



The Tahrir Institute
for Middle East Policy

Combating al-Qaeda in Syria: A STRATEGY FOR THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION



Image Credit: Reuters,
Hamid Khatib

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The product of the Strategy Group's deliberations is this report, which is a consensus document that reflects the collective analysis of the group's individual members. However, this report should not be construed to represent the official position of the institutions with which the Strategy Group members are employed and/or affiliated. The Strategy Group members would like to acknowledge Jomana Qaddour and Amr Kotb for their participation and analytical contributions in the group's deliberations, and Jay Roddy and Allison McManus for their help reviewing and editing drafts of this report.

SECTION I

Introduction

In 2017, the conflict in Syria will reach its seventh year of violence. In the past six years, we have witnessed at least 450,000 deaths in Syria, with close to 17,000 casualties in 2016 alone. The attempted ceasefire agreements to end the bloodshed have failed up to this point, serving primarily as a way for the government of Bashar al-Assad to advance its priorities with the support of powerful members of the international community, most prominently Russia and Iran. Assad's failure to address the sociopolitical and existential demands of Syrians, and the continued massacre of his people, have given al-Qaeda a way to claim Syria as its newest and most important safe haven for the organization's radical Islamist ideology.

The United States and its international partners have overwhelmingly focused on waging its counter-terrorism mission in Syria against the Islamic State, primarily utilizing kinetic means to challenge the broader socio-political movement of Salafi-jihadism in Syria. As a result of the strong emphasis placed by the administration of President Barack Obama on the counter-Islamic State campaign, al-Qaeda and its enablers in the Syrian opposition movement have benefited, slowly and steadily shaping the sociopolitical norms of many areas of opposition-controlled northwest Syria. As a new administration assumes office in the United States, Syria will remain the crucial arena for its global counter-terrorism strategy, and will require non-kinetic as well as kinetic activities to counter the Salafi-Jihadi movement that is taken deep root in the heart of the Middle East.

The Combating al-Qaeda in Syria Strategy Group was formed in July 2016 by Nicholas A. Heras, the Bacevich Fellow at the Center for a New American Security. Over the past six months, the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy has sponsored this integral working group of young Syria, Middle East, and U.S. national security experts to analyze the challenge presented by al-Qaeda in Syria.

Al-Qaeda's strategy in Syria is not limited to one group such as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. It has always sought to maintain connections with multiple organizations, some composed mainly of Syrians and others composed mainly of foreign fighters, to become the vanguard of the Syrian revolutionary movement. To address al-Qaeda's strategy, our report seeks to build out a long-term approach to combating al-Qaeda in Syria

that addresses the environmental conditions that provide opportunities for it and its extremist allies to set enduring roots in the local communities and grow. We emphasize that it is not enough to defeat al-Qaeda on the battlefield inside of Syria, and that the United States will need to play a stronger role to support civil society in opposition-controlled areas of Syria to be resilient against al-Qaeda. This strategy prioritizes support for civil society as a necessary element in addressing the roots of the problem. An exclusively military approach will be neither effective nor sustainable, as al-Qaeda's presence in Syria is only a symptom of the problems plaguing the country.

We humbly recognize that this report by no means provides an all-encompassing panacea for the crisis, nor does it cover all the multiple players that influence the situation in Syria. This report reflects the deliberations and conclusions of the strategy group, but also reflects the difficulty the U.S. faces in achieving desired outcomes amidst the violent and complex conditions in Syria. This report therefore includes a Red Team analysis of its own recommendations in order to highlight the most serious risks that could require an alteration to the recommended strategy.

We also acknowledge that the situation in Syria remains highly volatile and continues to change. This Strategy Group will maintain its analysis of the Syrian conflict and note further updates for the future. However, what we have laid out, at the minimum, are priority recommendations to address the al-Qaeda threat to prevent further deterioration in Syria, and hopefully lay the groundwork for a sustainable post-conflict phase.

This report could not have happened without the work and dedication of each member of the group, who worked relentlessly to produce our findings and recommendations. I am particularly grateful for Nick Heras, who served as the Strategy Group's strategic director, for his patience, rigor, and ability to recognize all the different views expressed by the group. I would also like to thank the Atlantic Council, the Middle East Institute, the Institute for the Study of War, the Center for a New American Security, and People Demand Change LLP for their support of and confidence in this endeavor.

We are all also very grateful to our sources on the ground and in the policy world for granting us their time to provide crucial information and discuss our ideas.

This report should be a starting point for continuing the conversation on the evolving situation in Syria, with the hope of preventing further violence, curbing the threat of al-Qaeda, and ultimately saving lives.

Sincerely,



Nancy Okail
Executive Director
The Tahrir Institute for Middle East policy

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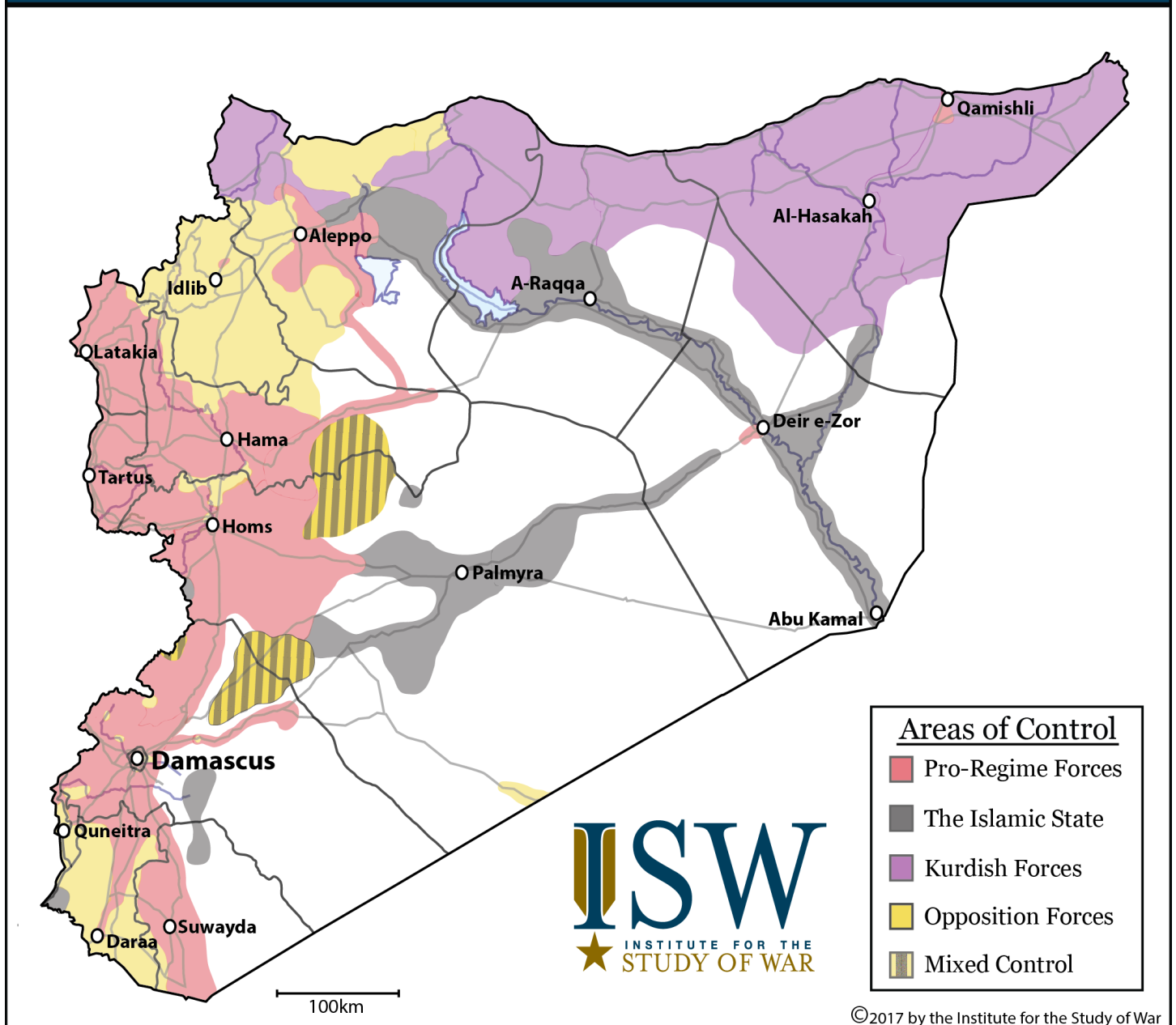
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Control of Terrain in Syria: January 5, 2017





