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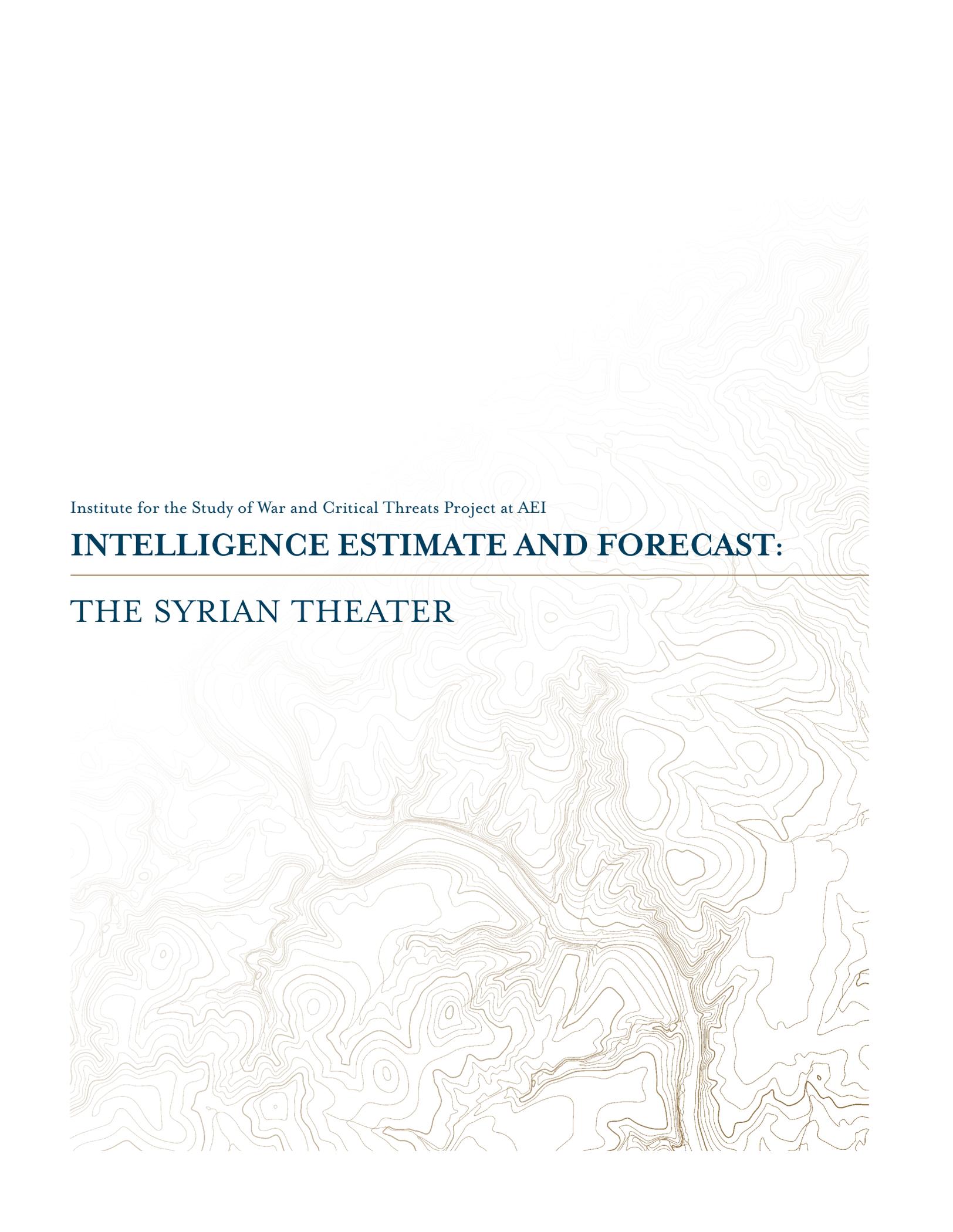
INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE AND FORECAST: THE SYRIAN THEATER



INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND CRITICAL THREATS PROJECT AT AEI

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The background of the entire page is a detailed topographic map of a region, likely Syria, showing intricate contour lines and geographical features. The map is rendered in a light, golden-brown color against a white background.

Institute for the Study of War and Critical Threats Project at AEI

INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE AND FORECAST:

THE SYRIAN THEATER

Cover: Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani during their meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia March 28, 2017. REUTERS/Sergei Karpukhin, reproduced with permission.

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1400 16th Street NW, Suite 515 | Washington, DC 20036

1789 Massachusetts Avenue, NW | Washington, DC 20036

understandingwar.org

criticalthreats.org

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The combined research teams of the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and AEI's Critical Threats Project (CTP) authored this report.

Dr. Kimberly Kagan, Founder and President of the Institute for the Study of War.

Dr. Frederick W. Kagan, Christopher DeMuth Chair and Director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute.

Jennifer Cafarella, Senior Intelligence Planner at ISW.

Katherine Zimmerman, AEI Research Fellow and Research Manager, CTP.

Maseh Zarif, External Relations Director at ISW.

Jessica Lewis McFate, Director for Innovation and Tradecraft at ISW.

Marie Donovan, Senior Iran Analyst at CTP.

Genevieve Casagrande, Senior Syria Analyst at ISW.

Christopher Kozak, Senior Syria Analyst at ISW.

Franklin Holcomb, Ukraine and Russia Analyst at ISW.

Elizabeth Teoman, Turkey Research Assistant at ISW.

Catherine Harris, Ukraine and Russia Research Assistant at ISW.

Matti Suomenaro, Syria Research Assistant at ISW.

Omer Kassim, Iraq Research Assistant at ISW.

Jessa Rose Dury-Agri, Evans Hanson Fellow.

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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization. ISW advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. ISW is committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

The Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute equips policymakers, opinion leaders, and the military and intelligence communities with detailed and objective open-source analysis of America's current and emerging national security challenges. Through daily monitoring, in-depth studies, graphic presentations, private briefings, and public events, the project is a unique resource for those who need to fully understand the nuance and scale of threats to America's security to effectively develop and execute policy.

ABOUT OUR TECHNOLOGY PARTNERS

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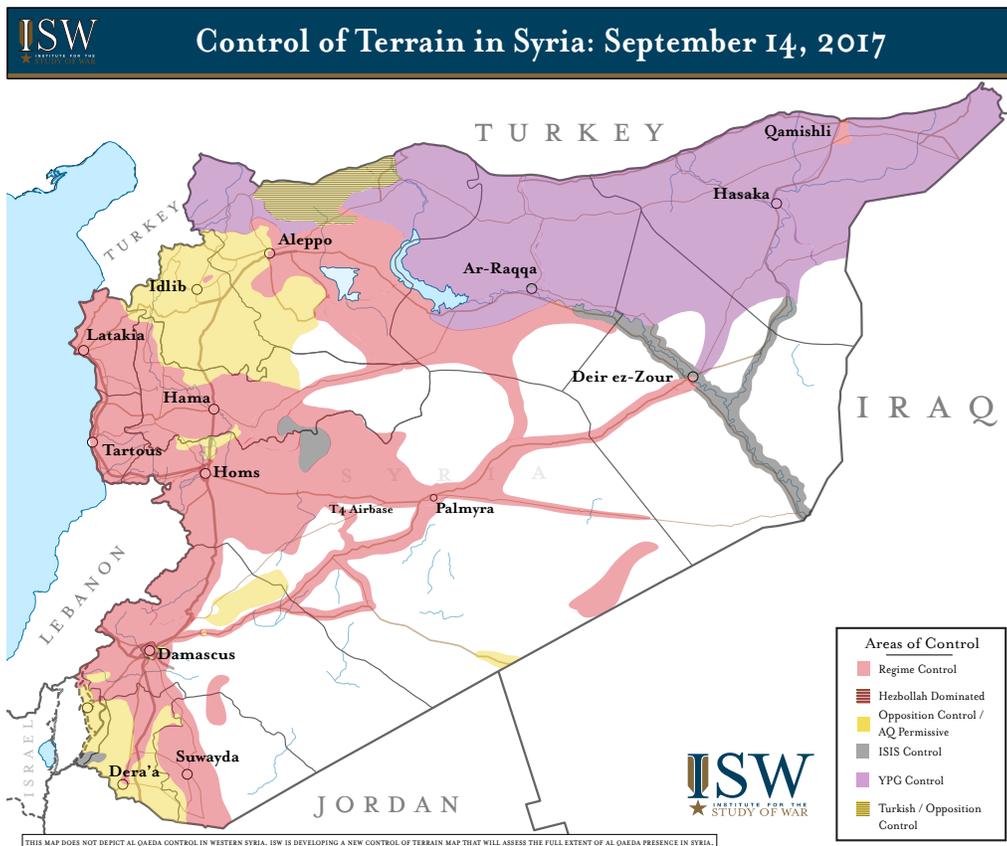
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States will continue to risk its vital strategic interests in the Middle East unless it changes its policies in Syria and Iraq. President Donald Trump and his administration inherited a weakened U.S. position, with Russia imposing constraints on American freedom of action and options. The Trump administration has taken initial steps to advance U.S. prestige in the region by reassuring America's traditional allies and acting more firmly against its enemies and adversaries. The tactical tasks of recapturing Mosul and liberating Raqqa from the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) are complete and nearly complete, respectively. Nevertheless, its efforts to define and execute policies that secure America's vital interests are moving more slowly than those of America's enemies, adversaries, and spoilers who are more agile than the U.S. These actors include Russia, Iran and its proxies, Turkey, ISIS, al Qaeda, and some Kurdish elements, who are pursuing goals that threaten American objectives and are exploiting the current situation to make strategic gains as the U.S. champions short-term gains and tactical success.

The Trump administration has not yet broken with its predecessor's approach to the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq. It has prioritized conducting counterterrorism operations against ISIS to recapture ISIS's territory. American military forces have accelerated this campaign by relying on the most readily available local forces, including Kurdish forces in northern Syria that are aligned with terrorists targeting Turkey. The administration has eschewed a U.S. role in addressing the regional war's underlying drivers, including the role of the Bashar al Assad regime in Syria and sectarianism in Iraq stoked by Iran. The main effort of the counter-ISIS fight must become preventing the organization from reconstituting and its rivals from inheriting its leadership of the Iraqi and global jihad. ISIS re-emerged from a defeated al Qaeda in Iraq and controlled Iraqi cities only three years after American troops departed in 2011.



The Trump administration has also acquiesced to an expanding Russian and Iranian ground campaign in Syria and a growing role for Iran inside Iraq. Its diplomatic efforts to end the wars have focused on the most expedient political outcomes shaped by dominant local and regional actors. It does not appear committed to shaping a long-term stabilization congruent with a wider set of American regional interests. The administration has expressed that it will confront and roll back Iran's destabilizing campaign but has neither set the conditions for such a campaign nor undertaken sufficient policy action that will set conditions for such an outcome.

The Russo-Iranian coalition is exploiting the continuity in American strategy from President Obama to President Trump's administration. It is now strengthening its grip in Syria while enabling the Assad regime to extend its positions. Vladimir Putin's dependence on Iran for securing Russia's most important interests in Syria – its airbase at Latakia and naval base at Tartous – will continue to ensure that he will remain intertwined in a deepening partnership with Tehran. The “de-escalation” agreements brokered in Syria will allow Russia to remain in the driver's seat for shaping the overall political settlement. These agreements will also fail to prevent Iranian expansionism. Russian and Iran share the ambition to weaken and ultimately expel the U.S. from the region. They are continuing to position themselves to make that outcome a reality.

The Salafi-jihadist movement remains a long-term threat to the United States, in part because of the time and space the U.S. has ceded to al Qaeda and ISIS by remaining fixated on terrain. ISIS has lost territory but is not defeated. The anti-ISIS coalition is actually setting conditions that will enable ISIS to resurge, by leaving communities in Syria and Iraq vulnerable and core governance and political issues unresolved. Al Qaeda, a more serious long-term threat to the U.S., has used its freedom of operation to defeat competitors within the broader anti-Assad opposition. America's growing alignment with the pro-regime coalition in Syria benefits al Qaeda by legitimizing its narrative, incentivizing al Qaeda to reaffirm Syria as its priority theater globally. An escalating regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran also threatens to empower Salafi-jihadists and embolden Tehran by fueling the sectarian war from which both benefit.

The Iraqi Kurdish community's planned referendum on independence has created conditions and competition that could result in increased violence and further regional instability. The referendum in Iraq will fuel further division within the broader ethnic Kurdish community that extends into Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Kurdish presence and control over non-Kurdish communities will likely result in Kurd-Arab tensions and potential conflict. Turkey's ongoing escalation against the PKK and Iran's increasingly aggressive campaign against the referendum will likely create additional flashpoints. Salafi-jihadists will be poised to exploit the ensuing violence and instability. This report does not discuss regional actors' approaches to the Iraqi Kurdish referendum in depth, but it offers important context for the regional geo-political trends with which the referendum will take place.

