

## FORECASTING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

*The trajectory of the Syrian Civil War may fundamentally shift within the 90 day timeframe. Russia escalated its military assistance on behalf of the Syrian regime in early September 2015, deploying armored vehicles and hundreds of personnel to the Syrian Coast in preparation for the establishment of at least one forward air operations base. Rebel factions led by Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) continue to pressure the regime's stronghold along the Alawite Coast following a several-month campaign to expel regime forces from Idlib Province. Turkey and the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition intend to establish an "ISIS-free" zone in northern Syria along the Turkish border with the assistance of moderate rebel forces. There a number of ways that the actors driving conditions on the ground could respond to these events or generate new conditions. The interplay between these developments and their courses of action could create numerous different outcomes in Syria over the next 12 weeks. A number of these divergent pathways could generate negative effects that intensify the conflict, spread regional disorder, and threaten U.S. interests in Syria.*

*It is possible to forecast these trajectories to provide policy-makers and analysts with a key tool to anticipate the actions of adversaries such as ISIS and avert the potential pathways that could be most damaging to the U.S. or its allies. The following forecast applies the traditional techniques of intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) to actors and conditions in Syria. IPB is a process of analyzing enemy forces, terrain, weather, and civilian considerations in order to anticipate their effects upon friendly forces and their planned or ongoing operations. IPB involves analysis of the possible courses of action of the primary actors on the ground, given existing knowledge about their capabilities, tactics, and intent. Courses of action are ranked from most to least likely and evaluated for the dangers that they potentially pose to friendly force operations. The purpose of this course of action projection is to inform decision-makers with accurate forecasts that adequately account for a range of possibilities as well as the outside risk of most dangerous courses of action. Most dangerous courses of action are designated as such because they are not most likely, but they are nevertheless plausible. Illuminating them allows commanders to mitigate risk while planning in the context of most likely courses of action.*

*The forecasts presented in this paper are undergirded by several fundamental assumptions. First, the recent deployment of Russian military forces to Syria will maintain a defensive posture to prevent the collapse of the Syrian regime rather than a direct offensive posture to seize territory from anti-regime actors. Second, the Iranian nuclear accord and its corresponding sanctions relief for the Iranian government will be implemented in full. Third, the U.S. and Turkey will succeed in organizing and launching some form of offensive by rebel forces on the ground in an attempt to implement an "ISIS-free" zone in northern Syria. Fourth, Turkey will not take hostile action against the Syrian Kurdish YPG due to pressure on both parties by the U.S. Fifth, neighboring states — particularly Lebanon — will remain relatively stable. Sixth, the Iraqi Security Forces will continue their current pace and scale of anti-ISIS operations in Iraq with a prioritization of Anbar Province. If one or more of these assumptions prove false over the 90 day timeframe, this forecast will need to be adjusted to account for a significant inflection in the Syrian Civil War.*

*Based upon the assessed courses of action available to actors on the ground in Syria, ISW anticipates a spectrum of possible developments in the Syrian Civil War over the 90 day timeframe.*

*These outcomes have been characterized through analysis of the most likely courses of action (MLCOAs) and most dangerous courses of action (MDCOAs) for three primary actors: ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Syrian regime with its allies.*

## Interaction within Most Likely Courses of Action

Syrian Civil War MLCOAs for 90 Days	
September 16, 2015	
Actor	MLCOA
ISIS	Conduct offensive operations and spectacular attacks against anti-ISIS forces along the Turkish border; escalate assassination campaign against Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies; set conditions for future operations against the Syrian regime
Jabhat al-Nusra	Secure a defensible perimeter in Idlib Province against both the Syrian regime and ISIS while expanding its influence within rebel governance and military structures
Syrian Regime	Secure a defensible perimeter around core terrain in Latakia Province and the Syrian central corridor while clearing pockets of remaining rebel presence near Damascus

The assessed most likely courses of action (MLCOAs) for the Syrian regime, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS tend to favor defense and consolidation over offense and maneuver. This observation holds particularly true for the Syrian regime, which suffered a series of prominent battlefield defeats over the past six months that highlighted its limited ability to sustain offensive operations across multiple fronts. Russia and Iran recently increased their direct support to the Syrian regime in response to these setbacks, although their mobilization thus far appears insufficient to enable large-scale operations by regime forces. The conflict between the Syrian regime and Jabhat al-Nusra will thus likely settle into relatively stable front lines as both parties continue to contest the boundary between Latakia and Hama Provinces. Russian personnel and equipment will likely enable regime forces to secure a buffer zone in southwestern Idlib Province, potentially including the city of Jisr al-Shughour, but will not empower the Syrian regime to conduct major offensives beyond the clearing operations ongoing in Damascus and its vicinity.

Jabhat al-Nusra will likely seek to preserve its momentum in northwestern Syria through follow-on offensives against regime forces in Latakia and Hama Provinces. Nonetheless, the arrival of increasing amounts of Russian assistance to the Syrian regime may eventually neutralize the immediate threat posed to the regime heartland and place Jabhat al-Nusra on the defensive. Jabhat al-Nusra will also seek to balance its constraints against the need to consolidate its recent gains in Idlib Province, particularly given the potential for an escalating ISIS-directed campaign of assassinations and spectacular attacks targeting Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies in Idlib Province. Jabhat al-Nusra will prioritize its efforts to embed itself within the structures of the Syrian opposition, although the expansion of its influence over the 90 day timeframe may be slowed by a corresponding decrease in

major victories over newly-reinforced regime forces as fighting moves into increasingly pro-regime terrain.

ISIS is the actor most likely to destabilize the current equilibrium. ISIS will act to evade the pressure of outside actors, to satisfy its need to maintain a narrative of expansion, and to accommodate its organizational inclination towards offensive action. ISIS will achieve limited gains in the eastern Homs countryside, including the likely seizure of regime forward positions at the T4 (Tiyas) Airbase and the regime-held strategic oil and gas fields in central Syria over the medium-term. Further advances by ISIS will likely be dictated by the status of the balance between the Syrian regime and Jabhat al-Nusra; ISIS will leverage its opportunities to undermine the party perceived as the most vulnerable. ISIS may nonetheless seek to prioritize operations against the Syrian regime in order to promote its image as an anti-regime actor and cleave other rebel factions away from both Jabhat al-Nusra and the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. Although the seizure of the remaining regime positions in Deir ez-Zour City remains an operational objective for ISIS, a major offensive against the enclave appears less likely over the next twelve weeks due to the strength of the regime's garrison and competing resource demands from ISIS's fronts in northern Syria and western Iraq.

ISIS's forces in Aleppo and ar-Raqqa Provinces may shift based upon the success experienced by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in organizing and implementing ground operations against ISIS in conjunction with moderate Syrian rebel fighters. The ability of the coalition to secure sufficient numbers of fighters for an operation targeting ar-Raqqa City appears suspect, particularly given pressure for Syrian Kurdish forces to be excluded from the fighting. In the event of such an offensive, ISIS will likely mount fierce resistance to any coalition effort to seize ar-Raqqa

City and seek to draw their opponents into urban fighting which neutralizes the advantages of coalition air power. ISIS thus remains unlikely to lose ar-Raqqa City in the 90 day timeframe. Nonetheless, ISIS will likely be forced to cede ground to rebel forces supported by Turkey and the U.S. in northern Aleppo Province. These losses may incentivize ISIS to further escalate its activities against Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebels in Idlib Province or otherwise pursue new courses of action to preserve its status quo. Some of these reactions have the potential to generate disruptive effects on the Syrian Civil War on a whole.

