

Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War

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Executive Summary

As Aleppo goes, so goes Syria's rebellion. The city is crucial to the mainstream opposition's military viability as well as its morale, thus to halting the advance of the Islamic State (IS). After an alliance of armed rebel factions seized its eastern half in July 2012, Aleppo for a time symbolised the opposition's optimism and momentum; in the following months, it exposed the rebels' limits, as their progress slowed, and they struggled to win over the local population. Today, locked in a two-front war against the regime and IS, their position is more precarious than at any time since the fighting began. Urgent action is required to prevent the mainstream opposition's defeat: either for Iran and Russia to press the regime for de-escalation, to showcase their willingness to confront IS instead of exploiting its presence to further strengthen Damascus; or, more realistically, for the U.S., Europe and regional allies to qualitatively and quantitatively improve support to local, non-jihadi rebel factions in Aleppo. Any eventual possibility of a negotiated resolution of the war depends on one course or the other being followed.

Rebel-held areas in and around Aleppo remain the most valuable of the mainstream opposition's dwindling assets. Sensing weakness, the regime and its allies have invested significant resources in trying to retake the city; they now appear to be on the verge of severing the last rebel supply line linking it to Turkey. Still, the rebels maintain certain advantages. The armed factions in and around the city include some of the rebellion's most powerful and popular. The location near the Turkish border facilitates the flow of supplies and communication. The regime's task is thus more difficult than at Homs and Damascus, where brutal siege tactics compelled acceptance of truces on its terms. Yet, even a partial siege of the rebel-held parts of Aleppo could deal an enormous blow.

To its east, the mainstream opposition faces a second deadly foe: IS, formerly ISIL, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, riding high after victories in western Iraq and eastern Syria. In January 2014, Aleppo was ground-zero for IS's most humiliating setback, when rebels drove it from the city and its western and northern hinterlands, forcing it further east. But today, with much of the rebel force tied down on one front against the regime, IS is making headway north of the city, toward the heartland of northern Syria's most prominent mainstream rebel factions.

A combination of regime and IS victories in and around Aleppo would be devastating not only to local rebels, but to the Syrian opposition as a whole. The loss of territory and morale would reverberate throughout the country, pushing many to give up the fight or join a more powerful militant force: IS.

The regime and IS are not bedfellows, though mutual restraint in the first five months of 2014 gave some that impression. Rather, and despite recent clashes, they share some short- and medium-term interests: chiefly the defeat of mainstream rebel groups backed by the opposition's state sponsors, in particular those credible with local populations. For the regime, their defeat would eliminate what remains of the only existential threat it has feared: the prospect of robust Western military support to armed opponents. For IS, it would remove most of its meaningful competition, so it could eventually establish a monopoly on armed resistance to an unpopular Iranian-backed dictator, much as in Iraq.

At stake in Aleppo is not regime victory but opposition defeat. The war would continue should that occur, pitting regime and allied forces that lack the capacity to reconquer chunks of northern and eastern Syria or to subdue them through compromise against an emboldened IS that would gain strength by attracting rebel remnants. Between such antagonists, there would be no prospect of a political resolution and little hope of restoring the integrity of Syrian and Iraqi borders.

The situation is grim, but all is not yet lost. The bulk of the armed opposition is dominated by groups that, unlike IS, have demonstrated responsiveness to local populations and state sponsors. Their shortcomings are manifold and performance uneven, but the most successful of them have begun to show political pragmatism needed not only for continued viability but also to resolve the war.

It is past time for state supporters on both sides to acknowledge that the status quo leads to disaster. For Iran and Russia, this means recognising that – lip service to a negotiated solution and counter-terrorism notwithstanding – the regime strategy they facilitate renders resolution impossible and strengthens the jihadis it claims to combat. For the mainstream opposition’s principal backers – the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – it means acknowledging that their tough words, meagre support and strategic incoherence have helped produce the current desperation. Recent modest increases in support for armed groups will not prevent their defeat, though they may shift the political and ideological balance among them. Syria is sliding toward unending war between an autocratic, sectarian regime and an even more autocratic, more sectarian jihadi group that, on present trends, will potentially destabilise the Middle East well beyond Syria and Iraq.

The fall of greater Aleppo to regime and IS forces would do much to bring this about. There are two means of avoiding it:

- Best would be through immediate negotiation and implementation of a local ceasefire between the regime and anti-IS rebel forces in Aleppo. This would allow the latter to dedicate their resources to halting and eventually reversing IS gains. It would require a dramatic shift in regime strategy: from prioritising defeat of the mainstream opposition to prioritising the fight against IS, and recognising that IS cannot be defeated without conceding a role to the mainstream opposition. If the regime and its allies are serious about weakening jihadis, they should immediately show willingness to halt their offensives in Aleppo and withdraw to positions from which their forces no longer threaten the main rebel supply line to the city. If such a ceasefire is offered, mainstream rebels in Aleppo should accept it and ensure that their anti-IS jihadi allies do the same. The mainstream opposition’s state backers should pressure them to do so.
- Such a regime shift appears unlikely. In its absence, the only realistic alternative is for the opposition’s state backers to improve support, qualitatively and quantitatively, to credible non-jihadi rebel groups with roots in Aleppo. That could become more costly to the regime and its allies than a local deal, as some of the support would inevitably be deployed against regime forces. The option would also carry costs for the opposition’s backers. To be effective, it would entail, at minimum, an increase in cash, ammunition and anti-tank weapons delivered to mainstream rebel factions – some of which could end up in jihadi hands; it would also require a higher level of investment by the U.S. and of cooperation among Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Even if successful, this effort would not tilt the

military balance in favour of the mainstream opposition – but it could prevent its defeat, halt IS gains on a key front and thus preserve the chance for an eventual political resolution.

Other prominent options at the centre of the Western policy debate would likely be counterproductive. Calls for partnership with the Assad regime against jihadis are ill-conceived. Until regime forces fundamentally revise their posture and abandon the habit of exploiting jihadi gains for their own benefit, they have little to offer in the fight against IS. Their current dependence on indiscriminate tactics and Iran-backed militias is fuel for jihadi flames. Proposals to expand U.S. airstrikes against IS into Syria are incomplete tactical prescriptions in search of a strategy. IS gains can only be halted and eventually reversed through the empowerment of credible Sunni alternatives, both locally and within the context of national governance. In the absence of a broader strategy to accomplish that, airstrikes against IS would accomplish little; indeed, the propaganda benefits that would accrue to the group could be more important than the tactical setbacks it would suffer.

There are, of course, risks in the two more promising policies outlined above. But the failure of any and all parties to take some risk will lead only to disaster.

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Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War

I. Introduction

Aleppo, Syria's largest city and economic capital prior to 2012, is a primary battleground in the conflict between the country's mainstream armed opposition and its two foes: President Bashar Assad's regime and "the Islamic State" (IS), a jihadi group that now controls huge swathes of the country and neighbouring Iraq. An array of rebels has controlled the eastern half of the city since July 2012; given regime and IS gains elsewhere, these chunks of Aleppo and its countryside are the mainstream opposition's most valuable remaining territorial asset. Greater Aleppo is thus a potentially pivotal prize, both for Damascus, which since September 2013 has escalated its attempt to retake the city, and for IS, for whom the city's hinterland may represent its best opportunity to expand at a time when the world's attention is focused on Iraq.

This briefing focuses on Aleppo to illustrate its current importance and highlight the broader dynamics of Syria's war.¹ In so doing, it addresses the strategies employed by the regime and IS and examines decision-making and political evolution among the array of rebel forces fighting them both. Finally, it discusses recent shifts in support provided by the mainstream opposition's state backers, examining why this is proving insufficient to prevent IS and regime gains. The report is based on extensive field research in Damascus and neighbouring countries.

¹ For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°153, *Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria*, 27 May 2014; N°151, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, 8 May 2014; N°146, *Anything but Politics? The State of Syria's Political Opposition*, 17 October 2013; N°143, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, 27 June 2013; N°131, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 12 October 2012; and N°128, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, 1 August 2012.

II. The Pivotal Autumn of 2013

A. *The Strike that Wasn't*

The current phase of the Syrian war kicked off in Washington. Speaking ten days after a 21 August 2013 chemical weapons attack that killed hundreds of civilians in opposition-held areas in the Damascus outskirts,² President Barack Obama announced that, before launching a widely anticipated military strike against regime forces blamed for the attack, he would first seek congressional authorisation for use of force.³ His decision, taken by many to imply that any U.S. military action would hinge on the approval of a chronically divided U.S. legislature, triggered jeering triumphalism in pro-regime circles.⁴ It also caused a steep decline in morale among Washington's allies in the Syrian opposition, who had hoped enforcement of the president's "red line" regarding chemical weapons would restore their own relevance and degrade the regime's military capacity.⁵

The political and diplomatic drama that played out over the following days presaged a shift in military dynamics. Within weeks, the Obama administration reached agreement with Moscow on removing and destroying the regime's chemical weapons by the end of June 2014.⁶ In so doing, Washington rendered its threat of military force less credible, made Bashar Assad a partner in an internationally monitored disarmament process and dashed the hopes of Western-backed opposition elements that had been counting on U.S. military support to turn the tide on the battlefield.⁷

The blow to the mainstream armed opposition's Western-backed umbrella body, the Supreme Military Council (SMC), was devastating. When Washington shifted toward a negotiating track, the SMC and its then-leader, Salim Idris – hamstrung from the outset by his would-be backers' refusal to channel assistance exclusively through the SMC – were left with little to offer rebel factions. The opposition's main political umbrella body, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (the Coalition), found itself facing intense U.S. pressure to negotiate in Geneva with representatives of a regime believed to have gassed the opposition's con-

² The attacks, which targeted rebel-held neighbourhoods of east and west Ghouta on the fringes of Damascus, coincided with a regime campaign to regain ground in these areas. Estimated deaths ranged from 355 (Médecins Sans Frontières) to more than 1,300 (opposition activists, later repeated by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry). "Syria chemical attack: What we know," BBC, 24 September 2013; Human Rights Watch, 10 September 2013.

³ See Statement by the President on Syria, 31 August 2013.

⁴ Pro-Assad media in Syria and Lebanon characterised the announcement as evidence of a White House retreat due to fear of retaliation by the regime and its allies, reluctant domestic public opinion and crumbling Western support following the 29 August UK House of Commons vote against military intervention. See, for example, coverage in Syrian newspapers *Al-Watan* and *al-Thowra* and on Beirut-based Al-Mayadin television, 1 September 2013.

⁵ Obama had said, "[w]e have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation". Remarks to the White House press corps, 20 August 2012.

⁶ "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons", U.S. Department of State, 14 September 2014.

⁷ In an op-ed as debate raged over a potential strike, the leaders of the opposition's Western-backed political and military bodies described U.S. military engagement as essential to counter both the regime and jihadis. Ahmad al-Jarba and Salim Idris, "Why America must act on Syria", *The Washington Post*, 9 September 2013.

stituency just weeks prior.⁸ The SMC's links with the Coalition, a body viewed by the activist base as ineffectual and subordinate to the whims of foreign backers, exacerbated the former's own credibility crisis.⁹

Washington's shift reverberated across the opposition militant spectrum, changing the calculations of rebel leaders on the ground. Two stand out. First, rebels saw less incentive to distance themselves from Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda-linked jihadi group that had proven itself effective in battle. Secondly, the Western pivot to an international political track elevated fears of a deal that would benefit opposition exiles at the expense of rebels in Syria.¹⁰

In the three months after the chemical deal, leading rebel factions severed ties with the Coalition, further distanced themselves from the SMC and took limited steps to consolidate on their own terms. On 24 September, eleven prominent armed factions released a joint statement rejecting the Coalition's legitimacy and calling on fellow groups to unite behind the shared goal of "applying Sharia [Islamic law] and making it the sole source of legislation". The signatories included Jabhat al-Nusra, leading factions in Aleppo, three of the largest groups linked to the SMC (Liwa al-Towhid, Jaish al-Islam and Saqour al-Sham), and the powerful Salafi group Ahrar al-Sham.¹¹ Two months later, the latter four joined three smaller factions to form the Islamic Front, an alliance that, while perhaps strongest in Aleppo and Idlib provinces, included affiliates active throughout Syria.¹²

From its inception, the Islamic Front emphasised its independence from Western-backed elements of the opposition, rejected the Geneva process and adopted a political platform close to the positions of its most hardline member, Ahrar al-Sham.¹³ On 9 December, elements of the Front seized control of the SMC's storage facilities near the Bab al-Hawa crossing on the Turkish border, illustrating the antipathy and

⁸ The talks, labelled "Geneva II", served as the main focus of Washington's Syria policy from shortly after the chemical deal until they ended without tangible result in February 2014. They never generated much optimism even among diplomats charged with encouraging the opposition's participation and coaching its performance. A senior U.S. diplomat said early on, "I'd say there is about a 10 per cent chance that Geneva works". Crisis Group interview, Washington, November 2013.

⁹ The SMC is represented in the Coalition's general assembly; leaders within the bodies coordinate regularly, though wrangling frequently has tested institutional links. Like other Western-backed umbrella bodies, these have suffered from, inter alia, a huge gap between the expectations of the activist base that has tended to view them as vehicles to secure and deliver Western military support and the meagre aid actually delivered by Western patrons. The SMC, the Coalition and the latter's predecessor (the Syrian National Council) each spent substantial time and resources on largely fruitless efforts to secure support. Washington's endorsement of a negotiation process was widely viewed by activists and armed rebels as a naive waste of time at best. Crisis Group Report *Anything but Politics*, op. cit.

¹⁰ A senior U.S. diplomat was told by leading members of two factions which in late November would join the Islamic Front that they did not object in principle to Geneva II, so long as the goal was Bashar Assad's departure, and that they, rather than the Coalition, sat at the table. Crisis Group interview, Washington, November 2013. Concerns among armed factions that the Coalition and its backers aimed to usurp their gains visibly escalated in fall 2013; see, for example, Liwa al-Towhid leader Abd al-Aziz Salameh's 8 September address at a local rebel meeting. www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_7IfosLWYk.

¹¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9a5TQ_qP64. These factions are discussed in Section IV.

¹² www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoqKSW1iM9M. The other founding members were Liwa al-Haq (a leading faction in Homs), Ansar al-Sham (prominent in Latakia province) and al-Jabha al-Islamiya al-Kurdia (a smaller Kurdish Islamist faction).

¹³ Eg, the 27 December 2013 Al Jazeera interview of Hassan Abboud, Ahrar al-Sham leader and head of the Islamic Front's political bureau, www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lNGSKCF3AI.

competition between opposition factions and the Western-backed umbrella groups claiming to speak on their behalf.¹⁴ In response, the U.S. suspended support to the SMC.

