Syria and it is unlikely an Assad regime will be able to govern the territory in the future.

Outside of patronage, force, and coercion, Hafez and Bashar al Assad failed to gain buy-in from the population and hold Syria together. Taking from the failure of the Assad dynasty, which only held Syria together for 63 years and the success of the Ottomans, which

governed the territory for over 400 years, allowing for personal, cultural, and religious autonomy and political representation are important to successfully governing a population that consists of multiple ethno-religious groups with diverging beliefs and traditions.

Civil War Breaks Out, ISIL Emerges

In December 2010, as stories of Mohammad Bouaziz’s self-immolation spread across the MENA region, Syrians found themselves relating to the Tunisian’s plight: economically frustrated, oppressed, and politically underrepresented. In March 2011, Syrian President Bashar al Assad met peaceful protesters, inspired by Bouaziz, with imprisonment, torture, and death. Unlike his father in Hama during the 1980s, Bashar failed to quell dissent through force. His forceful actions combined with diminishing leverage through patronage resulted in the defection of many military, political, and civil workers. The defectors formed SOC, comprised of the FSA and the political opposition body, the SNC. However, initial hopes of forming a unified opposition quickly faded. The opposition remained fractured between secularists, Islamists, and Kurds, all of whom had differing visions for Syria.

The SOC and FSA’s failure to fill the political void at the national, local, and sub-national levels left by retreating regime officials allowed those with nefarious intentions to take advantage of the space. After years of repressive Baathist rule, Syrian opposition structures were fledgling, underdeveloped, and often led by newly-elected or appointed officials. And more often than not, the SOC leadership remained in Turkey failing to connect with local councils and armed opposition groups. As the SOC and FSA remained weak, many groups
emerged attempting to establish structure. The groups that succeeded were those with pre-established visions for statehood – the Kurds and ISIL.

The Kurdish people long held territorial ambitions. After the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the Kurds spanned three countries- Iraq, Turkey and Syria. Despite being promised a state in the Treaty of Serves, the British and French negotiated the Sykes-Picot agreement, which split Kurdish territory between the three countries. Kurdish ambition for a state was long fought by ruling regimes in Iraq, Turkey and Syria. Rulers attempted but failed to co-opt the population into the newly established governments. Despite facing persecution, the Kurds preserved their history, culture, and language. After civil war erupted in Syria, Kurds, encouraged by the success of Iraqi Kurdistan, consolidated territory. As the west sought an ally to fight ISIL, the goals of the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) aligned temporarily with U.S. ambitions, at least in Kurdish areas held by ISIL. As such, the YPG and later the SDF received military and financial support from the U.S. to fight ISIL, which further empowered Kurdish aim for statehood.

The Kurds were not the only group with a pre-established vision for statehood, so were the former al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) affiliates. Syria’s civil war provided space for AQI to actualize their vision of establishing a Sunni Caliphate with the help of former Sons of Iraq and Saddam Hussein Baathists- who after the American invasion in Iraq found themselves without jobs and unable to join the new Shia-aligned government.52 The Nouri al Maliki

government in Iraq came to perceive the Sunni tribal population that fought against al-Qaida with the United States, known as the Sons of Iraq, in 2005-2007 as a threat to the government. The Iraqi government marginalized and imprisoned many involved in U.S. efforts, which led to resentment and protest by the Sunni community. Quickly the community felt abandoned by the U.S. and found themselves jobless, underrepresented, and targeted by the new Shia-led government.\textsuperscript{53} When ISIL emerged, finding no other prospects in Iraq, they provided strategic insight, military, and intelligence support to ISIL fighters allowing them to capture territory and establish a governing structure swiftly. ISIL created a strong bureaucracy, which included intelligence, military, governance, recruitment, and Islamic accountability apparatuses.\textsuperscript{54} ISIL’s extreme tactics to exert control over local populations allowed it to co-opt tribal leaders in Raqqa and Dayr al Zawr by threatening tribal extinction. ISIL’s association with former Hussein Baathists also appealed to those of eastern Syria whom formally aligned closer to Hussein’s government than Assad’s. In addition, ISIL provided services to local communities, including food distribution, educational systems and medical services, which the SOC failed to provide after the civil war erupted. ISIL took advantage of the weak SOC structures and lack of a formidable FSA fighting force to provide order, services, and governance in return for security, safety, courts, and unified rule.\textsuperscript{55} ISIL’s vision, organization, and preparation led


to successful acquisition and rule of territory. No other force in Syria—other than the Kurds—succeeded to swiftly capture and grow territory.

