The ISIS dilemma

Recent gains by the Assad regime in Syria and by jihadists in Iraq have complicated the Middle East morass. What is to be done when both sides feel they are winning, and both are anathema to Western interests?

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The past few months have produced two oddly contradictory trends in Syria: on the one hand, the regime has grown increasingly confident, while on the other, one of the main Islamist groups fighting it have spread their wings to become dominant powers in parts of eastern Syria and increasingly across Iraq. In other words, both sides feel like they are playing with a winning hand. What is to be concluded from this set of seemingly contradictory trends, and what does it mean for the threat picture to the West from the conflict in Syria?

Bashar al-Assad’s decision to hold an election (which his regime won unsurprisingly with 88.7% of the vote) was a tangible demonstration of a growing sense of confidence. No longer fearful that it was fighting for existential survival, the regime held an election in a demonstration of both its continued control over the country as well as a way of validating its popular support in a distinctly Western fashion. The decision to allow multiple candidates to compete in the election for the first time in years is meaningful. While the presence of two other candidates did not threaten the likelihood of Assad’s expected victory, it did highlight the regime’s eagerness to be seen to be holding a free election process.

However, the appearance of democratic process was undermined by a number of realities. Not only did the regime have to put heightened security measures in place, but the exclusion of areas of eastern and northern Syria (as they were under rebel control) also unmasked the truly democratic aspect of the process, highlighting how some Syrians were completely omitted from any opportunity to participate in the process. While stringent security measures, such as several checkpoints at the entrance to Damascus and individual searches of cars and people by troops, were aimed at guaranteeing the safety of people at polling stations, fighting and bombings were reported to have been heard on election day near rebel-held areas. Shots were also heard during victory celebrations a few days after the vote, killing three and wounding dozens.

Soon after the election was announced the regime decided to barter a deal with rebels in Homs to take back the city after a months-long siege. The agreement, facilitated by Russia and Iran, led to the final withdrawal of the rebels from the old city and required the rebels to release seventy people they held, alongside guarantees they would ease their presence in two Shia cities in the north of the country, Nubul and Zahraa. On May 9, government forces entered and took full control of Homs. Alongside other similar agreements, the deal can be understood within a wider Assad strategy (defined as a “national reconciliation plan”) and as preparing the ground for the election itself. Besides the need to show the ability to provide full guarantees of security and safety within the country he putatively rules, the move was also a clear attempt to both boost Assad’s legitimacy as president domestically and internationally, highlighting his ability to broker deals with rebels to help civilians trapped in Homs.

Bolstered by Hezbollah and Iranian forces, the previously lackluster performance of the regime forces have changed noticeably since the early days of the rebellion with a more concerted effort to eject rebel forces and hold territory once they have moved on. The effort is pursued in two different ways. The first path comes as the regime shows an improved level of professionalism of its armed forces. Indeed, Kassab is the most recent example of a rebel withdrawal following months of bloody fights with regime and Hezbollah fighters.
lab forces. Another example is Al-Quasyr, which in
2013 witnessed a governmental offensive, which forced
the rebels to withdraw. The second way to free Syrian
territories from opposite fighting forces - through ne-
gotiations – is something new in recent months. It is
most vividly illustrated by the agreement in Homs,
something that paved the way for a national atmos-
phere conducive to elections. Negotiations were also
held in December 2013 in Moadamiyeh. The agreement
has been accompanied by other “reconciliatory ac-
tions,” such as a ceasefire to allow evacuation proce-
dures and the provision of food supplies by the regime
forces. Finally, in both cases, the deal required the re-
lease of prisoners by both parties. While on the one
hand these actions can be seen as recognition of the
rebels’ power and control, they also highlight the regime’s willingness to try to focus on retaking control
using methods other than violence, something that
casts them in a better light on the international stage
as well as at home.