B. *The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: from “al-Dowla” to “Daesh”*

The turbulent trajectory of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (al-Dowla al-Islamiya fil-Iraq wal-Sham, ISIL, subsequently rebranded “The Islamic State”, IS, per its 29 June 2014 communiqué¹⁵) is at root a manifestation of strategic, cultural and personal rifts within the Salafi-jihadi community, played out at the expense of Iraqi and Syrian civilians. What is today known as IS emerged in Iraq in 2003 under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; it officially joined al-Qaeda in 2004 and adopted the name Islamic State of Iraq (Dowlat al-Iraq al-Islamiya) following al-Zarqawi’s death in 2006.¹⁶ Under Zarqawi, it distinguished itself from other al-Qaeda affiliates by igniting a sectarian war with Iraq’s Shiite community and employing particularly brutal tactics, including indiscriminate suicide attacks in crowded neighbourhoods and beheadings.¹⁷

Under his successors, it declared itself a state, then sought to impose its authority in Sunni areas at the expense of tribal and insurgent rivals without first consulting its nominal overall leader, then al-Qaeda head Osama bin Laden.¹⁸ Ever since, members and supporters have referred to it simply as al-Dowla (“the State”), an aspirational moniker in keeping with its narrative and strategic priorities, yet mocked by rival militants.¹⁹

IS was instrumental in the founding of Jabhat al-Nusra, a jihadi group that emerged in Syria in late 2011. Links between the two were severed because of a leadership spat that unfolded through audio recordings in April 2013, forcing jihadis inside Syria to choose between them. IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that it would subsume Jabhat al-Nusra, which he called little more than an extension of IS, adding that henceforth the Syrian and Iraqi wings would be known as the Islamic

¹⁴ For details, see Aron Lund, “Showdown at Bab al-Hawa”, Carnegie Endowment’s “Syria in Crisis” blog, 12 December 2013. Speaking prior to the seizure, a senior U.S. diplomat acknowledged that the SMC’s relevance had declined significantly: “Idris is fading as is the SMC. I can’t even tell who’s left in the SMC at this point”. Crisis Group interview, Washington, November 2013.

¹⁵ Previous Crisis Group reporting referred to the group by the acronym “ISIL”; also common are “ISIS” and the Arabic acronym “Daesh”, the latter of which the group considers derogatory. For convenience this report refers to the group as IS also for events that preceded June 2014.

¹⁶ For a summary of IS name and leadership changes, see web.stanford.edu/group/mapping_militants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1.

¹⁷ Though al-Qaeda’s leadership publicly embraced al-Zarqawi’s affiliate, it appears to have warned him against his strategy. In a letter dated 9 July 2005, then number two Aymen al-Zawahiri emphasized to him the counter-productivity of the attacks on Shiite civilians, mosques and holy sites and slaughter of hostages. The letter was obtained by U.S. forces in Iraq, and its authenticity cannot be independently confirmed, though the strategy and critique it outlines are consistent with subsequent material released by al-Qaeda’s leadership. A translation is available at www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2.

¹⁸ For more on formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sunni rebellion against it, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°74, *Iraq after the Surge I: the New Sunni Landscape*, 30 April 2008. Current al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri explained IS’s relationship to al-Qaeda central leadership in his 2 May 2014 audioteape, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_vQIT-wbyI.

¹⁹ Crisis Group observations of Iraqi and Syrian militant online communication, 2009-2014. See, for example, late 2007 discussion of IS on al-Boraq, an Iraqi web forum linked to a rival Sunni militant group, www.alboraq.info/showthread.php?t=35823&page=3.

State in Iraq and the Levant.²⁰ The next day, al-Nusra head Abu Muhammad al-Jolani issued an audiotape that rejected the name-change and amounted to a declaration of independence from IS. He emphasised that the priority should be to function as a state rather than to declare one unilaterally, and that the eventual establishment of an Islamic state in Syria should only occur through cooperation with other leading rebel groups and religious scholars.²¹

Within the broader Salafi-jihadi debate, al-Jolani in effect announced his commitment to a strategy outlined by al-Qaeda leader Aymen al-Zawahiri, whose approach contrasted sharply with IS's.²² When al-Jolani concluded his tape by pledging allegiance to al-Zawahiri, he for the first time confirmed al-Nusra's affiliation with the al-Qaeda network. In the weeks that followed, al-Zawahiri's efforts to mediate the dispute between al-Jolani and al-Baghdadi failed. The breadth of the rift separating IS from its ostensible parent organisation became public; months later, al-Qaeda formally disowned IS.²³

By the end of 2013, IS had grown to become one of the most powerful factions in rebel-held areas, evoking respect, fear and animosity among other anti-regime militants.²⁴ It was able to do so due to superior planning, organising, funding and combat capacities in large part provided by its core of seasoned non-Syrian jihadis and base in Iraq.²⁵ It also began to manifest the traits that had led fellow Sunni insur-

²⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HPQxA3catY.

²¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFu9Sq8qwIs.

²² In a 2013 document outlining al-Qaeda's strategic goals and providing tactical guidelines, al-Zawahiri prioritised instilling jihadi values in a combatant vanguard and propagating them to the broader Muslim public, rather than immediately establishing a state or applying Sharia. He also advised affiliates to abstain from attacks on adversaries in crowded civilian areas; avoid armed hostilities with non-Sunni sects (including Shiites as well as Christians, Hindus and others in Muslim countries) except for self-defense (including defense of other Sunnis), in which case attacks should target only combatants and avoid family members and other civilians; and avoid conflict with other Islamist groups. See Al-Sahab, a media outlet affiliated with al-Qaeda central leadership, September 2013, at azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22-general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-ar.pdf.

²³ In a letter dated 23 May 2013 addressed to the two leaders and leaked to Al Jazeera, al-Zawahiri rejected the name change and ruled that al-Baghdadi's group would remain the lone al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq and al-Nusra the lone affiliate in Syria. The letter's content and that it was ultimately ignored showed al-Zawahiri's lack of influence over decisions in both groups; he scolded al-Baghdadi for declaring IS without consulting or informing him first and al-Jolani for similarly rejecting IS and announcing al-Nusra's al-Qaeda affiliation. www.documentcloud.org/documents/710586-ayman-zawahiri.html#document/p1; Basma Attasi, "Qaeda chief annuls Syrian-Iraqi jihad merger", Al Jazeera, 9 June 2013. For the February 2014 al-Qaeda central leadership statement cutting ties with IS, see azelin.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/al-qc481_idah-22on-the-relationship-of-qc481idat-al-jihc481d-and-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-shc481m22.pdf.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activists and militants, Gaziantep, Kilis and Reyhanli, November 2013. A Muslim Brotherhood organiser recently returned from northern Syria reported that IS was benefitting immensely from oil fields it seized from Jabhat al-Nusra when the two split, and that by late summer, al-Baghdadi's group had become the most powerful in the rebel-held north and east of the country. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, August 2013. For a summary of how IS benefits from oil and other funding streams, see Nour Malas and Maria Abi-Habib, "Islamic State Economy Runs on Extortion, Oil Piracy in Syria, Iraq", *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 August 2014.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, rebel militants, activists and political figures, Turkey, August-November 2013; Hassan Abu Haniyeh (Jordanian analyst of jihadi movements), Amman, October 2013. Estimates of the proportion of non-Syrians among IS fighters ranged significantly at the time; most suggested that a majority were Syrian, while the leadership was mostly Iraqis, other non-Syrian Arabs and Chechens.

gents to rebel against it six years earlier in Iraq: executions of rivals,²⁶ heavy-handed suppression of critics,²⁷ and efforts to impose its political authority – including application of its aggressive interpretation of Sharia – in areas from which other rebel groups had driven regime forces.²⁸ It quickly became known among its critics, and eventually the broader Arab public, by its Arabic acronym, “Daesh”, which carries a derisive connotation because it suppresses mention of the group’s claims to “Islamic” identity and “State” legitimacy.

In Aleppo as through the north, debate raged among rebel militants and activists over IS’s rise. How to weigh the short-term, tactical benefits of cooperation with it against the long-term threat posed by its appetite for expansion at the expense of other groups and its tendency to reinforce the regime’s narrative depicting the rebellion as brutal, extremist and foreign-led?²⁹ Or its reputation for discipline and abstaining from petty crime, in contrast to that of some mainstream rebel groups, against its autocratic tendencies and excessive ideological zeal?³⁰ Through November 2013, even as animosity steadily rose across the rebellion’s ideological spectrum,

²⁶ IS militants killed a mainstream rebel commander and SMC member, Kamal Hamami (known as Abu al-Basir), at an IS checkpoint in Latakia province on 11 July 2013, setting a precedent of attacks on rebel fighters that was repeated throughout northern and eastern Syria in following months. A rebel fighter from a rival Latakia faction and a local cleric involved in raising support for Latakia rebel groups accused IS’s local emir, an Iraqi known as Abu Aymen, of personally executing Abu al-Basir. They further blamed him for subsequent offenses against local rebels, including the execution of several fighters and of a cleric sent to him as a mediator. Word of these events spread quickly, fueling the rising anti-IS narrative among opposition supporters in fall 2013. Crisis Group interviews, Reyhanli and Antakya, November 2013.

²⁷ Activists blamed IS for killing or kidnapping at least a dozen activists and Syrian journalists known for criticising the group in rebel-held areas of Aleppo and the surrounding countryside between July and mid-November. See www.zamanalwsl.net/news/43228.html. At the time, a Liwa al-Towhid member who advocated continued cooperation with IS acknowledged that its kidnapping of activists and journalists (including Westerners) was damaging the rebel cause. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2012. An Aleppo activist later said IS kidnappings of activists and setting up of mobile checkpoints throughout rebel-held areas of the city in effect halted civil society activity there. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2013.

²⁸ An Ahrar al-Sham fighter from Idlib said, “[IS] is a big problem. They are entering towns and neighbourhoods [controlled by rebels] and harassing the people, banning smoking and the like. They are making people hate the rebels. They say they are here to impose the Caliphate, but they are simply imposing themselves”. Crisis Group interview, Kilis, November 2013.

²⁹ The complications of this cost-benefit analysis could be seen in how Liwa al-Towhid (then considered the largest group in Aleppo province) handled IS’s seizure of Azaz, a town next to the crucial Bab al-Salameh border crossing with Turkey, from Asifat al-Shamal (a mainstream rebel faction) in September 2013. Al-Towhid played a neutral, mediating role rather than heeding Asifat al-Shamal’s calls to intervene on its behalf. Several weeks later, an al-Towhid member offered a partial defence of IS, complementing its battlefield bravery and arguing that some of the groups with which IS had clashed had bad reputations. Yet, he acknowledged it had become a problem and was “benefitting the regime” most. Crisis group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

³⁰ IS initially had a reputation among some activists and residents as being more effective in enforcing order (or at least less prone to theft) than some mainstream rebel counterparts. That reputation began to erode substantially in late fall 2013. An Aleppo activist described the process of weighing these factors: “When Daesh surrounded forces loyal to Khaled Hiyani [leader of the mainstream faction Shuhada’ Badr] in [the Aleppo neighbourhood] Ashrafia, it presented tough choices for activists. Do we side with the somewhat criminal leader who nevertheless gives us room to work, or with Daesh, whose ideology and program we reject but whose image was cleaner and might offer better protection from criminal elements? We debated for days; we eventually sided with Hiyani, at least partially”. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014.

no consensus against it emerged;³¹ in the absence of a united front capable of containing it, IS became the dominant militant force throughout rebel-held areas of Aleppo city and countryside.³²

C. *The Regime Clears the Way with Barrel Bombs*

Eleven months after the July 2012 rebel offensive that seized the eastern half of Aleppo city, regime forces launched a campaign to regain the initiative. Following the June 2013 victory of regime and allied Lebanese Hizbollah forces in the battle of al-Qusayr (a town south west of Homs near the Lebanese border), the regime deployed additional forces toward Aleppo in an attempt to cut rebel supply lines between the city and its northern countryside and to secure its own supply lines between the city and Hama province to the south.³³

Though this initial push failed on both counts, it was indicative of the regime's military posture following al-Qusayr: confident but increasingly dependent on allied militias to compensate for its shortage of troops. June video footage showed a senior regime officer addressing hundreds of men from the Shiite villages of Nubul and al-Zahra' in Aleppo's northern countryside, trying to recruit them into militias to aid regime soldiers in breaking the siege on nearby Menegh airbase.³⁴ Footage filmed later that summer showed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers south of the city training local pro-regime National Defense Force militiamen, advising Syrian officers and fighting alongside Syrian forces. A senior IRGC officer in the footage described the Syrian war as one of "Islam against infidels" that was attracting fighters from Iran, Hizbollah, Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁵ The regime's use of militias in Aleppo expanded in the months to come, mirroring a nationwide trend.³⁶

³¹ Activists and militants from northern Syria complained of IS offences ranging from petty authoritarianism to ideological extremism to ruthless efforts to control rebel-held ground at the expense of other factions. An Ahrar al-Sham fighter's account indicated the feelings about IS: "We need to fight them now, because if we don't, then by the time the regime falls they will have taken over. There are two fronts now, one with the regime and one with Daesh". He added that IS had ties to the Iranian or Iraqi governments, a common, though unsubstantiated charge. Yet, he acknowledged that his group continued to coordinate with IS on some fronts because of its need for IS's tactical contributions. Crisis Group interview, Kilis, November 2013.

³² Crisis Group interviews, activists who lived in rebel-held Aleppo during fall 2013, Gaziantep, March 2014. One explained that IS's power was not in numbers or military capacity but rather in aggressiveness in asserting itself behind the front lines. "It wasn't that Daesh was the strongest, but they amplified their presence by using mobile checkpoints and patrols. It was humiliating, especially for the rebels who had actually liberated the city. Liwa al-Towhid or Ahrar al-Sham could have done something at the time, but chose not to".

³³ www.almayadeen.net/ar/news/syria-owb1uHOLeoaO2qHZAOEQgw; Reuters, 13 June 2013.

³⁴ The senior officer, identified as a brigadier general, declared that together they would "raise the banner of Hussein above Menegh airbase, and we will fight under Hussein's banner", a reference to the fourth Shiite Imam who was martyred, according to the Shiite tradition, in the battle of Karbala against forces loyal to the Caliph Yazid, an event central to the split between Islam's two main denominations. The officer promises state employment to volunteers, raises to those who are already so employed and making the villages the new "capital of the Aleppo countryside". www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAvQaTSoDhE.

³⁵ The footage was filmed by an embedded Iranian filmmaker and seized by rebels who ambushed the Iranians. www.youtube.com/watch?v=LV2xgh2CM58.

