All Eyes on the Islamic State? Repercussions of the Fight against Jihadists on War-Torn Syria

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Since autumn 2014 the United States has largely focused on building an international coalition with the aim of degrading and destroying the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, after the group’s well-mediated advance in Iraq and the declaration of a caliphate in June 2014. Yet, this coalition of some 60 states has not had a shared approach when it comes to addressing the civil war, ending the bloodshed and achieving sustainable stabilisation in Syria. At the same time, in the spring of 2015, the efforts of the UN Syrian envoy Staffan de Mistura at achieving a ‘freeze’ (or limited) ceasefire in Aleppo – and thus the attempt at launching a stabilisation process from the local level – have run aground. Regional powers have kept fanning the military confrontations between the Syrian regime and different rebel formations. In sum, the international shift of attention away from Syria to Iraq, the tacit cooperation with Iran in the anti-IS campaign in northern Iraq, as well as the weakening efforts to support the emergence of a credible alternative to the Assad regime have meant that a political solution to, or even a containment of, Syria’s civil war has become ever more elusive.

The International Coalition against the So-Called Islamic State

Already the coalition’s definition of the main threat is problematic in view of understanding current dynamics as well as with regards to achieving sustainable stabilisation in Syria. While the coalition has depicted the Islamic State (IS, or ISIL in UN parlance) as a threat to the national security of coalition partners as well as to regional stability and international security, IS should rather be seen as a product of the civil wars and the degradation of state structures in the region. It is thus just one of the many symptoms of the region’s conflicts rather than their source. And it is these conflicts that constitute a threat to regional stability and international security as they continue to attract foreign fighters, generate refugees, lead to the spilling over of fighting across borders and foster a sectarian reading of conflicts and geopolitical struggles. This implies that reducing the international approach to fighting one of the symptoms as manifested in IS will hardly reduce the threat to regional and international security either significantly or sustainably. This problem has been compounded as, beyond the fight against the IS, there has not been a common approach among coalition partners to dealing with the conflict in Syria. While the US has made Iraq a priority, Turkey and important Arab partners in the coalition prefer to focus on Syria. And while for Western governments, regime change in Syria is no longer (if it ever was) a priority, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have maintained their goal of regime change and supported radical rebels’ military advances in northern Syria. A further complication has arisen from Iran’s becoming an important, albeit tacit partner in the coalition’s efforts in Iraq. While indirect cooperation with Iran, which has trained, advised and led Shiite militias in the fight against IS, has been important in pushing back the jihadists there, the Iranian presence on the ground is seen as a potential threat to US troops and

has limited the US’ room for manoeuvre, not only in Iraq but also in Syria.

The fight against IS in Syria has also been hampered because the coalition has not been able to rely on local ground forces, as it has done in Iraq. Though the US have started a programme to train, assist, and equip some 15,000 so-called moderate rebels over a period of three years, that approach might well be too little too late to make a decisive difference. Already, over the last few months, moderate rebel formations have been crumbling under the force of jihadists.

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On the ground, while IS has clearly been put on the defensive in Iraq, that has not been the case in Syria, although it is true that there too IS resources have been diminished considerably through coalition attacks on oil fields and infrastructure. Also, IS supply lines between Syria and Iraq have been partly destroyed and command and control capacities have been decimated, as have been some of the training bases.

A major success has been to push IS out of the Kurdish town of Kobane – though in a lengthy campaign, partially undermined by Turkey, and at the cost of the town being completely flattened. At the same time, IS advances in other parts of the country have not been stopped, and the group has proven very swift and able in adapting its tactics and methods under pressure. And even though there seems to be a degree of infighting as a consequence, IS has continued to successfully recruit personnel, internationally and from other rebel groups.

A Divided Country with Dynamic Front Lines

As a result of the continued fighting, Syria has become ever more fragmented. In the spring of 2015, the country is divided into at least four areas under the control of different forces. The regime and its allies (mainly in the form of Hezbollah and local sectarian militias) control around a third of Syrian territory, including central Damascus, the larger parts of all provincial cities (except for Raqqah and Idlib), the centre of the country, as well as what is usually called the Alawite heartland, i.e. the coastal towns of Tartous and Latakia and their mountainous hinterland. IS controls the east and parts of the north of the country, mainly along the Euphrates valley and the border with Turkey. Since the liberation of Kobane from an IS onslaught with international air and Kurdish Peshmerga ground support in January 2015, the Syrian PKK affiliate Democratic Union Party (PYD) (again) controls the three main Kurdish towns in Syria’s north. But it does not have full control over the whole of the three cantons in which at the beginning of 2014 it had declared the Kurdish self-administration of Rojava (West Kurdistan). A broad array of armed groups, including Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliated rebels, IS and the Nusra Front is present in the north and the south of the country, with little coordination between FSA-affiliated rebels in the two regions. None of these areas is contiguous and, except for those zones controlled by the PYD and IS, there is little central control and command. That is also true

in the areas dominated by the regime, as the latter has had to rely on Hezbollah and the militias of the so-called Syrian resistance. The rebel-held areas, in particular, resemble a dynamic assemblage of warlords’ fiefdoms with constantly shifting alliances and mergers between different rebel groups, mainly motivated by local priorities and the availability of resources, much less by ideological affinities.