Overall, these assessed most likely courses of action (MLCOAs) under current conditions may drive the Syrian Civil War towards a state of relative equilibrium over the next three months. The dynamics detailed above suggest that no one actor will be able to force a strategic shift in the conflict through military means over the next three months. The multilateral nature of the Syrian Civil War provides motivation for actors on the ground to preserve this balance. In this environment, conflict between any two actors generates exploitable opportunities for the third. The primary actors on the ground are thus incentivized to exercise restraint as they anticipate the moves of other actors. Most often, they act to create conditions that neutralize the moves of other players in order to preserve themselves and avoid creating advantages for other parties. This dynamic equilibrium is characteristic of the Syrian Civil War as all sides attempt to achieve optimal positioning against their adversaries.

Any equilibrium in Syria remains unstable. Several actors possess the ability to disrupt the balance and drive the Syrian Civil War along hazardous alternate pathways.

Several actors can also pursue courses of action to alter the balance in ways that are most dangerous to U.S. interests. Namely, both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra are poised as of September 16, 2015 to force the uncontrolled collapse of the Syrian regime or the direct intervention of an outside actor. A decision by one or more actors to pursue their assessed most dangerous courses of action (MDCOAs) in Syria would thus result in a sharp inflection in the trajectory of the war in Syria. In some cases, an actor may pursue one of the above MDCOAs if the equilibrium is temporarily disrupted by other conditions, such as MLCOAs that have unexpected consequences. A rapid series of effective limited offensives by ISIS in eastern Homs Province, for example, could overwhelm regime defenses and precipitate MDCOA responses from other actors; alternately, the inability of ISIS to prevent advances by anti-ISIS forces in northern Syria could cause ISIS to pursue an MDCOA against the Syrian regime near Homs City to compensate for its losses. ISIS remains the actor most likely to pursue its most dangerous course of action and the actor best positioned to exploit follow-on opportunities from such a disruptive action. Successful U.S.-led coalition operations to contest ISIS in northern Aleppo Province or ar-Raqqa City could inadvertently incentivize ISIS to pursue these courses of action in order to secure additional urban terrain or border access in western Syria. This forecast seeks to illuminate this risk in order to avert near-term surprise.

The implementation of one MDCOA by any actor in Syria generates compounding incentives for other actors to pursue their own MDCOAs. For example, a successful large-scale offensive against the Syrian regime by ISIS in Homs Province or Jabhat al-Nusra in Latakia Province would likely spur the regime into a dangerous and uncontrolled contraction. This development would likely spur direct engagement by military

### Interaction within Most Dangerous Courses of Action

Syrian Civil War MDCOAs for 90 Days	
September 16, 2015	
Actor	MLCOA
ISIS	MDCOA #1: Offensive against Syrian regime in Homs City or Qusayr
	MDCOA #2: Offensive against Jabhat al-Nusra and allies in Idlib
Jabhat al-Nusra	MDCOA #1: Ground offensive targeting Alawites in Latakia Province
Syrian Regime	MDCOA #1: Uncontrolled regime contraction to a 'rump state'
	MDCOA #2: Iranian-backed offensive along Golan Heights border

forces from Russia or Iran that would inflame regional tensions and provide fuel for recruitment efforts by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and extremist groups. At the same time, a major operation by Jabhat al-Nusra targeting the Syrian Coast could incentivize ISIS to conduct its own offensive into Idlib Province while Jabhat al-Nusra and its allied rebel forces are distracted elsewhere. ISIS may actually seek to leverage the cascading effects generated by the pursuit of one of its MDCOAs in order to provoke a wider destabilization of the Syrian conflict under the rationale that it is the best-positioned actor to take advantage of this disorder.

Any and all of these dangerous courses of action will produce heightened levels of disorder in Syria which will undermine regional security, expand the influence of malign actors, and limit the options available to U.S. policymakers. The prospect of expanded influence for ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, or Iranian proxy forces within Syria will motivate other foreign actors in the Syrian Civil War – including Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia – to further intensify their direct and indirect assistance to factions on the ground in a manner that prolongs the conflict and further reduces the space for political compromise. At the same time, continuing violence provides both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra with optimal conditions to export their militant ideologies, expand their recruitment efforts, and dictate the terms of a generational conflict. These courses of action and their predicted outcomes will ultimately develop too rapidly for the U.S. to generate a coherent response to an even greater and more complex threat environment. The avoidance, neutralization, and prevention of these most dangerous courses of action should therefore remain at the forefront any discussion of U.S. policy towards the anti-ISIS campaign or the Syrian Civil War as a whole.

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# SYRIA 90-DAY STRATEGIC FORECAST: THE REGIME AND ALLIES

## PRO-REGIME OBJECTIVES

### Grand Strategic Objectives:

- *[Syrian Regime]* Preserve the rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a post-war Syria encompassing the entire pre-war Syrian state
- *[Iran]* Preserve a viable Syrian regime led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a key member of the 'Axis of Resistance'; achieve strategic positioning against Israel
- *[Russia]* Preserve the Syrian state – not necessarily Syrian President Bashar al-Assad – as a key foothold in the Middle East and an ally against terrorism
- *[Hezbollah]* Prevent the spread of the Syrian Civil War into Lebanese core terrain

### Strategic Objectives:

- *[Syrian Regime]* Maintain Syrian territorial integrity through an 'army in all corners'; consolidate Syrian civilian population in regime-held areas; bolster international and domestic legitimacy as ruler of Syria.
- *[Iran]* Position against Israel in southern Syria along the Golan Heights; preserve access to supply lines from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon; develop network of Syrian proxies to maintain Iranian influence if regime falls
- *[Iran/Russia]* Enable Syrian regime to defend core terrain along Syrian central corridor
- *[Hezbollah]* Secure Lebanese border region against incursion by militant groups

## SYRIAN REGIME AND ITS ALLIES: CURRENT CONDITIONS

The Syrian regime is constrained by a pressing shortage of manpower (and to a lesser extent military equipment) which severely restricts its ability to conduct major offensive operations or adequately defend all of its outposts across Syria as part of its 'army in all corners' strategy. The rapid fall of the urban centers of Idlib City, Jisr al-Shughour, and Palmyra over the March 2015 to May 2015 time period in the face of separate offensives by JN-led rebel forces and ISIS highlighted the degree to which the Syrian Army is overstretched. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad later gave a public address on July 26 which admitted a "shortfall of human capacity" among regime forces and stated that the Syrian Army has been forced to prioritize

the defense of some "critical areas" at the expense of others. These circumstances have left the Syrian regime increasingly dependent on support from its foreign backers, namely Iran and Russia.

Developments on the international stage have also set conditions which will affect the calculations of the Syrian regime and its backers. The implementation of the Iranian nuclear accord signed on July 14 will provide tens of billions of dollars in sanctions relief to the Iranian government. This windfall will likely enable Iran to expand its military and financial support to the Syrian regime in response to recent battlefield setbacks. Meanwhile, Russian activities in Ukraine suggest that Moscow remains willing to undertake a high degree of risk in order to secure its geopolitical interests, one of which is the preservation of the Syrian state as its only

foothold in the Middle East. Overall, the conclusion of the nuclear deal with Iran has also opened a new phase of international diplomacy aimed at ending the Syrian Civil War which has generated incentives for Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime to achieve optimal political and military positioning in Syria in order to improve their leverage over any negotiations. Recent reports of increased deployments of Russian personnel and equipment to the Syrian Coast suggest that the foreign supporters of the Syrian regime intend to pursue these interests through means that include direct military intervention.