³⁶ Addressing the regime's decision to use, in addition to Hizbollah's many highly trained fighters, less-professional, foreign Shiite volunteers, a senior regime official explained: "Numbers count. We have around 350 fronts or flashpoints around the country, not to mention all the roads, pipelines

Yet, momentum and militias were insufficient to gain ground in Aleppo. In September 2013, the regime escalated its tactics after rebels cut both of its supply lines to the city.³⁷ To reopen the eastern one, a network of desert highways connecting regime military facilities in Hama to Aleppo, it sent a convoy from Hama to gain control of the two rebel strongholds along the route, the towns of Khanasser and al-Safira south east of Aleppo. As it progressed, planes and helicopters helped clear the way with heavy shelling and “barrel bombs”, improvised devices packed with explosives and shrapnel dropped indiscriminately from a helicopter.³⁸ After taking Khanasser on 3 October, regime forces pounded al-Safira for more than three weeks before seizing it on 31 October, reportedly driving out more than 130,000 residents.³⁹ In the next two weeks, they captured two additional key villages, opening a supply line more secure than any in months.

This stoked renewed hope in Damascus of gaining a decisive upper-hand in Aleppo. Regime forces continued to push north in order to cut off rebels inside the city from rebel-held towns in the eastern countryside; from there, the regime meant to proceed north west toward besieged compatriots in the Aleppo central prison, which is along the main rebel supply line north to the Turkish border.⁴⁰ If it could extend control to the area surrounding the prison, it would be in a position to encircle and potentially besiege rebels inside the city.⁴¹

Barrel bombs, in Aleppo as elsewhere, have been a key part of the regime’s strategy to create a humanitarian catastrophe and depopulate rebel-held districts,⁴² as part of a doctrine that blurs the line between military tactics and collective punish-

and other infrastructure that need to be guarded. So Shiites from Iraq, even if incompetent, can be used in secondary positions to free up better troops for actual combat”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2014. For discussion of the role of local Sunni residents in pro-regime militias in Aleppo, see Edward Dark, “Pro-regime Sunni fighters in Aleppo defy sectarian narrative”, *Al-Monitor*, 14 March 2014.

³⁷ Rebels captured Khan al-Assel town just west of Aleppo on 22 July, severing regime forces in western Aleppo city from their main supply line, the M5 highway. On 27 August, rebels seized Khanasser town south of Aleppo, severing the lone alternate supply line to the city. See Isabel Nassief, “The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo”, *Institute for the Study of War*, January 2014.

³⁸ *Ibid*; “Syria Updates”, *Institute for the Study of War*, 18 October 2013. For more on barrel bombs and their impact, see “Unlawful air attacks terrorize Aleppo”, *Human Rights Watch*, March 24 2014. For footage, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMiWeL9cGTg; www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiEYF1pgDo; and www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NU1tG3LKZg.

³⁹ “Syria Updates”, *Institute for the Study of War*, 5 November 2013; also *Al Jazeera* (Arabic) 31 October, reporting at www.youtube.com/watch?v=imacHwBgXjc; and “Syria: Civilians forced to flee Al Safira under heavy bombardment”, *Médecins Sans Frontières*, 25 October 2013.

⁴⁰ This plan was discussed openly in regime-linked media. An 11 November 2013 article in *Al-Watan*, a nominally private newspaper published in Damascus and closely tied to regime figures, described the army’s progress and concluded with a quote from an unnamed military analyst: “Presumably the army’s next operation will be to break the siege of the [central] prison and cut the last [rebel] supply line.”

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, rebel officials and Lebanese figure close to the regime, Turkey and Beirut, March-May 2014; see also *Syria Direct*, 28 May 2014. Regime forces broke the prison siege on 22 May and consolidated their control in subsequent weeks.

⁴² A study reported that over 550,000 had left rebel-held eastern Aleppo between January and mid-May 2014, and an additional 220,000 were displaced in eastern Aleppo; it suggested that worsening conditions the next month led to displacement of another 150,000-300,000. “Aleppo city key informants assessment report”, *REACH Initiative*, June 2014.

ment.⁴³ An activist displaced from Aleppo said, “barrel bombs make the city completely unlivable”, not only directly, but also by cutting off electricity and water and preventing vegetable sellers and other suppliers from entering the city from the countryside.⁴⁴

The aerial assault in Aleppo began in late-November 2013 and escalated even as the regime sent a delegation to the Geneva II talks in January.⁴⁵ It continues to use the tactic regularly, despite a 22 February 2014 UN Security Council resolution demanding an end to barrel bombing and other indiscriminate attacks.⁴⁶

⁴³ Since early 2012, the regime has heavily shelled civilian neighbourhoods before ground incursions. Crisis Group addressed the impact in describing the recapture of Homs’ Baba Amro neighbourhood in February 2012: “The operation was either an unmitigated failure or an undeniable success, depending on one’s perspective. If the goal was to solve the challenge presented by Baba Amro, the regime did so, but at the cost of essentially depopulating the neighbourhood. Armed groups were not destroyed; they chose to retreat. Local civilians fled devastation. In the subsequent period, there was neither normalisation nor reconstruction, sending a clear signal to others around the country about what the regime had to offer”. Middle East Report N°128, *Syria’s Mutating Conflict*, 1 August 2012.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014.

⁴⁵ A 24 March 2014 Human Rights Watch study on barrel bombs and other airstrikes found that areas hit in Aleppo between 1 November and 20 February “were widely distributed across almost all neighbourhoods under opposition control, with a majority falling in heavily built-up residential areas far from the frontline”. During the first peak of the strikes, 15-18 December, a Syrian NGO, the Violation Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) counted 204 civilians killed in Aleppo; between 1 November and 31 January, it counted more than 266 airstrikes on Aleppo and its countryside, killing at least 1,380 civilians.

⁴⁶ During the five months after its passage, the NGO VDC, counted 1,655 civilians killed in aerial attacks in Aleppo governorate. See Human Rights Watch, 30 July 2014.

III. Between Hammer and Anvil

A. *The War Against Daesh*

Months of mounting frustration with IS ruthlessness in northern Syria finally exploded in January 2014. Tensions had grown especially high in rebel-held areas along the Turkish border, where it asserted potentially lucrative control over towns and roads leading to crucial crossings.⁴⁷ IS's killing of two rebel commanders provided sparks, and on 2 January several independent factions powerful in Aleppo city and its western countryside formed a new coalition, Jaish al-Mujahidin, to drive it from the area. Within two days, the fight against IS was joined by the Syrian Revolutionaries Front – a coalition formed in December under the leadership of prominent commander Jamal Marouf that provided significant firepower in Idlib province to the west of Jaish al-Mujahidin's zone of influence.⁴⁸

Other groups were more circumspect but ultimately joined the fight as it spread throughout northern and eastern Syria. Despite the Islamic Front's effort to portray itself as united, its component factions took independent decisions on when and where to go against IS; in some cases, the groups themselves were divided.⁴⁹ Jabhat al-Nusra vacillated between fighting IS and seeking to mediate, as local commanders chose different approaches.⁵⁰ In most cases, however, IS's tactics, including repeated

⁴⁷ For a list of prominent incidents between IS and rebel groups in northern Syria during December 2013, see www.joshualandis.com/blog/battle-isis-syrias-rebel-militias.

⁴⁸ In a 31 December prisoner exchange, IS gave Ahrar al-Sham the dead, apparently tortured body of a commander, sending outrage through rebel and activist ranks. <http://halabnews.com/news/45536> and the Islamic Front's 1 January statement, http://just.paste.it/abo_rayan_statement. Two days later, IS killed a rebel leader from Atareb in Aleppo's western countryside and seemed poised to seize the town; the urgency of protecting Atareb led factions to conclude weeks of unification talks and announce formation of Jaish al-Mujahidin. Crisis Group interviews, senior Jaish al-Mujahidin official, Antakya, March 2014; analyst from western Aleppo countryside, Beirut, February and April 2014; Al-Arabiya, 3 January 2014; *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 5 January 2014. The groups that formed Jaish al-Mujahidin included Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Liwa al-Ansar, Liwa Amjad al-Islam, Tajamma Fistaqum Kama Umert, Harakat al-Nour al-Islamiya, Liwa al-Huriya al-Islamiya, Liwa Jund al-Haramein and Liwa Ansar al-Khilafa. Jaish al-Mujahidin formation video and 3 January statement announcing its decision to fight IS at www.youtube.com/watch?v=RY7mltUQmmY and www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=af4d286c0726e9c74045822fe7824e90. Al-Modon, 3 January 2014, and www.all4syria.info/Archive/122779.

⁴⁹ A Jaish al-Mujahidin official asserted: "In the first two days after battle began in the western countryside, Jaish al-Mujahidin fought alone. Liwa al-Towhid finally joined on the third day. The problem is that there was no consensus within the Islamic Front". An al-Towhid official partially confirmed this: "There was disagreement within and among the Islamic Front's battalions; within Ahrar al-Sham and al-Towhid there were some who did not want to fight Daesh even after it surrounded some of our people. But during the first couple days [of hostilities] a joint Islamic Front decision was made to confront Daesh, and we have remained on the same page ever since". Crisis Group interviews, Antakya and Gaziantep, March 2014.

⁵⁰ Al-Nusra elements in Idlib and Aleppo provinces sought to broker deals between local rebels and IS, even as members fought IS in Raqqa. Al-Nusra played a lead role in the fight against IS that escalated in eastern Syria in spring 2014, though internal disagreements over whether, when and where to prioritise confrontation with IS continue. See Ahmad Abazeid, *Zaman al-Wasl*, 4 August 2014. Officials from Islamic Front factions acknowledged that similar debate within the alliance had been raging for weeks before the outbreak of war between IS and Jaish al-Mujahidin on 3 January. Opinion varied both among and within the major components. Ahrar al-Sham was generally considered most reluctant to escalate. Crisis Group interviews, Liwa al-Towhid, Ahrar al-Sham, Saqour al-Sham, and Jaish al-Islam officials, Gaziantep, Istanbul, Reyhanli, March-June 2014.

use of suicide bombs,⁵¹ and refusal to compromise led groups to conclude that they had no choice but to fight.⁵² The resulting collection of groups was strong enough to drive IS from much of the area in which it had established a strong presence, namely within the city of Aleppo and to its west.⁵³

However the fighting north and east of Aleppo proved much trickier. As IS implemented a 4 January threat to end its limited contribution to the battle with the regime in and around Aleppo, it freed its forces to defend positions in the northern countryside. In particular, it maintained its hold on Azaz, a border town that choked the rebel supply line to Aleppo.⁵⁴ Moreover, by late-January, IS had driven its foes from the main towns north east of the city and along the road east to al-Raqqa. These gains, creating a buffer zone around al-Raqqa, the heart of IS's realm, enabled it to fight back from the brink of defeat.

Poor rebel coordination and command-and-control were crucial to IS's eastern surge. This was especially costly within Ahrar al-Sham. Even as Ahrar fighters in Aleppo and Idlib helped expel IS from these areas, local Ahrar commanders in al-Raqqa city and along the highway leading west to Aleppo made crucial concessions. The local Ahrar al-Sham contingent's ambivalence allowed IS to retake al-Raqqa, after having been surrounded by Ahrar and al-Nusra.⁵⁵ Similarly, a large IS convoy heading west toward Aleppo from Deir al-Zour was permitted to pass through Ahrar-controlled territory, the result of a deal struck by powerful Ahrar al-Sham commander Abu Khaled al-Souri and an equally renowned Chechen IS counterpart, Omar al-Shishani.⁵⁶

These decisions proved costly to rebels, including Ahrar al-Sham. The convoy was pivotal in IS's capture of strategic points in the north-eastern Aleppo countryside⁵⁷

⁵¹ For example, a Liwa al-Towhid activist reported that a sixteen-year-old suicide bomber struck an al-Towhid checkpoint on 6 January; on 8 January, the activist wrote: "Total number of martyrs today in Aleppo: 16 killed by Assad, and 69 killed by Daesh! Because of the gap between those numbers, jihad against you [IS] has become a right and duty". twitter.com/Aboferasalhalb/status/420267905893560320; twitter.com/Aboferasalhalb/status/421037754622181376. A senior Ahrar al-Sham official said, "prior to [rebel-IS fighting in] January, IS had conducted eight car bombings in nine months against the regime. Since [then], they have carried out 60 such bombings against rebels and against the people". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2014.

⁵² IS repeatedly refused initiatives by prominent activists and jihadis to resolve IS-rebel disputes through neutral or joint Islamic courts. See, for example, Saudi jihadi cleric Abdullah al-Muheisni's description of IS's refusal of his initiative that its leading opponents had publicly accepted, www.youtube.com/watch?v=s08_Tm_Mbyg&feature=youtu.be. A prominent jihadi cleric based inside Syria, many viewed him as a potential neutral arbiter before he sided with al-Nusra in February 2014.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, Jaish al-Mujahidin senior official, Saqour al-Sham official, Liwa al-Towhid member, activists from Aleppo, Antakya, Gaziantep and Kilis, March 2014. After IS was driven from its Aleppo headquarters in a children's hospital, opposition sources reported discovering dozens of prisoners executed by IS, including activists. *Zaman al-Wasl*, 9 January 2014; *Al-Modon*, 4 January 2014; *Al Arabiya*, 8 January 2014; *Al-Riyadh*, 9 January 2014.

⁵⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-P0rS1A_UA; <http://all4syria.info/Archive/124723>.

⁵⁵ Wael Essam, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 31 January 2014. An activist volunteering at a Raqqa hospital confirmed this account. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2014.

⁵⁶ A description of the deal and a video of the signed statement is at www.dawaalhaq.com/?p=9528. A Liwa al-Towhid official said the Ahrar commander allowed the convoy to pass because his men lacked force to stop it. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014. See also a 20 January al-Shishani interview explaining that IS forces travelled more than 300km to fight rebels in the Aleppo countryside, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIUz6ukidnk.

⁵⁷ An al-Towhid official explained: "Al-Shishani's convoy was big, perhaps 1,500 men, and it was they who took the lead in capturing the eastern countryside towns of al-Bab, Menbaj and al-Rae

and of villages along the border that, for the time being, severed the last remaining rebel supply line from Turkey to the northern countryside and Aleppo city.⁵⁸ IS also captured and executed dozens of Ahrar fighters days after they had let Raqqa fall.⁵⁹ Abu Khaled al-Souri himself was killed in a suspected IS suicide bombing.⁶⁰

In retrospect, the scorecard for this initial six-week phase of the war was mixed. Rebels stripped IS of revolutionary credibility, branded it an enemy on par with Assad and expelled it from key areas. Yet, that came at great cost. IS's victories in Raqqa and the eastern Aleppo countryside gave it for the first time a territorially contiguous domain in which it had exclusive governing authority. Moreover, the rebels lost great human and material resources and diverted men, weapons and ammunition from the Aleppo front at a time when pro-Assad forces were pushing to retake the city.⁶¹

B. *The Regime Takes Advantage*

Damascus quickly exploited the fight between its foes. Even as the regime, on the eve of the January Geneva II talks, stressed the fight against "terrorism", its forces on the ground acted otherwise.⁶² Far from engaging the most brutal jihadi faction, the regime largely ignored IS, while escalating its campaign against the rebels in Aleppo. It intensified aerial and ground assaults on areas from which IS had withdrawn, while sparing its newly conquered eastern strongholds.⁶³ Concentrating firepower on the rebels, the Syrian army and allied militias made significant gains on the city's

[a border town northeast of Aleppo that had been an al-Towhid stronghold]. They were mostly *mu-hajirin* [non-Syrian fighters] and of course did not face a single regime bullet, much less airstrike, on their way west". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014. See also www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=c7f315cd4ba7a3e341d381408f87e230.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Liwa al-Towhid officials, Syrian journalists, Gaziantep and Kilis, March 2014; Al-Quds al-Arabi, 17 February 2014. IS withdrew from the border towns north of Aleppo on 27 February; see below.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Islamic Front officials, Turkey, March 2014. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 14 January 2014.

