

## U.S.-led bombardement challenges Islamic State's hold on eastern Syria: but without addressing the roots of the conflict, the group will remain hard to beat

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## U.S.-led Bombardment Challenges Islamic State's Hold on Eastern Syria

But without Addressing the Roots of the Conflict, the Group Will Remain Hard to Beat

*Khaled Yacoub Oweis*

In July 2014, the so-called Islamic State solidified its hold on large parts of the Euphrates river basin in eastern Syria, expelling its al-Qaeda rivals from the region, weeks after having captured the city of Mosul in neighboring Iraq and having declared a caliphate. The advance undermined the pro-Assad Shi'ite-dominated government in Baghdad and prompted Syrian regime forces to confront the group. In September 2014, a U.S.-led air campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq expanded into Syria. It was met by dismay on the part of Syria's opposition about the lack of pressure on President Bashar al-Assad as jihadists feed on Sunni resentment against his minority Alawite rule. This has increased the urgency for forging an international solution to Syria's civil war that not only addresses the jihadist dimension but also includes a strategy to reclaim the east – namely one that provides an alternative to Islamist militancy and the Assad family's reign.

Comprising the provinces of Raqqa and Deir al-Zor along the Euphrates river basin, eastern Syria has been among the most neglected parts of Syria for decades, despite accounting for one-third of national gas and oil production and contributing significantly to its wheat and cotton output. Divide-and-rule tactics during the reign of President Hafez al-Assad (1970–2000), father of current President Bashar, altered the region's tribal structure by marginalizing the traditional leadership in favor of several local power centers that were answerable to the security apparatus. Indeed, decades of neglect, corruption, and societal fragmentation under Assad family rule have

provided fertile ground for militant groups there. Since its entry into Syria, the Islamic State has used a mixture of cash and terror to subdue and enlist local tribes in the east and create a reputation for ruthless efficiency in providing order. This tactic has attracted recruits from other militant brigades and made it difficult to build local alliances to counter the group. At the same time, the Islamic State itself is a product of fragmentation. The group, formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/ Greater Syria (ISIL or ISIS), was formed in April 2013 after a schism with the al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

## Facts on Eastern/Northeastern Syria

**Population:** Approximately 3 million (till 2010): 1.2 million in Deir al-Zor province; 800,000 in Raqqa province; and 1 million in the mostly Kurdish province of Hasakah in the northeast. Significant numbers of Syria's Kurds also live in the enclaves of Kobanê and Afrin in the province of Aleppo, as well as in Kurdish neighborhoods of Damascus and Aleppo.

**Oil output:** Syria's total production was 370,000 barrels per day in 2010, according to official figures (actual production was estimated to have been significantly lower due to U.S. sanctions and deteriorating conditions of some fields). Hasakah accounts for approximately two-thirds of the output, with Deir al-Zor producing the remaining one-third.

**Oil fields:** In Deir al-Zor, the largest are al-Omar, al-Ward, and al-Tayyem, which are near the Iraqi border. In Hasakah, the largest fields are situated in the province's northeastern corner along the border with Turkey and Iraq.

**Wheat production:** Raqqa and Deir al-Zor together produce one-quarter of Syria's overall output, which totaled 4 million tons in 2012. Hasakah accounts for one-third of the country's total output.

In a bid to stop the Islamic State and the less powerful al-Nusra, the United Arab Emirates convened a Western-backed meeting for Eastern tribal figures and military defectors from the region in Abu Dhabi in November 2013. The apparent aim of the meeting was to explore the possibility of creating an equivalent to the Sahwa (awakening) tribal alliances that had contained al-Qaeda's gains in Iraq before the United States withdrew its troops from the country in December 2011. The meeting came to nothing, mainly because the participants lacked effective control over their tribes, and, unlike in Iraq, there were no U.S. troops in Syria on which to count. Some

tribal representatives also objected to fighting fellow Sunnis without being offered help to bring down the Assad regime.

A Sunni backlash against the political order on both sides of the border then helped the Islamic State to conquer territory quickly, leading to the declaration of a self-styled caliphate in July 2014 that covered an arc of territory from the city of Mosul in Iraq through to eastern Syria to the outskirts of the province of Aleppo. The group, at least in theory, aspires for a global reach that harks back to the zenith of the Arab-Muslim empire.