American national security requires that the Trump administration pursue a strategy that helps constrain, contain, and ultimately roll back Russia and Iran; defeat Salafi-jihadists in ways that prevent their reconstitution; defend strategic allies and bolster partners; and facilitate the emergence of independent, representative, and unitary states in Syria and Iraq. The removal of the Assad regime remains a necessary condition to achieve a desirable outcome in Syria. The U.S. must apply meaningful pressure against the Assad-Russia-Iran axis and regain leverage over it rather than accommodate it. The U.S. is now accommodating its adversaries by signing onto various agreements that allow it to consolidate control. This axis not only destabilizes the region and perpetuates conflict, but it also fuels radicalization and strengthens jihadist forces through its policies. It is making it increasingly difficult for the U.S. to protect its own security and interests.

INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE AND FORECAST: THE SYRIAN THEATER

Institute for the Study of War and Critical Threats Project Teams

Introduction

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute have conducted this intelligence estimate of Syria in its regional context in order to help forecast the likely and dangerous alternative futures that the U.S. will face in Syria and Iraq between September 2017 and January 2018. This estimate serves as a baseline for understanding the rippling effect of the movement for Kurdish independence in Iraq without forecasting its likely or dangerous outcomes. Rather, this forecast aims to help policy-makers anticipate the actions of American adversaries in Syria and Iraq to avoid inadvertently facilitating developments that could be most damaging to the U.S. or its allies and partners.

The Trump administration's actions and statements in early-to-mid 2017 indicated an emerging set of policies that will maintain its predecessor's approach to the fight against ISIS, accommodate Russia in Syria, and restrain the activities of Iranian proxies in the region. This forecast generally finds that this set of policies can succeed only under extremely optimistic assumptions about what individual actors will do and how their activities will interact with one another, assessing the aims of key actors such as Russia based on a detailed analysis of actions and statements. ISW and CTP assess that the assumptions behind U.S. strategy are unlikely to hold. The likeliest scenarios each actor will pursue will lead to a significant degradation of American influence in Syria and Iraq and the failure to achieve core objectives vis-à-vis Iran and Russia.

Methodology

This forecast applies the traditional techniques of intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) to actors and conditions in Syria and Iraq. IPB is a process of analyzing enemy forces, terrain, weather, and civilian considerations in order to anticipate their effects upon friendly forces and their planned and ongoing operations. IPB involves analyzing the possible courses of action of the primary actors on the ground, given existing knowledge about their capabilities, tactics, and intent. Courses of action are ranked from the most to least likely and evaluated for the dangers they pose to friendly forces and operations.

This forecast examines the following actors and their anticipated actions over the next five months: Russia, Iran, ISIS, al Qaeda, and Turkey. Analysts at ISW and CTP have identified the strategic objectives of each actor as they apply to Syria and

Iraq, the current "state of play" from each actor's perspective, and the operational objectives each will likely prioritize. Analysts then identified the possible courses each actor could pursue to accomplish its operational objectives, presenting the most likely and the most dangerous courses of action each actor could take. It also identifies indicators for determining which course of action an actor is pursuing, as well as sources of friction that could impede or accelerate its progress. It considers several dangerous scenarios that could result from the convergence of multiple actors' undertakings over the next five months. The forecast concludes with policy recommendations.

This forecast finds that this set of policies can succeed only under extremely optimistic assumptions about what individual actors will do.

This forecast does not consider the independent courses of action that could be pursued by the Syrian Regime into 2018. Syrian President Bashar al Assad is neither sovereign nor capable of pursuing his own strategic objectives without the support of the Russo-Iranian coalition. Russia and Iran have penetrated the regime's command-and-control authorities at all levels and propped up its forces by providing the bulk of its offensive combat power on the ground.¹ The Syrian regime thus primarily serves as a vehicle for the regional power projection of Moscow and Tehran in the Middle East. ISW and CTP thus evaluate the objectives and plans of those actors, rather than the Assad regime itself.

None of the actors evaluated in this forecast operate in a vacuum. The decisions and signals of one actor dynamically alter the decisions and actions of other actors. ISW and CTP have identified the major inflections caused by Russia, Iran, ISIS, and al Qaeda, as well as exogenous factors, including decisions by actors outside the scope of this forecast. U.S. statements and actions also shape other actors' behaviors. This forecast includes an assessment of the recent inflections that have meaningfully altered the calculus of the primary actors. The forecast aims to harness their dynamic interplay in order to refine an assessment of how each actor will behave. This forecast will begin with an evaluation of the Trump administration's emerging policy for the Middle East, which influences, and in some cases has been shaped by, the campaigns of other actors examined in this study.

U.S. State of Play

The Trump administration has yet to articulate a comprehensive set of objectives or define a regional strategy for the Middle East that would encompass them. ISW and CTP therefore evaluate the current state of play for the U.S. in the region against the following strategic framework designed to secure the minimum requirements for American national security.²

Objectives:

- Secure the American people and homeland;
- Protect, retain, and promote by example our free and democratic way of life;
- Retain and promote a free market international economic system, which relies on the free flow of people and goods throughout the world;
- Protect and strengthen a rules-based international order; and
- Retain and strengthen our alliances and assist our allies to survive and prosper in the face of common dangers.

A series of U.S. strategic objectives in the Middle East flows from this framework.³ The U.S. must destroy the base of Salafi-jihadism in Syria, Iraq, and the wider Middle East that fuels ISIS and al Qaeda. The U.S. must constrain, deter, and reverse gains by Iran and Russia in the Middle East. The U.S. must ultimately promote and maintain order by helping end ongoing regional conflicts, including the Syrian war, under the right conditions.⁴

President Donald Trump and his administration may be attempting to pursue these strategic objectives, but its policy decisions remain unclear, mutually inconsistent, and fluid. The Trump administration has not yet released the results of several relevant policy reviews – on ISIS and Iran in particular. It concluded its Afghanistan review at the end of August 2017.⁵ Trump administration officials' statements and actions have outlined the broad contours of an evolving Middle East policy that features multiple continuities with – as well as notable breaks from – the Obama administration's policies. The core elements of this emergent policy orient on the following major themes, which frame and incorporate ongoing U.S. operations in the Middle East and Europe:

1. The U.S. will prioritize the defeat of ISIS as the centerpiece of its overall strategy in the Middle East.

The Trump administration has retained the core strategic objective of defeating ISIS in the Middle East.⁶ It has also largely maintained the Obama administration's terrain-centric and partner-led strategy against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The U.S. anti-ISIS coalition and Iraqi Security Forces cleared the last ISIS-held districts Mosul in Northern Iraq in early July 2017.⁷ The U.S. anti-ISIS coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) launched simultaneous operations to seize ISIS's *de facto* capital in Raqqa city in Northern Syria in June 2017.⁸ President Trump authorized several measures to accelerate the Raqqa campaign. He delegated command and targeting authorities to lower echelons and approved a change to "envelop and annihilate" foreign fighters rather than displace them.⁹ The White House also authorized expanded military action against ISIS Wilayat Khorasan, al Qaeda, and the Taliban in Afghanistan, along with an unspecified increase in the number of American troops there.¹⁰

The Trump administration expects success against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. ISIS has lost large portions of its urban terrain across Iraq and Syria since 2014, and it will likely lose additional territory over the next several months. Administration officials have signaled their intention to work with partner forces to ultimately clear ISIS from the Euphrates River Valley in Eastern Syria after Raqqa falls.¹¹ The U.S. has expressed willingness to deconflict these operations with the Russo-Iranian Coalition in Eastern Syria.¹² The Trump administration has avoided linking the anti-ISIS campaign to the larger regional drivers that fuel ISIS and al Qaeda, such as the broader war in Syria, and it seems ambivalent about the role Bashar al Assad or his inner circle could play in resolving that conflict and leading Syria after it. Current U.S. strategy thus fails to address the factors that enabled ISIS's rise in the first place, offering little ground for optimism that it will not set conditions for ISIS or another Salafi-jihadi group to resurge. Al Qaeda is, in fact, already laying the groundwork to gain from the weakening

of ISIS, and the U.S. has offered no meaningful plan for preventing that eventuality or for coping with it. President Trump therefore remains on his predecessor's path to defeat.

2. The U.S. will attempt to cooperate with Russia on regional security issues while pushing back on it in Europe.

The Trump administration has adopted a nuanced yet contradictory approach towards Russia. The White House asserted its willingness to confront destabilizing behavior by Russia against the U.S. and Europe.¹³ The U.S. and NATO increased their commitment of military forces, equipment, and training exercises to Eastern Europe, including the deployment of four battalions to the Baltics and Poland that had been planned for since 2016.¹⁴ President Trump has said Russia remains responsible for adhering to the Minsk Accords as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has called on Russia to take the first steps to de-escalate in Ukraine.¹⁵ The Trump administration has simultaneously renewed discussions over providing defensive weapons systems to the Ukrainian Armed Forces – a proposal President Obama rejected.¹⁶ President Trump has also signed a bill passed by the U.S. Congress that intensified sanctions authorities targeting Russia in August 2017.¹⁷

The White House has simultaneously pursued constructive relations with Russia in the Middle East. The Trump administration has stated its desire to explore potential cooperation between the U.S. and Russia in the fight against ISIS and al Qaeda in the Middle East.¹⁸ The U.S. and Russia announced a ceasefire agreement and the establishment of a so-called de-escalation zone in Southern Syria in July 2017.¹⁹ Further negotiations may extend these zones to other regions held by anti-Assad forces, particularly Idlib Province in Northern Syria. President Trump has argued that the U.S. could ultimately leverage this cooperation to turn Russia against Iran and President Assad.²⁰ U.S.-Russia cooperation in Syria thus far has stabilized Assad and Iran's positions and accelerated

Russia's campaign to jettison the U.S. from the region in order to weaken the U.S. globally.

3. The U.S. will confront and push back against the destabilizing activities of Iran in the Middle East.

The Trump administration has declared its intent to confront the threat to regional stability and national security posed by Iran in the Middle East. President Trump aggressively condemned the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran and opened a formal review of U.S. policy toward Iran in the Middle East.²¹ The U.S. Treasury Department imposed additional sanctions on Iran in response to its ballistic missile program as well as its destabilizing activities in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan.²² The Trump administration also demanded the full withdrawal of Iran and its proxies as a key condition for the end of the Syrian war.²³ U.S. military forces have thus far taken some defensive force protection measures against Iranian proxies but the administration has thus far avoided direct or decisive confrontation with Iran. President Trump recertified Iran's compliance with the JCPOA in July 2017 and waived specified sanctions but he said subsequently that Iran would not be compliant by the next deadline in October 2017.²⁴ His administration is finalizing its counter-Iran policies and actively exploring options to avoid a future recertification.²⁵

The White House is nevertheless acting from a position of weakness against Iran in the Middle East. Iran has developed an expeditionary and international hybrid force currently engaged across Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan.²⁶ Iran is poised to use indigenous elements of that force to influence security and politics in Syria and Iraq over the long term. The U.S. lacks similar sources of military or political leverage on the ground in light of its unwillingness to use its own military forces in large numbers. The Trump administration has also undermined its own objectives towards Iran by cooperating with Russia in Syria. Iran and Russia have built a regional military axis based on shared strategic interests that exerts influence from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf.²⁷ They have begun trying to co-opt traditional U.S. allies and

partners, including Turkey, Egypt, and Iraq. They have cooperated to deny, constrain, and shape the future policy options available to the U.S. in Iraq and Syria. The Trump administration is unlikely to split the Russo-Iranian Coalition while the U.S. remains actively engaged in the region. It is therefore unlikely to succeed in meeting its intent to confront and push back the destabilizing activities of Iran in the Middle East. By working with Russia in Syria, the Trump administration may actually drive further Russo-Iranian cooperation in the Middle East.

4. The U.S. will seek to reach expedient political outcomes in Iraq and Syria through currently established local and regional partners in the Middle East while eschewing a deeper commitment by the West to help "nation-build" over the long term.

The Trump administration has elected to further empower select local and regional partners as a means to fight ISIS and Iran in the Middle East. President Trump authorized the direct provision of arms and equipment to the Syrian Kurdish YPG in Raqqa city in May 2017 despite fierce objections from Turkey.²⁸ The U.S. also demonstrated its willingness to conduct multiple strikes against Iran and Assad to protect its ground partners in the SDF and Vetted Syrian Opposition.²⁹ The White House intensified its diplomatic support for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States against Iran in the Middle East. President Trump began his first major foreign trip in Saudi Arabia that included a major arms deal on precision munitions previously withheld by the Obama administration.³⁰ The Trump administration simultaneously stressed its unwillingness to engage in major reconstruction or nation-building projects beyond short-term stabilization in Iraq and Syria.³¹ It has also not sought to build up new, viable partners from within the Sunni Arab communities that resist jihadist groups and Iran. The unwillingness of the U.S. to commit to long-term projects oriented on key populations in the region damages its ability to retain committed partners capable of delivering sustainable gains. It also limits America's ability to shape political competition in both Syria and Iraq.