SECTION II

Summary of Developments

Source: People Demand Change LLP (PDC)

Syria is emerging as the newest and most important safe haven for al-Qaeda as the radical Salafi-jihadi ideology threatens to subvert the pluralistic and nationalist goals of the 2011 Syrian Uprising. And it is Bashar al-Assad who is directly responsible for creating the conditions that are empowering al-Qaeda in Syria, as the policies pursued by his government are creating the sociopolitical conditions for extremism to thrive. Syria is the fulcrum on which future events in the broader Middle East will turn. Al-Qaeda knows this and is acting decisively to make this key piece of real estate on Europe's doorstep its strategic depth in the long war with the West.

Al-Qaeda has benefited from the opportunities provided to it by the Assad government's brutal crackdown on the peaceful protest movement that arose in 2011, and from the subsequent civil war that has killed up to half a million Syrians and displaced more than half the country's pre-war population. Instead of focusing on combating al-Qaeda, the government has concentrated on destroying ideologically moderate civil society organizations and armed opposition groups that administer rebel-ruled areas of the country, thereby empowering al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other Sunni extremist organizations. Meanwhile, the Obama administration has mainly focused on waging its counter-terrorism mission in Syria against the Islamic State, allowing al-Qaeda and its enablers to benefit from American inattentiveness by slowly and steadily shaping the sociopolitical norms of many areas of opposition-controlled northwestern Syria.

Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), as al-Qaeda's de facto Syrian affiliate is now called, and which was formerly called Jabhat al-Nusra, and its Sunni fundamentalist enablers, are trying to wrest control of the opposition movement that has governed many areas of Syria for more than half a decade in order to build a new, enduring Sunni extremist order in Syria. We utilize "JFS" and "al-Qaeda" interchangeably in this report, and we expect the strategy that is outlined here to apply to groups that are affiliated with al-Qaeda and groups that are enablers of al-Qaeda as it pursues its mission to build influence within the Syrian revolutionary movement and to shape the social norms of opposition-controlled areas.

The al-Qaeda project in Syria encompasses more organizations than just JFS, making it important for the United States to also address the challenge represented by JFS's enablers in Syria. We define JFS's enablers as armed opposition groups, civil society organizations, or other actors which seek to impose a governance system in Syria based on Sunni sectarian extremist principles, and which also work frequently and in close coordination with JFS and other al-Qaeda groups in military operations and in shaping society, politics, and cultural norms in opposition-controlled areas. An example of a Syrian organization that actively enables JFS and which is deserving of greater scrutiny from the United States as it seeks to counter al-Qaeda in Syria is Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya (HASI).

The time for decisive action to prevent JFS from accomplishing this mission is growing short, as al-Qaeda is now engaged in a tug-of-war for the hearts and minds of a significant part of the Syrian opposition movement. JFS is actively seeking to build influence within Syrian revolutionary society, shape the socio-political norms of opposition-controlled areas, and institute a sharia state that will protect global Salafi-Jihadi operatives. And if it succeeds in building a bastion of radical religious fundamentalism (through an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam) in Syria, al-Qaeda would construct a safe haven in the Levant that rivals or surpasses what al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is building in Yemen, and what it enjoyed in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

JFS has worked hard to present itself as a Syrian movement that is a full participant in the revolution, and implementing a strategy whereby Salafism-Jihadism is a fluid and adaptable ideological current that blends revolutionary Islamism with traditional Islam, therefore making it potentially more difficult to separate JFS from the broader Syrian revolutionary movement. As a result of its strategy, JFS has developed a number of enablers within the Syrian opposition, including organizations mobilized from both Syrians and foreigners. Even some organizations that receive assistance from the United States cooperate with it, most often militarily but also at times socially and politically. Our strategy seeks to provide the conditions through which a range of actors within the Syrian revolutionary movement that are hesitant to confront and marginalize JFS will be more likely to do so.

The result of this struggle for the control of society in opposition-controlled areas of Syria may come to determine two important issues:

1) whether an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam becomes the social norm in the heart of the Middle East, irreversibly damaging the societal and physical cohesion of the broader region and; 2) whether global Salafi-jihadi organizations are allowed a safe space to plan and execute attacks against America and its friends and partners.

Our group includes academics and researchers, civil society activists, national security policy professionals, journalists, and humanitarian and civil society capacity-building program implementers. We have lived and traveled frequently to Syria and its neighbors in the Levant, both before and after the outbreak of the uprising in 2011 and the subsequent civil war. We have studied the dynamics of the Syrian conflict closely, analyzed it and its impact on the broader Middle East, and are observing how Syrian civil society and politics are being transformed by the actors participating in the war. The United States and allied governments will have an opportunity to apply a holistic, preventative counter-terrorism policy that empowers moderate Syrians in opposition-controlled areas to outcompete and to overcome extremists in Syria—both on the battlefield and in society.

By empowering and protecting moderate Syrian civil society, this strategy can help shape the kind of permissive human terrain that would better support direct action by U.S. forces to eliminate Salafi-jihadi operatives seeking to make Syria their Levantine safe haven.



Photos are the work of a civil society organization based in Northwest Syria called *Lowadissa*

This report reflects our analysis and conclusions on how to combat al-Qaeda in Syria, but it also reflects the difficulty the U.S. faces in achieving desired outcomes amid the violent and complex conditions as a result of the Syrian civil war. The new administration will quickly be confronted with the stark and devastating reality that exists throughout Syria, as many areas of the country have been self-governing for over a half-decade of incipient governance and new civil society and communal norms.