## Ripe for Militancy

A difficult socioeconomic situation, in particular in Syria's east, has provided the background for the Islamic State's success there. The east had been hit by a drought that started in 2006 and lasted until the run-up to the revolt. Mismanagement of the water system and lack of investment, coupled with a dearth of rainfall, caused water and food shortages, destroyed agriculture and grazing land, and drove hundreds of thousands of people from Raqqa, Deir al-Zor, and the mostly Kurdish province of Hasakah in the adjoining northeast to seek a living in the peripheries of Damascus, Deraa, Hama, and Aleppo – outskirts that developed into slums.

The number of Syrians living under what the United Nations defines as “extreme poverty” – deprived of food, clean drinking water, sanitation, health, proper shelter, education, and information – increased between 2004 and 2010 from 2 million to as much as 3 million, out of a total population of 21 million. Most of the extremely poor were inhabitants of a territory starting in Deir al-Zor and encompassing Hasakah, Raqqa, and its neighboring Aleppo countryside. It is no coincidence that these regions, with the exception of the Kurdish areas, have formed a main support and recruitment base for the Islamic State and al-Nusra.

Until the revolt broke out, it appeared as if tribal loyalty and the emergency U.N.

food aid that was being distributed in the east to help mitigate the effects of the drought, as well as the pervasive security apparatus, would keep the region quiet. Farmers were grouped under a corrupt pro-regime “Peasants Union,” which distributed subsidies for the wheat and cotton crops. Land and water rights were used to buy loyalty. Indeed, army and secret police personnel stemming from poor rural communities in the east, known as *shawaya*, were considered so reliable that they were included in the storm troops that overran the city of Hama in February 1982, killing up to 40,000 of their Sunni brethren and quelling the insurgency led by the Fighting Vanguard branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Drawing on the poor from the east has also worked for the Islamic State. The group has used a war chest, mainly financed by selling oil from captured wells, to recruit young men who have known little except poverty under the Assad regime, despite living in the vicinity of energy sources that were the regime’s main source of hard currency. Salaries of at least \$400 per month have attracted thousands of Syrians, who now constitute a majority of the Islamic State’s rank-and-file in Syria, in contrast to foreign fighters, who formed the majority of fighters in the country when the Islamic State was created and, to date, dominate its command structure.

### **Courting Salafists**

Another factor that has contributed to the rise of Islamist militants since the outbreak of the revolt is a legacy of the regime strengthening Salafist influence and allowing militant Salafists to obtain military expertise. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, the authorities allowed Salafists returning from Saudi Arabia to preach in Deir al-Zor city to help counter the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. They were mostly members of the Salafist-leaning Hizb al-Tahrir, a movement founded by a Palestinian cleric in the 1950s, which calls for the reestablishment of a pan-Islamic

state ruled by Islamic law, or *sharia*. A crackdown on Hizb al-Tahrir in Syria took place only in the late 1990s, when the group tried to lure two army lieutenants into joining its ranks. It resulted in the arrest of 920 of its members across the country in 1999 and the (temporary) demise of Eastern Salafism.

But the U.S. invasion of Iraq a few years later prompted the Assad regime to open another chapter with Salafists, this time of the jihadist variety, who were less interested in ideological nuances and more reliant on the barrel of the gun to fulfill their religious vision. Hundreds of Syrian would-be-jihadists were allowed to go fight in Iraq in 2003, just before the toppling of Saddam Hussein, who had been an arch foe of the Assads. When Iraq’s Sunni insurgency gathered steam a year later, clerics in Syria, licensed by the authorities, began recruiting Syrian jihadists and sending them over the border. Facilitating a jihadist movement appeared worthwhile to the Assad regime at the time to counter Western pressure on it with regards to Lebanon – where it was accused of being behind the murder of statesman and former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri – and to keep the United States occupied with Iraq.

Assad’s honeymoon with the jihadists, however, began to sour in 2008 when a group of Iraqi-bound jihadists mounted an armed robbery on the offices of the Qadmous Bus Company in Deir al-Zor city to help finance their operations in Iraq. Qadmous is owned by the Khonda family, which is associated with the regime. At the same time, U.S. pressure was growing on Assad to curb the export of jihadists to Iraq. Assad sent one of his most ruthless lieutenants – Brigadier General Jamil Hassan – to deal with the situation in the east. Assad had already transferred another top enforcer, Jamea Jamea, to head Military Intelligence in Deir al-Zor, after a U.N. investigation mentioned Jamea in connection with the Hariri assassination.