## 90 DAY FORECAST

### *Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)*

The coming three months will likely constitute a period of retrenchment for the Syrian regime given the strain of its manpower shortage and the current momentum of anti-regime actors. The regime remains unlikely to conduct any major offensive operations which would drive a strategic shift in the Syrian Civil War in the absence of a dramatic increase in outside support. Although both Iran and Russia have recently demonstrated their willingness to expand their involvement in the Syrian Civil War, the expected

pace and scope of this mobilization over coming weeks appears calibrated towards preserving the Syrian regime and preventing Western intervention rather than driving rapid or fundamental change in the conflict. At the same time, the regime remains unlikely to voluntarily withdraw from its outposts in the ‘army from all corners’ strategy given the imperative to preserve its control over terrain in advance of any international negotiations. Pressure from ISIS or other anti-regime actors will nonetheless likely force the Syrian regime to cede at least one of these positions over the next three months, particularly the besieged Kuweires Airbase east of Aleppo. The loss of more strategic positions such as the Deir ez-Zour Military Airbase or the Jazal Oil Fields in central Syria, however, would likely prompt the Syrian regime to conduct operations to reclaim these positions at the expense of other objectives.

The regime’s primary operational objectives are defensive:

- Secure Defensive Perimeter for Latakia Province
- Buffer Syrian Central Corridor Against ISIS
- Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity

Syrian Regime Operational Objectives & MLCOAs for 90 Days	
September 9, 2015	
Operational Objective	Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)
Secure Defensive Perimeter for Latakia Province	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure and fortify the al-Ghab Plain in northwestern Hama Province against JN-led rebel forces (ongoing)</li> <li>• Launch limited operations to set conditions for recapture of Jisr al-Shughour and northeastern Latakia Province</li> </ul>
Buffer Syrian Central Corridor Against ISIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure and hold the major oil and natural gas fields between Homs City and Palmyra (ongoing)</li> <li>• Conduct limited operations to contest outskirts of Palmyra and force ISIS into defensive posture (ongoing)</li> <li>• Reinforce and hold the strategic T4 (Tiyas) and Shayrat Airbases to buffer against ISIS incursion</li> </ul>
Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminate rebel presence in the besieged town of Zabadani in conjunction with Hezbollah (ongoing)</li> <li>• Continue limited operations and sieges against rebel-held pockets in Western Ghouta and southern Damascus</li> <li>• Escalate against rebel-held Eastern Ghouta, potentially using reinforcements drawn from Zabadani (ongoing)</li> </ul>

The Syrian regime’s MLCOA for the next 90 days is detailed in the chart above.

The Syrian regime will pair these delineated operational objectives and MLCOAs with actions which exploit opportunities opened by the courses of action pursued by other actors on the ground. In Aleppo Province, the Syrian regime will likely seek to leverage a major ongoing escalation between ISIS and rebel forces as well as efforts to install an “ISIS-free” zone along the Turkish border in order to pursue its objective of encircling the rebel-held districts of Aleppo City. The Syrian regime will also likely use any conflict between ISIS and JN-led rebel forces in Idlib Province in order to achieve opportunistic advances and expand its buffer zone around the Syrian Coast.

As noted above, the operational objectives and MLCOAs pursued by the Syrian regime will also be heavily shaped by the extent of military assistance received from Iran and Russia over the 90-day timeframe. Both countries have dedicated significant amounts of military resources on behalf of the Syrian regime and appear likely to increase this support further over the next twelve weeks in order to bolster the regime retrenchment within its core terrain, particularly the regime heartland along the Syrian Coast. However, the deployment of a quantity of troops sufficient

to dramatically shift the current momentum on the ground and open major opportunities for the Syrian regime would require a level of investment that surpasses the current trajectories of expanded Russian and Iranian aid in Syria.

*Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)*

As noted above, the Syrian regime remains highly limited in its ability to conduct operations which achieve a significant non-linear impact on the course of the Syrian Civil War. Nonetheless, there are at least two potential most dangerous courses of action (MDCOAs) under current conditions which do not directly rely on the offensive capabilities of the Syrian regime. The regime might contract uncontrollably into an Alawite rump state, not of its own choosing but under pressure from its adversaries or from internal schisms. Alternatively, Iran could conduct an offensive along the Golan Heights border with Israel in order to regain control over that terrain and pursue its objectives against Israel.

The regime’s primary operational objectives will include:

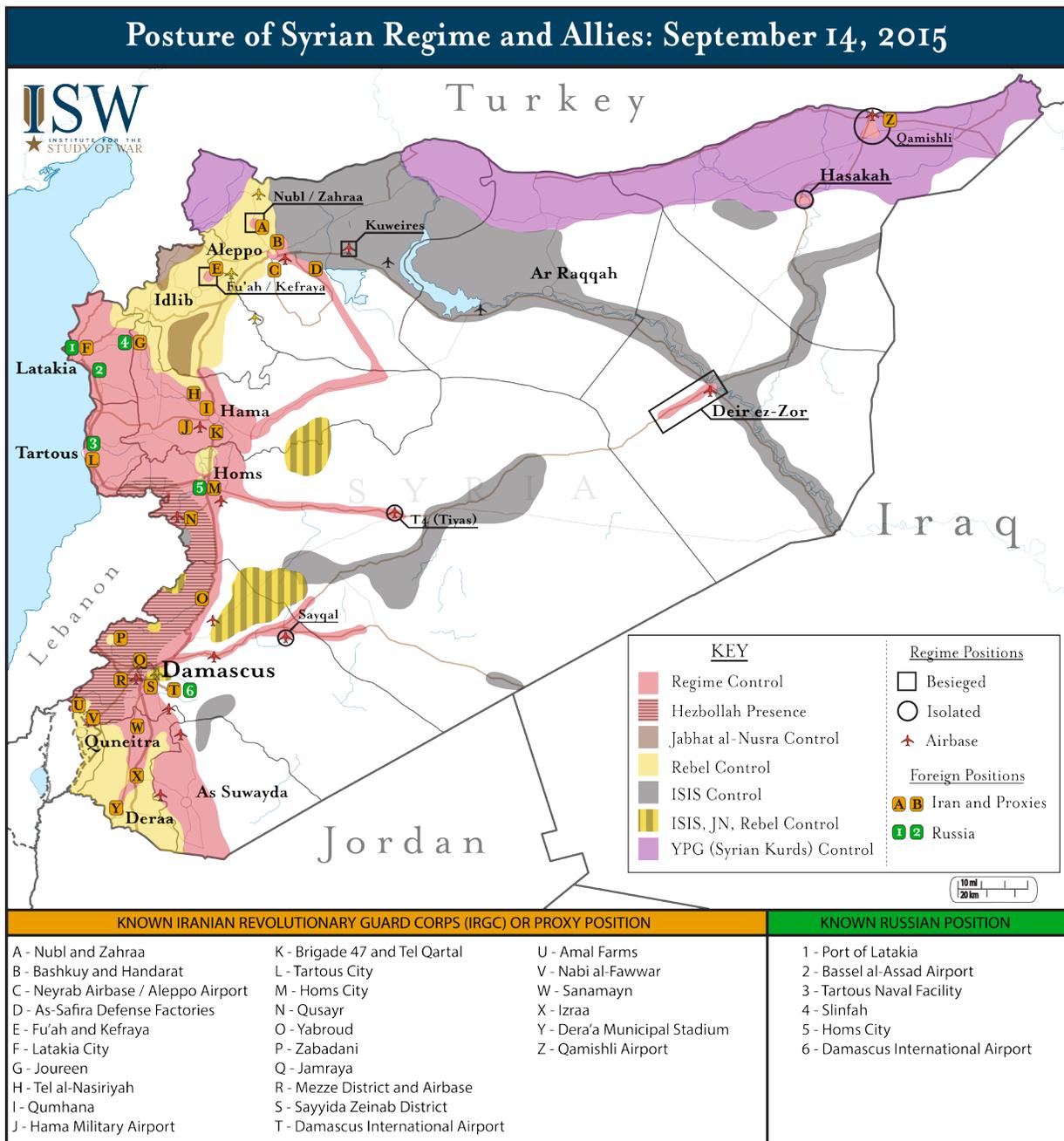
- Establish Defensive Perimeter for Latakia Province
- Buffer Syrian Central Corridor Against ISIS
- Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity

Syrian Regime Operational Objectives & MDCOAs for 90 Days	
September 9, 2015	
MDCOA #1: Uncontrolled regime contraction to a ‘rump state’	
MDCOA #2: Iranian-backed offensive along Golan Heights border	
Operational Objective	Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)
Establish Defensive Perimeter for Latakia Province	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure and fortify the al-Ghab Plain in northwestern Hama Province against JN-led rebel forces (ongoing)</li> <li>• MDCOA #1: Conduct major operation including chemical weapons, airstrikes, and Iranian proxies to secure northeastern Latakia Province</li> </ul>
Buffer Syrian Central Corridor Against ISIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MDCOA #1: Reinforce outskirts of Homs and Hama Cities, and violently clear of suspect populations through massacres, chemical weapons</li> <li>• MDCOA #1: Withdraw from the T4 (Tiyas) and Shayrat Airbases as well as the oil and natural gas fields between Homs City and Palmyra</li> </ul>
Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MDCOA #1: Conduct major operation including chemical weapons, airstrikes, and Iranian proxies to violently clear rebel-held pockets of Eastern and Western Ghouta</li> <li>• Eliminate rebel presence in the besieged town of Zabadani in conjunction with Hezbollah (ongoing)</li> </ul>
[Iran] Secure Golan Heights Border	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MDCOA #2: Conduct major operation through Iranian proxies to seize terrain along Golan Heights</li> </ul>

- Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity
- [Iran] Secure Golan Heights Border

First, the overstretched posture of the Syrian regime sets conditions for a possible rapid collapse in its military and political institutions which would empower ISIS, JN, and other malign actors in Syria. Current setbacks for the Syrian regime have been managed in a gradual series of phased withdrawals which contain any potential for an exponential expansion in disorder. Nonetheless, an unmanaged transition prompted by a major or unexpected operation targeting the Syrian central corridor – such as a successful ISIS offensive

against Homs City or Qusayr – could prompt the Syrian regime to undergo a sharp contraction to a ‘rump state’ centered in Damascus and the Syrian Coast, enabling major territorial gains for ISIS and JN. The Syrian regime and its allies would likely further escalate the use of indiscriminate violence in order to quickly secure the bounds of this ‘rump state’ through the employment of chemical weapons and massacres of perceived anti-regime populations. A breakdown in the Syrian regime would also further empower Iran and its network of proxies inside of Syria while eliminating the potential for a negotiated transition that would end the conflict. Similar outcomes could also be produced by a substitute MDCOA in



which Russia or Iran heavily expand its military support for the Syrian regime beyond the bounds currently anticipated in the MLCOA. Foreign reinforcements sufficient to enable major offensive operations by regime forces would likely be leveraged to pursue the same lines of effort detailed in the above scenario, including violent and indiscriminate action to clear core regime terrain in the Syrian Coast and Damascus. Directly intervening on behalf of the Syrian regime would likely push other regional actors to expand their own support to the Syrian opposition, exacerbating the conflict and enabling militant Islamist factions in a manner which fuels regional disorder.

An Iranian-driven offensive along the border of the Israeli-held Golan Heights constitutes a second possible MDCOA under current conditions. Iranian proxies – including Palestinian militants, Afghan Shia militiamen, and Lebanese Hezbollah – have been increasingly active along the Golan Heights border in recent months and have conducted several attacks against Israel or the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Iran may calculate that a direct operation along the Golan Heights will be necessary to secure strategic positioning against Israel given the recent setbacks of the Syrian regime. Advances by anti-regime actors, including ISIS, JN, and the Syrian opposition, which sufficiently weaken the Syrian regime could pressure Iran to pursue this course of action and prioritize its own efforts within the country. This escalation would likely constitute a component of a broader Iranian decision to move to a new phase of direct engagement in Syria. In any scenario, such a move by Iran would likely prompt a military response from Israel, which has conducted multiple airstrikes against Iranian-backed forces in Syria and recently engaged in military exercises focusing on a limited operation into southern Syria. Events along the Golan Heights border could thus escalate into a broader struggle between Israel and Iran along with its proxies which threatens the stability of the region.

## ENDNOTES

1. For more, see: Christopher Kozak, “An Army in All Corners”: Assad’s Campaign Strategy in Syria, April 2015, <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/An%20Army%20in%20All%20Corners%20by%20Chris%20Kozak%20I.pdf>
2. For more, see: Christopher Kozak, The Assad Regime Under Stress: Conscription and Protest among Alawite and Minority Populations in Syria, December 2015, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-assad-regime-under-stress.html>

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# SYRIA 90-DAY STRATEGIC FORECAST: JABHAT AL-NUSRA (JN)

## JABHAT AL-NUSRA'S OBJECTIVES

### Grand strategic objectives:

- Establish an Islamic Emirate in Syria that is a future component of the envisioned al-Qaeda Caliphate
- Unify the global jihadist movement

### Strategic objectives:

- Destroy the Assad regime
- Transform Syrian society from secular nationalism to an Islamic theocracy
- Establish locally-accepted governance as a precursor to an eventual Islamic Emirate
- Build an army to protect the Islamic Emirate by partnering with Syrian rebel groups
- Resolve the fitna, or schism, with ISIS
- Counter U.S. influence in Syria

## CURRENT CONDITIONS AFFECTING JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN SYRIA

Jabhat al-Nusra is relatively unconstrained in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra tailors its approach within each of Syria's rebel-held regions to local conditions in order to maximize its effect without alienating local populations. Local conditions therefore factor heavily into Jabhat al-Nusra's calculus. Conditions in Syria that shape Jabhat al-Nusra's options and requirements include:

Condition		Impact
U.S. airstrikes targeting Khorasan-linked Jabhat al-Nusra members	→	Heightened operational security requirements in Idlib and Aleppo; opportunity for anti-U.S. propaganda
U.S.-trained rebels entering Syria; Syrian rebel forces seeking partnership with the anti-ISIS coalition	→	Incentive to attack rebel forces that partner with the U.S., especially in northern Syria
Increased assassinations of Jabhat al-Nusra members and associated Shari'a officials, likely attributable to ISIS, in Idlib and Dera'a Provinces	→	Requirement to secure institutions in areas of operation in Idlib and Dera'a Provinces against ISIS
Unrest within pro-regime populations regarding regime's military strategy	→	Opportunity for maximized psychological effect of military operations against pro-regime forces

## CONDITIONS SETTING BY JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN THE NEXT 90 DAYS

Jabhat al-Nusra will continue to set the following conditions for its longer-term campaign:

- prevent a negotiated solution to end the Syrian war;
- counter U.S. influence in Syria;
- prepare for an ISIS military offensive against Western Syria.

Jabhat al-Nusra's operational objectives, explored in the next section, support the creation of these conditions.

### *Prevent a Negotiated Solution in Syria*

Jabhat al-Nusra pursues the full destruction of the Syrian regime as an ideological imperative and a necessary condition for the complete transformation of Syrian society. To preserve time and space to set this transformation, Jabhat al-Nusra obstructs a negotiated solution to the Syrian war, which would likely leave the Assad regime intact. Jabhat al-Nusra does so in part by protecting and expanding its network of military and governance structures, which Jabhat al-Nusra uses to influence the opposition strongly against the cessation of hostilities. Jabhat al-Nusra also exploits opportunities to increase the overall sectarianism of the war in an attempt to undermine dialogue between pro- and anti-regime populations. Unrest among pro-regime populations and the behavior of Syrian regime international supporters may increase the requirement for Jabhat al-Nusra to reinforce its measures to influence rebel groups to eschew negotiations.