The Obama administration was late to recognize—and did not take the steps necessary to effectively address—the nature of al-Qaeda’s mission in Syria, and the truly transformative effect that the group wants to have upon the sociopolitical order in the Levant and the wider Middle East and North Africa. Time is not on the side of the United States and its partners, as al-Qaeda is trying to utilize the disruption of the region’s previous existing order to install an ideologically extremist norm into the psyche of Sunni society. The best opportunity to implement this plan has been Syria, due to the political and societal vacuum caused by the Assad government’s facilitation of a starkly sectarian civil war.

However, as committed as the Obama administration was to combating the Islamic State, it never developed a coherent policy toward protecting moderate indigenous Sunni Syrian actors, within both the armed opposition and in political and civil society organizations, and from both the actions of the Assad government and from attacks by JFS. The United States can remodel its strategy to be more effective at overcoming the social and political efforts of al-Qaeda to shape the human terrain of opposition-controlled areas of Syria to its long-term advantage.

The new administration can enact a strategy that places Syria in its proper position as the most crucial arena for enacting the global counter-terrorism mission that is essential to protecting the United States of America and defending America’s partners and allies. Despite claims that the Assad government via Russia could be an effective counter-terrorism partner for the United States in Syria, it is Bashar al-Assad and his Russian and Iranian partners who have played a significant role in empowering a religious fundamentalist movement in Syria.

The Assad regime cynically released Salafi-jihadi and radical Sunni Islamist operatives from prison to subvert the more secular, pluralistic, nationalist elements of the 2011 uprising, and forces loyal to Assad and his Russian allies have willfully targeted more moderate, vetted Syrian armed opposition groups, rather than fighters from al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

We define moderate armed opposition organizations as groups that accept and agree to the pluralistic and inclusive end-state goal for Syria as defined by the December 11, 2015, Riyadh Declaration. The Riyadh Declaration calls for a transition from the Assad government to an inclusive, and democratic post-conflict Syria. Moderate armed opposition organizations are generally but not exclusively vetted by the United States and support the overarching political goals for Syria as laid out by the Riyadh Declaration. The Assad government's specific targeting of moderate opposition groups has weakened them and emboldened extremists, thereby driving more young Syrian opposition fighters to armed groups influenced by or aligned with JFS.

Further, Assad's government has neither the reserve manpower nor the capability to reclaim all the areas of the country that have had the better part of a decade of self-rule. Even more troubling, the Assad government is utilizing the support of Iranian proxy Shi'a militias to conquer limited areas of western Syria, solidifying a statelet that serves as a base of operations for Iran's malign activities throughout the broader Middle East. While an Assad-run statelet rooted in a part of western Syria is a pragmatic reality, active American support for the Syrian regime—via Russia as a counter-terrorism partner in Syria—will further root Iran in the Levant.

Iran's escalation in Syria, and its mobilization and widespread deployment of ideologically extremist sectarian Shi'a militias from throughout the greater Middle East to assist the Assad government's war effort is heightening sectarian tensions among Syrian communities. The targeting and destruction of predominately Sunni communities by the Assad, with the assistance of Iranian-imported, sectarian Shi'a militias, helps drive recruitment for JFS and other Sunni fundamentalist groups inside Syria and attracts foreign Salafi-jihadi fighters. Assad and his Iranian allies are empowering al-Qaeda in many areas of Syria and could push regional Sunni powers to further mainstream the Salafi-jihadi ideology.

Despite the limitations of the Obama administration's engagement with the moderate Syrian armed opposition, Trump will inherit the foundation of an already extremely vetted, truly indigenous, potential counter-terrorism force from his predecessor. After more than a half-decade of investment, the United States has developed equities in carefully selected moderate Syrian armed opposition groups, and in U.S.-funded and -trained indigenous civil society organizations that challenge the narratives of Sunni fundamentalist religious ideology in opposition-controlled areas.



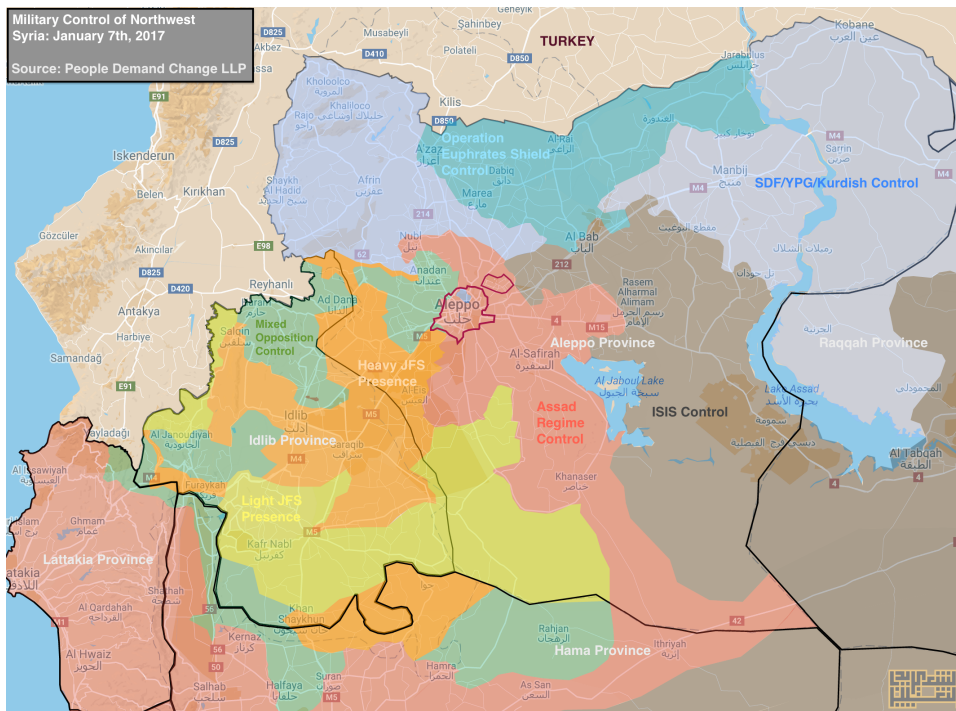
Source: People Demand Change LLP (PDC)

The truth of the matter is that al-Qaeda is not simply seeking to conduct one-off external attacks on the United States and American interests and friends from a safe haven inside Syria. Instead, the Salafi-jihadi movement has ambitions to make its ideology the guiding principle and normative experience of millions of people in the Levant, situated in the heart of the most important geography in the Muslim world. The Trump administration will need to recognize that jihad will not stop at Syria's borders: if al-Qaeda succeeds in this mission, it will have accomplished the overarching objective of the generations-long struggle waged by radical fundamentalists in the name of Islam.

Our group outlines four main lines of effort, carefully staged over the period of four years, to accomplish the overarching objective of confronting and overcoming the social, political, and security challenges that al-Qaeda and its radical Islamist enablers present with their battlespace-shaping activities in Syria.