The two officials swiftly developed a rivalry but still managed to mount a crackdown on Islamists. (Jamea was eventually

killed in Deir al-Zor in October 2013). Among those rounded up, jailed, and tortured in Deir al-Zor were hundreds of Salafists who did not subscribe to jihad in Iraq and were more focused on religious practice, such as praying correctly or adhering to strict personal habits. As a consequence, the indiscriminate nature of the crackdown fomented Sunni anger toward the regime. At the same time, a policy of favoring Alawites for government jobs, such as school teachers, intensified, further inflaming local Sunni sentiment. Before the revolt, across Syria, an estimated three-quarters of all managerial jobs in the public sector were held by Alawites. In the military, the sect dominated the officer corps by a similar proportion.

The crackdown on Islamists was accompanied by an Iranian-backed drive to spread Shi'ism in rural areas of Syria, which resulted in the conversion of up to 21,000 Sunni villagers in Deir al-Zor between 2008 and 2010. Their conversion was helped by preferential food aid and cash handouts. Eastern Shi'ites, however, appear to have reverted back to Sunni Islam following a massacre committed by the al-Nusra Front of 60 Shi'ites – mostly members of a pro-Assad militia – in the town of Hatla in the province of Deir al-Zor in June 2013.

The policy of using Salafists for its own purposes came back to haunt the regime. With the apparent aim to scuttle the initially peaceful uprising, Assad released hundreds of Salafists between May and July of 2011 from Sednaya Prison in the north of Damascus as part of a pardon that was extended also to criminals, many of whom were later recruited into loyalist militia. Among the Salafists who were released was Hassan Abboud, who went on to lead the Ahrar al-Sham brigade, one of the most formidable Islamist units, which suffered a severe blow when Abboud and its leadership tier were killed in an explosion in northern Syria in September 2014. Also among Sednaya detainees were Ahmad (Abu Issa) al-Sheikh, who subsequently headed Suqur al-Sham – another militant

group active in the north – and Zahran Aloush, who would later become leader of the Saudi-backed Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) and was the son of a Salafist sheikh living in exile in Saudi Arabia. At least four other inmates of Sednaya became commanders in the Islamic State.

Thus, most of those Salafists set free in 2011 quickly turned against the regime and became leading figures in the more vociferous militias of the uprising before also feuding among themselves. In another consequence, moderate rebel units, led primarily by officers who had defected from Assad's army and grouped loosely under the Free Syrian Army (FSA) banner, quickly lost ground to better-financed Salafist jihadists, among whom the Islamic State and al-Nusra emerged on top.

### **Jihadist Rivalry**

The Islamic State and al-Nusra have fought several battles against each other across Syria but have kept mostly to their own fiefdoms since the U.S. air campaign began targeting both in September 2014. Al-Nusra has remained strong in the province of Hama and in the southern province of Deraa. In the east, the Islamic State was able to expel al-Nusra in July 2014 after overrunning al-Shuhail, an al-Nusra stronghold 40 km south of Deir al-Zor city. Lacking the ruthless efficiency of the Islamic State, al-Nusra became embroiled in disputes with local tribes in the east over territory and oil fields without being able to assert its authority. In contrast, the Islamic State has had fewer qualms about entering into feuds with local communities and has distinguished itself by firmly enforcing its own Sharia-inspired version of law and order. This approach has curbed theft and armed robbery – such as on the road from Raqqa to the town of Tel-Abiad on the Turkish border – and won it a certain form of respect from inhabitants exhausted by prolonged lawlessness.

Unlike al-Nusra, whose leaders have engaged in tactical discussions influenced

by their al-Qaeda elders outside Syria about seeking as much popular support as possible to establish an emirate, the Islamic State just went ahead and declared a caliphate, in a “build it and they will come” approach without deep theological justifications. Also in contrast to al-Nusra, the Islamic State has found no problem in treating other Muslims as apostates deserving to be killed if they oppose its domination.

The successes of the more radical “black and white” approach, backed by military prowess and financing from the oil in the east, drove hundreds of al-Nusra fighters to join the Islamic State in July/August 2014, after the Islamic State overran Shuhail. Recruitment also appears to have risen in the days immediately after the U.S. strikes.