Defeating ISIL presents a multifaceted problem. In order to defeat it, an alternative strategy needs to exist for the civilian population. Syria faces one of the worst humanitarian disasters in history. To date, the conflict has resulted in more than 400,000 deaths, 4.8 million refugees, and 6.5 million internally displaced persons as well as 13.5 million people in need of life-saving humanitarian assistance.\(^56\) These statistics mainly resulted from Assad’s torture centers, barrel bombs, and chemical weapon attacks, not ISIL executions. Defeating the Assad regime remains the sole focus of armed actors residing in Syria’s opposition territories. Assad’s increasingly sectarian war against the Sunni majority, makes ISIL even stronger because no alternative Sunni forces exists strong enough to protect the Sunni community, which represents 74 percent of the population.\(^57\) The U.S needs both a Sunni partner to defeat ISIL and to shift the focus of the Sunni majority from Assad to destroying the terrorist organization. However, doing so means approaching the Syrian conflict differently.

The U.S. should learn from Iraq that forcing sects back into a unified government is not a long-term and sustainable solution. Iraq is deeply divided and less stable today. The Shia dominated government in Baghdad isolated and suppressed the Sunni tribes to the west, which opened a vacuum for ISIL and al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) to exploit and capture territory. Today, Iraq has become a proxy between the Shia dominated south supported by Iranian

\(^{56}\) USAID Syria Complex Emergency - Fact Sheet #3

\(^{57}\) The World Factbook, Syria.
militias, ISIL territory in the west promoting a radical version of Sunni Islam, and the autonomous Kurdish region in the north. The government is barely able to centralize governance efforts in Baghdad. Thus, in Syria, the U.S. must not force sects back together expecting a unified country to arise. Instead, supporting division based on current divides is more reasonable.
III. U.S. Policy Recommendation, Approaching a Syrian Partition

The following outlines a strategy for approaching Syria using partition as a guide for U.S. foreign policy efforts. The strategy requires an increased level of urgency by the United States and perhaps new and atypical tactics to end the civil war and destroy ISIL. Since attempts to establish peace talks based on creating a transitional government failed, and violence is escalating rapidly, the author believes helping facilitate a partition is the best avenue to destroying ISIL. The author suggests the U.S. coordinate internal efforts between all diplomatic, intelligence and defense agencies to work towards setting the stage for a Syrian partition while external diplomatic efforts work to gain buy-in for a ceasefire, and the establishment of independent governing entities in territories held by the regime, Kurds, and opposition. At the same time, the U.S. can work to designate ISIL territory a terrorist entity and start a Sahwa style movement with Sunni tribes in eastern Syria to disband it and help facilitate the creation of a new governing entity, which with a partition would not be accountable to a Shia dominated Damascus- the reason the movement in Iraq failed. This paper does not encourage an immediate partition nor does it steadfastly advocate for partition as the end result. Instead, it advocates for the U.S. to set forth steps that will lead to either an eventual partition or for the creation of separated governing bodies, which, if the desire remained, could reunite to form a federation with a central government. Both a partition and federal style government would address issues of personal, cultural and political autonomy- embraced by the Ottomans and suppressed by the Assads. As Syria and Iraq demonstrated, suppressing these issues by force eventually escalates tensions, which leads to conflict. By setting forth the below stages, the intention
is to decrease violence, increase stability, and pave the way towards a political solution while simultaneously destroying ISIL in eastern Syria.

As described in greater detail in the background section, the Ottoman millet system allowed individual communities to organize along ethno-religious lines, which some scholars argue set the precursor for the break-up of Yugoslavia and the creation of modern Balkan nations.58 In other words, identities of Balkan people grew out of their millet identities, which was detrimental to the development of a national identity in Yugoslavia.59 Similar to the Balkans, the millet system governed local communities in Syria. Based on the Balkan experience, the world could be seeing a similar trend in Syria- millet identities are influencing territorial divisions currently seen between the regime, Kurds, opposition and those under ISIL control as referenced in the above maps located in the background section. Using the Ottoman and Balkan experiences as reference, it can be foreshadowed that one of two models could work for Syria. Either Syria breaks into individual territories like in the Balkans or a federal style government emerges, which allows for locally elected governments to hold autonomy over the internal and ethno-religious issues of communities without major interference from the government. In order for the latter to work, there would need to be constitutional reform, a change in political leadership, and power-sharing agreements between Syria’s ethno-religious groups. In Syria today, it is unlikely Assad will give up power in order to facilitate this change. And, with Russia and Iranian backing, he has little incentive to change the status quo. Thus, taking from history, and the

59 Peter Mentzel. “Conclusion: Millets, States, and National Identities.”
predictions of the intelligence and diplomatic communities - as said by CIA director John Brennan and Secretary of State John Kerry that Syria is unlikely to be put back together again, the author recommends pursuing a policy of partition, which aims to destroy ISIL through a Sahwa style movement with local Sunni tribes. In order to destroy ISIL, a post governing strategy must exist for the territory, which partition provides.