### *Counter U.S. Influence in Syria*

Jabhat al-Nusra develops strategic positioning against the U.S. in Syria on behalf of the global al-Qaeda movement. Jabhat al-Nusra does so in part by leveraging widespread disillusionment with the U.S. within Syrian civilian populations to increase local support for al-Qaeda. This outreach contributes to Jabhat al-Nusra's effort to undermine a negotiated solution to the Syrian war, but also generates social change by creating a permissive environment for Jabhat al-Nusra's religious outreach. Jabhat al-Nusra also attacks and defeats moderate rebel groups that begin to threaten its influence or provide the U.S. with direct nodes of influence in Syria. Increased activities by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in August 2015 will increase the requirement for Jabhat al-Nusra to reinforce anti-U.S. sentiment among rebels.

### *Prepare for an ISIS Offensive in Western Syria*

Jabhat al-Nusra has prioritized the deconfliction its operations with ISIS in an attempt to avoid an escalation of the fitna, or schism, between the two groups. This prioritization stems in part from Jabhat al-Nusra's strategic objective of unifying the global jihadist movement, and in part from a pragmatic desire to avoid a costly war with ISIS. Jabhat al-Nusra's commitment to resisting U.S. involvement in Syria is shared by ISIS. However, ISIS began to escalate against Jabhat al-Nusra in Western Syria in July 2015, forcing Jabhat al-Nusra to adopt a defensive posture. Jabhat al-Nusra's intent to confront the U.S.-backed coalition in Syria is therefore increasingly undermined by its need to defend itself against ISIS. Jabhat al-Nusra will likely tailor its response to ISIS within each of Syria's rebel-held regions in the next twelve weeks, avoiding escalation against ISIS where possible but adopting an offensive posture where necessary.

## 90 Day Forecast

### *Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)*

Jabhat al-Nusra is pursuing six operational objectives in order to set these conditions as of September 11, 2015:

- Secure defensible perimeter in Idlib Province
- Expand network of military alliances
- Compete with and eliminate Western influence within rebel ranks
- Protect gains from ISIS
- Expand Jabhat al-Nusra-linked governance structures
- Generate schisms within the regime's support base

The chart on the following page outlines JN's most likely courses of action (MLCOA) in the next 90 days in order to advance its operational objectives and set favorable conditions.

If successful, this course of action would extend Jabhat al-Nusra's network in Syria and protect the group's core gains from ISIS predation in the near term. In addition, it would set conditions that obstruct a negotiated settlement to the Syrian war by increasing Jabhat al-Nusra's influence over rebel structures. Jabhat al-Nusra's offensive operations against Sahel al-Ghab, south of Jisr al-Shughour, and against regime positions northwest of Hama City would set back the Syrian regime, but they would not independently produce major asymmetric battlefield effects. Jabhat al-Nusra's exploitation of tensions within the pro-regime camp will likely remain at low levels over the next 90 days, but could produce asymmetric

## Jabhat al-Nusra's MLCOA for September-December 2015

September 11, 2015

Operational Objective	Conditions Set	Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)
Establish defensible perimeter in Idlib Province	Counter U.S. Influence in Syria; Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seize Sahel al-Ghab, south of Jisr al-Shughour, from pro-regime forces (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Expand network of military alliances	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hama and Homs: Create a new military operations room to launch offensive against pro-regime forces, likely NW of Hama City</li> <li>Damascus: formalize partnership with Afnar al-Sham in order to undermine Jaysh al-Islam's power</li> <li>Damascus: foster unrest toward Jaysh al-Islam in Eastern Ghouta in order to undermine Jaysh al-Islam's power (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Compete with and eliminate Western influence within rebel ranks	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attack U.S.-trained rebels after insertion into Syria (ongoing)</li> <li>Reinforce defensive lines in Aleppo City IOT offset rebel deployments to fight ISIS north of Aleppo City</li> <li>Escalate against groups receiving covert Western aid in Idlib Province*</li> </ul>
Protect gains from ISIS	Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Secure its institutions in Idlib and Dera'a Provinces</li> <li>Defeat alleged ISIS affiliate Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk in Dera'a and Quneitra (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Expand Jabhat al-Nusra-linked governance structures	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resolve disputes with the HASI-led Islamic Commission of the Idlib Countryside (ongoing)</li> <li>Establish joint governance structure in the Homs Countryside</li> </ul>
Generate schisms within the regime's support base	Prevent a negotiated solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct low-level attacks targeting civilians in Latakia Province (ongoing)</li> <li>Exploit the assassination of Druze leaders in Suwayda Province in order to facilitate a schism between the Druze and the Syrian regime</li> </ul>

effects over a longer timeframe if they succeed at generating schisms within the pro-regime camp.

### *Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)*

Jabhat al-Nusra's most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) under current conditions is to launch as its main military effort a ground offensive into Latakia Province targeting pro-regime Alawite population centers. Jabhat al-Nusra may pursue this objective in order to produce maximized psychological effects that weaken the regime's support within minority populations and potentially generate asymmetric effects against the regime's war effort. To do so, Jabhat al-Nusra would likely have to abandon seizing the Sahel al-Ghab region south of Idlib in

order to control Idlib Province because it would need to allocate increased resources to Latakia.

This MDCOA is more likely under current conditions than the MDCOA forecasted by ISW in June 2015. Jabhat al-Nusra is not likely to escalate against Hezbollah in both Syria and Lebanon in September 2015. Hezbollah's offensive in the Qalamoun mountain range along the Syrian-Lebanese border has successfully forced Jabhat al-Nusra and allied groups to go to ground. Meanwhile, a crackdown by the Lebanese Armed Forces and Lebanese General Security appears to have sufficiently disrupted Jabhat al-Nusra's networks in Lebanon to prevent major escalation as of September 2015.