⁶⁰ BBC News, 24 February 2014. Abu Khaled al-Souri was a trusted associate of Aymen al-Zawahiri, though he does not appear to have been an active al-Qaeda member. Aron Lund, "Who and What was Abu Khaled al-Suri? Part I", Carnegie Endowment's "Syria in Crisis" blog, 24 February 2014.

⁶¹ A Liwa al-Towhid official said, "we had been building up ammunition for months preparing for an attack to gain control of Aleppo airport. We had the fighters necessary but not yet sufficient ammunition. But then IS forced war upon us. As a result, we ended up spending the entire quantity of saved ammunition fighting IS". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014.

⁶² As talks in Geneva commenced, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad invoked the standard narrative of the regime and its loyal media: "We have to agree on a formula where all terrorist organizations should be fought by all Syrians and be expelled". *The New York Times*, 23 January 2014.

⁶³ Between January and June 2014, regime aircraft rarely targeted IS strongholds east of Aleppo; easily identifiable IS headquarters remained unscathed; and regime ground forces made no tangible effort to regain ground from IS east of Aleppo. Asked why regime forces had avoided IS's de facto Syrian capital in Raqqa city, a Lebanese figure close to (and strongly supportive of) the regime explained: "The regime doesn't strike al-Raqqa because it wants the city to be a model. It wants the world to see what Daesh is doing there and be warned. Also, al-Raqqa has no strategic importance. There is no need to retake it". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2014. The regime finally began regular attacks on IS assets in early June 2014, following IS's capture of Mosul. Mousab Alhamadee and Jonathan Landay, "Syrian airstrikes on ISIS mark new strategy in civil war", McClatchy, 25 June 2014.

eastern edge, slowly progressing toward their goal of encircling rebel-held neighbourhoods.⁶⁴

The regime's focus on anti-IS rebels reflected its approach to the conflict as a whole. Since the beginning of the uprising in 2011, it has premised its strategy on preventing the emergence of a coherent, credible opposition inside the country and ensuring that the costs and risks of both domestic rebellion and foreign intervention remain as high as possible.

So long as IS prioritised its rule within "liberated" areas over the broader fight against the regime, it served certain regime interests, at least in the short term. From Damascus' perspective, as IS grows stronger, so too does domestic and international fear of any alternative to the regime.⁶⁵ The regime hopes the rising number of jihadi combatants – particularly those holding Western passports – eventually will motivate Western governments to accept continued Assad rule and renew ties.⁶⁶

IS gains in Iraq in June 2014 and its subsequent effort to consolidate control in eastern Syria where the regime maintains isolated bases shifted calculations but did not change the regime's fundamental approach. Damascus has significantly increased its use of airpower against IS since June in an effort to protect its remaining eastern outposts and demonstrate counter-terror credentials to Western audiences increasingly alarmed by the IS rise.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, it continues to focus the brunt of its military resources, in Aleppo and elsewhere, on IS's rebel foes.

Meanwhile, the regime's extensive bombardment and siege of rebel areas – to the point of starvation in some cases – aim to crush the will of any domestic opposition. A regime official explained:

You need to learn from the Jews and their use of the Holocaust: never again. People must understand that their pursuit of foreign ideals visited utter destruction upon their country. How many schools were destroyed in the name of this

⁶⁴ The regime's progress became clear as it claimed control over al-Niqarein, an industrial area just east of Aleppo where it had fought rebels for weeks and from which IS had recently withdrawn. See al-Manar's 14 January coverage at www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ilYzKDMwyA. Some of the same pro-regime media outlets then touting regime counter-terrorism credentials simultaneously celebrated its exploitation of the rebel fight against IS, eg. *Al-Akhbar*, 13 January 2014. A pro-regime Damascus-based paper said, "in Aleppo, recent battlefield developments have made clear that the Syrian Arab Army's operations east of the city will soon bear fruit with the formation of a security belt around the city similar to the rings imposed around Damascus and Homs, meaning the besiegement of large numbers of militants ... pushing them to surrender or flee before the severing of their supply lines is complete". *Al-Watan*, 19 January 2014.

⁶⁵ A senior Hizbollah official explained: "The opposition itself provided gifts to the regime – in particular al-Nusra and Daesh [IS] helped push people back toward the regime through their own bad behaviour. For example, the Shammar tribe shifted from the opposition and began asking the regime for weapons in order to fight them. And the Kurds did something similar". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2013.

⁶⁶ In an interview, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad suggested an increase in communications from Western countries interested in repairing diplomatic ties to counter the "terrorist" threat. BBC News, 15 January 2014.

⁶⁷ The regime's most extensive aerial bombardment of IS targets occurred on 17 August, one day after the Coalition called on the U.S. to conduct airstrikes against IS within Syria, in addition to increasing support to rebels. Regardless of whether the former was intended in response to the latter, the concurrence is indicative of competition between regime and opposition to demonstrate value-added in counter-terror. An editorial in Syrian state media three days later complained that the U.S. "completely ignores the most powerful strikes with which the Syrian Arab Army has hit Daesh." *Al-Thowra* 20 August 2014; *Al-Hayat*, 18 August 2014.

so-called revolution? How much pain was inflicted on Aleppo, where no demonstrations even took place? All this to replace one man? It has to be part of the social memory and conscience never to go down that road again.⁶⁸

The regime's tactics not only deter opposition politicians (including those in the Coalition's affiliate bodies) and Western aid organisations from operating on the ground. They also severely degrade the ability of activists to maintain structures capable of providing services⁶⁹ and provide a propaganda coup. With areas held by the mainstream opposition unliveable, civilians have evacuated en masse toward safer regime-held areas, an exodus that the regime touts as evidence of its popularity.⁷⁰ The contrast between utter destruction and the relative stability the regime can offer is one of its rare assets with the public, as it has demonstrated no capacity to rebuild⁷¹ or foster reconciliation.⁷²

In Aleppo as elsewhere, opposition factions have played into this aspect of Damascus's strategy. Though regular aerial bombardment has rendered governing exceedingly difficult, rebel factions have wasted whatever energy and resources might be available; competition for influence, both among themselves and vis-à-vis their counterparts in the external political opposition, has sapped their ability to provide services and a semblance of law and order.⁷³ Looting and profiteering,⁷⁴ as well as the

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2014.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Aleppo activists, Western diplomats and aid workers, and an interim government official, Turkey, February-June 2014.

⁷⁰ Nowhere is this clearer than Aleppo, where pro-regime voices highlight the relative stability of the regime-held western neighbourhoods in contrast to the chaos and destruction of the rebel-held eastern half – without noting the persistent, indiscriminate regime shelling and barrel bombs that have been instrumental in the east's devastation. A prominent pro-regime Lebanese evoked such a narrative: "Of Aleppo's five million inhabitants, four million of them live under regime control and support the regime". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2014.

⁷¹ Asked about reconstruction, a senior official acknowledged that the regime had yet to begin implementing plans even in Baba Amro, a Homs neighbourhood it recaptured from rebels in March 2012. He added: "People should be all the more motivated [not to rebel] given that the country that was destroyed they will have to rebuild themselves". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2014. Crisis Group reports have noted regime inability to normalise relations with pro-rebel communities and rebuild destroyed districts, eg, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, op. cit.

⁷² The regime has pursued local ceasefires in some areas and marketed these, locally and internationally, as "reconciliation". In fact they are a military tactic devoid of a broader political strategy, aimed at pacification or to free resources for combat elsewhere. They are often used after rebels have been brought to their knees by some combination of bombardment and siege. A senior government official explained: "Reconciliation deals don't have a political component; the regime remains focused on the military campaign. Anything else is kicked down the road". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2014. Another senior official said, "I doubt we can build on [the ceasefires] in the short term. It will take time for people [in pro-rebel areas] to evolve in their mentality, to come to terms with a new reality, to accept other options. Maybe in three or four years they will give up on their illusions of radical change and be satisfied with being local police for instance". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2014.

⁷³ For example, Liwa al-Towhid, Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra joined in late 2012 to create the Islamic Court Commission (al-Hei'a al-Sharaiya) in Aleppo; it performs some law-and-order functions in rebel-held areas, but other prominent factions do not participate, and activists complain of arbitrary enforcement and abuses. It operates independently of the provincial council, a Western-backed body elected by activists and charged with coordinating and facilitating services in rebel areas. Liz Sly, "Islamic law comes to rebel-held areas of Syria", *The Washington Post*, 19 March 2013. Jabhat al-Nusra withdrew from it in July 2014, citing differences with fellow founders. *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, 9 July 2014.

rebels' resort to indiscriminate tactics of their own, has strengthened the regime's narrative; shelling of regime-held areas in western Aleppo⁷⁵ and besieging of Shia villages north west of the city stand out.⁷⁶ The worst offenders may be only a small part of rebel ranks, but the inability or unwillingness of the more reputable groups to contain these abuses has tainted perceptions of the opposition as a whole.⁷⁷

Whatever the regime's success in thwarting the emergence of credible alternatives, a government unable to bring about reconciliation or reconstruction cannot end an insurgency whose nominal goal – regime change – retains significant popular support. Nor can dependence on depopulation tactics and Iran-backed militias eradicate jihadis; it only adds fuel to the fire. "Success" of the regime's strategy would produce a frightening scenario, the opposite of what it ostensibly seeks: as mainstream rebel groups are defeated, the many Syrians wishing to continue the fight might have little choice but to join or ally with IS. The current militant surge in Iraq offers a cautionary tale: the once hated IS has made a comeback among Sunnis, allying in certain areas against a common foe – the Iraqi government – with some of the same rebel elements that routed it in 2007-2008.

C. *The Islamic State Bides Its Time*

The combination of regime escalation and IS's severing of supply lines left rebels in desperate straits by late February. Even as Jaish al-Mujahidin and Liwa al-Towhid together gained ground and linked rebel strongholds in the western and northern countryside,⁷⁸ IS retained key areas, notably Azaz. Its 16 February capture of border

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews and communications, Aleppo activists and residents from Aleppo, Beirut and Turkey, 2013-2014.

⁷⁵ Rebels periodically have shelled regime-held western Aleppo, resulting in dozens of civilian casualties. See Al-Monitor, 3 June 2014. In spring 2014, rebel groups, notably Jabhat al-Nusra, with initial support from Jaish al-Mujahidin, Liwa al-Towhid and Ahrar al-Sham, sought to cut electricity to regime areas as pressure on it to cease indiscriminate aerial attacks in Aleppo and siege tactics elsewhere. This failed. Instead, electricity was denied to rebel and regime areas alike, and the city's water supply was disrupted, forcing civilians to rely on contaminated sources. Regime tactics did not change, and water supply remains problematic in Aleppo, with the sides blaming each other. See the 18 April statement by al-Nusra, Jaish al-Mujahidin, al-Towhid, Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic court authority; www.aksalser.com/?Page=view_articles&id=a570218260befdef076a821a24b0b616; www.aksalser.com/?page=viewarticles&id=ee1d12bcb3dfd08c22a30f2c77f2d5ef; Al-Monitor, 26 June 2014.

⁷⁶ Rebel forces surrounding the Shia villages of Nubul and al-Zahra' have employed siege tactics and engaged in apparently indiscriminate shelling, especially since June 2013, when (as noted above) the regime began utilising the villages as staging grounds for militias, and rebel downing of a helicopter en route there led Damascus to cease supplying the villages by air. See "Living Under Siege", Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), February 2014; and "Syria: Barrage of Barrel Bombs", Human Rights Watch, 30 July 2014.

⁷⁷ Aleppo's most powerful non-jihadi factions, Jaish al-Mujahidin and components of the Islamic Front, deny any role in indiscriminate shelling targeting regime-held areas of Aleppo. Jaish al-Mujahidin has publicly condemned such attacks. twitter.com/TahrirSy/status/457335401456218112/photo/1. An official from Islamic Front component Saqour al-Sham explained: "The Islamic Front is against such attacks and has condemned them in the past. If it turned out that anyone from within the Front was responsible, we would hold them accountable". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, June 2014. Rebels and activists often blame such attacks on smaller local factions with criminal reputations. Crisis Group interviews, Turkey, May-June 2014.

⁷⁸ See www.all4syria.info/Archive/131483.

villages to Azaz's east ensured that the rebels would be unable to secure a logistical corridor given the intensity of their simultaneous battle with the regime.⁷⁹

Ironically IS territorial ambitions – the bane of northern rebel groups since mid-2013 – worked to their advantage in this case. Though IS did not appear in imminent danger of being overrun by rebels in Azaz or nearby villages, it withdrew from these areas on 27 February, leaving them to local rebels.⁸⁰ It thereby spared itself a potentially costly battle, as its opponents had reinforced;⁸¹ it also distanced itself from the main Aleppo fronts with the regime.

IS's unilateral withdrawal from strategically relevant territory that it appeared capable of defending shed light on its priorities. Facing a long list of rebel enemies and unprecedented unpopularity among anti-regime Syrians, it consolidated behind more defensible lines, freeing up precious fighters. The towns of al-Raee and al-Bab, north east of Aleppo city, became the westernmost strongholds of a de facto emirate extending through most of Raqqa province. The withdrawal enabled IS to strengthen its presence there and to shift additional fighters east into al-Hasakah and Deir al-Zour provinces, where it subsequently escalated fighting with Jabhat al-Nusra, other rebels and, separately, Kurdish forces over valuable oil resources and territory contiguous to its areas of strength in north-western Iraq.⁸²

IS's decision to consolidate in eastern Syria for the time being, rather than to remain a significant player in the war against Assad, enabled it to mount an unprecedented surge in Iraq in June. As for the rebels, it enabled them to reopen supply lines from Turkey, for both military and humanitarian purposes, and to dedicate more resources to countering the regime's campaign to encircle Aleppo.⁸³

The regime's gains slowed but did not cease in the weeks that followed. Its forces and allied militias continued to push westward along the northern edge of Aleppo, eventually breaking a months-long siege on its troops at the city's central prison and seizing ground overlooking the road linking central Aleppo to Turkey. Opposition

⁷⁹ A member of Asifat al-Shammal, the group from which IS had seized Azaz in September 2013, acknowledged that rebels in the northern countryside were not currently strong enough to defeat IS militarily in Azaz and nearby villages. Crisis group interview, Kilis, 27 February 2014.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Asifat al-Shammal member, Kilis, 27 February 2014; communication with same member upon his return to Azaz, 28 February. A few days after IS withdrew from Azaz, a Liwa al-Towhid official said, "the regime took advantage of the rebel fight against Daesh very well. If Daesh had not withdrawn from Azaz and [nearby villages], Aleppo could have been lost in days. Now at least we can focus on [the] regime. Until that point, February had been our worst month since the beginning of the war". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014.