The White House faces mounting divergences among its partners in the Middle East. America's partnerships with Sunni Arabs are increasingly damaged or dysfunctional as of September 2017. President Trump ended a four-year-old program that provided military assistance to vetted anti-Assad opposition groups in July 2017, undermining one of the last remaining avenues for the U.S. to gain support among Sunni Arabs in Syria that could help the U.S. against al Qaeda.³² Meanwhile, the Gulf States suffered a major public rupture after Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt severed ties with Qatar in June 2017.³³ President Trump's deepening support for Saudi Arabia partly fueled this breakdown by emboldening Saudi Arabia sufficiently to take action against Qatar. The U.S. meanwhile remains in an indirect war with Turkey, which has pledged to continue offensive military operations against America's primary ground partner in Syria, the Syrian Kurdish People's Defense Forces (YPG) because of its relation to Turkey's domestic terror insurgency the Kurdistan Worker's Movement (PKK). The U.S. is also directly at odds with its historic partner the Iraqi Kurds, which plan to hold an independence referendum. The Trump administration opposes it and has called it "distracting" from the anti-ISIS mission due to the risks of escalating regional conflict and strong opposition from Turkey, Iran, and the Iraqi government in Baghdad.³⁴ These compounding fractures will further constrain opportunities for the U.S. to act through its regional partners.

The Current Situation

Three fundamental inflections in the past six months have shaped the current state of the Middle East. President Trump ordered cruise missile strikes against the Syrian regime's Shayrat Airbase in western Syria on April 7, opening a brief window of potential U.S. reorientation toward a counter-Assad strategy.³⁵ Secretary Tillerson subsequently stated that the U.S. is not pursuing a strategy to

remove President Assad from power immediately, however. The Trump administration set and upheld a new "red line" against the use of banned chemical weapons but emboldened the Syrian regime to act below that threshold. Iraqi Kurdistan Regional President Masoud Barzani called on June 7 for a formal independence referendum for Iraqi Kurdistan, sparking new alignments of interest among the U.S., Turkey, Iran, and Iraq but creating conditions in which an Iraqi civil war is more likely.³⁶ Finally, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman consolidated his rise within the House of Saud on June 21, heralding a more aggressive and unpredictable regional posture from Saudi Arabia.³⁷ These inflections forced all primary actors to adjust their policy assumptions and shift their ongoing engagements in Syria and Iraq.

These inflections have in turn generated several intersecting dynamics that guide the current and future behavior of actors in Syria and Iraq. Russia and Iran have accelerated their operations to constrain and eventually expel the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition from Syria and possibly Iraq. Saudi Arabia has intensified its own aggressive action to counteract gains – both real and perceived – by Iran across the Middle East, most notably in Yemen. Saudi Arabia is driving further escalation by Iran in ways that do not appear coordinated with the U.S., Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. They have intensified their long-standing geopolitical competition to secure the role as the primary champion of Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, which precludes them from cooperating effectively on issues of common interest, such as defeating ISIS. Iraq has devolved towards further competition among ethnic, sectarian, and political groups following the capture of Mosul. All these dynamics increase regional disorder and set favorable conditions for the continued spread of Salafi-jihadism. Their effects serve as a central theme through the following sections of the forecast.

The White House is acting from a position of weakness against Iran in the Middle East.

Russia

Grand Strategic and Strategic Objectives Relevant to the Syrian Theater:

- Preserve Putin's regime
 - Prevent the emergence of a meaningful internal opposition
 - Minimize Western influence in Russia
 - Recover and grow the Russian economy
- Regain lost spheres of influence, particularly in the former USSR
 - Expand political and economic influence in the former Soviet Union and prevent former Soviet countries from integrating more closely with the West
 - Retain political, economic and military influence in Central Asia. Contain terrorist groups that pose a threat to Russia and its partner states
- Destroy the unipolar international system in favor of a multipolar order that greatly weakens the U.S. and separates it from its allies
 - Regain and increase Russian economic power and ability to exert economic pressure on international actors
 - Erode the capability and willingness of the U.S. and Western Europe to take military or political action against Russia
 - Cultivate pro-Russian political actors internationally
 - Decrease U.S. influence and drive wedges between the U.S. and its partners globally, particularly in Europe and the Middle East and North Africa
 - Counter-balance the spread of Chinese influence in Eastern Russia, Central Asia and the Arctic, while engaging in limited economic and political cooperation with China
- Reestablish Russia as a global power
 - Rebuild Russian global military power, nuclear, conventional, and unconventional
 - Expand Russian global positioning and constrain the U.S. in the Middle East and North Africa

- Continue to expand military presence and undermine other countries' Arctic holdings
- Increase Russian military and economic presence in the Pacific

- Preserve Russian territorial integrity
 - Combat terrorism and separatism within Russia and its partner states

Current State of Play:

The Kremlin is projecting a position of strength globally, despite operating from a position of relative weakness. Russia continues to suffer from tight sanctions and low oil prices that constrain its ability to pursue its strategic objectives.³⁸ The European Union (EU) has hardened its resolve to extend sanctions and take concrete steps towards a common defense particularly after Emmanuel Macron beat pro-Russia candidate Marine Le Pen in France.³⁹ Russia nonetheless retains sufficient initiative and freedom of action to exploit weaknesses in the U.S. and NATO across all theaters.

Putin's top priority in Syria is to retain and expand his airbase at Latakia and naval base at Tartous. He has expended significant financial, political, and military capital in building up those bases, especially Latakia, and securing long-term leases from the Assad regime. He has made significant progress, but his gains are not yet secure. He needs a stable and reliable client in Damascus that can legitimize Russia's claim to be in Syria based on the invitation of Syria's "sovereign" government. President Assad's position in Damascus is reasonably secure at present because the international community lacks the will to remove or directly oppose his regime. Putin must ensure the long-term survival of the Syrian regime, however. He seeks a diplomatic settlement of the Syrian war that preserves the regime, if not Bashar himself. Russia also needs military security against local threats in the near term, which requires the maintenance of pro-regime ground forces able to keep opposition or Salafi-jihadi forces from threatening Latakia militarily. Putin relies on Iran to provide these forces through its network of proxies. Putin will continue to deploy some irregular and

non-Russian forces – including Chechen and Ingush military police – in order to augment Iranian and Syrian capabilities but is unlikely to deploy Russian forces that he needs in higher priority theaters.⁴⁰

Russia's dependence on Iran for the security of its most important interests in Syria is the most important – but not sole – factor shaping the ISW-CTP assessment that Putin will not turn against Iran even under American pressure. Russia will most likely take additional steps to cultivate its own influence within the Syrian regime's militia forces in order to professionalize them and position Russia to offset Iran's leverage over the Assad regime in the longer term. This Russian effort will accelerate the regime's reconstitution and will augment – rather than undermine – Iran's own efforts to build up pro-regime forces to secure newly captured areas.

Putin will not be easily convinced that the U.S.'s opposition to Iran's presence and operations in Syria is serious enough to merit concern. He was not deterred by previous U.S. rhetoric and episodic military action intended to signal a tougher policy against Assad and his backers.⁴¹ He did not interpret those actions as indicators of a game-changing shift in U.S. approach, but rather doubled down on efforts to compel the U.S. into a partnership in Syria. The Kremlin expanded its naval Mediterranean Task Force to an unprecedented degree after the U.S. targeted the Shayrat Airbase in Syria on April 6.⁴² Russia also launched an information campaign designed to portray the U.S. as the aggressor in Syria.⁴³ These steps indicate that Putin will adjust and reset to U.S. policies as necessary, but without abandoning or reducing his goals.

Putin's read that he can mitigate and shape U.S. decisions has thus far proved correct. His shaping contributed to a set of decisions by the Trump administration that amount to ceding political conditions in Syria to Russia. Trump canceled covert support to vetted opposition groups in western Syria in July 2017, a long-standing Russian demand.⁴⁴ The cessation of lethal aid to the Syrian armed opposition removes the U.S. as a meaningful counter-Assad actor in Syria and leaves the Syrian opposition vulnerable to future regime offensives.

The U.S. has also recognized Russia as an equal and legitimate player on the global stage by making diplomatic agreements with Moscow over the future of Syria. The U.S., Russia, and Jordan reached a deal for a de-escalation zone in Southern Syria in July 2017.⁴⁵ The U.S. likely intends to leverage the agreement – which excludes Iran – to exert pressure on the Russo-Iranian Coalition. The deal nonetheless stands to deepen the Russo-Iranian coalition's penetration in southern Syria, as the U.S. appears to have allowed Russia to be the primary enforcer of the agreement. Russia therefore has little incentive to grant additional concessions to the U.S. such as an Iranian drawdown. The deal also helps Russia with its campaign to create a de facto end to the Syrian war that amounts to Assad's victory by negotiating a series of localized deals that crystallize the battlefronts in western Syria such that the regime can stitch itself back together over time, with the acquiescence of the international community. These changes in U.S. policy have provided Russia, and by extension Iran, time and space to reallocate and restructure their forces inside of Syria to pursue strategic objectives that directly diverge from U.S. goals.

The success of Russia's and Iran's efforts to shape U.S. decisions to date will embolden them to take action toward their next goal: to get the U.S. either to withdraw from Syria entirely or to enter a "counterterrorism partnership" with Russia. Russia and Iran will continue setting conditions in Syria in the next few months while the U.S. completes the Raqqa operation that will enable them to achieve their goal in 2018. Russia perceives two opportunities to shape the U.S. counterterrorism policy: (1) in al Qaeda-held Idlib Province, and (2) in setting conditions for the final phase of anti-ISIS clearing operations in southeastern Syria.

1. Idlib Province. Russia has mitigated the jihadist threat to the Syrian coast by entering into a de-escalation agreement with Turkey and Iran that stabilizes front lines in northwestern Syria.⁴⁶ Russia is likely quietly advocating for a U.S. role in scaling up counterterrorism action against al Qaeda, which dominates opposition-held areas of northwestern Syria. The U.S. has reportedly been negotiating

with Russia over a second de-escalation zone, most likely in Idlib Province.⁴⁷ Russia, Turkey, and Iran announced a tentative agreement to finalize four interim “de-escalation zones” across western Syria — including al Qaeda-dominated Idlib Province — on September 15.⁴⁸ It is unclear whether and how the U.S.-Russia negotiations relate to this deal. The deal will allow the pro-regime coalition to remain focused on projecting force into southeastern Syria by guaranteeing that Turkey will not directly enable another al Qaeda led push against Hama Province. In return, Turkey has likely received guarantees that the pro-regime coalition will not shift to conduct offensive operations in Idlib Province in the near term. The agreement calls for monitoring forces drawn to enforce the deal under the oversight of a Joint Coordination Center.⁴⁹ Unconfirmed reports indicate that both Turkey and Russia are planning to deploy military police and/or other units to the “contact line” between pro- and anti-regime forces in the area, similar to the outcome of the U.S.-Russian-Jordanian “de-escalation” agreement in Dera’a Province.⁵⁰ Russia and Turkey still have some divergent interests in Idlib, and it is unclear from open source whether their agreement has resolved these divergences. Russia seeks to draw the U.S. into counterterrorism operations in northwestern Syria that help protect Russia’s bases. Turkey, alternately, seeks to preserve its clients in Idlib province and position itself to block any possible expansion of the YPG’s Afrin canton northwest of Aleppo.

2. Remaining ISIS-held southeastern Syria. The pro-regime coalition has recaptured most of the Syrian oil and gas infrastructure around Damascus and are projecting force further east into Deir ez Zour province in order to coerce the U.S. into deconflicting operations in the area. Pro-regime forces advanced rapidly across the desert and lifted the siege of regime-held districts of Deir ez Zour City and Military Airport in September 2017.⁵¹ They reinforced the city with elite forces as well as boats and pontoon bridges for potential

amphibious operations across the Euphrates River.⁵² Their intent is likely to block the U.S. if possible but to set conditions for the Syrian regime return to the province after the defeat of ISIS. Russia will likely attempt to broker a formal “de-escalation” agreement in the province that in essence guarantees the Syrian regime’s legitimacy in the area. The pro-regime coalition’s short-term tactical goals are to continue to reclaim ISIS-held oil and gas infrastructure in southeastern Syria and to expand the regime’s outreach to anti-ISIS tribes.

Russia seeks to draw the U.S. into counterterrorism operations in northwestern Syria that help protect Russia’s bases.

Russia is cultivating relationships in Iraq in order to expand Russia’s influence in the Middle East in support of Russia’s campaign to constrain and ultimately expel the U.S., meanwhile. Russia perceives the same opportunity as Iran to develop clients within the Iraqi government to constrain the U.S. Russia is expanding its engagement in Iraq beyond accessing revenue streams such

as oil and reconstruction contracts.⁵³ Russia may seek to develop a client regime in Baghdad over time, or at least benefit from independent relations with a client regime that Iran seeks to establish. Russia began to reach out to Iraqi politicians such as Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Chair Fallah Fayyad, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, and National Alliance leader Ammar al Hakim starting in early 2017. Russia and Iran may begin to coordinate their political shaping efforts in Iraq, which could accelerate Iran’s success in shaping the 2018 Iraqi elections toward an outcome unfavorable for U.S. interests.