### **Islamic State Approach**

By late October 2014, stepped-up U.S. raids will have dented the Islamic State’s self-propagated image of omnipotence, lowered its revenue from oil, and will have increased calls among its leaders for reconciliation with al-Nusra. If such reconciliation occurs, it would vary by region. For example, the local al-Nusra commander in the Qalamoun Mountains along the border with Lebanon is more sympathetic to the Islamic State than other al-Nusra units based around Damascus, which were attacked by ISIL/ISIS, the predecessor of the Islamic State, in 2012, after having captured several neighborhoods from the Assad regime. The air campaign will also test the seriousness of tribal allegiances to the Islamic State, many of which were announced through videos choreographed by the media division of the group prior to the aerial bombardments.

At the same time, the strikes are likely to curb the Islamic State’s mobility and ability to mount attacks, thus making it difficult to repeat the kinds of raids that have planted horror in the ranks of rebels and regime loyalists alike. In July 2014 the Islamic State had made a foray into Homs province, briefly capturing the al-Sha’ir desert gas field and killing up to 350 loyal-

ist militia, soldiers, and intelligence agents, as well as seizing military hardware. The group eventually withdrew, thus keeping the lines of confrontation with the regime away from the main highway running from the north to the south of the country, which is crucial for the regime’s supplies.

Before, several leading Islamist rebels and activists from Homs had called on the Islamic State to advance into the province and help avenge the destruction of Homs city, whose Sunni neighborhoods had been flattened in carpet bombings by the regime. The Islamic State, however, has mostly focused its military operations – since the schism with al-Nusra – on “liberating the liberated,” meaning seizure of territory already captured from the Assad regime by the FSA, al-Nusra, or by other rebel units.

Major confrontations with Assad’s forces mostly broke out in the east, and only after the regime’s air force bombed Islamic State positions following the group’s capture of the city of Mosul in Iraq in June 2014. It was this capture and the proclamation of the caliphate that prompted the U.S.-backed counteroffensive by the pro-Iranian Shi’ite government in Baghdad – a supporter of Assad – and by Kurdish Peshmerga and units of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Paradoxically, while the United States and its European allies backed up PKK fighters in Iraq from the air, the PKK is considered a terrorist organization by both the United States and the EU. The PKK is also fighting the Islamic State in Syria along with its de facto subsidiary, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Keen to mend ties with Turkey, the Assad regime had cracked down on the PKK before the revolt broke out in March 2011, but the regime and the PYD have since reestablished lines of communications and military understandings; the regime has withdrawn most of its forces from the northeast and allowed the PYD to establish self-rule in the Kurdish enclaves.

### **Stopping Islamic State's Advance?**

The airstrikes against the Islamic State in Iraq, which began around the Sinjar Mountains in August 2014, were a precursor of the Syria campaign. But the lack of U.S. ground forces, even in a non-combat role such as in Iraq, and a dearth of strong local allies make success in Syria unlikely. The U.S. aerial bombings have made the frontier more difficult to cross and will thus prevent fighters easily moving from one theater to the other. Indeed, foreign fighters had begun crossing from Iraq into Syria in a "facilitator" capacity in 2012 to provide bomb-making and suicide-bombing expertise. In turn, jihadists operating in Syria crossed into Iraq simply to take a break from fighting. Later, jihadists from Iraq settled in Syria and inter-married.

In Iraq, U.S. air cover has allowed Kurdish Peshmerga units and Shi'ite militias backed by Iran to roll back some of the Islamic State's advances in northern Iraq that came close to Erbil, capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, in August 2014, and to subsequently go on the offensive. But across the border, in Hasakah province, the PKK/PYD has not managed to fend off the Islamic State's advances since the U.S.-led strikes expanded into Syria, indicating that Kurdish forces in Syria might lack the military capability to lead the fight against the Islamic State.

Furthermore, the Islamic State has been able to capitalize on Arab tribal resentment of what is seen as overreaching Kurdish nationalism and territorial claims. Hasakah province, which has a large Arab population, remains broadly divided into territory controlled by the PYD, the Islamic State, and its allies, and Arab tribes allied with the regime. In late September 2014, when U.S. airstrikes were launched against Islamic State fighters in this part of Syria, the strikes were seen by many Arabs as a form of blatant support for PYD dominance rather than a hit against terrorism. This has placed the mainstream National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, which has had delicate relations with the Kurds and has boycotted the PYD, in a difficult position.