The current U.S. strategy is to work with the SDF, which is a Kurdish led force, to destroy ISIL and create a post ISIL governance strategy in northern and eastern Syria. However, there is little desire by the Kurds to enter or hold Sunni territory. Kurds seek to consolidate their Kurdish Rojava in northern Syria not to control parts of Syria with Sunni majorities.60 The Sunni population would also resist Kurdish control. Animosity exists between the two entities in eastern Syria as Sunnis claim Kurds have killed and isolated Sunnis residing in Kurdish areas of Syria. Many speculate that having a Kurdish led force enter ISIL territories will push more Sunnis to fight for ISIL rather than against it.61 A Sunni partner is essential for the U.S. to succeed. Local ISIL fighters forced into ISIL ranks are more likely to drop weapons for a Sunni force - especially one led by local tribal leaders - than a Kurdish force. As described in the background section, tribes hold considerable influence over communities in eastern Syria. Partition provides different incentives for local Sunni populations to transition away from their focus on defeating Assad to fighting ISIL. Until now, potential Sunni partners are more concerned with Assad’s unrelenting barrel bombs than ISIL executions - halting the barrel bombs can help refocus their attention to ISIL.

61 June 2016 discussions with members of the Syrian opposition
Partition would require buy-in from Russia, Assad, and the opposition. Though, the challenge of gaining such support should not be immediately dismissed. Russia supports Assad in order to maintain its military bases in Syria, establish a foothold in the region, and extend its sphere of influence. Though, allowing Assad to recapture all of Syria, which is Assad’s stated goal, poses risks for Russia. Taking for a moment the possibility of Assad reconquering the territory, the post-reconstruction costs would be significant. In Afghanistan, the U.S. spent over $109 billion in reconstruction costs, and in Iraq spent $60 billion. Russia is unlikely to engage in similar reconstruction measures—especially since it faces a $23.7 billion budget deficit at home. And with the high production of oil, Russia is running low on cash reserves, which have fallen from $91.7 billion in 2014 to $32.2 billion today. If Saudi Arabia and other OPEC countries continue to produce oil at high rates— which keep oil prices low, Russia’s long term economic growth and remaining reserves are threatened.

If Russia helps Assad destroy and recapture Aleppo and other opposition territory without engaging in post-reconstruction, the Assad regime will likely seek needed reconstruction funds elsewhere. The west, seeing an opportunity to reengage in Syria and gain influence, could choose to funnel significant money to rebuild it, which could shift the balance of power in Syria away from Russia. Russia is playing a dangerous game supporting Assad’s

62 Peter Coy.
64 Anna Rianova.
aim to reconquer all of Syria. With a partition, Russia can control the outcome in Assad controlled territories, retain a stronghold in the region, and continue to assume an influencer role in the Middle East. Whereas Russia cannot control the outcome if Assad wins and Russia is reluctant to pay for reconstruction. With a new American administration steadfast on finding a Syria solution, the U.S. can up the ante making the costs of continued Syria engagement unreasonable for Russia, which may also rationalize that partition is the best avenue to maintain their interests in the long-term. In the opposition’s outlook, while they may initially reject such a plan, this could change if offered aid, air coverage and an end to the violence, airstrikes, and chemical weapons attacks by the Assad regime and Russia. The alternative, Assad advancing and recapturing opposition territory would be detrimental for the opposition. The following outlines stages the author believes would need to materialize for an eventual partition to occur.

Stage One, Designating ISIL as a Terrorist Entity

The biggest challenge to initiating steps to a partition is ISIL’s control of eastern Syria. Clearly, a negotiated partition would exclude ISIL territory. The author recommends the U.S. negotiate with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to adopt a measure that designates ISIL territory an internationally designated terrorist territory, which approves all and any military action against it in Iraq and Syria. In 2015, the UN Security Council extended mandate 2253 under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter to include ISIL, which extended traditional means used to fight al-Qaida to ISIL. According to the mandate it “covers asset freeze, travel bans, arms embargos and listing criteria for
ISIL, al-Qaida and ‘associated individuals, groups, undertaking and entities.’” However, it fails to address ways to defeat ISIL’s proclaimed “Caliphate” in Iraq and Syria.