Current and Future Plans:

Main Effort - Internal (enduring): The Kremlin will reprioritize its longstanding effort to manage its domestic affairs ahead of the 2018 Russian Presidential Elections. Putin will use both populist measures and state repression to boost his public support, subdue internal discontent, and block the emergence of political opposition. The Kremlin will undertake information campaigns and limited “liberal” posturing to bolster Putin’s image as the

only guarantor of stability and security in Russia. Russia's weak economy will pose an obstacle to these efforts. The Kremlin will aim to bolster economic growth by setting conditions to remove or circumvent sanctions, reaching a wider agreement on production cuts to raise oil prices, and expanding global weapons sales.

Main Effort - Former Soviet Union (enduring):

The Kremlin will continue to prioritize its campaign to assert dominance over former Soviet space. The Kremlin will continue to destabilize and discredit the Ukraine's government in order to set conditions to return pro-Russia actors in Ukraine to power in the upcoming 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections. Russia will challenge Kyiv through various methods including cyberattacks and support for pro-Russian and populist political parties. Russia will continue its efforts to alienate Kyiv from its partners, particularly Poland. The Kremlin will continue to use its proxy forces in Eastern Ukraine as a lever of influence over Kyiv's decision-making while also destabilizing the country. The Kremlin will attempt to weaken pro-Western actors in Moldova's government and reinforce the pro-Russia president there in order to halt Moldova's efforts to integrate with the West and Ukraine. The Kremlin will likely seek to engage its Central Asian partners, particularly Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in Russia's global military operations.

Main Effort - Europe (enduring): The Kremlin will exploit wider seams within Europe through specifically-crafted intelligence and disinformation campaigns. This campaign is intended to undermine European institutions and values through low-visibility methods designed not to trigger a comprehensive Western response. The Kremlin remains willing to act opportunistically if it sees the potential to create wider instability in Europe. The mounting political instability in the Balkans is one such vector, and there are indicators of more active Russian engagement in this area.

Supporting Effort - Middle East (enduring):

The Kremlin will continue to position itself as the primary security guarantor and peace arbiter in the Middle East and will likely attempt to co-opt the U.S.

into an effort supposedly seeking the defeat of ISIS and al Qaeda. It will undermine U.S. bilateral relationships in the region and continue to court traditional U.S. allies such as Egypt and Turkey. The Kremlin will fold Iraq into its alternative regional security architecture through its quadrilateral discussions with Syria and Iran – an ad hoc dialogue that ISW and CTP have labeled the “Quartet” group. The Kremlin will exercise diplomatic and military pressure to shape security agreements for the post-ISIS environment in Southern, Eastern, and Northern Syria. These deals include the four de-escalation zones. The Kremlin will also continue to expand its own train-and-equip mission to the Iraqi PMU and/or the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).⁵⁴ The Kremlin will set conditions to secure additional strategic basing along the Eastern Mediterranean Sea in Egypt and Libya as well as the Gulf of Aden in Yemen.

Supporting Effort - Middle East (new):

Russia will use oil-field development, natural gas pipelines, nuclear technology, and other energy deals to finance its own operations in the Middle East and deepen its economic influence there. Russia has already secured oil deals with U.S. partners in Iraq, including in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁵⁵ Russia has positioned itself to gain influence over oil and natural gas infrastructure in Libya and Syria through its support to local factions fighting on the ground. Russia will also continue to court other traditional U.S. allies such as Egypt and Turkey. Russia will use arms sales as a foreign policy tool and source of additional income. Russia recently agreed to sell S-400 systems to Turkey and T-90 tanks to Iraq.⁵⁶

• **Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA) in Syria.**

The Russo-Iranian Coalition undertakes an economy-of-force mission to preserve the outcomes it has achieved in eastern and southern Syria. Russia sustains UAV reconnaissance operations and a deployment of military forces in Dera'a province in order to position itself as the guarantor of the de-escalation agreement. Russia and Iran enable pro-regime forces to conduct offensive operations to seize key oil fields from ISIS in Deir ez Zour Province faster than American-backed SDF forces can advance. They thereby secure essential infrastructure and

resources necessary for reconstituting the Assad regime in the long term. Russia and Iran position themselves to contest American operations if necessary. Iran maintains its proxy deployments along the Syrian-Iraqi border and in proximity to U.S. military bases near Tabqa and Tanf in Syria.

- Russia postures as a legitimate counterterrorism actor in order to incentivize the U.S. to enter a counterterrorism partnership in Idlib, which the pro-regime forces lack the resources to manage themselves. Russia continues to conduct air operations against ISIS in Homs, Hama, Raqqa, and Deir ez Zour Provinces. Russia sustains its information operation to portray alignment between U.S. and Russian interests in southeastern Syria. Russia also wages a disinformation campaign to support the notion that it has the willingness and ability to contain Iran. Russia emphasizes the severity of the ISIS and al Qaeda threats to pro-regime populations and emphasizes the connection between the U.S. fight against ISIS in Raqqa and the threat to pro-regime populations in western Syria.
- Russia proposes another agreement with the U.S. that allows the Assad regime to resume providing basic services in Raqqa after its recapture. Russia positions itself as the guarantor, and may offer to deploy Russian technicians to oversee the project in order to avoid alienating local populations by allowing Assad regime employees to return. The Assad regime meanwhile negotiates a joint anti-ISIS security arrangement with the SDF in order to secure Raqqa against ISIS counter-attack.

FRICITION: Russia's engagement in Syria does not come without cost or risk. Opposition forces and pro-regime militias threaten to degrade the Assad regime's security across western Syria.⁵⁷ Russia will balance the continued risk to its personnel and equipment in the theater against the strategic benefit that its posture secures as it seeks to counter the U.S. in the Middle East and re-establish itself as a major military and diplomatic player in the Mediterranean. Russia's primary source of friction will be economic constraints that limit its ability to pursue its objectives. Russia cannot unilaterally or peacefully increase the price of oil or meaningfully reinvigorate its struggling economy over the near term, limiting its ability to project force worldwide. Putin's aggressive actions have also hardened political resolve against Russia in the EU. Russia operated largely unconstrained by the U.S. under the Obama administration. It thus remains vulnerable to any new policy that would counter its global ambitions across Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East. Russia must maintain positive relationships with key regional actors including Iran and Saudi Arabia in order to sustain its long-term operations in the Middle East. Russia will likely struggle to maintain its overall neutrality in ongoing political disputes between the Gulf States as well as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The Russo-Iranian Coalition in Syria: MLCOA

Russo-Iranian Coalition Challenges U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition in Eastern Syria

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russian deployment of military police in Dera'a province and UAV operations in Quneitra province;¹³³ • Russia and Iran temporarily adhering to terms of the ceasefire in Southern Syria;¹³⁴ • Russia shifts air assets to the T4 military airbase in eastern Homs province;¹³⁵ • Intensified Russian airstrikes against ISIS in Eastern Syria;¹³⁶ • Russian rhetoric regarding cooperation with the U.S. against ISIS;¹³⁷ • Increased Russian missile strikes in Eastern Syria from the Mediterranean and Russia;¹³⁸ • Russia brokers deal with the Cairo-based Syrian political opposition for a second de-escalation zone in Eastern Ghouta, including Ahmed Jarba the leader of the U.S.-backed Syrian Elite Forces fighting in Raqqa City;¹³⁹ • Russia and Iran positioning pro-regime forces south of Raqqa City;¹⁴⁰ • SDF allows Syrian regime to resume service provision in Manbij; • Unnamed Western officials state support for allowing the Syrian regime to resume service provision in Raqqa City;¹⁴¹ • Russia meets with delegations from the YPG, or SDF;¹⁴² • Iran deploys additional surveillance and/or armed drones to Palmyra airfield.¹⁴³ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iran establishes drone control rooms in eastern Syria; • Iranian-backed militias secure permission to enter into Syria from the government of Iraq in order to sustain cross-border operation;¹⁴⁴ • Russia proposes a new counterterrorism partnership in Syria to the U.S.; • Russia rotates out high-end defensive systems aimed at deterring the U.S.

Iran

Grand Strategic and Strategic Objectives Relevant to the Syrian Theater:

- Preserve the current regime
 - Ensure a smooth transition to a new Supreme Leader after the death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei
 - Expand regional support for Iranian concepts of religious governance
- Protect Iranian territory and people
 - Deter the U.S. and Israel
 - Defeat Salafi-jihadi threat to Iran and allies
- Establish regional hegemony
 - Support and expand the “Axis of Resistance”
 - Develop a conventional force projection capability
- Expel the U.S. and its allies from the Middle East
 - Protect Iran’s client regime in Syria
 - Replace the U.S. as Iraq’s primary security partner

Current State of Play:

Iran is currently operating from a position of strength in the Middle East. Iran does not face an existential threat to its domestic stability or territorial integrity. It has suffered one ISIS attack in Tehran during Ramadan 2017. Iraq remains on a slow path towards temporary stabilization under conditions favorable to Iran.⁵⁸ Tehran has therefore prioritized its strategic objectives in Syria, namely the preservation of Assad’s regime and ultimately the expulsion of the U.S. from the Middle East. Iran and Russia have largely stabilized the Assad regime following a joint military intervention that began in 2015.⁵⁹ Assad is more secure in his continued rule now than at any point in the past four years. Iran and Russia exploited their de-escalation zone deals with Turkey in western Syria to reallocate limited pro-regime ground forces. Iran began to

direct its available forces to disrupt the expansion of the anti-ISIS coalition into eastern Syria in June 2017.⁶⁰ Iran also prioritized its continued mission to secure its ground access to Lebanese Hezbollah through Syria as well as positioning its forces along Israel’s border near the Golan Heights. It has also been developing missile production capabilities in both Lebanon and Syria.⁶¹

Iran achieved important progress in other strategic theaters in early 2017. Iran continued to influence Baghdad through the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), an auxiliary force dominated by Iranian-directed Shi’a militias. The PMU secured operating positions across northern Iraq during anti-ISIS coalition operations in 2017.⁶² Iran has been setting conditions to counter the Kurdish independence referendum by assisting the Iraqi provincial and municipal politicians who oppose it. It is attempting to constrain Turkish influence in northern Iraq. Iran also leveraged the PMU to assume positions along the Syrian-Iraqi Border in Anbar and Ninewa provinces in June 2017.⁶³ Iran is using this force in an attempt to block and disrupt U.S. operations to clear ISIS from the Euphrates River Valley on both sides of the border. Meanwhile, Iran invested some made resources in the al Houthi movement in Yemen to distract Saudi Arabia from potential confrontation in Syria or Iraq.⁶⁴ Iran’s proxies in Iraq have consistently spoiled Prime Minister Haidar al Abadi’s efforts to reform the Iraqi Government and address key Sunni grievances, including by obstructing passage of Iraq’s proposed National Guard Law.⁶⁵ Similar efforts in Bahrain have proven less fruitful. Iran faces few meaningful threats in the wider region absent a major policy shift by the U.S. in the Middle East.

Numerous Iranian political figures close to the Supreme Leader have expressed concern for the long-term health of the regime following the re-election of President Hassan Rouhani. The conservative establishment and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) are working to curb Rouhani’s strengthened popular mandate.⁶⁶

Iran is currently operating from a position of strength in the Middle East.

The uncertainty surrounding the Supreme Leader's succession, expected in the coming years, exacerbates these tensions, which will continue to grow in late 2017 with unpredictable effects on Iran's activities abroad.

This forecast assumes that Khamenei will remain alive and in power going into 2018. His death or incapacitation would render the forecast invalid. It likewise assumes that Rouhani will remain in power and not face any serious attempt to remove him. The forecast assumes that Iran will not face any significant internal unrest, including mass protests or a high-end terrorist campaign. All three of these assumptions appear valid as of mid-September 2017.

Iran intends to expel the U.S. from Iraq in a manner that precludes the U.S. from returning in the future.⁶⁷ Iran has been setting conditions that support this outcome while the U.S. has focused on reclaiming terrain from ISIS. Iran will accelerate its campaign to expel the U.S. now that the anti-ISIS coalition has retaken Mosul for two reasons. The high-end urban clearing operations against ISIS, for which Iran calculates some American support is necessary and tolerable, will likely conclude over the next six months. Second, the U.S. will then face a decision about whether and how to remain involved in Iraq, which Iran will try to shape. Iran will use both military and political means both to coerce the Iraqi Government into requesting the U.S. withdraw or retain a very limited presence in Iraq. Iran will also employ military and political pressure to weaken American will for further involvement in Iraq. Iran likely intends to finish setting the conditions over the next several months that will result in the withdrawal of all or most U.S. forces from Iraq in 2018.