Further west, the U.S. airstrikes have also been targeting Islamic State forces that have attacked the Kurdish enclave of Kobanê (official name: Ain al-Arab) on the border with Turkey, slowing the group's advance into the town. But the strikes have received only lukewarm support from Turkey, which has differences with Washington on how to deal with the Syrian conflict and is wary of rising PKK strength. Reluctant to put troops on the ground, Ankara maintains that the best option to protect civilians would be the establishment of safe zones, in which the local population in northern Syria as well as refugees could be protected. At the same time, Turkey made it clear that it would not go it alone to establish such a safe zone but only with its Western allies.

### **Control of Oil**

By the end of September 2014, the U.S.-led air campaign appeared to have diminished oil and gas production capacities in Deir al-Zor, robbing the Islamic State of a main source of revenue and making it easier for the regime, or the opposition, to regain support in the region through the use of cash. Before supply disappeared from the market, shortages had almost doubled the price of gasoil sourced from Islamic State territory in the east in September 2014 to \$110 for 200 liters. Cooking gas bottled in the east had also doubled in price during the same period, as aerial bombardment made continued production difficult.

Indeed, the Islamic State's sweep of the east had concentrated control for most of the region's oil fields – except those with Kurdish militia – in the hands of the group, ending a chaotic struggle between different rebel groups, armed gangs, and various tribes. Thus, prior to the U.S. airstrikes, although industrial-scale production had mostly ended with the defeat of the regime in most of the east, the region witnessed a relative oil boom based on free-flowing wells supplying crude and gas oil extracted with basic refining techniques. It provided the Islamic State with an estimated \$80–

\$100 million a month in revenue. Downstream, the Islamic State has also been present along the pipeline network connecting the oil fields of Hasakah, which are largely under Kurdish control, to the country's two oil refineries in the regime-held cities of Homs and Baniyas. No major attacks on the pipelines have been reported since the Islamic State took hold of the east, indicating that oil might still be flowing through them. This provides another twist to the apparent tacit arrangements between the Islamic State and the regime, arrangements that seems to also cover electricity from the Tabqa hydroelectric dam in the province of Raqqa, which is controlled by the Islamic State.

The importance of oil as a source of revenue for the Islamic State was highlighted by killings carried out by the group against the Shueitat tribe, which attempted to resist the Islamic State's takeover of oil wells in territory associated with the tribe, near the Iraqi border, which boasts some of the biggest oil wells in the province of Deir al-Zor. In reaction, hundreds of Shueitat members were executed by the Islamic State between July and September 2014. Appeals by the Shueitat for help from neighboring tribes went unanswered and the most the National Coalition could do was issue statements condemning the massacre.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The U.S.-led airstrikes have driven the Islamic State to move fighters and hardware into residential areas of Deir al-Zor and Raqqa, taking the shine off the group's bold image but apparently not denting the appeal of militant Islam among rural Sunnis, who have been at the forefront of the Syrian revolt and increasingly subscribe to a sectarian understanding of the conflict. These communities do not support the killing of fellow fighters who have dealt military blows to a minority Alawite regime, which they see as using massive force indiscriminately to hang on to power and prevent the political ascendancy of the majority Sunni population. Sympathy with al-

Nusra in particular appears to have risen, whereas the Islamic State is seen as more of an alien force that might have to be neutralized – but only after the Assad regime falls.

In the east, where Western-backed opposition brigades have virtually disappeared and regime loyalist forces are still entrenched in the southern sector of Deir al-Zor, the regime has been trying to crawl back as a result of the continuing air bombings. Indeed, emboldened by the U.S. strikes, regime representatives have been contacting tribal figures who have sided with the Islamic State, offering them money and weapons if they switch sides. Assad's forces also attempted to take advantage of the U.S. strikes by making a foray into parts of Deir al-Zor in mid-October 2014, which was repelled by the Islamic State and other Islamists. In retaliation, a residential quarter in Deir al-Zor was shelled, leaving seven civilians dead and dozens wounded. Thus, even if the air attacks against the Islamic State curb the group's advances, they will not halt a slide to more Sunni radicalization related to the underlying causes of the Syrian conflict and the crackdown on the revolt by Assad's security forces.