ISIL should be approached as both a state sponsor of terrorism and non-state terrorist organization. ISIL should be seen as a state actor defeated through conventional military means; while outside of Iraq and Syria, it needs to be treated as a non-state actor defeated through non-conventional means. Not many terrorist organizations have controlled, run, and governed territory before. Amid civil war, ISIL has the ability to operate a state presenting a new challenge to traditional approaches to terrorist organizations. Tactics used against al-Qaida will not reach the stated U.S. objective of destroying ISIL.

While labeling ISIL a terrorist entity acknowledges its formation, ISIL is operating as a state with intelligence, military, governance, recruitment, and Islamic accountability apparatuses. ISIL’s ability to export terrorism and galvanize people across the world to orchestrate attacks in its name begins in Iraq and Syria. According to the New York Times, ISIL built a secret branch called the “emni” from its base in Syria. The core responsibility of this branch is coordinating terrorist attacks globally. According to a former ISIL fighter Harry Sarfo, trainees of the “emni” unit led the Paris attacks, and ISIL sent thousands of operatives from ISIL territory back to the European Union (EU) and Turkey to conduct

---

further attacks.\textsuperscript{68} Investigative records show that ISIL fighters have been sent to Austria, Germany, Spain, Lebanon, Tunisia, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia to orchestrate attacks.\textsuperscript{69} ISIL is not a typical terrorist organization and should not be treated as one.

ISIL requires a different approach by the UN and United States to defeat it. An international designation of the territory would allow for any and all efforts to take place to destroy it. While efforts to fight ISIL militarily are already being undertaken by different sides in the conflict, internationally designating ISIL an official terrorist held territory in Iraq and Syria will allow for the UN to refocus political efforts on western Syria. When approaching a partition, once an ISIL designation is passed by the UN Security Council, efforts to bring actors to peace talks to negotiate a partition in Syria’s west should begin. As described above, it is not in Russia’s best interest for Assad to recapture all of Syria since the balance of power could shift against it in the long-term. In addition, the U.S. backed offensive against ISIL in Mosul will increase ISIL’s presence in Syria, which has the potential to increase attacks against the regime and Russian forces. By negotiating with Russia to pass such legislation, the two countries can work on multiple fronts to destroy the organization. With the production of oil continuing to cripple the Russian economy and force it to use reserves, the U.S. could leverage relationships with Saudi Arabia and OPEC to negotiate on behalf of Russia to lower production in return for support for such a designation. ISIL’s designation is a key first step towards creating the necessary environment for a partition because it anticipates and prevents future road blocks to U.S. efforts.


\textsuperscript{69} Rukmini Callimachi. “How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers.”
Stage Two, Focusing on Western Syria

Efforts to dismantle ISIL should continue as the U.S. and those invested in Syria’s future—Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the E.U. initiate discussions between the Assad regime, Syrian opposition, and Kurds to negotiate a ceasefire with the prospect of negotiating a partition. After the failed peace talks in September, pushing Russia into peace talks once again may be difficult. However, with a change of political administration and increased urgency for a political solution in Syria—especially with ISIL’s potential to grow in Syria due to a Mosul offensive, the forthcoming administration can assume a new position towards Syria. Instead of the current lassiez-faire approach, the U.S. should negotiate a ceasefire with Russia based on the condition that the U.S. and international coalition against ISIL, in coordination with Turkey, will begin securing specific airspace above areas of northern Syria for civilian protection while also continuing attacks against ISIL territory. In Assad held territories, Russia and Iran would conduct similar measures to prevent attacks against the territory. The author does not suggest the U.S. approach Russia in an adverse manner, rather work behind the scenes to negotiate terms and agreements of ceasefire lines and approved airspace in which to provide needed relief for civilians from attacks. Forces on both sides should secure territory and protect assets as the ceasefire and territorial negotiations occur. As stated above, Russia’s interest may align more closely with U.S. interests if approached in the correct manner.