The Trump administration's Iran policy review is reportedly nearing completion as of September 2017. The specifics of where and how the U.S. will take action to contain Iran in the Middle East could meter Iran's timeline and/or aggressiveness in Iraq. Russia may seek to preempt and deter any aggressive U.S. policy decision against Iran by positioning itself as an interlocutor in Iraq similar to the role it plays in Syria.

Current and Future Plans:

Main Effort: Iran will continue to prioritize efforts to constrain, disrupt, and ultimately expel the U.S. from Syria. Iran will conduct operations to block further expansion by coalition partners on the ground, including the Syrian Kurdish YPG near Raqqa City. Iran will continue supporting operations to bolster the presence of pro-regime forces in Deir ez Zour Province in Eastern Syria. The pro-Assad coalition remains unlikely to launch major urban clearing operations in Deir ez Zour City. They will likely choose to conduct further operations to secure key oil fields and minor population centers along the Euphrates River Valley. Iran will help Assad consolidate his control over Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, Hama, and Dera'a Provinces in western Syria. Iran remains unlikely to contribute additional, large combat forces to these efforts unless required to preserve its proxies' combat power or to counter an emergent threat to Assad. Iran will likely remain cautious in supporting operations in southern Syria to reduce the risk of a major direct conflict with Israel, which Iran is not pursuing at this time. Iran will prioritize efforts to maintain and develop the Russo-Iranian coalition as well as the Quartet with Russia, the Assad regime, and Iraq.

- Iran is unlikely to undertake fully independent operations in support of this effort in the next six months. The COAs outlined in the Russia section include the Iran's contributions to wider Russo-Iranian coalition operations.

Main Effort: Iran will focus on political efforts in Iraq to secure its influence and the full withdrawal of U.S. forces. Iran will attempt to shape the outcome of the 2018 Iraqi Parliamentary Election in order to cultivate a favorable government in Baghdad. Iran will likely attempt to craft a coalition that sets political constraints on current Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi.⁶⁸ Iran could alternatively seek to ensure the election of a more responsive premier. Iran will continue its efforts to establish durable influence within the ISF.⁶⁹ Iran has a number of possible courses of action it may pursue in support

Iranian MLCOA in Iraq

Russo-Iranian Coalition Contests U.S. Role as Security Guarantor in Iraq

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iranian leaders warn Abadi to “exercise caution” in relationship with the U.S.;¹⁴⁵ • Abadi clarifies he will not support U.S. “combat forces” in Iraq;¹⁴⁶ • PMU chair meets with Russo-Iranian coalition in Russia;¹⁴⁷ • Syrian defense ministry head of operations meets with ISF chief of staff Gen. Uthman Ganimil;¹⁴⁸ • Russian ambassador meets separately with Maliki, Abadi, Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs Jaafari and National Alliance chairman Ammar al Hakim;¹⁴⁹ • Iraqi Foreign Minister calls for a partnership with Russia similar to the U.S.-Iraq Security Framework Agreement after meeting with Russian envoy Bogdanov;¹⁵⁰ • Former Iraqi PM Nouri al Maliki travels to Moscow and calls for greater Russian political and military involvement in Iraq;¹⁵¹ • New Russian weapons sales to Iraq (T-90 tanks);¹⁵² • PMU reinforcements deployed to Tel Afar in anticipation of a clearing operation;¹⁵³ • Abadi announces Tel Afar clearing operation;¹⁵⁴ • Iran and Iraq sign new military cooperation agreement;¹⁵⁵ • Iran establishes new rotary wing air assault unit;¹⁵⁶ • Iran and Russia in negotiations over contract to produce rotary wing aircraft;¹⁵⁷ • The PMU creates a rotary wing “directorate;”¹⁵⁸ • PMU messaging about increased coordination with Syria;¹⁵⁹ • MOI messaging about increased military and intelligence cooperation with Russia;¹⁶⁰ • Resumption of Iraqi Missile Development Program.¹⁶¹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraqi politicians, Prime Minister, and security officials begin to talk more frequently about the Syrian conflict, echoing regime-Russia-Iran sentiment;¹⁶² • Change in Abadi’s opposition to cross-border Iraqi PMU deployments into Syria;¹⁶³ • Iraqi politicians call for “Astana process” in Iraq;¹⁶⁴ • Increased Russian media focus on Iraq; • Russian offer of train and equip support to ISF and/or PMU; • Russian offer to mediate between exiled Sunni politicians and Baghdad; • Russian discussion of de-escalation agreements to address local competition for power and resources in recaptured areas.

Iranian MDCOA in Iraq A

Iranian Proxies Conduct Attacks to Expel U.S. from Iraq

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased threat level to U.S. persons announced by the State Department on June 14;¹⁶⁵ • Iranian proxy militia openly discuss desire to attack U.S. personnel;¹⁶⁶ • Iranian proxy groups threaten U.S. personnel at bases in Syria, forcing the U.S. to undertake force protection strikes on five occasions.¹⁶⁷ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Green on Blue” attacks against U.S. personnel on bases in Iraq; • Locals hold demonstrations protesting U.S. involvement out in Iraq; • Plain-clothed individuals attack or kidnap U.S. personnel in Baghdad or remote locations.

of its main effort in Iraq in the next six months. They include:

- *MLCOA - Iraq*: The Russo-Iranian coalition takes new steps to offset the U.S. role in Iraq and set political conditions that accelerate an ultimate U.S. drawdown. Iran uses its proxies to coerce the Iraqi government into launching clearing operations in ISIS-held Tel Afar, now completed, and Hawija with heavy PMU involvement and minimal U.S. involvement (this operation is well underway). Iran uses these operations to further develop its influence within the Iraqi Ministry of Defense while sidelining the U.S. Russia offers military advisors to the ISF, PMU, or both in order to offset the U.S. role. Russia and Iran may undertake a combined effort to build up Iraq’s rotary wing capability independent from the U.S. and possibly in direct support of the PMU. Russia and Iran both pressure key Iraqi leaders, possibly including Abadi, to call for a full U.S. withdrawal from Iraq rather than a residual U.S. troop presence.
- *Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA) - Iraq (A)*: Iran orders its proxy forces to attack U.S. personnel or U.S. contractors in Iraq in order to compel a U.S. withdrawal. This COA directly places forces at risk and might escalate beyond Iraq. It is not likely unless the U.S. decides to increase the U.S. troop presence in Iraq or to take aggressive action against Iran after the U.S. policy

review concludes, such as imposing meaningful secondary sanctions against the entire IRGC. Iran’s proxies could also target U.S. personnel that deploy to Iraq to secure the highways from Jordan and Saudi Arabia to Baghdad.

- *MDCOA - Iraq (B)*: Iran deploys ground forces into Diyala Province in eastern Iraq in order to secure the province. This course of action is likely if ISIS shifts reinforcements to Diyala Province or has unspent capabilities there – not visible through open sources – that let ISIS achieve a major breakthrough. This COA is dangerous because it would further undermine Iraqi state sovereignty and set a precedent for foreign intervention in Iraq that could embolden Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to increase his own involvement in northern Iraq.

Supporting Effort (enduring): Iran will prioritize efforts to strengthen the capabilities and cohesion of the Axis of Resistance. Iran will attempt to limit the costs of its ongoing interventions in Iraq and Syria by discouraging large-scale troop deployments or sudden, massive military campaigns by Assad.⁷⁰ It will work to preserve and expand its existing proxy forces including Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shi’a militias. Iran will also continue supporting the al Houthi movement in Yemen, although it remains unlikely to expand that support dramatically in either scope or scale.⁷¹

Supporting Effort (enduring): Iran will vigorously oppose the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. It will try to block or delay a declaration of independence in principle and in practice after the independence referendum. It will use military means to deny the incorporation of contested terrain and key positions into Kurdistan. It will begin by positioning military assets to deter Kurdish forces, but is willing to use force if deterrence fails. Its primary instrument will be its proxy forces within the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units⁷². Iranian-backed PMU are currently positioned on the southern and western borders of the oil-rich disputed Kirkuk Province, currently largely under Kurdish control. They are also present around contested areas in both Diyala and Salah al Din Provinces. Iran will also use coercive means to deter local councils in disputed areas from joining the referendum. This effort is already underway.⁷³ Iran will also pressure Arab politicians to reject the referendum, and possibly to oppose it through force.

FRICTION: Iran’s primary source of friction will be the continued threat posed by ISIS in Iraq. Iran is unlikely to press for the rapid expulsion of the U.S. from Iraq if it would risk a resurgence by

ISIS. Iran will opt to increase political pressure on Baghdad to gradually reduce and ultimately end the U.S. presence in Iraq. Iran will likely wait until after anti-ISIS operations in Kirkuk and Anbar provinces conclude to push this campaign. Iran could nonetheless orchestrate a more dramatic campaign to expel the U.S. from Iraq if it perceived a more manageable threat from ISIS and al Qaeda or a more urgent threat from the U.S. Iran could pursue this option if the U.S. attempts to increase its force posture in Iraq or challenges Iran elsewhere in the Middle East.

Iran must also balance its hostile policy towards the U.S. and Israel against its obligations in the Russo-Iranian coalition. Iran will avoid generating a major confrontation with the U.S. in Syria. Iran will also refrain from openly spoiling negotiated deals between the U.S. and Russia in Syria. Iran could reevaluate its priorities if tensions escalate between the U.S. and Iran elsewhere in the Middle East. Increased pushback by the U.S. against Iran — including sanctions legislation passed this year and tougher rhetoric — remains unlikely to generate such a decision in the absence of wider threats to Iran’s core strategic interests.

Iranian MDCOA in Iraq B

Iran Deploys Ground Forces to Diyala Province

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heightened ISF violence against Sunni populations in recaptured Mosul;¹⁶⁸ • ISIS attacks along the Iraq-Iran border;¹⁶⁹ • Attacks by ISIS in front of government buildings within downtown Baquba;¹⁷⁰ • Iranian-backed militia and ISF conduct operations to clear ISIS from Diyala;¹⁷¹ • Displacement of civilians from major cities along the Diyala River Valley;¹⁷² • ISIS fighters retreat to northeastern Diyala after losing their strongholds in Mosul and Tal Afar.¹⁷³ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iranian-backed militias and ISF operations to clear ISIS from Diyala fail to mitigate ISIS’s attacks in Diyala Province; • Iran mobilizes IRGC units at border crossings; • Iran reinforces IRGC and/or Artesh units in Kermanshah Province, Iran; • Fighters from the Iranian proxy Badr Organization displace from Diyala to northern and eastern Salah ad Din, indicating another force will move into Diyala to secure Iran’s interests.

ISIS

Grand Strategic and Strategic Objectives Relevant to the Syrian Theater:

- Avoid defeat by maintaining the capability and will to fight
 - Generate a diversified and sustainable pool of resources and recruits
 - Expand the ranks of ISIS's trained fighting force by exporting operational art to new theaters
- Start and win an apocalyptic war with the West
 - Polarize Western society and drive Muslims to join ISIS⁷⁴
 - Spark sectarian wars between Muslims and non-Muslims
- Maintain and expand a physical caliphate
 - Break modern states in the Sunni majority world
 - Maintain a minimum claim to territorial control under its caliphate
 - Conquer more territory under the banner of its caliphate

Current State of Play:

ISIS has lost terrain and leadership but retains the capability to design, resource, and execute global campaigns.⁷⁵ The group retains combat capability and command-and-control across all of its geographic rings, including its core terrain in Iraq and al Sham, the regional power centers of the Muslim world (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey), the rest of the Muslim world, and the non-Muslim world in Europe and Asia. It successfully mounted a sustained and layered defense of Mosul from October 2016 to July 2017.⁷⁶ It has thus far replicated this defensive strategy in Raqqa.⁷⁷ It sustained its terrorist campaign designed to undermine regional power centers in Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, as evidenced by a major operation in Tehran in June 2017 and multiple attempted attacks in Saudi Arabia and Turkey in 2017.⁷⁸ ISIS expanded the focus and resourcing of its overseas campaign to new countries, including the UK, Spain and the Philippines, where the group

seized the city of Marawi in May 2017 and mounted a sustained defense against security forces.⁷⁹ These coordinated and effective operations demonstrate ISIS's organizational strength.