These lines of effort are: **Robust Population Protection; Strategic U.S. Government Bureaucratic Reform; Better Coordination of Lethal and Nonlethal Assistance to Indigenous Counter-terrorism Actors; and Acceleration of U.S. Counter-terrorism Direct Action Tempo.**

These lines of effort are the minimum requirements needed to begin to effectively address the challenge that is represented by al-Qaeda's forces in Syria. However, the reality is that greater use of U.S. military force will be required to successfully combat the al-Qaeda project in Syria and the wider Levant. Utilizing these lines of effort, the U.S. can maximize the return of its more than half-decade of investment into sociopolitical governance and security structures in opposition-controlled areas of Syria. Therefore, the new administration is set to support the Syrian opposition in their multifaceted struggle to outcompete the global Salafi-jihadi movement which is trying to root itself in the Levant.





SECTION III

Recommendations

Photos are the work of a civil society organization based in Northwest Syria called *Lowadissa*

As the Syrian civil war enters its sixth year, it is becoming clearer that the al-Qaeda project in Syria is continuing its steady adaption from being primarily a network of non-Syrian, global Salafi-jihadi operatives into a local, popular social and political movement that is adept at accommodating itself within Sunni Syrian revolutionary society. Jabhat Fatah al-Sham is actively seeking to increase its influence and become a vanguard within the broader revolutionary movement in Syria. We also expect that JFS has the intermediate goal of re-expanding its military, social, and political influence in areas of eastern Syria that have been liberated from the Islamic State by the U.S.-led coalition. However, over the long term JFS is working to build a Sunni extremist emirate inside of Syria that will be a component of the global caliphate that al-Qaeda is seeking as its end state goal.

In the aftermath of the fall of opposition-controlled areas of Aleppo city, JFS and its Sunni extremist allies are in the process of utilizing the inattention of the United States and the broader international community to undermine the position of ideologically moderate actors within the revolutionary movement. The outcome of this tug-of-war between al-Qaeda and its Sunni extremist allies and the more moderate armed opposition groups will determine whether significant areas of Syria will become a long-term safe haven for global Salafi-jihadi organizations. This is important because al-Qaeda's operations in Syria are not only limited to those it carries out through the JFS organizational structure; it also seeks to work through other Salafi-jihadi factions present in the country.

JFS is seeking to seed its vision for civil society norms in Syria through the efforts of allied organizations in the revolutionary movement. In lieu of the formal unification of all or most of the armed opposition groups under one banner and one command, JFS and its Sunni extremist allies are trying to utilize military coalitions such as Jaish al-Fatah and other joint military organizations that have been established by the broader armed opposition throughout the war, to shape both security and civil society in opposition-controlled areas. JFS will continue to seek to develop deep roots in the governing structures in opposition-held terrain and will try to use these structures to advance its transformational agenda to create a de facto global Salafi-jihadi supported emirate in Syria, even though it likely will not declare one openly in the near term.

The areas where al-Qaeda has worked to entrench itself are within the Sunni-dominated communities that have been the backbone of the Syrian revolution against the Assad government—a government which is primarily run by religious minorities at its highest levels. The Sunni Arab population of Syria has felt political and economic disenfranchisement for over 40 years of the Assad family’s rule. Amid the chaos and death of the Syrian civil war, al-Qaeda has found fertile ground to acquire ideological purchase in the minds of average Syrians who feel isolated and abandoned by the international community (especially the United States), to whom they had initially turned to for protection.

Al-Qaeda will also continue to propagate a stringent anti-Western, anti-American narrative that will make it more difficult for the more moderate organizations to justify continued partnership with the United States. It will also seek to recruit more Syrians to conduct external attacks against the United States, its European allies, and Middle East regional partners, to add a Syrian face to the global al-Qaeda attack network. The immediate result of this campaign, if the U.S. does not invest more in its preexisting moderate Syrian opposition partners, will be a steady process of dismantling the only potentially effective, indigenous counter-terrorism force inside opposition held areas of Syria. Over the long term, this al-Qaeda spearheaded campaign inside of Syria will set the conditions in which the local population in many opposition-controlled areas of Syria will come to accept al-Qaeda’s fundamentalist interpretation of Sunni Islam as the norm and will tolerate global Salafi-jihadi actors operating in their communities to a degree not seen since Afghanistan in the 1990s.

The ongoing anti-Islamic State campaign in northern and eastern Syria will also be challenged by the al-Qaeda project, as JFS will seek out opportunities to expand its military, social, and political influence to areas taken from the Islamic State. There will be growth opportunities for al-Qaeda in areas of eastern Syria when they are taken from the Islamic State, such as in and around the cities of Raqqa and Deir al-Zour. Therefore, the ability to marginalize and ultimately defeat the larger Salafi-jihadi movement in Syria will be dependent on a continued and strengthened American investment in the indigenous counter-terrorism forces that it has built within the Syrian opposition movement. This counter-terrorism force needs to be led by moderate Sunni Arab fighters as Syria is a majority Sunni Arab country.

Timescale:

The policy recommendations that we propose here should be implemented over the course of the first **two** years of the incoming Trump administration. Two of the policy recommendations, Robust Population Protection and Strategic U.S. Government Bureaucratic Reform, would ideally be implemented within the first 100 days that Trump is in office. The overarching objective of our policy recommendations are to strengthen acceptable Syrian opposition organizations as security, social, and political actors to prevent the incorporation of many areas of opposition-ruled Syria under the control of al-Qaeda and its Syrian Sunni extremist allies. Our strategy supports the implementation of the Riyadh Declaration principles, which call for a pluralistic, inclusive, and democratic future for Syria, starting with opposition-controlled areas of the country. These recommendations should also provide additional American leverage within the Syrian opposition to negotiate more effectively with Russia and Turkey, and by extension the Assad government, Iran, and the Sunni Gulf states.

If the effects of our policy recommendations are achieved over the course of two years, the Trump administration will likely have set the conditions by the end of **four** years where al-Qaeda and its enablers are marginalized within opposition-governed areas of Syria. Increasing the American investment in moderate and acceptable Syrian groups it has provided with more than a half-decade of support can also yield a security and governing structure capable of making potential safe zones for refugees inside Syria resistive and resilient against al-Qaeda.

Our overarching objective through these policy recommendations is to achieve, over four years, an end state where moderate organizations in opposition-controlled areas of Syria actively marginalize and outcompete JFS and other Sunni extremist groups. This objective will be accomplished by supporting governing structures in opposition-controlled areas that will feature local, elected municipal councils, under which armed opposition groups will be subordinate. These local governments would rule per a civil, liberal legal framework, and be culturally competent and speak to the ideals and founding principles that initially guided the peaceful revolution against the Assad government. Currently powerful sharia (religious law) court systems that are promoted by JFS will over time be marginalized, coopted, or dismantled. This is a very important area of focus as providing rule of law and security is a major component and test of legitimacy for any nascent governance structure.