Initiatives to provide safety from barrel bombs and chemical attacks will reduce the death toll and strengthen the U.S. position in Syria by proving its willingness to stand by the
Kurds and opposition by providing desperately needed protection. Turkey also demonstrated willingness to enter Syria to protect the opposition. Perhaps motivated by the desire to halt Kurdish advances west of the Euphrates river and to assist the opposition— for the first time since the conflict started, Turkey entered Syria on August 24, 2016 to help the opposition fight ISIL out of its territory. Turkey, supported by U.S. drones, sent warplanes and Special Forces into Syria purging ISIL from the territory and helping the opposition regain control. While tensions between the U.S. and Turkey have since escalated over U.S. support for the Kurds, it shows international actors are capable of intervening in Syria to protect their interests, and should at the same time work to protect these territories against attacks from ISIL and the Assad regime in order to push Syria into a new future and reduce the amount of violence experienced by civilians. Critics might say violence will continue without ISIL’s complicity; however, a ceasefire held from February-April 2016 without ISIL’s involvement.

Once negotiated, de Mistura should privately work with each side to obtain territorial concessions each is willing to make. An international monitoring center should be set up by the United Nations to monitor ceasefire and airspace violations as de Mistura initiates private discussions with stakeholders from each side. Once this occurs, de Mistura with assistance from key international players—mentioned above—should begin territorial negotiations. Negotiations should allow for step-by-step prisoner swaps and population relocations. In August 2016, for the first time since the conflict began, the Assad regime

---

and opposition negotiated a population relocation for those residing in the besieged Darayya near Damascus without assistance from the United Nations.\textsuperscript{71} The regime allowed thousands of civilians and opposition fighters to relocate to Idlib with assistance from the Red Crescent. To date, approximately 6.5 million Syrians are internally displaced and over 400,000 have died.\textsuperscript{72} Population relocations are unlikely to pose more suffering than already experienced by Syrians. UN involvement would place further pressure on both sides to respect the process. The initial relocations and prisoner swaps can be a mechanism to build trust in the initiative.

\textit{Stage Three, Partnering with Syria’s Tribes to Defeat ISIL}

As population swaps occur and negotiations over territory develop, the U.S. with assistance from the international coalition against ISIL should begin a Sahwa style movement with Syria’s Sunni tribal population residing under ISIL control in eastern Syria. The Sahwa strategy orchestrated by the U.S. in Iraq mobilized local Sunni tribes in Anbar province against al-Qaida in 2005. The strategy succeeded to expel al-Qaida; however, led to the suppression of the Sahwas also known as the “Sons of Iraq” by the Shia led Nouri al Maliki government after the U.S. exited Iraq.\textsuperscript{73} The government in Baghdad felt threatened by the Sunni tribes, which led to their imprisonment and marginalization.\textsuperscript{74} Many involved in the

\textsuperscript{72}“Syria Complex Emergency - Fact Sheet #3
Sahwa movement since joined ISIL. However, in Syria, with a partition, the outcome will yield different results. Sunni tribal leaders in eastern Syria with support from the international coalition against ISIL will control the future of the territory following ISIL’s disbanding and defeat and will not be subject to a Shia or Alawi dominated government in Damascus seeking to repress them. As described in the background section, the Sunni tribes of Syria have significant influence in Syria’s communities, and untied, have the potential to be a strong force against ISIL. The tribes in eastern Syria have also previously stood against institutionalizing Islamic practices in society as demonstrated by their role in helping the Assad regime fight the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980’s. ISIL’s control over the populace does not necessarily translate to support for radical Islam. It is important this stage follows stage two because the Sunni community needs to be able to foresee a future without Assad before committing to a U.S. backed strategy. In order to find a Sunni force willing to fight ISIL, Assad must be removed from the picture, and if not through a political transition, then through a partition. The U.S. needs to regain a position of trust among the local population, which has been lost due to lack of support for the opposition despite Assad’s chemical weapons attacks.

Already, tribal leaders expressed desire to fight ISIL. In July 2015, they created a coalition and met with UN and western representatives. However, tribal leaders fear manipulation by outside powers and retribution by ISIL if they unsuccessfully attempt to retake the land. In 2014, in an attempt to expel ISIL from eastern Syria, the Sunni al-Sheitat tribe began a

rebellion against the terrorist organization. Unfortunately, the rebellion led to the death of 700 members- shelled, beheaded, crucified, or shot- for rising against it. Tribes need a serious commitment by the international coalition against ISIL. With initial steps underway in western Syria to negotiate a partition, tribes would be incentivized to mobilize in order to regain control of the territory and economic resources available. Like the Sunni tribes in Iraq, most repudiate al-Qaida and ISIL tactics. ISIL also forcefully co-opted the tribes of Syria. Most ISIL leaders are foreigners, which creates resentment between the local population and foreign fighters. By assisting to pay salaries and provide training, weapons, and drone assistance to tribal leaders, and members agreeing to turn against ISIL- similar to efforts taken in Iraq, the international coalition against ISIL can help tribes rebel against ISIL.