Still, the U.S. air attacks present a rare opportunity to advance progress toward an overall solution to the conflict and change Western taboos of avoiding military intervention at almost any cost. This non-intervention mantra has emboldened Assad and allowed his forces to turn Syria into killing fields, and helped to further Islamist radicalism, which will only deepen if the aerial bombings against the Islamic State and al-Nusra are seen as propping up Assad or as waging a battle on his behalf (and in tacit alliance with him). Expectations that the U.S. bombing campaign will benefit the Assad regime has helped strengthen the Syrian pound following its decline in value in the weeks before the campaign on fears that the regime would also be targeted.

At the same time, the regime is unlikely to risk thrusting its Alawite fighting core into a far-reaching campaign against outlying Sunni regions to stamp out the jihad-



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**Further reading:**

Guido Steinberg  
*The New "Lions of Syria".  
Salafist and Jihadist Groups  
Dominate Insurgency*  
SWP Comments 19/2014,  
<[www.swp-berlin.org/file  
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ists and potentially incur large losses. Assad therefore has little to offer the U.S.-led alliance. In the absence of an immediate political settlement, strengthening moderate rebels appears to be the only available option, since cooperation with Assad would feed the Sunni backlash that is helping foster jihadism. The U.S. military, which has started training moderate rebels, says a rebel force of 12,000 to 15,000 would be needed to defeat the Islamic State in the east with American air support. And indeed, if the airstrikes sharply weaken the Islamic State in eastern Syria, there is a strong risk of a vacuum developing that would be filled by regime forces rather than by an alliance of Free Syrian Army and Islamist brigades. Still, even if such a force were assembled, outside personnel would be needed to provide logistics, engineering knowhow, maintenance, and tactical support. That would significantly change the offhand approach that the Friends of Syria – the international pro-opposition alliance – have adopted toward Syria.

Indeed, distrust of international support has driven many defectors from Assad's military to sit on the sidelines, as previous efforts to strengthen the opposition militarily were marred by disagreements among the Friends of Syria and ended in debacles. But the defectors have maintained much of their networks. They could help identify competent personnel to set up a more formidable force that could fill the void in the country's east and increase pressure on the Assad regime to compromise with regard to local ceasefires and once international peace talks are revived.

One crucial element of a changed approach by the Friends of Syria should be to support the establishment of safe zones, which would not only protect Kurdish civilians from Islamic State aggression but also extend to the Sunni population under continuous attack from the Assad regime. The establishment of such zones would show Syrians that the West cares about the well-being of Syrians rather than just fearing that foreign fighters will return to their

countries of origin. In addition, the inclusion of regions inhabited by Alawites and other minorities into long-mooted safe zones would provide an alternative to these parts of the population rather than them betting on protection by the regime. Safe zones would also allow the opposition government, operating in exile from southern Turkey, to set up a foothold inside Syria.

The establishment of such safe zones faces a major challenge. In order to offer effective protection against regime bombings, including from artillery, a no-fly zone would not be sufficient. Yet, so far, no country has been willing to provide the necessary intervention on the ground. In October 2014, the Turkish government obtained authorization from parliament for possible military intervention in Syria and Iraq and to allow foreign troops to be stationed in its territory for the same purpose. But in light of continuing differences with the West over priorities in the fight in Syria, Turkey will likely avoid military engagement and focus on defending its own territory. A raid by Turkish warplanes on PKK bases in Iraq in mid-October appeared to be in line with this approach, as was Ankara's lukewarm support for U.S. airstrikes on the Islamic State. At least one of Turkey's concerns – that a safe zone would strengthen Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria – could be allayed by joint positions adopted by the PYD and the National Coalition on the future unity of the country as well as a joining of forces in the fight against the Islamic State.

It is clear that genuine stabilization can only be achieved through a political settlement that allows for a democratic-based alternative to the Assad regime and the jihadists, allaying minority concerns about a post-Assad Syria and Sunni fears that minorities across the Middle East are coalescing against them with tacit Western support. Regional heavyweights Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Russia and the West, need to endorse such a settlement as a way to contain the militant sectarianism that is spreading across the Middle East.