Core Principles Guiding the Recommendations:

Each of the aforementioned four major recommended lines of effort seeks to build out a long-term approach to combating al-Qaeda in Syria that addresses the environmental conditions that provide opportunities for it and its Sunni extremist allies to set enduring roots in the local community and grow. We believe that the current authorization for the use of military force that is being utilized to wage the counter-Islamic State campaign—which was originally established for al-Qaeda and is being used to permit military activity against the Islamic State under the logic that it is an offshoot of al-Qaeda—can and should be used immediately to increase American efforts against al-Qaeda in Syria.

Robust Population Protection:

The United States will need to enforce the protection of the civilian population in opposition-controlled areas of the country. By committing itself to the protection of civilians, the U.S. can change the increasingly popular narrative within opposition-controlled communities that the international community has abandoned the Syrian people to death and destruction. This narrative is being aggressively utilized by JFS to argue that the broader revolutionary movement should support it in the war against the Assad government. Strong U.S. enforcement of the cessation of hostilities, by protecting the civilian population in opposition-controlled areas, can work against al-Qaeda's narrative as well as their military position.

The United States should strongly support an enduring cessation of hostilities. This may require the use of force against the Assad government and its military allies, particularly the Iranian mobilized Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi and other foreign Shi'a militias, some of which are listed as terrorist organizations by the U.S. government; as well as spoilers within the armed opposition, particularly JFS. Without assuring that opposition-controlled areas are protected from destruction on the scale of what occurred in Aleppo, it will be difficult for the U.S. to convince moderate opposition organizations to focus on a counter-terrorism mission against JFS. An international coordination mechanism for the cessation of hostilities needs to be supported by the credible deterrence of U.S. military



force. In short, there needs to be a means for the United States to trust but verify, or otherwise the Assad government and its allies will continue to target civilian areas, creating even greater displacement that destabilizes Syria's neighbors and Europe and which directly emboldens al-Qaeda and Sunni extremist groups and drives their recruitment.

Strategic U.S. Government Bureaucratic Reform:

Activities for our second policy recommendation seek to unify the counter-Islamic State and counter al-Qaeda missions in Syria. The appointment of a Special Presidential Envoy overseeing a Fusion Center that unifies the whole of government activities of the United States in Syria is necessary to more holistically and efficiently conduct America's larger counter-terrorism mission. The Department of State, Department of Defense, U.S. Agency for International Development, intelligence agencies, and other government bodies will need to better coordinate their activities—in Syria, in the Middle East region, and in Washington, DC—to effectively implement the strategy we propose. An effective strategy will require greater coordination between the civil society capacity-building, humanitarian assistance, military, and intelligence components of U.S. activities focused on supporting acceptable opposition groups. These components will need to be brought together with the objective of supporting a comprehensive American effort to work with partners and indigenous stakeholders to stabilize opposition-governed areas of Syria that are under threat by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as the Assad regime.

Better Coordination of Lethal and Nonlethal Assistance to Indigenous Counter-terrorism Actors:

Our third policy recommendation seeks to utilize the strategic reordering of U.S. government mechanisms to engage with the moderate Syrian opposition to dramatically improve the effects of lethal and nonlethal assistance to communities that are threatened by al-Qaeda. To date, the U.S. government—throughout Syria but especially in northern Syria—has had a poor track record of ensuring that the moderate armed opposition groups America supports are also providing security for communities that host moderate civil society organizations that push back against extremist ideology. The disorganization in the U.S. government effort in pairing lethal and nonlethal assistance is a weakness that the United States will need to overcome to build up an indigenous counter-terrorism force against al-Qaeda.

Considering the fluid horizontal movement that a transnational non-state actor like al-Qaeda is capable of, the U.S. government must be able to augment and improve its political, financial and aid mechanisms. By taking this action, the United States can set the tone and force al-Qaeda to compete with the U.S. government's aid assistance program—not the other way around, as is the current situation in the context of Syria. Thus far, U.S. government coordinating mechanisms have starved moderate armed opposition groups of the military support needed to protect the civilian population, and in time to combat JFS.

It is not an accident that the most capable civil society organizations—those which push back against the al-Qaeda ideology in Syria, and which remain operational in areas that are coveted by al-Qaeda—exist where there are also still powerful U.S.-supported, moderate armed opposition groups. In communities such as Kafrnabl and Maarat al-Nouman in the governorate of Idlib, more effective U.S. government coordination of lethal and nonlethal assistance could increase the zones of control of moderate civil society in opposition-governed Syria. Local governance structures, local moderate opposition forces, and local civil society organizations should all be strengthened and supported. It is not enough to defeat al-Qaeda on the battlefield: it is important that their reason for being present within a community is negated by stronger, more tangible social and ideological institutions.

It is for this reason that civil society must be supported financially, logistically, and otherwise for the foreseeable future, and be supported far more efficiently, with the overarching goal of aiding communities, rather than individual organizations or armed groups. Community leadership in opposition-controlled areas of Syria is fragmented, which will necessitate greater U.S. implementer emphasis on holistic support for communities governed by elected councils. The United States should also specifically support areas which have demonstrated a willingness to actively confront JFS with culturally appropriate methods that reinforce the message that this fight is against extremist ideology and not a war against Islam as a religion. An elected, civilian council governance structure that provides consistent social services, basic rule of law, and security to its inhabitants would deprive JFS and its allies of their legitimacy.

U.S. State Department assets need to be consistently present at the Syrian-Turkish and Syrian-Jordanian border. This will allow the U.S. State Department greater and more direct visibility in terms of tracking the complex dynamics of the Syrian conflict. The U.S. government will assume more risk, but without direct observation, the knowledge and information that can be verified is filtered through a series of U.S.-supported contractors who have other economic reasons for not transparently providing knowledge and information.

The competitive nature of U.S. funding for contracts to work on Syria has also created an atmosphere in which little information is voluntarily shared, and coordination among contractors and other actors is minimal. Because U.S. contractors are the primary means for implementing U.S. government policy and humanitarian aid in Syria, fusion centers should be established in which representatives from all relevant U.S. contractors—whether civil society, governance, political, military, or humanitarian—would be required to participate and share information. This would increase the dissemination of information among the U.S. government’s multiple agencies and allow those agencies to more firmly be able to set a proactive and responsive policy. Such a center would increase interaction with Syrian beneficiaries. A continued emphasis on monitoring and evaluation to ensure issues of corruption or malfeasance within the U.S. aid and development system are mitigated is also an important component.

Because the U.S. aid and development system tends to pick winners and losers, the net result is often the creation of a limited network of locally supported civil society and political actors who may or may not have real access and capacity within the society in question. Rather, these actors speak English well and espouse a more secular or liberal ideology as the main driving component for receiving funding. The reality is that societal transformation is a decades-long process and the U.S. government should not put all its eggs into one basket, but should work with and support a multitude of actors on the ground to build a dynamic and flexible network to have a real impact on Syrian society and have better long-term options for access within the country. The United States should also make it clear to Syrian armed opposition forces that to network with, provide shelter for, or facilitate specific Sunni fundamentalist actors like the al-Qaeda supported movements will be considered activities that are a direct national security threat to the United States, and that continuation of these activities will potentially result in the withdrawal of lethal and nonlethal support from their communities.