This government surge comes as the rebellion has
increasingly turned upon itself. Starting in April 2013,
tensions that had been boiling beneath the surface on
the rebel side came to the fore in a series of public state-
ments by senior leaders from the then-Islamic State of
Iraq (ISI), Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda. The public
spar started with a message by al-Qaeda leader Ay-
man al-Zawahiri in which he praised the fight in Syria
calling for the “lions of Sham (the Levant)” to work to-
wards establishing an Islamic state. This was the latest
message from the al-Qaeda leader to fighters in Syria
highlighting a desire by the in-
creasingly irrelevant leadership
in Pakistan’s handiaps to try to
stamp some authority or lead-
ership over what was happen-
ning in Syria.

However, soon after al-Za-
wahiri’s message, a recording emerged on extremist forums
from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the
leader of ISI, in which he
claimed that Jabhat al-Nusra –
an al-Qaeda-like group that had
emerged on the Syrian battle-
field – was in fact an extension
of his Iraqi organization. As he
put it, “What is Jabhat al-Nusra
but an extension of the Islamic State of Iraq, and a part of it?”
In his message he clarified how the organization had been founded in
Syria under his direction and support, drawing on some key
lieutenants and funding from the Iraqi organization. In light of
this reality al-Baghdadi announced that the time had
now come for the organization to be subsumed once
again into the Iraqi parent and a new super group to be
established called the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
(ISIS – Sham is the Arabic word for Levant, a transna-
tional territory that goes from Iran’s borders through to
Jordan, hence the use of the acronym ISIL).

This pronouncement by al-Baghdadi was followed a
day later by a statement by the on-the-ground leader
of Jabhat al-Nusra, Abu Ahmad al-Assad, to his au-
thentic group of his organisation, but that Jabhat al-
Nusra was going to continue to fight in Syria “under its own
flag.” This public spat was the first confirmation of the
behind the scenes tensions that had been increasing-
ly visible between the various hardline Islamist factions
within the rebellion. However, with this public outing,
the split between the various factions became more
pronounced and increasingly stories from the battle-
field emerged of rebel factions fighting each other
rather than the regime.

There had always been some level of tension be-
 tween the various factions on the ground. Kurdish
groups, for example, rejected the regime, but were
equally unhappy with the Sunni Islamist groups. The
Free Syrian Army (FSA), the initial seed from which the
rebellion developed, became increasingly discredited
as reports emerged of groups associated with it raping
and looting after they took control of areas. And among
the Sunni fighters, there were a number of different
groups – Jabhat al-Nusra was widely assumed to be the
closest to al-Qaeda and Iraq’s Islamists, but Ahrar al-
Sham was seen as the most hardline indigenous Syri-
an Salafijihad group. And tensions between these
groups and ISIS in particular seemed to grow over
time. Among the battalions of foreign fighters, there
proved to be a difficult split as one of the prominent
leaders, Omar al-Shishani, a Caucasian leader of the
foreign fighter brigades, announced he had pledged his
loyalty directly to al-Baghdadi, while other Caucasian
leaders of foreign fighter units instead opted to re-
maintain independence or cast their lot behind Jabhat al-
Nusra.

However, the spat between al-Baghdadi and al-
Jawlani crystallized divisions among the Sunni fighters
in particular and cut a line between ISIS and most of
the others. This led to a tit-for-tat fighting that escalated
to the point of the death of Khalid al-Suri, a prominent
leader in Ahrar al-Sham with a long history alongside
al-Qaeda. Appointed to act as a moderator between
the various factions by Aym an al-Zawahiri, he was instead
killed in a suicide bomber attack in February 2014,
which was allegedly carried out by ISIS. This act came
amidst a growing bloodletting between the various
factions and in particular between ISIS and the rest,
something that continues to this day.

The impact of this on the rebellion in Syria has
been noticeable and is in part the reason why the As-
sad regime has seemed on the front foot of late. Busy
fighting among each other, the rebel side has become
more fractured than it was before, with increasing evi-
dence that the priority for most of the groups on the
ground is no longer to topple Assad, but rather to se-
cure their own financial interests. Smuggling, extortion
and other forms of criminality have become features of
uncontrolled areas of the country and for the most part
local leaders are more focused on this than coun-
tering the regime.