## Jabhat al-Nusra's MDCOA for 90 Days

September 11, 2015

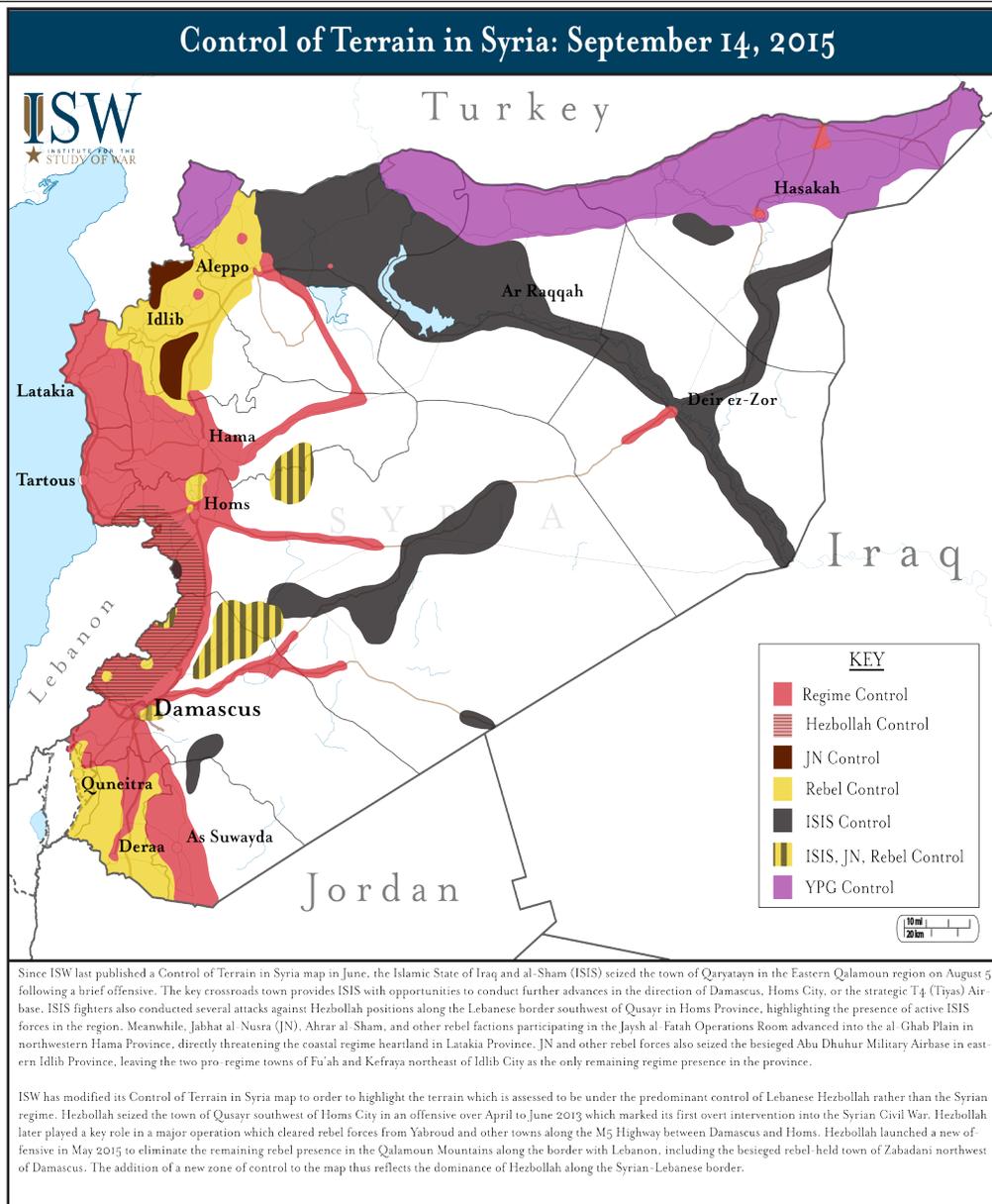
Operational Objective	Conditions Set	Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)
Expand network of military alliances	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for an ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hama and Homs: Create a new military operations room to launch offensive against pro-regime forces, likely NW of Hama City</li> <li>• Damascus: formalize partnership with Ajnad al-Sham in order to undermine Jaysh al-Islam's power</li> <li>• Damascus: foster unrest toward Jaysh al-Islam in Eastern Ghouta in order to undermine Jaysh al-Islam's power (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Eliminate Western influence within rebel ranks	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for an ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attack U.S.-trained rebels after insertion into Syria (ongoing)</li> <li>• Reinforce defensive lines in Aleppo City IOT offset rebel deployments to fight ISIS north of Aleppo City</li> <li>• Escalate against groups receiving covert Western aid in Idlib Province</li> </ul>
Protect gains from ISIS	Prepare for an ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secure institutions Idlib and Dera'a Provinces</li> <li>• Defeat alleged ISIS affiliate Liwa Shuhada al-Yarmouk in Dera'a and Quneitra (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Expand Jabhat al-Nusra-linked governance structures	Prevent a negotiated solution; Prepare for an ISIS offensive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resolve disputes with the HASI-led Islamic Commission of the Idlib Countryside (ongoing)</li> <li>• Establish joint governance structure in the Homs Countryside</li> </ul>
Generate schisms within the regime's support base	Prevent a negotiated solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct major ground offensive into Latakia Province</li> <li>• Assassinate Syrian Druze leaders in Suwayda Province IOT facilitate a schism between the Druze and the Syrian regime</li> </ul>

The chart on the following page outlines JN's MDCOA in the next ninety days.

Jabhat al-Nusra's propaganda began to foreshadow an incursion into Latakia Province after Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces seized the town of Jisr al-Shughour in April 2015. The seizure of the town connected the Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel stronghold in Idlib Province with previously isolated positions in Eastern Latakia Province, setting conditions for future operations in Latakia. Efforts by pro-regime forces to consolidate a new defensible perimeter at Sahel al-Ghab in Eastern Latakia, involving reported Iranian and Russian military support, have also largely failed. A recent build up of Russian military presence in Latakia Province, if sustained, could increase the effectiveness of pro-regime forces at defending Latakia in the medium term. It is unclear, however, whether Russia will commit deployable ground forces to Syria

that could supplement pro-regime forces in the defense of Latakia province or in a counter-offensive.

Growing unrest within pro-regime populations along the Syrian coast regarding the regime's inability to protect besieged pro-regime populations may incentivize Jabhat al-Nusra to launch a ground offensive into Latakia Province in the near term in order to maximize the psychological effect of anti-regime operations. The growing threat of ISIS in Idlib Province may furthermore encourage Jabhat al-Nusra to launch an offensive in Latakia Province in order to prevent the defection of foreign fighter groups in Idlib and Latakia to ISIS by committing them to offensive operations led by Jabhat al-Nusra. Direct Russian involvement through ground forces might increase the incentive of Chechen foreign fighter groups, which are active in Idlib Province, to conduct such an offensive.



A ground offensive into Latakia is most dangerous because, if large enough, it could produce an uncontrolled regime contraction. An abrupt toppling of the regime would produce even more power vacuums in Syria, accelerate lethal competition among opposition groups, and escalate attacks against Alawite civilians. At minimum, a ground offensive into Latakia would increase the sectarianism of the war, and potentially undermine emerging efforts by the United Nations to foster renewed negotiations. This offensive is also dangerous because because the Syrian regime will likely escalate in retaliation, possibly including the use of remaining chemical weapons. Latakia Province is core regime terrain, which the regime must defend in order to retain social control and likely the continued allegiance of other minority groups such as the Syrian Druze. The regime's demonstrated inability to secure a defensible perimeter around Latakia indicates that the regime will likely respond out of desperation if challenged.

This is a relatively high probability MDCOA, but it is unlikely to occur within the 90 day timeframe. Jabhat al-Nusra will likely chose instead to consolidate control of Sahel al-Ghab before launching a major offensive into Latakia in order to remove a vulnerability to Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces in Idlib Province. Furthermore, this COA risks producing a spiraling escalation of disorder in Syria, should the Syrian regime fall precipitously, that Jabhat al-Nusra cannot control. One dangerous possibility for Jabhat al-Nusra is that such escalation jeopardizes its ability to secure Idlib Province against ISIS's predation. Jabhat al-Nusra is therefore unlikely to assume the risks of this MDCOA in the next 90 days under current conditions, though it will likely continue to set conditions in Latakia Province as part of the MLCOA outlined in the previous section.

## ENDNOTES

1. For more, see: Jennifer Cafarella, Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for al-Qaeda, December 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/JN%20Final.pdf>
2. An ongoing assassination campaign targeting Jabhat al-Nusra members and affiliated Shari'a officials is likely attributable to ISIS. For more, see upcoming appendix: Assassination Campaigns in Syria January 2014 – present.