Also, while the general division between the areas under control of the regime, the rebels and the PYD has stabilised over the last year, the frontlines and major cities have been strongly contested and embattled, not only between rebels and the regime but also between different rebel formations. In the spring of 2015, two trends are noteworthy. Firstly, regime forces have been weakening, and the regime has had to rely more on Hezbollah and sectarian militias rather than the regular army. As a result, fighting led to the regime losing control over Idlib, the second of the provincial towns after Raqqa, to an alliance of radical fighters including the Nusra Front and Ahra al-Sham in March 2015. At the same time, regime forces and their allies (unsuccessfully) attempted to reconquer territory previously lost to rebels in the southwest – close to the Golan Heights and the Jordanian border – and to tighten the siege around Aleppo. Second, infighting between different rebel groups was decided by jihadist forces and led to a further weakening of moderate rebels. In early April 2015, IS moved into the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk less than 10 kilometres from the centre of Damascus. Moderate rebels connected to the FSA had already been squeezed out of Idlib province by an advance of the Nusra Front, resulting in, among other things, the dissolution of one of the groups that the US had trained and equipped, i.e. the Hazm Movement. Indeed, increased fragmentation and loss (or absence) of political control over parts of the regime and opposition forces will make negotiations over a political settlement ever more difficult, and implementation of agreements next to impossible.

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**Humanitarian Implications**

It has, above all, been the Syrian civilian population that has suffered the consequences of the continued armed fighting. Syrians have been affected by air and ground attacks, first and foremost by regime forces in the form of rather primitive ‘barrel bombs’ and chemical substances and by sieges on rebel-held areas that have led to the resurgence of malnutrition, starvation, and maladies thought to be eradicated. They have also suffered detentions, torture and killings by the regime as well as changing warlords imposing their rules, taxes and morals – with IS, albeit a particularly brutal force, only one of many such rulers. And they have been forced into displacement and flight.

As a consequence, at the beginning of April 2015, some 220,000 Syrians are estimated by the UN to have been killed in the violence. Some 3.9 million Syrians are registered as refugees, with most of them residing in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. More than 7.6 million Syrians are internally displaced. Some 12.2 million, i.e. around 67% of the Syrian population of 18.2 million, are in need of humanitarian assistance. Yet, around 4.8 million reside in hard-to-reach areas, i.e. localities under siege by regime or rebel forces or difficult to access due to restrictions or fighting, so that they cannot receive the help they need. In this regard, while some progress has been achieved with regards to the delivery of humanitarian aid across borders since

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3 For a detailed account of recent developments on the ground see also Oweis, Khaled Yacoub, “Sieges and Ceasef leaves in Syria’s civil war,” SWP Comments, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2015.


Security Council resolution 2139 in February 2014 and 2165 in July 2014, there has been very little improvement with regards to aid across front lines.¹

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

The fight against IS cannot be successful in Syria as long as the terror exercised by the regime and its allies – they have been responsible for some 95% of civilian deaths in Syria⁷ – is not tackled at the same time, and as long as there is no credible and effective alternative to the regime on the one hand and jihadists forces on the other. Only when these conditions are fulfilled is there a chance for the struggle against IS to be embraced by the mainstream rebels as well as the larger population.

Therefore, four elements seem to be key not only to fight IS effectively but also to work towards achieving a sustained stabilisation of Syria: 1) Supporting a credible and viable alternative to the regime and the jihadists. Indeed, in early 2014 an opposition government, the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), started to work from the Turkish city of Gaziantep with the task of providing services in areas outside Assad's control. Yet, while the SIG, with the help of an array of international partners, has evolved into quite an effective service provider over the year 2014, it is now about to collapse as it no longer receives any core funding. Such a collapse would spell the end of a tangible alternative to regime and jihadist rule in Syria. 2) Protecting the population by imposing a no-fly zone over Syria (except for fighting against IS) so as to shield civilians at least from air attacks. 3) Considerably increasing humanitarian aid with a special view to hard-to-reach areas as well as long-term development support for refugees to provide livelihoods and perspectives for Syrians who have had to flee the country and prevent radicalisation. 4) Exploring new regional and international opportunities for a political settlement based on the 2012 Geneva principles, in particular in light of a new Saudi leadership and a possible nuclear deal with Iran.


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