The effort would require an increased American presence dedicated to ensuring the success of the efforts; though, the U.S. should work with partners in the international coalition against ISIL to build resources and manpower for such an effort. Each coalition member has a vested interest in destroying ISIL. The aim should be to disband ISIL by incentivizing the local population to drop arms in return for a negotiated amnesty program and monetary incentives offered only to local Syrians not foreign fighters. Once tribes turn against ISIL and locals drop weapons to join the coalition against ISIL, the international coalition can work to merge the leaders of the Sunni tribal movement into ongoing partition negotiations to establish stability, governance and bring foreigners that fought for ISIL to trial.

---

Stage Four, Developing Nascent Political Bodies

As mobilization against ISIL occurs through a Sahwa style movement, defined territories and nascent political entities should begin emerging to represent citizens residing within regime, opposition and Kurdish territories. The United States, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and International Coalition against ISIL can work to continue to secure territory and develop representatives and local governments in each. These representatives can then decide whether to remain on a full path to partition or reunite as one country again, which the author believes the latter is unlikely to occur.

Foreshadowing Territorial Divisions

Predicting potential territorial borders under the pretext of partition is risky, and publically predetermining them could lead to further death and violence as the ceasefire is negotiated. Territories should be negotiated between the various sides in the conflict with the exception of ISIL held territory. Territories held by each side at the time of the ceasefire will likely be the starting point for negotiating a partition. It can be predicted that Syria would likely be divided into four or five different territories after ISIL is disbanded and defeated. These potentially include an Alawi controlled Damascus, Sunni opposition in the north and south, Kurdish territory to the northwest and the area currently under ISIL control either incorporated into a larger opposition territory or a separate territory overseen by the international coalition against ISIL after ISIL is disbanded and destroyed. One can foreshadow that Assad would likely control Damascus, Homs, Tartus, and Latakia with concessions made in Aleppo, Daraa, and a portion of western Hama. The opposition would
likely control Aleppo, Idlib, western Hama as well as Daraa and Azaz with concessions made in Homs and the suburbs of Damascus. The Kurds would probably control areas northeast of the Euphrates from Kobane east to Hasakah with concessions made in Afrin. Critics may say that Turkey would never let the Kurds hold territory in Syria. However, Turkey’s recent intervention into Syria to halt Kurdish advances west of the Euphrates River revealed important insight. It became clear that a deal between Turkey, the U.S. and Kurds had been reached stipulating that the Kurdish-led SDF would remain east of the Euphrates.77 This demonstrates that Turkey has already accepted the idea of a Kurdish Syrian territory from Kobane east to Hasakah. Aside from the Kurdish territory, the other likely major points of contention would be in Aleppo, Suwayda, Ghouta, Afrin, and Hama.

Risks of partition

Pursuing a policy of division is risky. Population transfers displace thousands and forced relocations remove many from homes their families have historically held. Though, amid chaos, death, and starvation, many Syrians may choose relocation and population transfers over continued suffering as those in Syria’s Darayya did in August 2016.78 Obviously, there are legal ramifications to accepting a Syrian partition, which would require recognition by the United Nations. Though, the steps laid out above suggest establishing a ceasefire, which leads to negotiations, population swaps, and the emergence of nascent territories. A potential UN acceptance of a partition would happen after all of the