⁸¹ A Jaish al-Mujahidin official said the alliance sent 400 fighters to support rebels in the northern countryside several days before IS withdrew. Crisis Group interview, Antakya, March 2014.

⁸² For more on Kurdish dynamics, including the Kurdish Democratic Union Party's (PYD) control of and political activity within Kurdish areas of northern Syria and its battles with IS, other jihadis and rebels, see Crisis Group Report, *Flight of Icarus?*, op. cit. Among the PYD's holdings are the area surrounding the city of Afrin north west of Aleppo and Kurdish neighbourhoods within Aleppo city. Its forces are not significant in the battles against the regime and IS described in this report. However, independent Kurdish forces have in some instances joined rebels against IS near Kurdish villages in Aleppo's northern countryside. There is potential for such cooperation to expand – particularly if rebels north of Aleppo and the PYD could agree to coordinate efforts. A senior official in a major Aleppo rebel group suggested that talks concerning coordination were making progress, though suspicions among rebels regarding the PYD's relationship with Damascus remain an obstacle. Crisis Group communication, late August 2014.

⁸³ Crisis Group interviews, Western government officials, aid workers, opposition militants and activists, Gaziantep, March 2014.

forces countered by escalating on the western outskirts, threatening key regime facilities and forcing it to fight on multiple fronts.⁸⁴

IS's withdrawal from Aleppo was incomplete, therefore no panacea for rebel ills. Its continued control of the eastern countryside still protects the crucial final stretch of the regime's supply line from rebel attack from the east, while IS itself has not attempted to cut the line or otherwise meaningfully engage regime forces along it.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ BBC News, 22 May 2014; Al-Monitor, 16 April 2014.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Liwa al-Towhid official, Gaziantep, May 2014; communication, UN official, July 2014.

IV. A Shifting Rebel Spectrum, on the Verge of Defeat

A. *The Main Rebel Players in Aleppo*

Compared with their foes, mainstream opposition forces in northern Syria are poorly organised and under-resourced. These relative disadvantages have steadily worsened in 2014, despite new incentives for state backers to strengthen their support: the commitment by leading rebel groups to continue the war with IS; the collapse of Geneva II; and limited gains achieved by regime and allied militias in Aleppo, along the Lebanese border and in Homs and Damascus. This collective failure is striking, given the shared rebel, Western, Gulf and Turkish interests in defeating IS and reversing regime progress. It is symptomatic of the disarray that has reigned within each and among the totality of these actors since 2011 and speaks to the complexity of a rebel militant spectrum whose breadth and fluidity remain its most defining characteristics.⁸⁶

As IS withdrew eastward, three rebel alliances and one jihadi group took control of most of the territory it left behind: the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, the Islamic Front, Jaish al-Mujahidin, and Jabhat al-Nusra. Of these, the latter three are the most powerful forces in and around Aleppo; the former, a non-ideological coalition led by prominent rebel commander Jamal Marouf, is strong in Idlib province but plays a minimal role in Aleppo. This section briefly discusses the main factions in Aleppo; the subsequent section addresses the smaller roles of non-ideological groups that have emerged as the main recipients of Western support since the Supreme Military Council crumbled. Given the situation's fluidity, these descriptions should offer not a guide to the future of the rebel scene in greater Aleppo, but rather a present snapshot of its major players.

1. The Islamic Front (al-Jabha al-Islamiya)

The Islamic Front is a national alliance whose components have contributed significantly to rebel activity throughout the country. At its formation in November 2013, it contained four of the rebellion's most powerful factions – Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Towhid, Jaish al-Islam and Saqour al-Sham⁸⁷ – and aimed to evolve from a coalition of Islamist groups into a single entity with unified command-and-control and policymaking.⁸⁸ Despite tentative steps toward a joint leadership structure and promotion of a common brand, there was no true merger, and the Front remained an alliance of autonomous elements among which coordination and cohesiveness varied significantly.⁸⁹ Its attempt to merge and streamline decision-making has, in a way,

⁸⁶ See Crisis Group Reports, *Tentative Jihad*, and *Anything but Politics*, both op. cit.

⁸⁷ At formation, Ahrar al-Sham was generally considered the strongest component. Originally based in Idlib province, it developed affiliate "battalions" in much of the country; Liwa al-Towhid, Saqour al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, Ansar al-Sham, and Liwa al-Haq are among the strongest rebel forces in Aleppo, Idlib province, greater Damascus, Latakia province, and Homs, respectively.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Liwa al-Towhid, Ahrar al-Sham and Saqour al-Sham officials, Turkey, November 2013-June 2014.

⁸⁹ A senior official in an Islamic Front component said, "there never was any merging of Islamic Front components. Each group is still making decisions on its own. I don't know why some factions pretend otherwise". Crisis Group interview, Reyhanli, June 2014. Representatives from other Islamic Front factions were more positive, acknowledging that most military decisions are still made by individual components (or their local commanders) but emphasising that the merger was always intended to take up to a year and that joint bureaus already manage media strategy and politi-

proven counterproductive; the control of its political bureau by a single faction – Ahrar al-Sham – enables more efficient tactical manoeuvring, but it has also raised concerns within the Front that Ahrar is dominating its politics.⁹⁰

In the city and countryside of Aleppo, two of the Front's factions, from opposite sides of its ideological spectrum, play major roles: Liwa al-Towhid and Ahrar al-Sham. Since joining the war against IS in January, both have publicly identified it as an enemy of the rebellion and allocated resources accordingly; their forces are currently coordinating with Jaish al-Mujahidin, Nour al-Din al-Zenki and Harakat Hazm (discussed below) to defend the northern countryside from a continuing IS offensive.⁹¹ Both al-Towhid and Ahrar also enjoy friendly relations with Qatar and Turkey that, while materially beneficial, complicate their policy decisions and render them vulnerable in the broader regional geopolitical tug-of-war.⁹²

Liwa al-Towhid (Unity Brigade)

Formed in July 2012, al-Towhid is a leading force in Aleppo's northern countryside and important on fronts within the city and on its outskirts. It spearheaded dramatic rebel gains in the city during summer 2012; though its fighters, most from the countryside, struggled to win city residents' trust, it vaulted to national prominence. Its public messaging at the time blended Sunni piety with commitment to non-sectarian, representative governance in a manner that appealed broadly to the opposition's popular base and helped make its then-military commander, Abd al-Qader al-Saleh, the uprising's most recognisable star.⁹³

In the two years since, al-Towhid has dealt pragmatically with fellow militants and others, while maintaining a political discourse Salafi in name but flexible in exe-

cal policy. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, Reyhanli and Istanbul, March-June 2014. The issue became further muddled in July, when the Islamic Front announced merger of its assets in Aleppo under the command of Liwa al-Towhid leader Abd al-Aziz Salameh, and four days later Jaish al-Islam and Saqour al-Sham announced merger of their two groups. The ramifications of these announcements are unclear. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1A00a5t4nM and www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaAxR4NI-MU.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Islamic Front officials, Gaziantep and Reyhanli, June 2014. Asked why his group was not more prominent in the Front's political bureau, a Liwa al-Towhid official explained: "All groups are represented within all elements of the Islamic Front's leadership structure. But positions are allocated according to capability. Ahrar holds more weight in the political bureau because they are strongest in political thinking". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014.

⁹¹ Announced on 25 August, the "Nahrawan al-Sham" operations room that coordinates defence of the northern countryside includes the Islamic Front, Jaish al-Mujahidin, Harakat Hazm and Nour al-Din al-Zenki; the roles of the last two are addressed below. Faylaq al-Sham, a pragmatic Islamist faction based in Idlib province, also participates in the operations room, which takes its name from the Caliph Ali bin Abi Thalib's battle against the Kharajites (al-Khawarij), a seventh-century break-away Islamic sect considered the first to abuse the practice of *takfir*, ie, declaring a Muslim a non-believer. The operations-room groups call IS "the Kharajite group", a derogatory title often applied by IS's rebel opponents. www.aksalser.com/?page=view_news&id=af484b4260bb1f633abb11bbaf1d6af9.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, Liwa al-Towhid official, Saqour al-Sham official, U.S. and British diplomats, Beirut and Turkey, November 2013-June 2014.

⁹³ Al-Towhid's formation resulted from agreement among leading factions from the countryside to merge on the eve of their attack on Aleppo city. *Towhid* can refer to unification, such as what occurred between its founding components, as well as to the oneness of God, a central concept in Islam. See Crisis Group Report *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

cution.⁹⁴ This results in decisions that appear ideologically contradictory but are consistent with immediate interests. It was among the first mainstream groups to publicly welcome help from Jabhat al-Nusra (August 2012) and the Coalition's then-interim prime minister, Ghassan Hitto (March 2013).⁹⁵ It was, with Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra, a founding member of Aleppo's Islamic Court Commission (al-Hei'a al-Sharaiya), as well as of the civilian Aleppo provincial council that receives support from Western governments and has Coalition ties.⁹⁶ Al-Towhid seeks Western support but was initially reluctant to turn against IS in its absence.⁹⁷ Its officials tend to avoid the word "democracy" – tarnished among militants as anger has risen at Western inaction and the political opposition's incompetence – but reject imposing an Islamic state by force. They hold that all Syrians should have equal rights and a vote in choosing their leadership.⁹⁸

Civilian activists in Aleppo complain al-Towhid was too slow to confront IS and of criminal behaviour among its members, even as they speak favourably of its openness to dialogue. They also praise its responsiveness to their occasional pressures,⁹⁹

⁹⁴ For background on Salafism among Syrian rebels and the ideological distinctions separating Salafi groups from more radical Salafi-jihadis (such as Jabhat al-Nusra), see Crisis Group Report *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

⁹⁵ Abd al-Qader al-Saleh welcomed help from his "brothers" in Jabhat al-Nusra during a prominent interview when many activists continued to view the jihadi group suspiciously. Al Jazeera, 11 August 2012. Seven months later, he publicly met Hitto during his brief visit to northern Syria, when credibility of the Coalition – itself an al-Nusra enemy – was seriously eroded among activists. www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhXIYxDfGKO.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Western, UN, al-Towhid and provincial council officials, Gaziantep, March-June 2014.

⁹⁷ In November 2013, an al-Towhid official said IS had become a burden on the revolt, but his group's relations with it were "fine". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep. The same official addressed U.S. support two months after al-Towhid had turned against IS but close coordination with al-Nusra continued: "If the U.S. wants us to stop cooperating with al-Nusra, then give us an alternative! We have no choice but to cooperate with them now for tactical reasons". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, May 2014. See also Abd al-Aziz Salameh's 20 August 2014 appeal for Western support, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qo_djbW9ans&feature=youtu.be.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Liwa al-Towhid officials, Gaziantep, November 2013-May 2014. Avoiding or rejecting the term "democracy" while defending representative governance, elections and equal citizenship, regardless of sect, is relatively common among mainstream rebels seeking to calibrate a message for audiences inside and outside the country, especially since July 2013, when prominent Syrian rebels expressed outrage at perceived U.S. complicity in the overthrow of Mohamed Morsi, Muslim Brotherhood member and democratically elected president of Egypt. An al-Towhid official expressed his desire for Islamic governance in Syria and equated "democracy" with Western-backed, anti-Islamist authoritarian political secularism but stressed that an Islamic state should never be imposed, and all Syrians should have a vote for the form of governance and selection of leaders. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014. In broader Arab world intra-Islamist debate, citizenship as the basis of an individual's relationship to the state and of equality between Sunnis and minorities is a crucial issue separating mainstream Islamists from Salafi-jihadis; al-Towhid leader Abd al-Qader al-Saleh sided with the former in an interview that introduced his group to a broader Arab audience: "Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Christians, all of us are in one state and are one people, and we are all equals like the teeth of a comb" Al Jazeera, 11 August 2012.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Turkey, October 2013-June 2014. A prominent female activist from Aleppo said, "Liwa al-Towhid was perhaps the most popular rebel group; people really felt like it represented them and the revolution, even seculars like us. But they lost a lot of credibility through their [initial] refusal to fight IS". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014. Another activist echoed that disappointment but added that she continued to view the group as a sound partner: "When we protested against actions taken by the Islamic Court Commission in Aleppo, al-Towhid

a crucial factor in local relations and, more broadly, potentially an indicator of pragmatism. “I’m not afraid”, a secular female activist said, “of any group that is concerned about its reputation”.¹⁰⁰

Al-Towhid’s popularity, power and cohesiveness have declined since Abd al-Qader al-Saleh was killed in November 2013. Abd al-Aziz Salameh, who led it in partnership with al-Saleh, has been unable to replicate his charisma and capacity to unify.¹⁰¹ Competition within the group escalated, spilling into public view in July when forces loyal to Salameh clashed with an erstwhile al-Towhid component based in al-Saleh’s hometown of Marea. Salameh portrayed this as an inevitable result of his campaign to weed out criminals, whom al-Towhid officials have long acknowledged pose an internal threat.¹⁰² Others saw the clashes as a symptom of al-Towhid’s unravelling, a sign that its dominant role in the northern countryside has eroded.¹⁰³

Such issues have distracted from the battles against regime and IS forces. Lacking sufficient resources and manpower since war with IS erupted, al-Towhid saw a former component join Jaish al-Mujahidin in May 2014 and has lost individual fighters to Jabhat al-Nusra.¹⁰⁴ Such defections – the former to a more moderate group, the latter to a more extreme one – are reminders of the fluidity of the rebel scene.¹⁰⁵ While al-Towhid’s current commanders and fighters likely will remain fixtures of the rebellion in the north, whether this is under its banner or those of other rebel or jihadi factions will depend largely on resources, leadership and organisation.

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham (the Freemen of Syria Movement)

A powerful player in Aleppo since July 2012 and one of the strongest rebel groups in the country, Ahrar al-Sham is generally considered the Islamic Front’s most hardline component. Since emerging in Idlib in January 2012, it has adopted unambiguously Salafi rhetoric and cast its narrative in explicitly Sunni terms that many rebel groups,

offered protection for our demonstrations, and our pressure eventually proved successful”. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2014. Another Aleppo activist explained: “In Aleppo city and in general, the largest chunk of the population is masses who follow, who are not politically inclined in any direction and thus will generally go with whomever is in power. Our role as activists is to take initiatives that can move some of those people. [Combining online and on-the-ground activity,] we can create enough of a fuss to shift the mood of others and thus the decision-making of armed actors”. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activists, analysts and members of competing rebel factions, southern Turkey and Istanbul, February-June 2014.