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# SYRIA 90-DAY STRATEGIC FORECAST: ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND AL-SHAM (ISIS)

## ISIS OBJECTIVES IN SYRIA

### Grand Strategic Objectives:

- Rule all Muslims under an Islamic Caliphate
- Provoke and win an apocalyptic war with the West

### Strategic Objectives in Syria:

- Preserve and expand territorial control in Syria
- Implement governance guided by Shari'a law and subjugate minorities within the caliphate
- Seize a historic caliphate capital and eliminate the Alawite regime
- Neutralize or absorb the Syrian armed opposition
- Neutralize or absorb Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN or JAN)
- Stoke regional disorder through sectarian or religious conflict in Syria

## ISIS IN SYRIA: CURRENT CONDITIONS

ISIS currently faces a new threat from the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in the form of an "ISIS-Free Zone" in northern Syria. But ISIS retains operational flexibility to adapt to new conditions on the ground. Anticipated or ongoing developments in Syria that will shape ISIS's options and requirements include:

Condition		Impact
Impending implementation of "ISIS-free" zone in northern Aleppo Province	→	Threat to last ISIS-controlled border crossings; incentive to seek additional cross-border access via Idlib Province, Lebanon, or Jordan
Potential U.S.-led coalition operation by FSA and YPG against ar-Raqqa City	→	Threat to key ISIS-held urban center; impetus for expansion of control into western Syria and consolidation of control in Deir ez-Zour
Series of military victories and governance measures by JN and allied rebel forces in Idlib Province	→	Challenge to ISIS's religious legitimacy, governance efforts, and leadership of the jihad; opportunity to maximize degradation of the Syrian regime
Growing discontent against the regime from loyalist populations, e.g., Druze	→	Opportunity to achieve maximum psychological effect against Syrian regime through operations against Homs, Damascus, or Deir ez-Zour.
Prospect of additional military support for Syrian regime from Iran or Russia	→	Potential increased resistance from pro-regime forces against ISIS's expansion into western Syria; opportunity to capitalize on sectarianism or regional proxy warfare in Syria

### THREE MONTH FORECAST: SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2015

#### Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)

ISIS's most likely course of action during the 90 day timeframe will prioritize maintaining cross-border access through Aleppo, Idlib, Lebanon, or Dera'a. ISIS will pursue this objective in concert with other operational objectives. It must balance the requirements of its defensive operations in northern Syria against its desire to conduct further advances

ISIS's likely primary operational objectives and most likely courses of action (MLCOAs) over the next twelve weeks.

ISIS will most likely pursue its objectives in ways that prevent creating a new advantage for another actor, in particular the Syrian regime. In order to make gains against the opposition without inducing this effect, ISIS will likely balance its attacks against the opposition and the Syrian regime. ISIS is pairing attacks on rebels north of Aleppo with a siege on the regime-held Kuweiris airbase east of Aleppo simultaneously in September 2015, likely in order to ensure that the regime is

ISIS in Syria Operational Objectives & MLCOAs for 90 Days	
September 9, 2015	
Operational Objective	MLCOA
Disrupt Anti-ISIS Forces in Northern Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage in 'active defense' to fix Syrian Kurdish YPG and moderate rebel forces in northern Syria (ongoing)</li> <li>Attack rebels in Azaz north of Aleppo City to disrupt "ISIS-free" zone and Idlib defenses (ongoing)</li> <li>Seize the regime-held Kuweires Airbase east of Aleppo City to maintain momentum for anti-regime operations (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Challenge Jabhat al-Nusra Position in Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Escalate assassination campaign and spectacular attacks against Jabhat al-Nusra and allied rebel forces in Idlib and Dera'a Provinces (ongoing)</li> <li>Continue messaging campaign against legitimacy of Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel methods of governance (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Position for Future Operations Against Syrian Regime in the Central Corridor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seize major oil and natural gas fields between Homs City and Palmyra from regime forces (ongoing)</li> <li>Seize the strategic T4 (Tiyas) and Shayrat Airbases from regime forces (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Secure Access to Cross-Border Supply Routes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seize the rebel supply line through Azaz in northern Aleppo Province to preempt "ISIS-free" zone (ongoing)</li> <li>Reinforce and fortify Jarabulus and other key ISIS-held border crossings in Aleppo Province (ongoing)</li> <li>Set conditions for operations to secure additional border access in Idlib Province, Lebanon, or Jordan</li> </ul>
Consolidate Full Control over Euphrates River	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seize remaining regime positions in Deir ez-Zour City and the Deir ez-Zour Military Airbase (ongoing)</li> <li>Suppress tribal unrest to consolidate popular control (ongoing)</li> </ul>

into the Syrian central corridor. ISIS retains the flexibility to reorder its operational priorities in response to changes in the conditions listed above, as they constrain or open opportunities for ISIS in Syria. ISIS can also pursue courses of action that serve multiple operational objectives. ISIS will attempt to position itself to maintain its options to pursue one or more courses of action in response to any phase change in these conditions. The chart below details

unable to exploit opposition losses. Attacking regime bases further buffers ISIS against assaults by other anti-ISIS actors, including the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, because other anti-ISIS actors will not stop ISIS from prosecuting anti-regime activities. Nevertheless, attacking Kuweires allow ISIS to replenish its military stockpiles and free up manpower for other operations, directly strengthening its northern campaign to the detriment of anti-ISIS operations. In this

way, ISIS is poised to exploit the dynamic equilibrium that other actors in Syria have managed to maintain over the last four years.

The operational objectives and MDCOAs pursued by ISIS in Syria will both shape and be shaped by the courses of action of other actors on the ground. The threat of expansion by ISIS into the Syrian central corridor may generate pressure on mainstream Syrian rebel factions to either align with ISIS as an effective anti-regime actor or alternately cohere with Jabhat al-Nusra as protection against ISIS, perceiving ISIS as a greater threat. Similar concerns regarding potential advances by ISIS could also push restive minority populations closer to the Syrian regime, or alternately fuel increased dissent from regime supporters dismayed by continued setbacks at the hands of anti-regime forces. This dynamic may either weaken or harden fighting groups against ISIS, but in the latter case, anti-ISIS formations will become increasingly sectarian, a condition that ISIS may

exploit to ignite greater regional conflict. Meanwhile, ISIS will also tailor its courses of action in response to pressure from other actors. Successful anti-ISIS coalition operations targeting ISIS in northern Syria may increase the likelihood of direct escalations by ISIS against Idlib Province, Homs City, or Deir ez-Zour. At the same time, evolving conditions in Iraq – particularly continued pressure from the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and allied militias in Anbar and Salah ad-Din Provinces – will likely spur ISIS to maneuver more vigorously in Syria to demonstrate the enduring capacity to achieve new territorial gains. This dynamic does not preclude reinforcements of its Iraq campaign from Syria.