The abovementioned steps occur and would depend on the success of each step. At the conclusion of these efforts, Syrians may be in a position to unify Syria again. Using the negotiated territories as a starting point, representatives from each can come together to form a new Syrian government. However, this would depend on the will of the people following these efforts and is unlikely to occur with Assad in power and with Russian and Iranian support, Assad is unlikely to leave in the near future. These steps should play a role in guiding U.S. foreign policy by providing direction for U.S. government agencies that has an overarching end result. Critics might suggest that accepting a partition would encourage others around the globe calling for succession to demand the same. However, Syria is in a state of civil war and there is no government in control of the whole country. In other parts of the world, civil war is not the reality making the situation different. This mechanism is used to address civil war not secessionist movements. Other voices of criticism may point to the problem of resource sharing. However, in the new potential territories that could emerge, resources exist in each. Referencing the below map, areas that would potentially be controlled by the opposition such as Idlib, Aleppo, and Daraa have industries ranging from industrial to cement and food processing. Similarly, potential areas controlled by Assad, offer a range of economic opportunity such as petroleum refining and metal processing; and areas east—currently under Kurdish and ISIL control, offer opportunity to develop oil and gas industries. With the ability to develop these industries better, economic opportunity exists in each potential new territory.
Pursuing partition is audacious; however, the alternative—civil war continuing, ISIL expanding and exporting violence and more civilians dying—is worse. After the first ceasefire broke down in April 2016, violence escalated rapidly. Assad with support from Russia advanced on major opposition territory, which prompted outcries for intervention by the international community to stop the killings. Almost 800 people died in the month of April alone. While there are risks associated to partition; continued violence at the current pace will have more serious implications. Based on the current death toll, in more
than five more years one can predict the death toll reaches 800,000. Additionally, the conflict could lead to even more support among the Sunni community for ISIL as a response to Assad’s indiscriminate killings and Kurdish marginalization of the Sunni population. There is a large and vulnerable population for ISIL to exploit by inciting sectarian grievances and highlighting violent acts committed by Assad or the Kurds to lure people into fighting for them. With no alternative Sunni force, ISIL has potential to be seen as the protector of Sunni Islam in Syria. In the past six months, ISIL has inspired attacks across the world including in the U.S., France, Belgium, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Tunisia, among many others. The longer ISIL hold’s territory and the civil war continues, the higher the numbers will rise. Continued conflict also threatens the stability of surrounding countries namely in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, and the cohesion of the EU, which is struggling to develop a suitable refugee policy.

Already, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon confront adverse effects from the civil war. Collectively all three countries host 4.8 million Syrian refugees. Refugees strain host countries’ economies, infrastructures, and stability. Since the outbreak of civil war, Turkey’s internal cohesion gradually deteriorated. Turkey’s relationship with the Kurds, which had improved by 2013 when the leader of the Kurdish terrorist organization- the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) Abdullah Ocalan, called for an end to the rebels’ armed struggle and set out conditions for a deal with the Turkish government. However, the Kurdish role in Syria has led to a deterioration in the relationship and increased PKK

81 “Syria Complex Emergency - Fact Sheet #3 | May 5, 2016
inspired attacks across Turkey. Further inflaming Turkey’s internal divisions are ISIL attacks. On June 28, ISIL attacked Istanbul’s Ataturk airport killing 44 people.\textsuperscript{83} Further complicating the situation is the recent coup attempt by Turkey’s military. Following the coup, Erdogan purged almost 60,000 military officers, teachers, judges, and journalists and suspended nearly 80,000 civil servants.\textsuperscript{84} The vacuum created from such actions opened space for ISIL and the PKK to operate and plan attacks, which led many foreign governments to issue warnings to their citizens against travel to Turkey. These events threaten Turkey’s economy and long-term stability. Civil war in neighboring Syria is placing undue strain on Turkey, which will likely see an uptick in violence the longer civil war persists in Syria.

The number of extremists in Jordan is also growing. In November 2015, a radicalized Jordanian police officer killed two Americans at a training camp. And in June 2016, an ISIL fighter killed six Jordanian soldiers. Jordanians fear support for ISIL permeates society especially since many Jordanians have ties to the Sunni community in Syria- the main victims of Assad’s brutality. Refugees are also straining Jordan’s infrastructures. Jordan hosts four refugee camps- Za’atari, Marjeeb al Fahood, Cyber City, and Al Azraq.\textsuperscript{85} With over 600,000 Syrian refugees, these camps tense relations between Jordanians and refugees over employment, resources, and economic opportunity in local communities.


Lebanon is also confronting challenges. Syria, with assistance from Hizballah, terrorized Lebanon’s population in the early 2000s attempting to exert influence over politics. It played a role in the assassination of major Lebanese political figures such as former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Today, Hizballah supports Assad by sending fighters and weapons to Syria. The Sunni community in Lebanon resents Hizballah’s involvement in Syria against the opposition, as many Sunnis in Lebanon have familial connection to those in Syria. The potential for members of the Sunni community, especially refugees, to resort to terrorism as retribution for Hizballah’s actions in Syria is high. Only last year- November 2015, two suicide bombers killed 43 Lebanese in Hizballah’s stronghold of Dahiyeh in Beirut.\(^{86}\) Heightened sectarian tensions resulting from continued civil war in Syria are likely to inspire similar attacks.