¹⁰² www.aksalser.com/index.php?page=view_articles&id=ceafa18e21dbaddf0f71f2d2e3e45eb4; www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=dedf8a71626f82bdae322177bd39c182; Crisis Group interviews, Liwa al-Towhid official, Gaziantep, November 2013-May 2014. Salameh expelled the group, Qabdat al-Shamal, from the Islamic Front in early July, and forces loyal to Salameh joined with Jabhat al-Nusra fighters to seize control of areas near the Turkish border from it.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Syrian analyst of rebel affairs, Istanbul, June 2014. Crisis Group communications, Jaish al-Mujahidin and UN officials, July-August 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, al-Towhid official, Gaziantep, May 2014. Al-Safwa al-Islamiya, a small faction in Aleppo city, left al-Towhid in October 2013 and joined Jaish al-Mujahidin in May 2014. www.facebook.com/KyLaNnsyShhdynaFyHlbWryfha/posts/710522692309178; www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=819518751409571&set=a.633201236707991.1073741828.633199616708153&type=1.

¹⁰⁵ See Crisis Group Report *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

seeing the deterioration of intersect relations as part of regime strategy to weaken the uprising, initially tried to avoid.¹⁰⁶

Ahrar al-Sham has a position on the Islamist political/ideological spectrum somewhere between the pragmatic, cooperative politics of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the jihadi worldview of Jabhat al-Nusra. It shares the latter's ultra-conservative values and suspicion of Western democracy but differs sharply in identity, enemies and approach to the nation-state system. Armed jihad is for it only a tool, used not to overthrow the international system but to carve out an acknowledged place within the Syrian nation-state.¹⁰⁷ Unlike al-Qaeda, it views Arab, Turkish and even Western governments as potential partners.¹⁰⁸

Ahrar al-Sham's battlefield performance, service provision and disciplined reputation have won it favour with the opposition's base, but many remain wary of its ultimate agenda.¹⁰⁹ Activists, political figures and militants are often quick to emphasise its ideological differences with other Islamic Front components; such distinctions are made even by Front officials.¹¹⁰ Most notable, and potentially worrying to many in the opposition, are divergent views on representative governance and citizenship. It is the most direct in calling for Islamic rule, most critical of "democracy"¹¹¹ and most ambiguous on equal citizenship for non-Sunnis and whether creation

¹⁰⁶ Ahrar al-Sham's first audio address stated its principal goal of replacing the regime with an Islamic state; described the Syrian uprising as a jihad against an Iranian-led plot to spread Shiite dominance; and referred to Shiites pejoratively as "*al-rafidha*" (rejectionists). Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ See twitter.com/HassanAbboud_Ah/status/380449693018238977.

¹⁰⁸ Ahrar leaders were among an Islamist rebel delegation that, with Turkish and Qatari facilitation, met with U.S. and other government officials supporting the opposition in November 2013. Crisis Group interview, senior U.S. official, Washington, November 2013. See also Ahrar leader Hassan Abboud's 17 December tweet, twitter.com/HassanAbboud_Ah/status/412976650465574912. A senior Ahrar official acknowledged the group and its Islamic Front allies maintain relations with governments that support the opposition and added: "We will get closer to other states in proportion to how close they get to us. We will respond positively to positivity". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian activists, militants and political figures, southern Turkey and Istanbul, August 2013-June 2014. Echoing broadly-held opinion, a secular Aleppo activist said Ahrar al-Sham and other Islamist factions are "way more effective" than non-ideological counterparts in providing services. She added: "As moderate activists, our battle with Ahrar al-Sham and al-Nusra is with segments of Syrian society with whom we disagree. Ahrar represents a bigger portion of mainstream society than al-Nusra; they are simply Syrian Salafis, who we now recognise are a much bigger part of our community than we previously imagined". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014. Asked about her relations with Ahrar, another secular Aleppo activist described the group as highly conservative but sensitive to popular opinion and responsive to activist pressure. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, February 2014.

¹¹⁰ An al-Towhid official said, "there is a range of thinking within the Islamic Front on ideological and political issues. We are on one end of the spectrum, and Ahrar al-Sham is on the other". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, March 2014.

¹¹¹ Ahrar al-Sham's influence appeared instrumental in leading the Islamic Front, in its original covenant, to explicitly describe "democracy and its parliaments" as contradictory to Islam because democracy is based on the premise that legislation is the people's right (through representative institutions), rather than God's alone. Asked about apparent contradictions between that original covenant and the more moderate "honour covenant" (discussed below) signed by the Islamic Front and other factions in May 2014, a senior leader in another Islamic Front faction explained: "The second covenant represents what our group has always believed. The first covenant should never have been published; it represented [Ahrar al-Sham's] attempt to compete with IS". Crisis Group interview, Reyhanli, June 2014. Officials in other Islamic Front factions acknowledge as much. Crisis Group

of an Islamic state and choice of its leaders should be subject to popular vote.¹¹² Yet, as discussed below, it, like many fellow rebel groups, has shown pragmatism, adjusting positions in response to conditions on the ground and in the geopolitical landscape. Increasingly, this has led senior officials to moderate the group's positions on contentious issues and to further highlight differences with al-Nusra and the broader Salafi-jihadi current.¹¹³

2. Jaish al-Mujahidin (the Mujahidin Army)

An alliance that coalesced to lead the charge against IS in January, Jaish al-Mujahidin dominates Aleppo's western countryside and remains a major force in the city. Its factions, with roots in those areas, had close ties prior to joining under the same banner and are not ambitious for a national role transcending their natural geographic base. As a result, it is more cohesive than the larger Islamic Front. It spans an ideological range from mainstream Islamist to secular whose common denominator is pragmatic political engagement that de-emphasises ideology in public rhetoric.¹¹⁴ It is sometimes described as close to the Muslim Brotherhood, a reference that understates the ideological diversity of the former and exaggerates the influence of the latter. It is better understood as a reflection of the constituencies in Aleppo city and the western countryside from which its fighters hail and where it maintains positive ties with local activists.¹¹⁵ Insofar as it has staked out ideological ground, it is primarily by distinguishing itself from the Salafi and jihadi factions with which it cooperates in Aleppo.¹¹⁶

interviews, Gaziantep, March-June 2014. The original covenant is available at docs.google.com/file/d/0ByBt2sGl4U4hU2lrZGFoeUtkV1k/view?sls=true.

¹¹² Senior Ahrar al-Sham officials sought to downplay the group's rejection of "democracy", arguing that *shura* (consultation), a pillar of Islamic governance, would allow people to choose leaders, potentially through elections. Yet when asked whether establishment of Islamic governance itself should be subject to a vote, the reply was more ambiguous. Crisis Group interviews, Istanbul, March 2014.

¹¹³ These shifts are addressed in the section below; see also, eg, Ahrar al-Sham leader Hassan Abboud's late-August tweets confronting jihadi critics, twitter.com/HassanAbboud_Ah.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews and communications, Jaish al-Mujahidin officials and Aleppo activists, Antakya, Gaziantep and Reyhanli, March-July 2014. Though four of Jaish al-Mujahidin's founding factions signed the 24 September 2013 statement rejecting the legitimacy of the Coalition and its interim government and calling for Sharia rule, their behavior and rhetoric shifted significantly, in accordance with pragmatic interests. Jaish al-Mujahidin officials openly acknowledged coordinating with and receiving support from the Coalition's interim government and meeting with Western officials. The alliance's covenant avoids ideology and the form of a future Syrian government entirely. It affirms support for civil society, separating the judiciary, economic activity and services from armed groups, and commitment to protecting the rights of all components of Syrian society. See gohasnaail.wordpress.com/2014/05/05/jeish-al-mujahideen-charter-comment-and-translation.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews and communications, activists from Aleppo city and countryside, Istanbul and Gaziantep, March-June 2014. An activist from Aleppo's western countryside who has coordinated nascent local civil society projects with Jaish al-Mujahidin component Liwa al-Ansar offered a typical activist appraisal: "They are good guys. Their leadership tends to be more educated than other groups. They seek relationships with [local civil society] for the future, so that fighters come to understand what it means to do non-violent, civil work in the long run". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2014.

¹¹⁶ Jaish al-Mujahidin does not participate in or acknowledge the authority of the Islamic Court Commission (established by al-Nusra, al-Towhid and Ahrar al-Sham) and endorsed formation of a mainstream clerical body, the Syrian Islamic Council, whose aspiration to be the opposition's leading Sunni religious authority competes with independent efforts of Islamic Front components. Cri-

Though its pragmatic rhetoric, strong local reputation and anti-IS credentials would appear to render Jaish al-Mujahidin a natural recipient of aid from the mainstream opposition's state backers, it has struggled to navigate the complexities of external support. Within an opposition polarised by competition between its two principal financial and material backers (Saudi Arabia and Qatar), its alliance and support networks place it closer to the latter. This has been a challenge in recent months, as Qatar's direct backing of northern armed groups has waned while Saudi Arabia's has expanded. Jaish al-Mujahidin's efforts to transcend that divide have been hampered by rumours of links to the Muslim Brotherhood, whose role within the opposition Saudi Arabia seeks to minimise. The rebel perception that Riyadh opposed direct state support to Jaish al-Mujahidin appears to have prompted one of its main components, Nour al-Din al-Zenki, to depart the alliance in May 2014.

3. Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (the Support Front for the People of Syria)

In Aleppo as on many fronts, Jabhat al-Nusra has proven a powerful and effective partner to rebel groups from across the ideological spectrum.¹¹⁷ It overcame initial unpopularity among mainstream activists and militants to earn broad acceptance as an authentic, Syrian component of the uprising.¹¹⁸ That distinguishes it from IS, which has earned nearly unanimous scorn as a foreign entity and enemy of the rebellion. As noted, the roots of that contrast lie in al-Nusra's strategy based on respectful collaboration with non-jihadi rebels and prioritising the war with the regime above efforts to control territory or impose its understanding of Sharia. As a result, non-jihadi activists and rebels often downplay the long-term threats posed by its jihadi ideology, sectarian rhetoric and al-Qaeda allegiance.¹¹⁹ As a secular activist put it,

sis Group interviews, communications, senior Jaish al-Mujahidin officials, Antakya, Reyhanli, March-May 2014. See also Thomas Pierret, "The struggle for religious authority in Syria", Carnegie Endowment's "Syria in Crisis" blog, 14 May 2014. Abu Huzaifa, a senior Jaish al-Mujahidin official and leader of one of its factions, said, "Al-Nusra are Syrian; they represent a part of this society that must be engaged. So long as we have the shared interest of a single focus, fighting the regime, we will work with them. But if their focus changes, and they seek to impose their vision, then we will deal with that". Crisis Group interview, Reyhanli, May 2014.

¹¹⁷ An al-Towhid official explained: "Al-Nusra in Aleppo is much smaller than us numerically, but what it lacks in numbers it makes up for in the capabilities of its fighters, and the fact that they are willing to do martyrdom attacks [suicide bombings]. Given the limited weapons we have, there are instances when we need a martyrdom attack, and they provide it. But al-Nusra isn't big enough to win battles on its own; rather groups like us provide the numbers, and they provide what you might call the elite forces". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, May 2014. A secular member of the Coalition involved in providing logistical support to mainstream rebel groups put it bluntly: "Everyone cooperates with al-Nusra to some extent; sometimes you need them to come in and blow something up". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2014.

¹¹⁸ See Crisis Group Report *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

¹¹⁹ Rebels, activists and political figures across the ideological spectrum often infer from al-Nusra's current priorities and tactics that it will not seek to impose its authority and worldview on Syrian society violently, though, as noted below, that perception appears to be shifting in some quarters. There is also a prevailing sense that if it tried, Syrians would be able to prevent this. A Liwa al-Towhid member explained: "Jabhat al-Nusra says they are fighting to overthrow the regime, and that they don't want to rule Syria themselves; rather, they want Syria to be governed by Sharia. Nothing they have done thus far suggests otherwise. Al-Nusra does have some differences with Syrian society as a whole, but dialogue is possible with them to some extent. Ultimately, Syrian people don't want to be governed by dictatorship, and if al-Nusra attempted to establish one we would confront them". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, May 2014.

“whatever al-Nusra’s leaders may say, I do not fear the group, because it is composed mostly of Syrians. They do not cause problems with civilians the way Daesh [IS] did; they are on the fronts fighting the regime, and without them I think we would have lost by now”.¹²⁰

Yet, amid the tumult of the rebel scene, views of al-Nusra appear to be shifting. The anger and sense of betrayal directed at IS by a broad spectrum of anti-regime Syrians have renewed latent suspicions of al-Nusra’s ideology and ultimate goals.¹²¹ These were sharpened when it initially sought to avoid confrontation with fellow jihadis before plunging into full-scale war with IS over control of both eastern Syria and hearts and minds within the global jihadi community.¹²² On both fronts, IS’s dramatic seizure in June of Mosul and much of western Iraq, followed by its defeat of al-Nusra and allied rebel groups in Deir al-Zour, were severe blows. Attempting to recover, al-Nusra borrowed from the IS playbook. Unlike its old consensus-seeking approach, it now speaks openly about establishing an Islamic emirate; makes applying Sharia a top priority; and asserts unilateral control over patches of territory along the Turkish border.¹²³ This has caused alarm among rebel groups across the ideological spectrum.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ She added: “Many of them don’t even fast or pray; they have simply joined the group because it is effective. With them and Ahrar al-Sham, I can argue and talk back without fearing that they will respond violently. Maybe eventually al-Nusra will behave differently; if and when that happens we will deal with it”. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2014.

¹²¹ Such concerns are shared even within Islamist groups that coordinate regularly with al-Nusra. An official from an Islamic Front faction said, “we are starting to wonder about al-Nusra, if its al-Qaeda connections may be dominant over its role within the revolution. Up until now they have remained with the revolutionary line, but it is not yet clear whether they would seek to impose their version of Islamic rule or not”. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, June 2014.

¹²² During the early rebel-IS war in January 2014, al-Nusra took a major role in Raqqa but elsewhere sought to avoid direct confrontation; its leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, announced an initiative to end the conflict. www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHGnwaukZuA. However, as IS sought to expand its control in eastern Syria in late March, al-Nusra assumed a leading fighting role. Valerie Szybala, “The Islamic State of Iraq and as-Sham and the ‘cleansing’ of Deir ez-Zour”, Institute for the Study of War, 14 May 2014.