ISIS's global operations have transcended control of terrain in Iraq and Syria. Former ISIS Spokesperson Mohammad al-Adnani highlighted this transition during a speech in May 2016 in which he asserted that "we don't do jihad to...control a land."⁸⁰ ISIS is executing an interim strategy focused on drawing out the tactical fight in Iraq and Syria to buy further space and time to develop its global organization. Its ground campaign in Iraq and Syria remains vital. It incorporates frontal attacks across its depth as well as explosive attacks behind enemy lines in Baghdad and western Syria. ISIS developed its external operations concurrently to set conditions for the current attack phase, particularly in Europe and Asia. ISIS retains a strong network capable of exporting doctrine and capabilities to new frontiers. ISIS leveraged signature ground tactics in Afghanistan and the Philippines in 2017, indicating the transfer of knowledge outside of the Arab world.⁸¹ ISIS-linked groups in the Philippines are demonstrating unusual operational coherence despite a sustained counter-attack by security forces in Marawi.⁸²

ISIS is organizing a greater volume of attacks in Europe despite increased efforts to interdict its networks since 2015. European authorities have not eradicated the network or forced it to revert to less sophisticated operations. ISIS continues to adapt and expand its operations in the West. ISIS's attacks in the UK and Spain highlight the conversion of long-standing support zones into attack zones.⁸³ ISIS's international networks continue to pose an asymmetric challenge to security forces across Europe, evidenced by the June 2017 interdiction of a six-member cell spread across the UK, Spain, and Germany.⁸⁴ ISIS also reportedly developed a specialized laptop bomb that highlights its continued attention to escalating attacks against the West.⁸⁵ The U.S. underscored the seriousness of this threat by issuing restrictions on airports across the Middle East, ultimately resulting in new travel procedures, as well as a broad travel warning

of increased terror threats from ISIS and al Qaeda in Europe.⁸⁶ The rate of attacks consistent with ISIS's calls for "lone jihad" in the west quadrupled from January 2014 to September 14, 2017, moreover.⁸⁷ The rising rate of these attacks demonstrates the continued resonance of ISIS's messaging despite the group's losses of terrain and leadership and demonstrate that the US-led anti-ISIS coalition's focus on terrain is failing to set conditions that decrease ISIS's resonance.

ISIS is also increasing its efforts to generate a sustained attack campaign in Russia, but ISW-CTP has not yet assessed those efforts in detail. The scale of the ISIS penetration into Russia is likely larger than Russian media is claiming. Subsequent ISW-CTP reports will examine the ISIS threat to Russia.

Current and Future Plans:

Main Effort – Global Attacks (enduring): ISIS retains its strategic main effort to polarize and radicalize the non-Muslim majority world. ISIS will pursue generational polarization campaigns in Europe and Southeast Asia through attacks targeting civilians, public transportation, and security forces in major cities. ISIS's focus on terrain in the Philippines indicates that ISIS intends to push the frontline of its ground war further into the territory of the non-Muslim majority world. ISIS seeks to use its ground campaign to further polarize Philippine communities and kick start a renewed phase of recruitment in East Asia. ISIS will continue to expand its coordinated attack campaign in Europe. ISIS will most likely conduct attacks in Sweden and Finland, where levels of ISIS-inspired activity are rising. ISIS also continues to attempt to generate attacks in the U.S., including cyberplanner activity. ISW has included assessments of ISIS's efforts outside the Iraq and Syria theaters because they relate directly to the organization's loss of terrain in those countries.

ISIS has lost terrain and leadership but retains the capability to design, resource, and execute global campaigns.

Main Effort – Iraq (re-emphasized): ISIS will accelerate its campaign to weaken major regional power centers in the Middle East. ISIS intends to spark a regional sectarian war that would break strong states in the Muslim World and thereby usher in the post-state Islamic Caliphate.⁸⁸ ISIS's coordinated

attack on Tehran indicated that the group is prepared to escalate its direct confrontation with Iran. ISIS intends to draw Iran deeper into Iraq and Syria in order to weaken the state or invoke backlash from Saudi Arabia. The focal point of this campaign will be northern Diyala province in eastern Iraq, exploiting the seam between Iraqi Kurds and Iran.

- ***MLCOA – Iraq:*** ISIS will fix Iranian-backed militias in remote areas of Diyala and contests their control of Baquba. Iran will consolidate PMU reinforcements to Diyala from other locations, especially south and west of Hawija. ISIS remnants from Hawija will displace to conduct operations in Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah ad Din, and southern Ninewa. ISIS will exploit Arab-Kurdish tensions along the Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs) after the Kurdish referendum to cultivate support and revive spectacular attacks. ISIS will also launch a military campaign to extend its control along the Euphrates River Valley in Western Iraq, aiming to seize Ramadi. ISIS has been conducting attacks within Ramadi as of mid-2017.⁸⁹ ISIS re-infiltrated the city alongside returning displaced civilians shortly after the ISF cleared Ramadi in late 2015.⁹⁰ ISIS will conduct diversionary operations in Western Anbar province targeting the ISF and PMU. ISIS will also continue its attacks against security forces along the Tigris River between Tikrit and Qayyarah to divert security forces from Anbar province. ISIS will continue raids within the Baghdad Belts at Jurf al Sakhar, Amiriyat al Fallujah, Tarmiyah, and Balad. These maneuvers cohere with the previous ground campaigns by ISIS and AQI around Baghdad. These operations will run concurrently with the main effort against Iran in Diyala Province.

ISIS MLCOA IRAQ

ISIS Prioritizes Campaign in Diyala Province against Iranian Proxies and Disputed Internal Boundaries

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heightened ISF violence against Sunni populations in recaptured Mosul;¹⁷⁹ • ISIS attacks along the Iraq-Iran border;¹⁸⁰ • Attacks by ISIS in front of government buildings within downtown Baquba;¹⁸¹ • Iranian-backed militias and ISF conduct operations to clear ISIS from Diyala;¹⁸² • Displacement of civilians from major cities along the Diyala River Valley;¹⁸³ • Attacks in Kirkuk involving JRTN signatures rather than ISIS signatures;¹⁸⁴ • Ayman al Zawahiri calls for guerrilla war in Iraq;¹⁸⁵ • Increased Iranian military security along the Iran-Iraq border with Diyala;¹⁸⁶ • ISIS fighters continue infiltrating from Hawija into Salah al-Din and Diyala;¹⁸⁷ • Increased ISIS activity in and around Saadiya District;¹⁸⁸ • ISIS fighters cross the Hamrin River to launch intermittent attacks on the Peshmerga in the Qara Teppe and Hamrin areas;¹⁸⁹ • ISIS launches attacks on Peshmerga and PMU forces near Tuz Khurmatu.¹⁹⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diyala provincial government members comment on the threat to Baquba; • ISIS attacks multiple military bases in Diyala; • ISIS conducts a spectacular attack against Shia pilgrims as they travel through Diyala during Ashura; • ISIS conducts additional attacks inside Iranian territory; • The re-emergence of revolutionary rhetoric among the Sunni population on par with 2013 levels.¹⁹¹

Secondary Effort – Syria (enduring): ISIS will continue to conduct isolated attacks against the pro-regime coalition in Syria in support of ISIS's wider campaign against Iran. ISIS will employ spectacular attacks within core regime-held terrain in Damascus, Homs, and Hama cities in order to undermine regime security and support ongoing ISIS operations in Deir ez Zour City. ISIS will seek to disrupt efforts by the pro-regime coalition to sustain a ground line of communication from Palmyra to Deir ez Zour City through intermittent

attacks against regime security installations and infrastructure in the desert surrounding Palmyra.⁹¹ ISIS will meanwhile continue to resource its robust logistic infrastructure and campaign against al Qaeda in Idlib Province.⁹² ISIS will prioritize the preservation of its access to the Syrian-Turkish Border in Idlib Province and western Aleppo Province through continued attacks intended to overwhelm al Qaeda's local security forces.⁹³ ISIS will also continue to target religious officials

and infrastructure in an attempt to undermine al Qaeda's governance efforts in Idlib Province.⁹⁴

- *MDCOA - Jordan*: ISIS launches a successful campaign to destabilize the Kingdom of Jordan through attacks against security services, tourism, and the legitimacy of the Jordanian monarchy. ISIS activates latent support networks in Southern and Eastern Jordan as well as cross-border flows of fighters and weapons from Iraq and Syria. ISIS could also inspire or direct Jordanian security force personnel to target the U.S. anti-ISIS coalition in Jordan.⁹⁵ This campaign could threaten to undermine Jordan's fragile economy, erode faith in the Jordanian Armed Forces, generate public protests against King Abdullah II, and ultimately collapse the Government of Jordan. ISIS may also use such a campaign to thwart the planned ceasefire zone in Southern Syria along the Jordanian border, which the U.S., Russia, and Jordan agreed to implement starting in July 2017.⁹⁶ Even significant destabilization short of state failure would pose a critical threat to the system of U.S. alliances in the Middle East.

Secondary Effort - Afghanistan (enduring): ISIS will expand its operations in Afghanistan in order to break the Afghan state, compete with rival Salafi-jihadi (or Deobandi) groups, expand its territorial and social control, and expand its international networks. ISIS launched an operation in Tora Bora in June 2017 and overran a large Taliban contingent there after a week of intense clashes.⁹⁷ ISIS also continues to launch spectacular attacks in Kabul that exploit the vulnerability of the National Unity Government and the weakness of the Afghan National Security Forces ANSF at a time when both face other threats. ISIS also continues to expand its social control measures in Jowzjan Province, including efforts to implement its own education curriculum in Darzab District, reported in July 2017.⁹⁸

Secondary Effort - Saudi Arabia: ISIS may retain latent capacity within the population and security forces of Saudi Arabia. ISIS may attempt to accelerate social upheaval against the monarchy or conduct a domestic military campaign to weaken Saudi Arabia. ISIS could attempt to leverage dissatisfaction within the security forces at the rise of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. ISIS will benefit passively from concurrent efforts by al Qaeda to recruit and mobilize former political Islamists backed by Qatar, especially in Egypt.

- *MDCOA - Saudi Arabia (black swan)*: ISIS launches a campaign to destabilize the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through attacks against security forces as well as Mecca and Medina. ISIS attempts to leverage dissatisfaction with the rise of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to generate discontent within the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) or Ministry of Defense that ultimately topples the Kingdom. ISIS prioritizes attacking MOI targets in Saudi Arabia in order to undermine public confidence in bin Salman.

FRICION: ISIS's primary source of friction will be determined by the operations undertaken by the U.S., Iraq, and Iran in Iraq and Syria. Coalition clearing operations in Hawija disrupt a long-term ISIS stronghold and could disrupt ISIS's campaign in Diyala. ISIS could fail to provoke Iranian escalation, dampening the intended effect of its campaign in Iraq and Syria. ISIS would likely respond by escalating attacks against shrines as well as Shi'a in Baghdad and Damascus. ISIS could also face friction as Jaysh Rijal al Tariq al Naqshbandi (JRTN) and other former Iraqi insurgent groups resurge. Unidentified insurgents conducted attacks in Kirkuk and possibly Salah ad Din Province in early 2017. The re-emergence of al Qaeda in Iraq or former insurgent movements as competitors for disenfranchised Sunni Arabs would also interfere with ISIS's resurgence in Ninewa and Anbar Provinces.

ISIS MDCOA JORDAN

ISIS Conducts Successful Campaign to Destabilize Kingdom of Jordan

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversionary attacks by ISIS that draw security forces into the eastern desert and away from urban attack zones;¹⁹² • Declared ISIS intent to increase attacks against Jordan;¹⁹³ • Expressed tribal support for attacks against U.S. service members;¹⁹⁴ • High rates of anti-American sentiment in Jordan.¹⁹⁵ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Jordanian raids on ISIS networks in Irbid, Zarqa, and/or Ma'an; • Creation of new Jordanian foreign fighter cell to coordinate attacks in Jordan; • Purges within the Jordanian security forces; • Purges or reshuffling of personnel at military facilities with U.S. presence.

ISIS MDCOA Saudi Arabia (Black Swan)

ISIS Intensifies Campaign to Destabilize Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrests of individuals planning attacks in Mecca, Medina, Jeddah, and Qatif;¹⁹⁶ • House arrests within the royal family, indicating the risk of a contested transfer of power;¹⁹⁷ • Saudi authorities foiled an ISIS-linked terror plot targeting Defense Ministry infrastructure in Riyadh.¹⁹⁸ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purges within the security forces; • Increased overall activity by security forces under the MOI in Mecca, Medina, and Riyadh indicating unusual mobilization; • Increased ISIS attacks against police and other MOI targets.