Acceleration of U.S. Counter-terrorism Direct Action Tempo:

The U.S. government will need to also begin planning for “Phase II” operations, which are kinetic activities that militarily address the likelihood that al-Qaeda will seek to increase the pace of its external attacks from Syria. JFS is also a powerful military actor on the ground, and it will not easily submit to an increased U.S. effort to defeat it by working by, with, and through local partners. This will call for greater use of U.S. military force to weaken JFS on the ground in order to support indigenous Syrian partners. It is important to increase the tempo of U.S. direct action against global Salafi-jihadi operatives in opposition-controlled areas by investing more in gaining actionable intelligence on these Salafi-jihadi commanders and the Syrian organizations that enable their activities. To develop more actionable intelligence, the United States will need to bridge the human intelligence gap that has been growing wider as U.S. influence over and connectivity with the Syrian opposition has weakened over the last year. In order to provide targeted support to the opposition, the new administration should reduce restrictions on intelligence gathering activities inside Syria by U.S. personnel, and explore ways to utilize permissible areas of opposition-held territory in northwestern Syria as forward operating bases for direct action as actionable intelligence is developed.



SECTION IV

Table of Recommendations

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Robust Population Protection

- Make civilian protection in opposition-controlled areas a policy priority in order to provide the opportunity for moderate Syrian organizations to take the risk to confront JFS.
- Ensure that the U.S. has a strong role to play in the process that would re-implement the February–March 2016 cessation of hostilities.
- Align all U.S.-vetted Syrian opposition organizations behind the cessation of hostilities.
- Signal to the Russians, the Assad government, and Iran that the U.S. will enforce the cessation of hostilities through coercive military force, through different military options such as a no-bombing zone or no-strike zone, if necessary.
- Utilize the cessation of hostilities period to engage directly with all Syrian and foreign stakeholders to build a framework for a long-term political agreement in Syria.

**Strategic U.S.
Government
Bureaucratic
Reform**

- Utilize the September 11, 2001, Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) to shift counter-al-Qaeda activities in Syria under the authority of a Special Presidential Envoy similar to the Obama administration's Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL in order to align counter-Islamic State and counter al-Qaeda activities in Syria.
- Authorize the Special Presidential Envoy to lead the interagency effort, organized at a Fusion Center to be based in the Middle East region, to coordinate lethal and nonlethal assistance to moderate Syrian opposition organizations that actively oppose the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.
- Reform the mechanism for information sharing and coordination for U.S. government contractors and implementers into one coordinating body under the direct oversight of the Special Presidential Envoy.
- Create legal obligations for U.S. contractors implementing work in Syria on behalf of the U.S. government to work together and share pertinent information and programming details through the office of the Special Presidential Envoy.
- Streamline the aid and development mechanisms available through the Fusion Center to more consistently and clearly support acceptable, ideologically moderate local governance structures in opposition-held territory.
- Order a strategic review of and develop a new framework for sustaining aid and development under the oversight of the Special Presidential Envoy.

**Better
Coordination
of Lethal and
Nonlethal
Assistance to
Indigenous
Counter-
terrorism
Actors**

- Utilize the September 11, 2001 AUMF, to increase U.S. lethal and nonlethal support for vetted indigenous organizations competing against al-Qaeda and its enablers in Syria.
- Repurpose the current, geographically separated Joint Operation Centers in Turkey and Jordan into one new Fusion Center within the interagency Syria task force, commanded by a two-star general who reports directly to the Special Presidential Envoy.
- Provide the Fusion Center with the responsibility to coordinate intelligence gathering, analysis, and assessment for targeting for U.S. and coalition direct action against Salafi-jihadi and high-value, ideologically extremist targets in Syria who are plotting external attacks or enabling external attacks.
- Provide the Fusion Center with the responsibility, under the oversight of the Special Presidential Envoy, for coordinating the interagency process to provide lethal and nonlethal assistance to communities that support vetted moderate armed opposition groups.
- Empower the Fusion Center to liaise and coordinate with U.S. partners providing lethal and nonlethal assistance to the Syrian armed opposition.
- Empower the Fusion Center to coordinate U.S.- and partner-provided lethal and nonlethal assistance to vetted, moderate armed opposition groups.
- Empower the Fusion Center to determine the vetting standards, mechanisms, and implementation for providing support to additional armed opposition groups.

**Acceleration
of U.S.
Counter-
Terrorism
Direct Action
Tempo**

- In order to understand the situation in Syria better, reduce restrictions on intelligence gathering by U.S. personnel inside Syria.
- Acquire more and redirect intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to Syria by allocating additional ISR to Syria and accepting greater constraints in Libya and Afghanistan.
- Grant additional permissions to the U.S. military to expand kinetic operations against Salafi-jihadi operatives working with al-Qaeda in Syria.



SECTION V

Red Teaming

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The strategy laid out in the policy recommendations of this report will not be uncontested by a range of domestic and foreign actors actively participating in the civil war. This includes U.S. government agencies that might not agree to the strategic bureaucratic reforms that we believe are necessary to effectively combat al-Qaeda in Syria. Our strategy upsets the status quo by advocating a stronger U.S. role in shaping the sociopolitical and security dynamics in opposition-controlled areas, which will cause it to be contested by al-Qaeda and its Syrian Sunni extremist allies. JFS should be expected to actively challenge any cessation of hostilities agreement alleging that it is a betrayal to the people of Bilad al-Sham (the Islamist name for Syria and the wider Levant region) or the Sunni population specifically.

Although we are deeply concerned that JFS is a long-term threat to the norms of civil society in opposition-controlled areas of the country, ordinary civilians and members of armed groups in these areas may not see this threat so clearly. One risk of instituting a coercive protective zone—such as a no-bombing zone or no-strike zone—in northwestern Syria, where JFS and its Sunni extremist allies are strongest—is that this zone will be used by al-Qaeda to continue to entrench itself into the local communities that it is targeting for control. The indigenous counter-terrorism force that we propose that the Trump administration build from vetted, U.S.-backed moderate armed opposition groups will require time and significant incentives from the United States to confront, marginalize, and outcompete JFS in this zone. This course of action will require strategic patience and a commitment from the United States and its partners to conduct selective military force when necessary to support the cessation of hostilities and this indigenous Syrian counter-terrorism force.

Over the course of the civil war the Assad government and its adjutant forces, and its foreign allies, have conducted a campaign that has utilized bombardment and starvation sieges of opposition-held areas, actively promoted population transfers as a tool of demographic warfare, conducted mass incarcerations of people in opposition-held areas, and in some instances, conducted massacres of the local population in these areas and of opposition supporters living in other portions of Syrian territory who nominally support the regime. The cumulative effect of this campaign plan, which over the last four years has also been increasingly carried out in

Syria by Iranian mobilized foreign Shi'a militias—from Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon—is a boon to the narratives of Sunni resistance used in the jihadist propaganda of al-Qaeda and its enablers within the broader Syrian opposition movement.