¹²³ An al-Nusra leader said to be al-Jolani discussed establishment of an Islamic emirate and immediate application of Sharia in an address to al-Nusra members leaked online on 11 July 2014. www.youtube.com/watch?v=3nGUj86jwrk. The tape, the authenticity of which cannot be verified, emerged three days after al-Nusra announced withdrawal from Aleppo’s joint Islamic Court Commission, of which it was a founding member. www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=d22304ea48b27cd676e72dc99b6faefe. A 13 July al-Nusra statement confirmed its goal of establishing an emirate but said it was not yet doing so; instead, it would begin implementing Sharia itself, not in joint Islamic courts. It further announced that al-Nusra would “not hesitate to deal militarily with the corrupt groups in the liberated areas”. A translation is at: justpaste.it/g7hh. In following days, al-Nusra used the pretext of fighting “corrupt” and “criminal” factions to assert control over several towns along the Turkish border in Idlib province, driving out Syrian Revolutionaries Front and Hazm fighters. Charles Lister, “Real Jabhat al-Nusra appears to be emerging”, Huffington Post, 7 August 2014.

¹²⁴ See, for example, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front’s 17 July 2014 statement complaining of al-Nusra aggression against the alliance, www.jabhtrevsyr.com/?p=11245; also an Ahrar al-Sham senior official strongly criticising al-Nusra hours after its call for an emirate leaked, twitter.com/abuabbas5/status/487687947425050624. Rumours abound that al-Nusra’s strategic shift has been accompanied by a leadership shakeup, though this is impossible to verify; Abu Maria al-Qahtani, a senior leader known for his opposition to IS and for pursuing close cooperation with non-jihadi groups, is said to have been distanced from decision-making circles in July 2014. His increasingly outspoken criticism of unnamed figures within al-Qaeda who oppose his views lends some credence

B. *Shifts in Support: Limited and Late*

Beginning in early 2014, a modest increase in U.S. support to rebels and changes among the oppositions' regional backers catalysed shifts among rebel militants. In contrast with past practice, including when channelling support to the Supreme Military Council, the U.S. now allows provision of American-made anti-tank missiles to northern factions and is also a leading participant in the joint Military Operations Center (MOC) that vets groups to receive those coveted weapons as well as light arms, ammunition and cash.¹²⁵ Qatar and Saudi Arabia have at least temporarily reduced support to groups outside that centre, thus increasing its leverage.¹²⁶ As a result, the intra-rebel balance of power has shifted slightly in favour of non-ideological groups. Beyond the substantial rise in capabilities and relevance of such factions with MOC support,¹²⁷ groups across the non-jihadi spectrum that are fighting a two-enemy war are coming to realise they need to meet the more demanding requirements of state support to be viable.¹²⁸

These changes have begun to spur a shift toward pragmatic political engagement and moderate rhetoric among the Islamist groups that maintain relations with state donors. This is especially tangible within the Islamic Front, components of which lost support from Qatari sources and so increasingly are addressing the concerns of the state backers.¹²⁹ Ahrar al-Sham braved jihadi criticism to join its Islamic Front

to such rumours. See his early August audio address and tweets, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PL8UutsYa2Y&list=UUSDS7zk3nshKNFqNwo5M2jg and twitter.com/algheebmohajer.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, rebel, UN, U.S. officials and National Coalition member, Turkey, May-June 2014. The MOC operates similarly to the U.S.- and Jordanian-led joint operations room in Jordan that became operational several months earlier. Liz Sly, "New US help arrives for Syrian rebels as government, extremists gain", *The Washington Post*, 27 July 2014. The MOC in effect has ignored the SMC, which has been further weakened since February 2014 by disputes over leadership and ties to the Coalition and interim government. SMC head Abdelilah al-Bashir complained that the U.S.-led effort was bypassing his body. Reuters, 9 June 2014.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, U.S., UN officials, Coalition member, aide to influential Coalition member close to Qatar, Turkey, May-June 2014.

¹²⁷ Ibid. The impact of MOC support can be seen in the rapid rise of two main recipients, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) led by Jamal Marouf, and Harakat Hazm, both based in Idlib province. The SRF was formed 9 December 2013 and Harakat Hazm on 25 January 2014. They are essentially alliances of largely non-ideological factions, most of which saw their influence steadily decline in the months preceding. MOC support helped drive both to the forefront of the Idlib rebel scene and extend their influence outside the province. An Aleppo activist recently returned from Idlib commented: "There has been a clear shift of fighters toward groups that are now receiving more support. For instance SRF in Idlib has grown significantly, at the expense of Saqour al-Sham; I also know of fighters who have left al-Towhid. I was surprised at the speed and extent of this shift, including among people I know. It shows that ideological motivations are not a major factor". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, May 2014.

¹²⁸ A Saqour al-Sham official said, "the revolutionary forces need to cooperate with states, including Western ones, to succeed. Such cooperation regarding shared interests does not imply any acceptance of or adherence to external agendas. This was a sensitive subject for some factions in particular, but we are coming to see it this way". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, June 2014.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, U.S., UN officials, Coalition member, aide to influential Coalition member close to Qatar, Syrian businessman involved in rebel resource acquisition, Turkey, May-June 2014; communication, Jaish al-Mujahidin official, July-August 2014. Sources disagree whether Qatar has entirely cut or only reduced funding; regardless, it remains to be seen if the change lasts. A Liwa al-Towhid official acknowledged and downplayed the downturn: "Qatari funding has receded, but this isn't the first time. And we aren't completely dependent on it; if we were we would have collapsed long ago". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, May 2014.

partners and several other prominent Islamist factions in agreeing to the “Revolutionary Honour Covenant”¹³⁰ that by not mentioning an Islamic state marked a significant rhetorical concession;¹³¹ the Islamic Front’s components have also announced support for an initiative to form a united rebel leadership body that would include leading non-ideological and Islamist factions while excluding al-Nusra.¹³² A shift toward pragmatism is further palpable in the vocabulary, tone and political savvy with which rebel militant representatives greet Western interlocutors and in the eagerness of moderate Islamist factions to satisfy MOC requirements.¹³³

Yet, the MOC cannot claim success. The increase in resources for vetted factions has been insufficient to meet their rising needs, particularly since IS’s summer gains, and has not compensated for declines in support for non-vetted groups. The result is a weakening of overall rebel capacity to halt regime gains in Aleppo and hold IS at bay to the east.¹³⁴ In Aleppo, the most critical northern front, the regime has made steady progress in encircling rebels; regime and allied forces achieved a significant success by capturing the Sheikh Najjar industrial city on 5 July. More dramatically, IS built on gains in Iraq by defeating its rivals in eastern Syria, by mid-July seizing

¹³⁰ The covenant announced on 17 May, signed by the Islamic Front, Jaish al-Mujahidin, Afnan al-Sham (a Damascus-based group politically close to Jaish al-Mujahidin), Faylaq al-Sham (a pragmatic Islamist group based in Idlib) and Alwiyyat al-Furqan emphasised principles shared across the broader rebellion base: commitment to overthrow the regime and fight IS, identified as an enemy on par with the regime and its militia allies; containment of military activity within Syria’s borders; openness to cooperation with the opposition’s state backers; rejection of foreign allegiances (widely interpreted to include Jabhat al-Nusra’s al-Qaeda affiliation); commitment to not target civilians; and the goal of establishing a state of justice, rule of law, freedom and security for all ethnic and religious components. www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-6mRYHm3ew.

¹³¹ According to officials in other Islamic Front factions, Ahrar al-Sham represented the Front in the talks preceding the covenant’s release, due to its leading positions in the political bureau. A senior Ahrar official explained that need for increased external support was a central motivation for the covenant. Addressing the contrast with the original Islamic Front covenant’s insistence on an Islamic state and rejection of democracy, he added: “Political wrangling is the biggest thing that has slowed military progress, so [in agreeing to the covenant] we made a decision not to address political issues until after the fall of the regime; then anyone can take his program and try to convince the people of it. Whichever program convinces the people will be the one that governs Syria”. Crisis Group interview, Muhib al-Din, vice president, Islamic Front political bureau, Istanbul, May 2014.

¹³² The “*Wai tasemo*” (loosely translated as “unite”, or “cling together”) initiative, launched on 3 August 2014 by leading groups both inside and outside the MOC (including Hazm, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, Jaish al-Mujahidin, Saqour al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam), aims to form a joint leadership body by late September. Ahrar al-Sham and Liwa al-Towhid were not among its original components but joined in mid-August. Jabhat al-Nusra was invited but declined – no surprise given that Western-backed non-ideological factions with which it had recently clashed in Idlib province were part of the initiative. www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ry9daTPHmM; www.facebook.com/waitasemo; Crisis Group communication, senior Jaish al-Mujahidin official, August 2014.

¹³³ Asked in May 2014 what role Syrians should have in selecting a form of government if the regime falls, a senior Ahrar official was more willing to embrace democratic elements than previously, even calling those who reject elections, a category including Jabhat al-Nusra, extremist. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul. Eagerness to meet MOC requirements is evident in talk with representatives of rebel groups. Crisis Group interviews and communications, May-July 2014.

¹³⁴ Aleppo rebels report a lack of anti-tank weapons, ammunition and cash (used inter alia to buy black market ammunition and weapons) to slow regime gains. The results are evident in regime progress; rising competition over remaining income sources (eg, smuggling and taxation from control of territory near the Turkish border); and a slow shift of fighters from resource-starved groups – Liwa al-Towhid is most often rumoured – toward wealthier groups at both ends of the ideological spectrum. Crisis Group interviews and communications, May-July 2014.

nearly all Deir al-Zour province. It followed up by capturing new ground from rebels north of Aleppo in mid-August, pushing closer toward key rebel strongholds in the countryside. Continued progress would enable it to again sever supply lines from Turkey, to its own and regime benefit.¹³⁵

The geographical distribution of vetted rebel factions helps explain this situation. Liwa al-Towhid and Ahrar al-Sham are excluded from the MOC, as, of course, is Jabhat al-Nusra; Jaish al-Mujahidin initially was as well.¹³⁶ Meanwhile the groups that benefited most substantially from the MOC during the first half of 2014, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front and Harakat Hazm, are based in Idlib province. They are significant there and in nearby areas of Hamah province but lack the local fighters needed to lead an effective campaign in Aleppo.¹³⁷ In a conflict in which fighters often prefer to defend their communities, not fight further afield, and in which local dynamics are crucial to determining credibility, state backers cannot effectively address challenges in Aleppo by increasing support elsewhere to groups they prefer.

Limited MOC support in Aleppo reflects the complexity of identifying partners acceptable not only to the U.S., but also to Gulf states mired in their own regional leadership struggle. MOC decision-making is opaque. Rumours abound that lingering Saudi concerns over supposed Jaish al-Mujahidin links to the Muslim Brotherhood are an obstacle; the former maintains ties to the MOC but has been slow to derive tangible benefit. Meanwhile the Aleppo faction Nour al-Din al-Zenki, whose ideology and moderate credentials are not readily distinguishable from Jaish al-Mujahidin (of which it was a founding component), began receiving substantial MOC support shortly after withdrawing from al-Mujahidin in May.¹³⁸ Continued regime progress within the city and IS gains to its north in the three months that followed suggest that adding al-Zenki to the local MOC recipients was insufficient to halt either.

MOC failure to adequately address opposition vulnerabilities in Aleppo has potentially deep ramifications for the broader war. Though the regime lacks forces to occupy opposition strongholds in the countryside, the combined military and psychological impact of the encirclement and eventual strangulation of rebel forces in the city could threaten the viability of the area's non-jihadi factions.¹³⁹ That would be a major regime win and potentially equally significant for IS in Aleppo. Having added to its weapons and oil resources with victories further east and now free to reallocate precious manpower, IS is deftly exploiting the rebel focus on defence of Aleppo

¹³⁵ "Syria Updates", Institute for the Study of War, 19 July 2014; Anne Barnard, "Dual threat has mainstream Syrian rebels fearing demise", *The New York Times*, 15 August 2014.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group communications, senior Jaish al-Mujahidin official, UN official, Syrian analyst in close communication with rebel groups; July-September 2014. Jaish al-Mujahidin did not receive material support from the MOC through June but appears to have progressed in the vetting process and received limited material since then.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, rebel and Western officials. Hazm includes at least one local affiliate from the western Aleppo countryside and has been active in Aleppo city (against the regime) and the northern countryside (against IS), including with use of anti-tank weapons. Yet, it lacks sufficient local manpower in these areas to take a lead role.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Coalition member from Aleppo, Istanbul, June 2014; communications, UN official and Jaish al-Mujahidin official, July 2014.

¹³⁹ The regime appears cognisant of the difficulty of retaking Aleppo's countryside. A senior official said, "maybe we can retake Aleppo city within months, but Aleppo countryside will take three or four years, and even that depends on how much support flows in from Turkey". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, May 2014.

city by escalating its push to retake territory in the northern countryside. If its August progress there continues, it will regain a strategic foothold from which to push further west against the rebels who expelled it in January.¹⁴⁰

Reports suggest that some rebels in the northern countryside, lacking resources and facing a potentially brutal end should IS gains continue, are choosing to abandon the battle or even to defect to the much wealthier, better-armed IS.¹⁴¹ The many who remain, backed by reinforcements from areas to the west, are locked in a battle to defend Marea, a town that gained prominence as an al-Towhid stronghold; its fall would signal IS's return to the mainstream opposition's northern heartland.

From a rebel perspective, what months ago might have seemed the worst-case scenario – a regime siege of Aleppo's rebel-held urban districts as IS retakes surrounding countryside – now appears the most likely if present trends continue. Given the area's importance to morale and territorial viability, that would threaten non-jihadi groups and thus the opposition as a whole throughout the country.

¹⁴⁰ See Noah Bonsey, "Why triumphant jihadis in Iraq will help Assad crush opposition in Aleppo", Huffington Post, 21 July 2014.

¹⁴¹ A Western analyst in close communication with Aleppo rebels reported that one local Islamist commander from the north-eastern countryside had seen 30 per cent of his men defect to IS. Crisis Group communication, August 2014. Similar reports have emerged from rebel fronts elsewhere in Syria. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Beirut, August 2014. See also "Dual threat has mainstream Syrian rebels fearing demise", *op. cit.*

V. Conclusion

Rapid IS gains on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border beginning in June 2014 raised the volume of policy debate in many capitals but have done little to improve it. Amid the calls to “do something” about IS, several points bear mention.

First, the mainstream Syrian opposition’s wars with the regime and IS cannot currently be separated. Each of the rebels’ foes benefits from the other’s gains. In some situations, such as Aleppo since early 2014, mutual benefits are immediate and tactical; further afield there are shared strategic benefits, as the ideal short-to-medium term outcome for both regime and IS is the defeat of the state-backed opposition, leaving each other as the war’s primary rivals. That they do not coordinate in pursuing this goal does not make the sum of their efforts less effective. By the same token, rebel progress against one foe could help against the other. For example, any future rebel gains against IS in the eastern Aleppo countryside would enable them to renew their threat to regime supply lines.

Secondly, defeat of the state-backed armed opposition would end what little hope remains for a political solution to the Syrian conflict, while offering no prospect of resolution by military means (assuming there ever was any). With mainstream rebels no longer a viable military force, the regime would expect its external opponents to accept it as a “counter-terrorism” partner, and IS would stand to gain support and recruits among Syrians unwilling to submit to Damascus and unable to find a potent alternative. The war would continue between them; even with additional foreign support, the regime lacks manpower to control much of northern and eastern Syria and capacity to reach meaningful compromises there.