European countries also face massive refugee inflows. In 2015 alone, one million asylum seekers entered the EU seeding dissent between EU members on how to process and receive refugees.\(^{87}\) In particular, Germany’s open-door policy was unpopular among other EU countries that limited the number of refugees accepted. The world saw pictures of thousands of refugees stranded at the borders of EU countries as the EU rushed to find a solution. Refugees strain host country economies, and with increased ISIL sponsored terrorist attacks across Europe, animosity between host populations and refugees continues to rise. ISIL divides countries between migrants, refugees, and host populations. Without

---


proper integration programs and a decrease in ISIL visibility on the battlefield, internet, and social media, Europeans and the U.S. will continue to face a threat from homegrown terrorists, and in some cases migrants and refugees.
IV. Conclusion

Defeating ISIL in Syria eliminates its ability to centralize efforts and radicalize populations through its indoctrination process, schools, campaigns, and massive online platform. By forcing ISIL to become a decentralized, amorphous organization similar to al-Qaida, its ability to coordinate attacks abroad, unify messages, and provide support to those plotting attacks lessens. While splinter groups will surely arise, without physical territory, the United States can continue to target leaders and splinter organizations in coordination with U.S. allies. The U.S. strategy against al-Qaida played a vital role lessening its visibility, capabilities, and attractiveness to would-be extremists. Al-Qaida today has not succeeded in orchestrating another 9/11. The United States needs to coordinate efforts across the government to orchestrate a unified strategy to defeat ISIL as a non-state actor and with U.S. allies abroad to improve intelligence sharing efforts. Since al-Qaida, the U.S. has improved efforts at sharing information between intelligence and law enforcement agencies, which already places the U.S. in a better position to counter ISIL. These include initiatives undertaken to target finances, leaders, and increase counter-ISIL cyber operations. It is important to lessen access to ISIL resources, diminish their visibility, and remove ISIL content online while pursuing efforts to create a counter narrative, improve immigration integration plans, and work with communities most susceptible to ISIL propaganda in the U.S. on ways to improve community resilience. The U.S. government should pursue cooperation with private corporations such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google to remove ISIL content from the web, which is likely already occurring. At the same time, the government should continue to work with grassroots-level civil society organizations with presence in at-risk communities to support their efforts to engage those
vulnerable to ISIL exploitation by pulling them into community level initiatives, helping them find jobs, and providing them with educational opportunities. These efforts combined with battlefield wins against ISIL and stabilization efforts in Syria will diminish ISIL’s capabilities, recruitment-efforts, and legitimacy.

Though, it should not be forgotten that ISIL emerged from a political vacuum in Syria, al-Qaeda emerged from a vacuum in Afghanistan, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) emerged from vacuums in Iraq and Yemen. The U.S. will continue to confront two prevailing issues with governments in the MENA region, they are either 1) weak governments incapable of governing the populace and providing security or 2) authoritarian governments capable of controlling the country; yet through repressive methods that often run counter to U.S. ideals. The Sykes-Picot agreement haphazardly divided the Middle East along unsustainable borders and then pushed the MENA region into nation-states. Local communities in the MENA region had no prior understanding of state-building, governance, or democracy. Instead, tribes and religious leaders led local populations. The Ottomans provided a governance model that allowed for different ethno-religious groups to coexist. In the modern era, the Sykes-Picot failed to do the same. The world needs to reevaluate whether it should continue to look at the Sykes-Picot as the paradigm for the MENA region. Change is already occurring, and it should not be fought to save the Sykes-Picot. Four-hundred years of Ottoman self-rule sticks in the memory of local populations longer than 60-70 years of state-building efforts by authoritarian and repressive dictators.
Bibliography


Sowards, Steven. “Geography and Ethnic Geography of the Balkans to 1500.” Michigan State University, November 4, 2008.
http://staff.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/lecture1.html.

“Statement by the President on ISIL.” Whitehouse.gov, September 10, 2014.

State Sponsored Terrorism | TRAC.” Terrorism Research and Analysis Center (TRAC), http://www.trackingterrorism.org/article/state-sponsored-terrorism.

https://www.usaid.gov/crisis/syria/fy16/fs03.

“Syria_econ.jpg (740×1052).” University of Texas at Austin.


http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/06/iraq-reconstruction_n_2819899.html.