Al Qaeda

Grand Strategic and Strategic Objectives Relevant to the Syrian Theater:

- Unify the global Salafi-jihadi movement under al Qaeda leadership
 - Establish al Qaeda rather than ISIS as the vanguard and leader of the global Salafi-jihadi movement, particularly within Arab populations
 - Resolve *fitna* with ISIS
- Expel U.S., Russia, and the West from Muslim lands and Israel
 - Remain below the level of U.S. and Western policy redlines in order to continue pursuing local objectives and building local support bases without attracting Western responses
- Transform Muslim societies to reflect al Qaeda's ideology
 - Destroy current secular regimes in Muslim lands and establish governments that rule according to al Qaeda's interpretation of Islam
 - Establish Caliphate across Muslim lands and ultimately around the world

Current State of Play:

Al Qaeda continues to operate from a position of strength in Syria. It has consolidated a durable safe haven in Idlib Province in northern Syria. It is operating largely unchallenged after rebranding as “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham” (HTS) in January 2017 and defeating or absorbing large elements of the remaining acceptable opposition forces in the province. It has co-opted most local service provision, humanitarian aid delivery, and financial networks. Al Qaeda controls most of the supply routes from Turkey into Idlib after Turkey failed to enable Ahrar al Sham to constrain HTS in the province.⁹⁹ Al Qaeda has leveraged its position of strength to refocus its resources and attempt to replicate its success in other parts of western Syria. It dispatched senior officials to reinvigorate efforts to transform the acceptable opposition in Dera’a and Quneitra Provinces in southern Syria in May 2017.¹⁰⁰ The cancellation of U.S. support to select opposition groups will enable al Qaeda’s

effort to absorb and defeat the remaining moderate opposition elements in southern Syria. Al Qaeda also remains positioned to resurge in areas formerly held by ISIS in Northern and Eastern Syria.

Al Qaeda is also growing stronger in other theaters. Al Qaeda is reconstituting itself inside Afghanistan in cooperation with factions of the Taliban.¹⁰¹ It remains focused on expanding its network and operations into the Indian Subcontinent.¹⁰² It adapted to counterterrorism efforts led by the UAE in Yemen in order to preserve its strength and insinuate itself into local conflicts within the Yemeni Civil War.¹⁰³ Al Shabaab retains territorial and social control over parts of south-central Somalia from which it continues to shape conditions in Somalia and launched a campaign to influence the August 2017 Kenyan elections.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, al Qaeda has begun to coopt mobilized ethnic Fulani in the Sahel, expanding its ability to operate outside of zones dominated by the Tuareg in northern Mali, Niger, and southern Libya.¹⁰⁵ The group is actively cultivating additional support in North Africa, including in Algeria and Tunisia.

Current and Future Plans:

Main Effort – Syria (enduring): Al Qaeda will prioritize the preservation and expansion of its current safe haven in Western Syria. Al Qaeda will concentrate its main effort in southern Syria where it will position itself to spoil the de-escalation zone established by the U.S., Russia, and Jordan. Al Qaeda will continue to transform the Syrian opposition in its own image from within until or unless there are anti-al Qaeda clearing operations in southern Syria.

Al Qaeda also seeks to absorb ISIS remnants in Syria through co-optation or coercion as ISIS loses Raqqa City. Al Qaeda will continue efforts to dismantle the existing ISIS network in Idlib by destroying ISIS leadership in the province and absorbing the remaining ISIS fighters.¹⁰⁶ Al Qaeda also intends to widen its network beyond its formal, pre-existing structures. Al Qaeda leadership will create additional factions including new structures parallel to HTS in order to obscure its identity. Al Qaeda is also preparing to lead a renewed insurgency

in eastern Syria and Iraq after the defeat of ISIS. Al Qaeda Emir Ayman al Zawahiri has specifically called for al Qaeda in Syria to support Sunni Arabs in Iraq.¹⁰⁷ Al Qaeda may establish new structures that enable Iraqi leaders and members within al Qaeda to redeploy to Iraq. Al Qaeda will intensify its efforts to infiltrate fighters and resources into its historic safe havens in Raqqa City and Deir ez Zour Province in the wake of clearing operations by the U.S. anti-ISIS coalition and Russo-Iranian Coalition in Northern and Eastern Syria.¹⁰⁸

- *MLCOA – Syria:* Al Qaeda establishes a safe haven in Southern Syria from which it can spoil the ceasefire and launch anti-Assad operations. Al Qaeda forms joint rebel military and governance structures in Dera'a Province by exploiting rebel grievances stemming from U.S. demands to halt anti-Assad operations and the cancellation of the U.S. support to vetted opposition groups. Al Qaeda spoils the ceasefire, but only after it has set conditions to lead a joint rebel offensive against the Assad regime in Southern Syria. Al Qaeda will use its safe haven in Southern Syria to defeat the non-jihadist opposition in the long-term. Al Qaeda will likewise exploit a potential de-confliction zone in northwest Syria to consolidate its recent gains and prepare for future offensive operations against the Assad regime.¹⁰⁹ Al Qaeda will also continue spectacular attacks in core regime-held terrain on the Syrian coast and in Damascus and Aleppo City.¹¹⁰ Al Qaeda will also begin to reconstitute the Euphrates River Valley through a tribal insurgency against the YPG and ISIS. Al Qaeda will deploy leadership to eastern Syria and re-activate its historic networks to spark a tribal uprising against ISIS in eastern Syria. Al Qaeda will position itself to absorb ISIS fighters and structures amidst SDF and regime clearing operations in Raqqa and Deir ez Zour Provinces. Al Qaeda will target seams between the YPG and Arab elements of the SDF in order to undermine the SDF's cohesion. Al Qaeda linked elements may join Arab units within the SDF in order to position

Al Qaeda continues to operate from a position of strength in Syria.

al Qaeda to exploit grievances within the local population in Raqqa and set conditions for an anti-YPG uprising in Raqqa City after its recapture by the SDF and the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition.

Main Effort – global (new): Al Qaeda will focus on building its new cadre of public-facing senior leadership.¹¹¹ Zawahiri will retain his leading role in al Qaeda and continue to address Muslims within the Muslim World. Hamza bin Laden, Osama bin Laden's son, will expand his role of inspiring attacks by Muslims in the West to also include messages for the global Muslim community.¹¹² Senior al Qaeda leaders operating in regional theaters will echo the guidance of this global-level pairing. The emirs of local al Qaeda affiliates will also issue calls to promote its global strategy and mobilize local support. Al Qaeda in Syria Emir Abu Mohammed al-joulani will likely retain a lower profile in order to limit the visible depth of al Qaeda in Syria. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula will continue to provide sanctuary to senior global leaders such as Ibrahim Abu Saleh, Ibrahim al Qosi, and Khaled Batarfi. Al Qaeda's guidance on jihad and stated objectives will remain consistent with that previously issued for Eid al Fitr.¹¹³

- *MDCOA – West:* Al Qaeda continues to develop and refine its external attack capabilities in order to launch them against the West when al Qaeda senior leadership decides to resume offensive attacks. Al Qaeda could conduct a mass-casualty attack against an American or European target that it planned and coordinated from its sanctuary in Syria. Al Qaeda's bomb-making expertise remains innovative and could out-pace homeland security countermeasures. It remains focused on designs that target commercial airliners. Al Qaeda could also activate trained attack cells in the West to conduct a mass-casualty combined small-arms and explosives attack. The timeline between deciding to attack and planning and executing the attack is likely to be short.

AQ MLCOA – SYRIA

Al Qaeda Reconstitutes Safe Haven in eastern Syria and Attempts to Spoil International ‘De-Escalation Zones’ in Syria

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assassinations of local rebel religious and governance officials;¹⁹⁹ • Al Qaeda arrests of local rebel and governance officials;²⁰⁰ • Re-deployment of al Qaeda leadership to Southern Syria;²⁰¹ • Formation of new joint rebel military and security structures;²⁰² • IEDs and other insurgent attacks targeting ISIS in Eastern Syria;²⁰³ • Al Qaeda-linked officials previously based in Eastern Syria become more active;²⁰⁴ • Creation of new anti-Kurdish groups by al Qaeda in northern Syria;²⁰⁵ • Statements by AQ-linked groups such as Ahrar al Sham expressing support for potential Turkish operations in Raqqa;²⁰⁶ • AQ-linked clerics and groups issuing statements supporting anti-YPG Kurdish rebel groups;²⁰⁷ • Increased messaging about Kurdish formations within the opposition;²⁰⁸ • Pro-government Turkish media circulating reports of PYD/YPG atrocities against Sunni Arabs in Tel Abyad.²⁰⁹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formation of new joint religious and governance structures; • Al Qaeda-led offensives against pro-regime forces in Southern Syria; • Pro-al Qaeda protests; • Spectacular attacks against Russian ceasefire observation posts; • Assassination campaign against ISIS leadership in eastern Syria; • Deployment of al Qaeda leadership to eastern Syria; • Formation of new tribal-linked groups in eastern Syria; • Al Qaeda-linked units join the SDF; • Redeployment of historical leaders of al Qaeda to eastern Syria; • Overt transfer of personnel or resources to eastern Syria; • Anti-ISIS tribal activity by clans historically linked to al Qaeda in eastern Syria; • Signature al Qaeda attacks against YPG in Raqqa City or northern Syria; • Emergence of competing Sunni Arab judicial and service provision organizations in SDF-held terrain; • Tribal outreach by HTS and its affiliated Sharia officials to Sunni Arabs in Raqqa province; • Assassinations of tribal leaders and local governance officials in Raqqa and Deir ez Zour provinces; • Increased arrests of former Ahrar al Sham and HTS fighters by ISIS across the Euphrates River Valley; • Unclaimed spectacular attacks against YPG in Hasaka and Raqqa Provinces.

Supporting Effort – global (new): Al Qaeda will seek to capture support from disillusioned political Islamists and eliminate vestiges of nationalism among armed Islamists. Both Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and newly-ascendant Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman oppose political Islam as a threat to the Gulf States. Saudi Arabia and the UAE will support efforts in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen to marginalize political Islamists.¹¹⁴ The reduction of public space for political Islam will incentivize some factions to move towards violence to achieve their ends. Al Qaeda will attempt to co-opt these factions into the wider Salafi-jihadi movement.¹¹⁵ Al Qaeda will separately hedge against nationalist agendas among its supporters and allied factions through an information campaign warning against division within jihadist ranks.

Secondary Effort – other theaters: Al Qaeda will retain its current local lines of effort to expand across the Muslim-majority world, especially in Afghanistan, the Indian Subcontinent, Yemen, the Sahel, and northern Africa. Al Qaeda will attempt to conduct attacks in the UAE in retaliation for its role in the Yemeni Civil War as well as in Russia for its role in the Syrian war.¹¹⁶

FRICTION: Al Qaeda faces two primary sources of friction. The first is retaining global support for its efforts in Syria and Iraq. The second is preventing Syrian opposition groups and the Syrian population from accepting a mediated settlement. The pro-regime coalition or the U.S. may prioritize fighting against AQ once the anti-ISIS fight culminates, posing new risks to the organization. Al Qaeda will also need to position itself to navigate disruptions from efforts to consolidate command-and-control under rival opposition structures in Northwestern Syria. Turkey has already begun to organize the opposition under a “National Army” as an alternative to al Qaeda’s unification initiative for rebels in Idlib Province. Turkey and al Qaeda may nonetheless mobilize al Qaeda fighters to launch insurgent operations against the YPG in eastern Syria or to support Turkish cross-border operations into the YPG-held Afrin Canton. Al Qaeda also faces a sustained threat from ISIS and its affiliates. ISIS could intensify its assassination and spectacular attack campaign against al Qaeda in Idlib Province after its defeat in Raqqa City. These pressures could disrupt al Qaeda’s wider governance project and force it to redeploy key assets back to Idlib Province. The ongoing rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia could also threaten long-standing funding streams to al Qaeda from the Gulf States.

AQ MDCOA – WEST

Al Qaeda Refines and Executes External Attacks against the West

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Qaeda’s top bomb-maker Ibrahim al Asiri remains at large and has trained a cadre of skilled bomb-makers;²¹⁰ • Al Qaeda sanctuaries provide training ground to coordinate attacks; • Al Qaeda continues recruitment of foreign fighters, including individuals who may not be flagged by security service; • U.S. SOF raid in early 2017 captures intelligence regarding AQAP laptop bomb technology.²¹¹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recently disrupted and centrally planned al Qaeda plots against targets in the West.