Nouri al-Maliki’s disastrous rule should be a reminder that an autocratic, sectarian government allergic to compromise, fond of indiscriminate tactics and dependent on Shiite militias – even when it enjoys both Western and Iranian support – exacerbates rather than diminishes a jihadi problem. No matter how hated IS is, should the Assad regime continue to behave in such a manner, and should credible Sunni alternatives fail to establish themselves, there will be an opening for IS to rebuild its reputation in Syria. Those advocating Western partnership with the regime against jihadis should understand that barring fundamental (and currently unforeseeable) shifts in the regime’s objectives, strategy and tactics, such collaboration would backfire and play to IS’s advantage.

Thirdly, with time working for the regime and IS, anyone looking to prevent the fall of Aleppo city to the former, Aleppo countryside to the latter, and the crippling blow to the mainstream opposition that would result should act with urgency. The regime’s progress just east of the main rebel supply line and IS’s capture of towns from rebels in the northern countryside in August are only the most recent reminders.

There are two potential means of averting this scenario. The first – preferable but unlikely – is a negotiated ceasefire in Aleppo between the regime and opposition forces. That would free opposition factions to concentrate against IS, whose most significant territorial losses (in Iraq in 2007-2008; Syria in January) were at the hands of local Sunni rebel forces. But this would require a fundamental change in Damascus’s approach. For more than three years it has treated mainstream opposition activists, parties and armed factions as its primary foe and the rise of jihadi groups at the expense of other rebels as carrying more benefits than costs.

If the regime and its Iranian and Russian backers truly wish, as they say, to diminish jihadi power in Syria, they must change their strategy from one pursuing the military defeat of the state-backed mainstream opposition to one that identifies

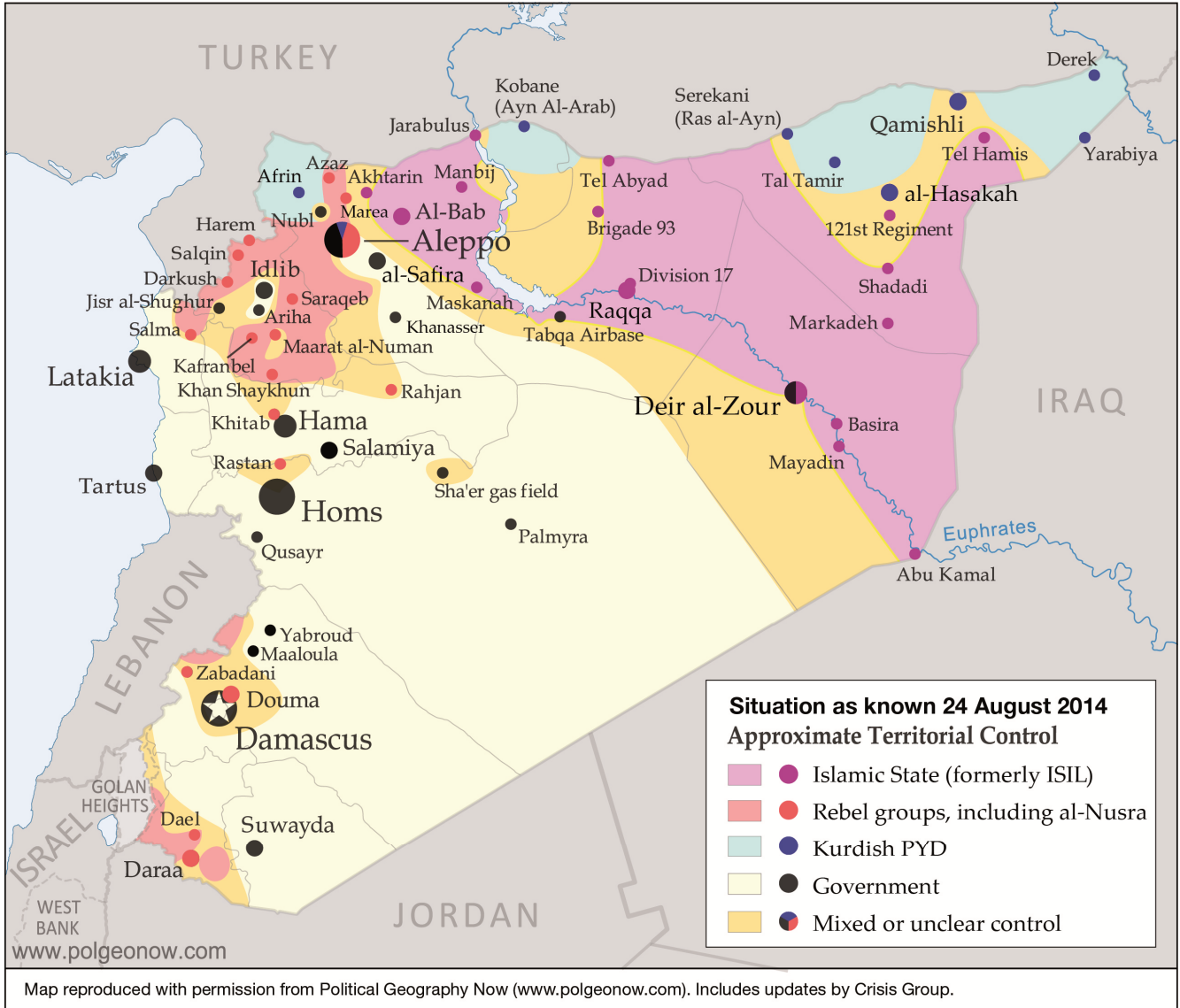
jihadis as the primary threat and seeks common ground on which to work with the former against the latter. The first step would be pursuit of an immediate ceasefire with rebels in Aleppo that should include regime withdrawal from areas it captured in the first half of 2014 that allow it to pose an immediate threat to the remaining rebel supply line to the city. If the regime makes such an offer, mainstream rebels should accept it and ensure that anti-IS jihadis fighting alongside them (most notably Jabhat al-Nusra) do as well. The opposition's state sponsors should apply leverage to encourage them to do so.

If the regime and its allies are not prepared to pursue such an agreement, they are leaving it to the mainstream opposition's backers to determine whether and how to rebuff IS. In the absence of a ceasefire, the only apparent way is through qualitative improvements and quantitative increases in support to mainstream rebels in greater Aleppo, including through the provision of additional cash, ammunition and anti-tank weapons. That would be costly for the regime: without a deal, rebels would use some of their new capabilities against regime forces. It would also entail significant risks for the opposition's backers, given that some materiel could be acquired by anti-IS jihadis or seized by IS itself, should its gains continue. Western decision-makers, however, should not imagine that there is a third viable alternative: expanding U.S. airstrikes into Syria. These alone would do little to weaken IS. In the absence of a strategy to empower credible Sunni alternatives both locally and in Damascus, they might actually strengthen it, since the boost to the group's jihadi credentials (and subsequent recruitment) might prove more significant than the tactical losses it would suffer.

Improving and increasing support to credible, local, non-jihadi rebels would offer potential benefits, including shifting the intra-rebel balance of power in favour of non-ideological groups and encouraging pragmatism among non-jihadi Islamist factions. An increase in U.S. resources committed to that end and decisions by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey to prioritise coordination over their individual relationships with rebel factions could maximise the impact of any aid increase, including by further encouraging responsible rebel behaviour. Ideally, these backers would jointly apply carrots and sticks to promote pragmatic political engagement and respect for local civil society, while penalising criminal behaviour, indiscriminate tactics and sectarian rhetoric. The effort would carry substantial risk, making the option of a ceasefire (should it emerge) more appealing by far. It should now be clear, however, that maintaining the status quo is not an option at all.

Beirut/Brussels, 9 September 2014

Appendix A: Map of Control in Syria



Appendix B: Main Opposition Groups in and Around Aleppo

The Islamic State (IS, al-Dowla al-Islamiya) – Jihadi group that emerged in Iraq following 2003 U.S. invasion, currently controls much of western Iraq and eastern Syria and is viewed as extremist and hostile by other rebel groups, including all those below. Its previous names include the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/the Levant (ISIS/ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq, and al-Qaeda in Iraq; al-Qaeda cut ties with it in February 2014.

Jabhat al-Nusra (the Support Front): – Jihadi group affiliated with al-Qaeda; its strategic emphasis on partnership (and avoiding confrontation) with non-jihadi rebels distinguishes it from the more extreme IS. Al-Nusra cooperates with mainstream rebel groups against both the Assad regime and IS, though rebel concern with al-Nusra's territorial and ideological ambitions is rising.

The Islamic Front (al-Jabha al-Islamiya) – A national alliance of Syrian Islamist factions, its components include four of Syria's most prominent rebel groups: Jaish al-Islam, Saqour al-Sham, Liwa al-Towhid and Ahrar al-Sham. Of those, the latter two play major roles against the regime and IS in greater Aleppo:

1. **Liwa al-Towhid** (Unity Brigade): A dominant force in Aleppo's northern countryside and a key player in the city, its political discourse is salafi in name but flexible in implementation.
2. **Ahrar al-Sham** (Freemen of Syria): Among the strongest groups in the country, it is considered the Islamic Front's most hardline faction, though it pursues a pragmatic approach in the international and domestic political spheres that distinguishes it sharply from the more extreme al-Nusra.

Jaish al-Mujahidin (Mujahidin Army) – An alliance of factions that joined together to expel IS from Aleppo's western countryside in January 2014. More pragmatic than ideological, it is a key force on both anti-regime and anti-IS fronts in and around Aleppo.

Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki (Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement) – A founding component of Jaish al-Mujahidin, it left the alliance in May 2014 and has since benefitted from the support of the Military Operations Center (MOC), run by the opposition's state backers, which has made it one of Aleppo's most important factions.

Harakat Hazm (Movement of Determination) – A non-ideological alliance formed in January 2014 and based primarily in Idlib province, it is among the MOC's principal beneficiaries. It expanded its role in Aleppo in mid-2014.

Faylaq al-Sham (Sham Legion) – A pragmatic alliance viewed as moderately Islamist, it has played a supporting role in Aleppo; in August 2014 joined the larger Islamic Front, Jaish al-Mujahidin, Nour al-Din al-Zenki and Hazm in the "Nahrawan al-Sham" operations room coordinating the fight against IS in Aleppo's northern countryside.

Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF, Jabhat Thuwar Souriya) – A non-ideological alliance led by prominent commander Jamal Marouf, it is strong in his base of Idlib province and has affiliate factions elsewhere but does not currently play a major role in Aleppo. It is among the main beneficiaries of MOC support.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 125 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2011

Israel/Palestine

Gaza: The Next Israeli-Palestinian War?, Middle East Briefing N°30, 24 March 2011 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).

Radical Islam in Gaza, Middle East/North Africa Report N°104, 29 March 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus Ça Change ..., Middle East Report N°110, 20 July 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Curb Your Enthusiasm: Israel and Palestine after the UN, Middle East Report N°112, 12 September 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Back to Basics: Israel's Arab Minority and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Middle East Report N°119, 14 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

The Emperor Has No Clothes: Palestinians and the End of the Peace Process, Middle East Report N°122, 7 May 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings, Middle East Report N°129, 14 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Israel and Hamas: Fire and Ceasefire in a New Middle East, Middle East Report N°133, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Extreme Makeover? (I): Israel's Politics of Land and Faith in East Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°134, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Extreme Makeover? (II): The Withering of Arab Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°135, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Buying Time? Money, Guns and Politics in the West Bank, Middle East Report N°142, 29 May 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Leap of Faith: Israel's National Religious and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, Middle East Report N°147, 21 November 2013 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

The Next Round in Gaza, Middle East Report N°149, 25 March 2014 (also available in Arabic).

Gaza and Israel: New Obstacles, New Solutions, Middle East Briefing N°39, 14 July 2014.

Egypt/Syria/Lebanon

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?, Middle East/North Africa Report N°101, 24 February 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics, Middle East Briefing N°31, 24 November 2011 (also available in Arabic).

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Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr al-Bared, Middle East Report N°117, 1 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria, Middle East Briefing N°32, 5 March 2012 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

Syria's Phase of Radicalisation, Middle East Briefing N°33, 10 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Lost in Transition: The World According to Egypt's SCAF, Middle East/North Africa Report N°121, 24 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Syria's Mutating Conflict, Middle East Report N°128, 1 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition, Middle East Report N°131, 12 October 2012 (also available in Arabic).

A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian conflict, Middle East Report N°132, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle, Middle East Report N°136, 22 January 2013 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

Too Close For Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon, Middle East Report N°141, 13 May 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Syria's Metastasising Conflicts, Middle East Report N°143, 27 June 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Marching in Circles: Egypt's Dangerous Second Transition, Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°35, 7 August 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition, Middle East Report N°146, 17 October 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria, Middle East Report N°151, 8 May 2014 (also available in Arabic).

Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria, Middle East Report N°153, 27 May 2014 (also available in Arabic).

North Africa

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Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges after Qadhafi, Middle East/North Africa Report N°115, 14 December 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Tunisia: Combatting Impunity, Restoring Security, Middle East/North Africa Report N°123, 9 May 2012 (only available in French).

Tunisia: Confronting Social and Economic Challenges, Middle East/North Africa Report N°124, 6 June 2012 (only available in French).

Divided We Stand: Libya's Enduring Conflicts, Middle East/North Africa Report N°130, 14 September 2012 (also available in Arabic).

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The Tunisian Exception: Success and Limits of Consensus, Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°37, 5 June 2014 (only available in French and Arabic).

Iraq/Iran/Gulf

Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen between Reform and Revolution, Middle East Report N°102, 10 March 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq and the Kurds: Confronting Withdrawal Fears, Middle East Report N°103, 28 March 2011 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

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Failing Oversight: Iraq's Unchecked Government, Middle East Report N°113, 26 September 2011 (also available in Arabic).

Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question, Middle East Report N°114, 20 October 2011 (also available in Arabic).

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Spider Web: The Making and Unmaking of Iran Sanctions, Middle East Report N°138, 25 February 2013 (also available in Farsi).

Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?, Middle East Report N°139, 4 April 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Great Expectations: Iran's New President and the Nuclear Talks, Middle East Briefing N°36, 13 August 2013 (also available in Farsi).

Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State, Middle East Report N°144, 14 August 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown, Middle East Report N°145, 25 September 2013 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain, Middle East Report N°150, 28 April 2014 (also available in Arabic).

Iran and the P5+1: Solving the Nuclear Rubik's Cube, Middle East Report N°152, 9 May 2014 (also available in Farsi).

The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa, Middle East Report N°154, 10 June 2014 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-Box, Middle East Briefing N°38, 20 June 2014.

Iran and the P5+1: Getting to "Yes", Middle East Briefing N°40, 27 August 2014.

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