For ISIS, the fracturing of the rebellion in Syria has
meant they have withdrawn from previously spread out
positions to consolidate their hold over a few key lo-
cations. Raqqaa has become the first provincial capital in
Syria to fall into the hands of ISIS rebels, where they
have imposed their strict interpretation of Islamic law.
Women are expected to wear a full-face veil, and the
groups control of the town includes management of
courts, social services and local security. This has ex-
tended most infamously into the area justice, where the
group has gained some notoriety for crucifying indi-
viduals, chopping limbs off thieves, and executing peo-
ple for various crimes. Last February, ISIS announced
a new set of rules to be applied to the minority Chris-
tian groups living in the city. Christians are required,
among other things, not to pray in public, nor to ring

Islamist Syrian rebel group Jabhat al-Nusra members on the
lookout for warplanes loyal to Syria’s
president Bashar Al-
Assad in the northern
Idlib province, May 17,
2014.

Shia volunteers register to join the Iraqi army so
they can /f/ightagainst
the predominantly
Sunni militants who
have taken over Misfah
and other northern
provinces, Derna
province, June 13,
2014.
leaders from the Saddam era, still left fighting against the Maliki regime, were seen in Mosul celebrating victory alongside ISIS. Other reports highlighted how a number of al-Baghdadi’s key lieutenants were former regime loyalists who had connected with the group and continued their anti-government struggle alongside ISIS. All of this serves to highlight how although ISIS was clearly the public face of the surge into Iraq, it was not the only actor at play.

The question is what will ISIS now do with its strengthened hold over territory and repleted weapons and financial coffers. Pictures showed ISIS leaders examining captured military hardware, and reports indicated that as much as half a billion dollars may have been taken from banks in Mosul.

While it is unlikely that everything went to ISIS, the group has undoubtedly benefited and strengthened itself off the back of its activities in Iraq. This suggests that it will likely use this to surge back into Syria and confront the regime and its rebel adversaries there. For outside powers, the concern is that the group will use this success to launch attacks further afield or stamp its authority over an even larger piece of territory, creating a new Islamic emirate in the heart of the Middle East.

For the West, there is a very complicated dilemma at hand. Supporting the Assad regime remains a tasteless if not impossible option, while on the other hand watching a group like ISIS take and consolidate its control over vast swathes of the Levant is equally problematic. In fact, some assessments, the potential of ISIS taking and holding large pieces of the region is the worst alternative and there have already been reports of Western powers establishing back channels to the Assad regime, presumably to try to prepare for the need to work together to deal with some of the more extreme elements fighting in the rebellion. But by even starting to open this route, the West is highlighting its impotence in Syria and the failure of its strategy in trying to contain the civil war and bring it to a conclusion. A failure that is only accentuated by the rapidity with which the Western-bolstered Maliki regime fell in the face of the ISIS and Sunni rebel advance.

On the other side of the coin, the prospect of having to strike some sort of deal with ISIS or even finding some way of dealing with them is unpalatable. At the same time, the group is a reality that cannot be wished away. And it is a group that has deep ties in Europe and North America (as well as the broader Middle East, Gulf and globally) through the numerous foreign fighters among its ranks. History has shown how groups advancing this sort of ideology with foreign fighters produce terrorist threats back home.

There continue to be no good options in Syria, a reality that is increasing spreading across the border into Iraq. Narrowing in on the specific problem of foreign fighters, Western governments could look to reach some sort of accommodation to ensure that in what ever peace deal was struck to conclude the civil war, foreign fighters were explicitly ejected (similar to what happened during the Dayton Accords in Bosnia), but the reality is that we remain far from any sort of resolution wherein this might be possible. The main option on the table at the moment seems to be limited strikes to degrade ISIS capacity in particular, though this is something that is only going inflame the group’s desire to want to strike the West and will only further anger those who say that the West is in fact fighting alongside the Assad regime.

The bad hand that the West had been dealt with Syria and Iraq has only gotten worse, with the reality that both sides feel like they are winning on the ground. For Western security officials and observers, identifying what our stake is and how to secure it is only going to become harder as time goes on. Waiting for someone to decisively win one way or the other seems as distant now as it did when the Civil War first erupted.