Even in the context of a U.S.-enforced cessation of hostilities that protects the civilian population in opposition-held areas, our strategy requires more ideologically moderate elements of the armed opposition to work actively to undermine the Salafi-jihadi and Sunni extremist organizations that compete against them in the civil society of opposition-controlled Syria. The Assad government's campaign plan in western Syria makes it more difficult for U.S.-vetted and other moderate armed opposition groups to disassociate themselves from the more ideologically extremist organizations in their battle space.

Our strategy will also induce the United States' indigenous Syrian partners in the moderate armed opposition to eventually choose whether to continue to fight against the Assad government and its allies in tandem with JFS and other Sunni extremist groups, or to fight JFS. So long as the Assad government's war effort continues, U.S. partners in the moderate Syrian armed opposition will be hard-pressed to be willing and able to fight against JFS and its allies. This tension will likely remain, no matter what strategy the U.S. decides to pursue. There is also the risk that some U.S. regional partners, such as Turkey and Qatar, are not aligned with the United States' priorities to counter JFS and other Sunni extremist groups within the Syrian revolutionary movement and could undermine the strategy that we lay out in this report. Our strategy could be compromised if there is a greater trend toward convergence among the various components of the armed opposition so that the vision of a national "Islamic Army" that has been espoused by Sunni extremist groups (such as JFS's close ally Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, or HASI) and even some U.S.-vetted and -supported armed opposition organizations becomes closer to reality. Al-Qaeda, under the guise of JFS, will continue to find opportunities to work with allies such as HASI to seek to reshape the ideological outlook of the broader armed opposition movement. U.S. partners, particularly Qatar and also possibly Turkey, could also see the development of an increasingly Sunni extremist ideologically-oriented Islamic Army as the best path to continuing an active and entrenched rural insurgency against the Assad government and its allies. These partners may even use such a development to contest Aleppo city, Hama city, and others areas shakily under Assad's control in western Syria.

The strategy we propose could also be challenged by the violation of the cessation of hostilities by one or more of the Assad government, Russia, Iran, and its proxy militias. This strategy could also undermine the authority of the government of Assad in areas that it currently controls, so it might lose territory throughout Syria, particularly in northwestern Syria's Latakia, Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo provinces. Therefore, even if Russia agrees to the framework of a cessation of hostilities, it is a distinct possibility that the Assad government and its adjutant militia forces, Iran, and the predominately foreign Shi'a militias mobilized by the Iranians will continue to try to attack opposition-held areas of the country. The opposition-controlled areas of Syria can be expected to be highly contested terrain between the Assad government's coalition and the armed opposition for a significant period even after the agreement to a cessation of hostilities.

Further, this strategy is dependent on the United States achieving the acquiescence of Russia, either through a better diplomatic rapport between the U.S. and Russia or through the threat of coercive American force being brought to bear on the Assad government and its allies if a cessation of hostilities is broken. It also depends on Russian action being constrained away from the direct area of concern for this strategy, partic-



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ularly in the context of the coalition-led campaign against the Islamic State. This includes Russia refraining from striking U.S. Special Forces conducting the anti-Islamic State campaign, Russia agreeing not to conduct air and artillery strikes on the “Southern Front” in Daraa Province and its allies in southwestern Syria, and the continued open channels of communication and constructive diplomatic dialogue between Russia and Turkey. Russia might also demand that in exchange for its acquiescence in Syria, the United States agree to Russian demands regarding NATO in Eastern Europe, U.S. acquiescence for Russian activities in eastern Ukraine, or the lifting of sanctions on Russian individuals and entities. The Trump administration would need to carefully weigh these potential Russian demands, and to determine whether combating al-Qaeda’s global mission via Syria is worth accommodating Russian interests elsewhere in the world.

The Russian-American-Turkish dynamic is also an important and quite challenging aspect of our proposed strategy. Operation Euphrates Shield, the Turkish military zone east of Aleppo city to the western bank of the Euphrates River in northern Syria, would be a natural area to stage the training and support of acceptable armed opposition groups against ideological extremist actors. Although JFS is currently opposed to the creation of the Euphrates Shield zone, it is possible that it will change this position and seek to utilize that zone as a potential refuge and place of strategic depth to carry out the battle against the Assad government. If the Euphrates Shield zone became a rear base for al-Qaeda to conduct attacks against the government and its allies, Assad and Russia would have some reason to question the cessation of hostilities and conduct attacks against targets in the zone.

Our strategy also requires that the next administration would commit to monitoring, identifying, and punishing non-compliance of the cessation of hostilities, both by the Assad government and its allies and by the armed opposition and its foreign backers. The strategy we lay out also seeks to harmonize the current counter-Islamic State campaign with a new campaign to undermine and defeat al-Qaeda’s long-term ambitions in Syria, utilizing the same authorization for the use of military force. Certain complexities of the coalition-run counter-Islamic State campaign, particularly the coalition’s continued reliance on predominately ethnic Kurdish and Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)-linked militias in the Syrian Democratic Forces coalition as the

primary vehicle for moving on the would-be caliphate's putative capital of Raqqa, are also germane to a new and partnered campaign against al-Qaeda. It is a distinct possibility that the United States' continued reliance on predominately ethnic Kurdish forces in the SDF, which are linked to the PKK, to conduct the counter-Islamic State campaign will undermine American ability to achieve the effects outlined in this report, and risks escalating into wider Kurdish-Arab war in Syria.

Such a Kurdish-Arab war in Syria would likely pit Turkey and other actors such as Qatar and even Saudi Arabia against the United States and some of its NATO allies. This conflict would not only frustrate American-Turkish cooperation that is necessary to holistically confront and outcompete both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Syria. It would also risk another, winning propaganda narrative for JFS to utilize against U.S.-backed, moderate armed opposition groups who already have U.S. backing and have been vetted. When pushed to choose between an American-supported, predominately ethnic Kurdish project, or a predominately Arab and Turkish and Gulf Arab-backed project that also has a core component of Sunni ideological extremist organizations, most vetted, moderate Arab armed opposition groups would be hard-pressed to work with the United States. The politics of ethnic identity in Syria will also be a challenge that the United States will need to overcome to harmonize the counter-Islamic State and counter-al-Qaeda components of this strategy. As much as possible, the United States and Turkey will need to coordinate with each other, and then with their local partners, to find a compromise solution that allows a multi-ethnic governance administration in these areas. There is an opportunity for the United States to leverage its escalating (and likely long-term) presence in the Kurdish-led region in northeastern Syria, to work closely with the Kurds, Arabs, and other ethnic and religious groups and sectarian groups in this region of the country to build out effective, inclusive, and resilient local governance that marginalizes al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Syrian Sunni fundamentalist groups.

The violation of any of these core assumptions would nullify the strategy outlined in this report and require the United States to undertake a contingency plan.



SECTION VI

Author Bios

Photos are the work of a civil society organization based in Northwest Syria called *Lowadissa*

Hossam Abouzahr is an Associate Director at the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council and is the Arabic and English editor of the Atlantic Council's SyriaSource blog. He has eight years' experience working in development and human rights organizations, focused on Syria and other areas of the Middle East.