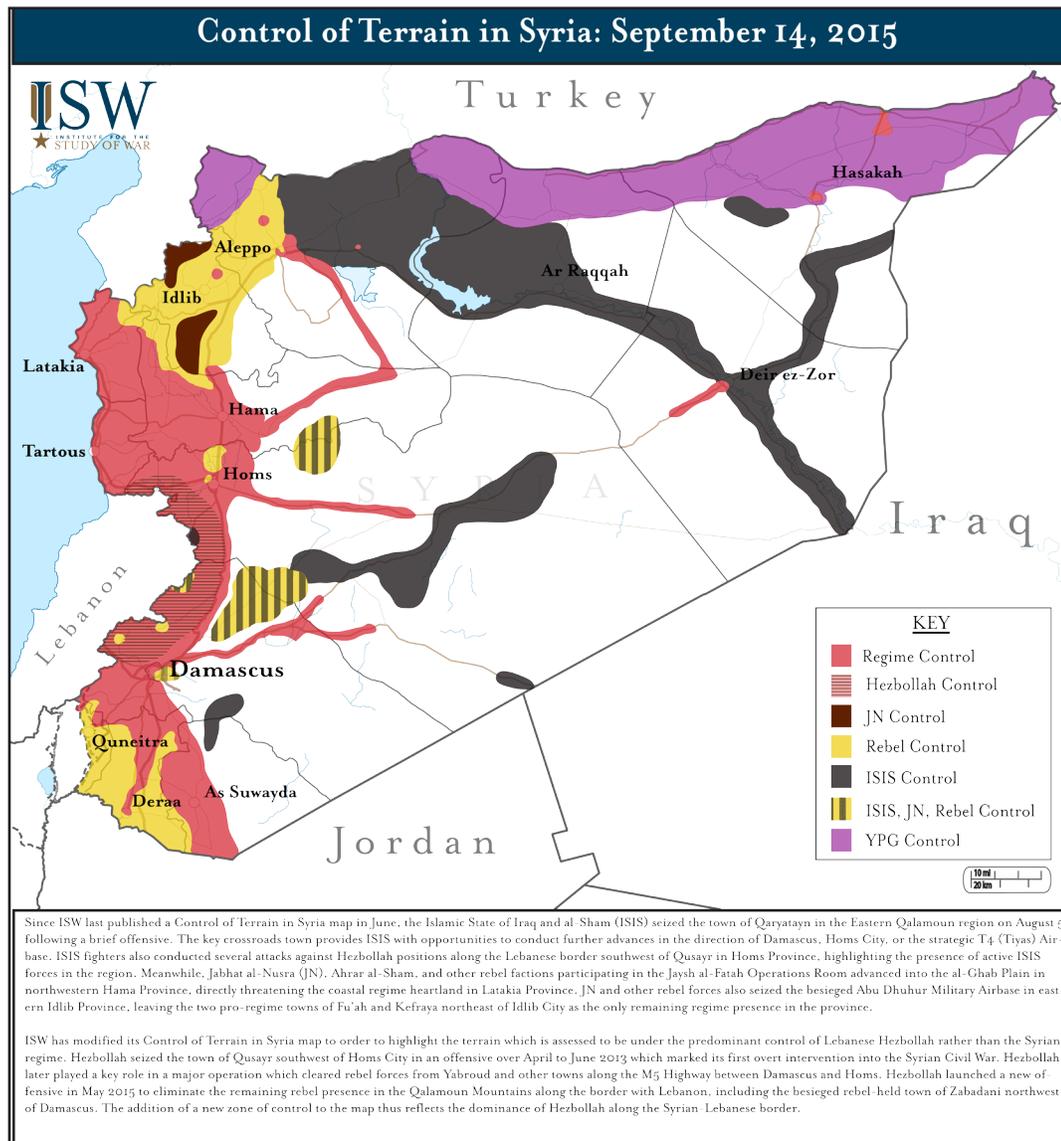
*Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)*

ISIS retains the ability to conduct major operations inside of Syria that generate nonlinear effects on the Syrian Civil War despite increasing pressure on its core terrain over

<b>ISIS in Syria Operational Objectives &amp; MDCOAs for 90 Days</b> September 9, 2015	
MDCOA #1: Offensive against Syrian regime in Homs City or Qusayr	
MDCOA #2: Offensive against Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces in Idlib Province	
Operational Objective	MDCOAs
Challenge Jabhat al-Nusra's Position in Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MDCOA #2: Conduct major assault against rebel-held terrain in Idlib Province over medium-term</li> <li>Continue messaging campaign against legitimacy of Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel methods of governance (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Deter Anti-ISIS Forces in Northern Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage in 'active defense' to fix Syrian Kurdish YPG and moderate rebel forces in northern Syria (ongoing)</li> <li>Reinforce and fortify Jarabulus and other key ISIS-held border crossings in Aleppo Province (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Position for Future Operations Against Syrian Central Corridor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MDCOA #1: Conduct shock offensive against Homs City or Qusayr in order to force regime contraction</li> <li>Seize the strategic T4 (Tiyas) and Shayrat Airbases from regime forces (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Secure Access to Cross-Border Supply Routes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MDCOA #1: Conduct rapid offensive against Qusayr in order to secure access to the Lebanese border</li> <li>MDCOA #2: Conduct major assault against rebel-held terrain in Idlib Province over medium-term</li> </ul>
Consolidate Full Control over Euphrates River	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contain remaining regime positions in Deir ez-Zour City and the Deir ez-Zour Military Airbase</li> </ul>

the medium-term. ISIS could pursue at least two most dangerous courses of action (MDCOAs) under current conditions in order to achieve nonlinear effects against its adversaries. The most dangerous course of action that ISIS can pursue in the 90 day timeframe is attempting to cause the precipitous collapse of the Syrian regime. Alternately or in concert, ISIS could decide to launch a major offensive against the opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra stronghold in Idlib. Both potential MDCOAs involve a decision to conduct limited defensive actions across most fronts in Syria while massing resources to conduct a major offensive against vulnerable terrain in western Syria – either regime positions in the vicinity of Homs City in the first MDCOA or regions governed by Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces in Idlib Province in the second. In either scenario, ISIS will also pursue objectives that also appear in the MLCOA, particularly to secure sustainable cross-border access, counteract expected advances by the anti-ISIS coalition in northern Syria, and generate exploitable opportunities for further expansion.

A major offensive against regime positions in Homs City or nearby Qusayr constitutes one MDCOA available to ISIS. ISW previously assessed this course of action as ISIS’s primary MDCOA in Syria during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan; however, this scenario now appears less likely over the 90-day timeframe given ISIS’s emergent requirement to conduct defensive operations in northern Syria. Nonetheless, ISIS could calculate that sufficient pressure against the regime in the Syrian central corridor would prompt uncontrolled regime contraction which ISIS could then exploit. ISIS may calculate that it is better positioned to take advantage of such a collapse than JN or the Syrian opposition due to its broad geographical disposition and ability to conduct cross-front operations. ISIS may also calculate that aggressive anti-regime actions that could lead to regime collapse will disrupt the U.S.-led anti-ISIS campaign. U.S.-led coalition operations that successfully challenge ISIS in ar-Raqqa City or northern Aleppo Province will increase the likelihood of this MDCOA by increasing ISIS’s incentive to secure additional border access to Lebanon and generate opportunities for expansion. If effective, the pursuit



of this MDCOA sets conditions for a rapid collapse of the institutions of the Syrian regime which would ultimately empower ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, Iran, and other malign actors in Syria at the expense of the U.S.-led coalition and its allies.

A ground offensive by ISIS targeting Jabhat al-Nusra and allied rebel forces in Idlib Province represents the second potential MDCOA available to ISIS over the next three months. U.S.-led coalition operations which successfully challenge ISIS's access to the Turkish border northern Aleppo Province will increase the likelihood of this MDCOA by requiring ISIS to transplant its physical control and governance structures into new cities. ISIS could also view current conditions as a key opportunity to force a military confrontation with Jabhat al-Nusra while the Jabhat al-Nusra-led Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room is engaged in heavy fighting with regime forces near Latakia Province. In this way, ISIS could provoke opposition actors and foreign fighter brigades to choose ISIS over Jabhat al-Nusra on the bases of performance in a direct contest. This direct contest may translate to other fronts besides Idlib. The conflict would also present ramifications for the overall competition for leadership in the global jihad between al-Qaeda and ISIS. A defeat of Jabhat al-Nusra in Idlib by ISIS would constitute a significant blow to al-Qaeda's overall prestige. An expanded confrontation between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra would also limit the combat power and cross-border access of opposition formations willing to work with the U.S., directly increasing the threat environment for them. It may nonetheless increase the appeal of partnering with the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS. But this MDCOA would also generate destabilizing effects in neighboring U.S. regional allies that serve as transit points and reservoirs for both groups, especially Turkey and Lebanon.

Early gaming of the second MDCOA also surfaced the dangers that an attack on Idlib poses to any future attempts to disaggregate Jabhat al-Nusra from less extreme rebel groups. Almost all rebel groups that are not fighting on the side of ISIS routinely unite strongly when facing military pressure from ISIS. The further intertwinement of Jabhat al-Nusra and other opposition forces in Idlib will likely result if ISIS pursues this second MDCOA.

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