Ibrahim Al-Assil is a Syrian political analyst and civil society activist who serves as a resident fellow at the Middle East Institute. He is also a non-resident fellow at the Orient Research Center in Dubai. His work focuses on the Syrian conflict with an emphasis on different aspects of security, civil society, and political Islam. Mr. Al-Assil is the president and a co-founder of the Syrian Nonviolence Movement, an organization formed in 2011 to promote peaceful struggle and civil resistance as a way to achieve social, cultural, and political change in Syrian government and society. In 2013 and 2014, he frequently visited northern Syria, where he led an initiative to train Syrian activists about strategic planning and project management, and conducted studies on the current status and potential role civil society plays in northern Syria. Mr. Al-Assil was chosen by the Swedish Institute in 2013 as a young leader from the MENA region.

Bassam Barabandi is a former Syrian diplomat and the Co-Founder of People Demand Change LLP.

Jennifer Cafarella is the Lead Intelligence Planner at the Institute for the Study of War, where she is responsible for shaping and overseeing the development of ISW's detailed plans and recommendations on how to achieve U.S. objectives against enemies and adversaries and in conflict zones. Ms. Cafarella served as a coauthor on ISW's 2016 Planning Exercise for a U.S. Grand Strategy to defeat the Islamic State and al-Qaeda including "Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to the U.S. and Europe," "Competing Visions for Iraq and Syria: The Myth of an Anti-ISIS Grand Coalition," and "Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength." In addition, she has written on and researched various opposition groups in Syria, focusing on al-Qaeda's military capabilities, modes of governance, and long-term strategic vision.

Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff is the President and co-founder of People Demand Change LLP, a socially responsible aid and development startup that focuses on supporting civil society and providing long-term aid and development solutions to the MENA region. The former Executive Director at the Syrian Emergency Task Force and a journalist with Congressional Quarterly, Mr. Ghosh-Siminoff was living in Syria and attending an immersion Arabic program at Aleppo University when the Syrian revolution broke out in early 2011 and had the unique opportunity to experience Syrian society right before, at the beginning of, and then immediately after the commencement of the revolution. Mr. Ghosh-Siminoff has been a guest analyst discussing Syria on a number of international media outlets and has also published several articles on the topic. Mr. Ghosh-Siminoff currently works with an extensive network of Syrian activists, opposition figures, and civil society activists both inside and outside of Syria and has continuously advocated on behalf of Syrian civil society and on behalf of those affected by the conflict overall.

Hassan Hassan is a resident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy focusing on Syria and Iraq. He is the author, with Michael Weiss, of *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, a New York Times bestseller chosen as one of the Times of London's Best Books of 2015 and the Wall Street Journal's top ten books on terrorism. He is a columnist for the National in Abu Dhabi, where he previously worked as deputy opinion editor. He was previously an associate fellow at Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Program in London and a research associate at the Delma Institute in Abu Dhabi. Working in journalism and research since 2008, he focuses on Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf States, and he has written extensively on Sunni and Shi'a movements in the region, including for think-tanks such as the European Council on Foreign Relations, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Chatham House and Brookings Institution. His writing has frequently appeared in the Guardian, the New York Times, Foreign Policy, Foreign Affairs, and others, and he has appeared on flagship television programs, such as the O'Reilly Factor, Amanpour and the Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell. Mr. Hassan received an M.A. in international relations from the University of Nottingham.

Nicholas A. Heras is the Bacevich Fellow at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), working in the Middle East Security Program. From 2013 to 2014, he served as a research associate at the National Defense University where he worked on a project that studied the impact of the Syrian civil war on the greater Middle East region. Mr. Heras has extensive field experience in all regions of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, and has also conducted substantive research in southern Turkey. He is also a fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, a Washington, DC-based global research and analysis institute. His work for the Jamestown Foundation focuses on the analysis of complex conflicts and security issues in the greater Middle East and North Africa and Sahara and Sahel regions, with emphasis on timely, relevant, and actionable analysis on developments in the Syrian civil war. Nicholas is a regular contributor to the Jamestown Foundation's Militant Leadership Monitor and Terrorism Monitor.

Faysal Itani is a resident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, where he focuses primarily on the Syrian conflict and its regional impact. Itani was born and grew up in Beirut, Lebanon, and has lived and worked in several Arab countries. Before joining the Atlantic Council, he was a risk analyst advising governments, corporations, and international organizations on political, economic, and security issues in the Middle East. Itani has repeatedly briefed the United States government and its allies on the conflict in Syria and its effects on their interests. He has been widely published and quoted in prominent media including the New York Times, Time, Politico, the Washington Post, CNN, the Huffington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. Mr. Itani holds an M.A. in strategic studies and international economics from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, a certificate in public policy from Georgetown University, and a B.A. in business from the American University of Beirut.

Charles Lister is a Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC, where his work focuses primarily on the conflict in Syria and on issues of terrorism and insurgency across the Levant. Until September 2016, Mr. Lister also managed nearly three years of intensive face-to-face engagement with the leaderships of over 100 Syrian armed opposition groups, on behalf of the multinationally-backed Syria Track II Dialogue Initiative. He is a frequent source of briefings on the Syrian insurgency to political, military, and intelligence leadership in the United States and across Europe and the Middle East. Lister has previously held positions as a Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution's Doha Center in Qatar and as head of MENA at IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center in London, U.K. Mr. Lister's critically-acclaimed book, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, was published in February 2016 by Oxford University Press. He has also published *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Brookings Press, 2015), and he is now working on a third book on Syria, commissioned by Oxford University Press.

Nancy Okail is the Executive Director of TIMEP, and has more than 15 years of experience working on issues of democracy, rule of law, security and extremism in the Middle East and North Africa region. She analyzes these issues and advocates in favor of human rights through her testimony to legislative bodies, providing policy briefings with senior government officials, speaking at public and private events, and writing for academic and popular publications. Prior to joining TIMEP, Dr. Okail was the director of Freedom House's Egypt program. She has also worked with the Egyptian government as a senior evaluation officer of foreign aid and has also managed programs for several International organizations. Dr. Okail was one of the 43 non-governmental organization workers convicted and sentenced to prison in a widely publicized 2012 case for allegedly using foreign funds to foment unrest in Egypt. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Sussex; her dissertation examined the power relations of foreign aid.

Kenan Rahmani is the Policy Advisor to The Syria Campaign, a global advocacy organization launched in 2014 with the mission to mobilize people around the world to advocate to protect Syrian civilians and accelerate progress toward a peaceful and democratic future for Syria. Mr. Rahmani is a Syrian-American political and human rights activist and a member of the Syrian Network for Human Rights. His parents are from Damascus and he visited Syria regularly during the summers while growing up in Indiana. Since the beginning of the uprising in 2011, Mr. Rahmani has traveled to rebel-held areas in northern Syria, meeting with and supporting many civil society and aid groups. He has also served as a political advisor to the Coalition for a Democratic Syria. He has a J.D./M.A. dual degree in international law and international relations at the American University Washington College of Law.

Notes

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