Turkey

Grand Strategic and Strategic Objectives Relevant to the Syrian Theater:

- Consolidate authoritarian power under Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan
 - Cultivate religious-nationalist coalition to win upcoming elections
 - Marginalize or silence political opponents in the Justice and Development Party (AKP)
 - Neutralize political power held by the Turkish Armed Forces
- Reassert Turkey's role as independent regional power vis-à-vis the U.S. and NATO
 - Prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdistan
 - Deny long-term expansion of regional influence by Russia and Iran
 - Reduce military dependence on the U.S. and NATO
 - Pursue closer economic and political cooperation with Russia and China
- Achieve full or partial integration into the European Union
- Reestablish a quasi-imperial sphere of influence over portions of the former Ottoman Empire
 - Promote governance by Sunni Islamists across the Middle East
 - Support armed Islamists in failed states in the Middle East and North Africa
 - Secure long-term spheres of influence in Northern Syria and Northern Iraq
 - Achieve economic dominance over portions of the former Ottoman Empire
- Achieve a position of leadership over the Islamic and Turkic world
 - Legitimize Turkey as a successful democratic state
 - Deepen political ties to minority populations of Turks outside of Turkey
 - Challenge Saudi Arabia and Egypt for leadership of Sunni Arabs
 - Cultivate popular support as a global champion of Muslims

Current State of Play:

Erdogan has positioned himself to successfully consolidate power in Turkey. He organized and won a constitutional referendum to centralize his power under an executive presidential system in April 2017.¹¹⁷ He mobilized nationalist sentiment in his favor by provoking political confrontations with the U.S. and Europe as well as military confrontations with Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).¹¹⁸ He leveraged his authority to restrict press freedoms, purge the military and government services, and imprison thousands of opponents including journalists, academics, activists, and rival politicians from the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP).¹¹⁹ Erdogan will need to reinforce and expand his current support base in order to preserve his political dominance ahead of the 2019 Turkish General Elections.¹²⁰ He will also need to overcome an ongoing economic slowdown that undermines his popular appeal.¹²¹

Erdogan holds a much weaker international position. He failed to prevent progress towards an independent Kurdistan in both northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. He failed to halt U.S. military support to the Syrian Kurdish YPG against ISIS in Raqqa City. The U.S. and Russia have repeatedly blocked his efforts to escalate against the YPG in Northern Syria. Erdogan holds even less leverage against the YPG and PKK in Northern Iraq. His major vector for influence is a loose alignment with Kurdistan Regional President Masoud Barzani, who called his own referendum for an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, set to take place in late September 2017.¹²² Erdogan remains willing and able to launch new interventions against the YPG and PKK in both Iraq and Syria, but seeks to avoid direct escalation against the U.S. Erdogan continues to support a network of opposition groups in Idlib Province as a bargaining chip in his pragmatic relationship with Russia and Iran.¹²³

Erdogan possesses a number of tools to project military force and diplomatic influence beyond neighboring states. He provides critical political support to the Muslim Brotherhood and HAMAS as well as military aid to armed Islamists in Libya.¹²⁴ He retains overseas military basing in Cyprus,

Qatar, and Somalia. He oversees a robust influence network rooted in humanitarian aid, economic deals, and covert support for Pan-Turkic and Pan-Islamist groups across Africa, Central Asia, the Balkans, and the Gulf.¹²⁵ Erdogan remains willing to leverage these tools to protect his strategic interests as demonstrated by his continued military support for Qatar amidst its ongoing rift with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).¹²⁶ He also holds key sources of leverage over the U.S. and Europe. The U.S. anti-ISIS coalition relies upon critical facilities at Incirlik Airbase in Southern Turkey. The European Union remains beholden to a faltering migrant deal brokered between the EU and Turkey in March 2016, despite possessing leverage in upcoming negotiations for Turkey's EU Customs Union.¹²⁷

Future Plans:

Main Effort (enduring) – Syria: Erdogan will prioritize military operations to prevent the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in Northern Syria. He will mobilize opposition networks including al Qaeda to fuel an insurgency by local Sunni Arabs against the YPG in Raqqa and Hasaka Provinces. He will also expand covert support to the rival Kurdish National Coalition (KNC) to undermine the YPG. Erdogan ultimately intends to set conditions for a limited cross-border intervention against the YPG in northern Syria. He will expand his efforts to establish local governance by Sunni Arabs in Mosul and Raqqa City as well as national-level leadership among Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria. Erdogan will expand his efforts to recruit, train, and equip local Sunni Arabs and Turkmen to block further expansion by the YPG in Northern Syria and to exert influence in Northern Iraq. He will leverage local partners to disrupt the cohesion of the YPG-led SDF. In the next six months, Erdogan will likely pursue the following two COAs:

- **MLCOA – Syria:** Turkey mobilizes al Qaeda and affiliated networks to conduct a tribal insurgency against the YPG in Raqqa and Hasaka provinces. This course of action enables Turkey to weaken the YPG and widen the seams between the YPG

and Arab elements of the SDF without directly risking a U.S. retaliation. It also sets conditions for possible follow-on operations to seize terrain from the YPG. Turkey cultivates clients within the Arab population of Raqqa in order to foster opposition to the SDF and, if possible, field a pro-Turkey candidate in Raqqa's elections scheduled to occur by May 2018.¹²⁸

Supporting Effort – Syria: Erdogan will also prioritize efforts to reconsolidate and defend a favorable opposition partner in Idlib Province in northern Syria following the defeat of Ahrar al-Sham by al Qaeda in Syria. Erdogan will likely attempt to reassert leverage through a new opposition unification initiative under the "National Army" in northern Syria. This new structure is nascent and linked to other Salafi-jihadist groups, including Ahrar al Sham.¹²⁹ He will nonetheless limit his overall support to armed Islamists in western Syria in order to buy space and time to pursue his efforts against the YPG in northern Syria.

Supporting Effort – Iraq: Erdogan will attempt to undermine Kurdish independence efforts through shows of military force, use of economic and non-military leverage, and financial support to selected Iraqi politicians in upcoming provincial and parliamentary elections. He will continue to provide support to ethnic Iraqi Turkmen.

Main Effort – Turkey: Erdogan will continue his military campaign against the PKK in Southern Turkey as well as his political campaign against opposition. Erdogan will continue enacting reforms to implement the presidential system fully ahead of the 2019 local, parliamentary, and presidential elections. He will seek to renegotiate terms of the Turkey-EU Customs Union while undermining and feuding with the German Chancellor.¹³⁰ He will maintain efforts to extradite cleric Fethullah Gulen from the U.S. through ongoing legal challenges and diplomatic rhetoric to mobilize a nationalist electoral base. Erdogan will continue his support to political and armed Islamists across the Middle East and North Africa including Libya, the Palestinian territories, and the Gulf States.

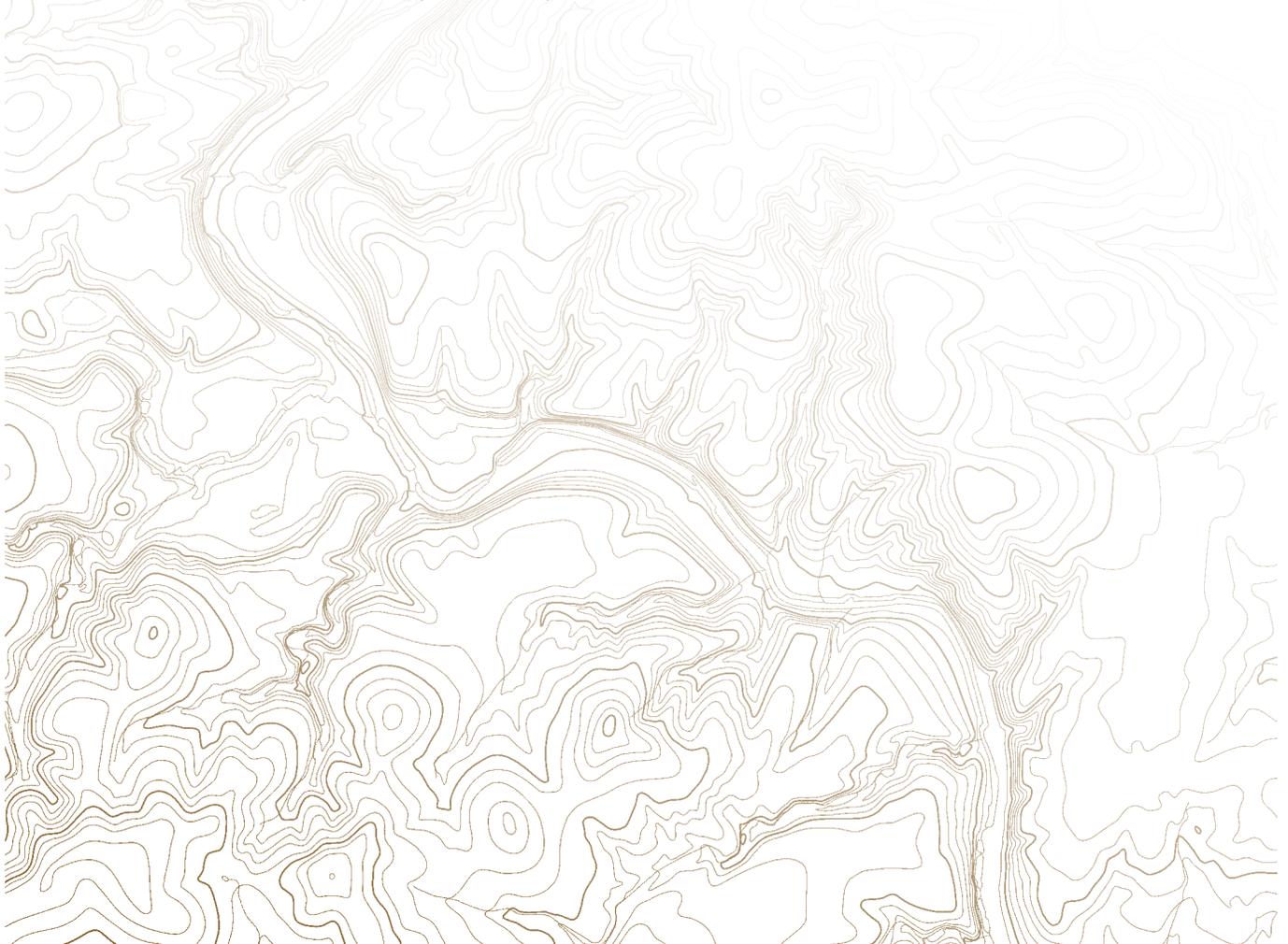
Turkey MLCOA – Syria

Turkey Mobilizes al Qaeda Insurgency against Kurds in Northern Syria

INDICATORS ALREADY OBSERVED:	INDICATORS NOT YET OBSERVED:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of new anti-Kurdish groups by al Qaeda in northern Syria;¹⁷⁴ • Statements by al Qaeda-linked groups like Ahrar al Sham expressing support for potential Turkish operations in Raqqa;¹⁷⁵ • Statements of support towards anti-YPG Kurdish rebel groups by al Qaeda-linked clerics and groups;¹⁷⁶ • Increased messaging about Kurdish formations within the opposition;¹⁷⁷ • Pro-government Turkish media circulates reports of PYD/YPG atrocities against Sunni Arabs in Tel Abyad.¹⁷⁸ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redeployment of historical leaders of al Qaeda to eastern Syria; • Overt transfer of personnel or resources to eastern Syria; • Anti-ISIS tribal activity by clans historically linked to al Qaeda in eastern Syria; • Signature al Qaeda attacks against YPG in Raqqa City or northern Syria; • Emergence of competing Sunni Arab judicial and service provision organizations in SDF-held terrain; • Tribal outreach by HTS and its affiliated sharia officials to Sunni Arabs in Raqqa province; • Assassinations of tribal leaders and local governance officials in Raqqa and Deir ez Zour provinces; • Increased arrests of former Ahrar al Sham and HTS fighters by ISIS across the Euphrates River Valley; • Unclaimed spectacular attacks against YPG in Hasaka and Raqqa Provinces.

FRICITION: Erdogan's primary source of friction will be constraints on his freedom of action generated by his fraught relations with the U.S., Russia, and Europe. Erdogan intends to avoid major conflict with the U.S. or Russia – both of which provide support to the YPG in northern Syria. The U.S. and Russia previously blocked interventions against the YPG by Turkey in Afrin Canton, Manbij, and Hasaka Province in northern Syria. Erdogan will adjust the timing and phasing of his operations to avoid direct interference with the core priorities of the U.S. and Russia in Syria. He will thus postpone large-scale action against the YPG in northern Syria until the end of operations against ISIS in Raqqa City. Russia and Iran also seek to marginalize Erdogan in negotiated settlements for Syria through exclusion from shaping de-escalation zones in Homs and Damascus.¹³¹ Erdogan will also face simultaneous challenges to his domestic and international legitimacy amidst mounting tensions with the EU – particularly Germany. Germany will

seek to formally end Turkey's EU accession process, thereby endangering Turkey's EU Customs Union and Turkey's economic recovery following the 2016 coup attempt. Erdogan's course of action will also be hampered by the limited military capabilities of local partners in Syria. The Sunni Arabs backed by Turkey in northern Syria require sustained Turkish high levels of military support including direct Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) units deployed into northern Syria. Meanwhile, his primary partner in northern Iraq remains limited to Barzani and the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Turkey's opposition to the KDP – led Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum, scheduled for September 25, 2017, adds serious friction to Turkey's relationship with the KDP and could preclude joint operations against the PKK in northern Iraq that Erdogan would otherwise pursue. Erdogan will thus be forced to expend greater investment – and thereby accept greater risk – to achieve his strategic objectives.



DANGEROUS OVERARCHING SCENARIOS

Jihadists benefit from current regional trends.

Al Qaeda will continue to grow stronger and will exploit security and political challenges in Iraq in order to expand. The growing U.S. alignment with Russia and Iran in Syria benefits al Qaeda by appearing to justify al Qaeda's narrative and by fueling local resentment over U.S. inaction against Syrian and Russian war crimes below the use of chemical weapons. Al Qaeda will also grow stronger as it channels Syrian opposition discontent with the level of U.S. support for the YPG. Further U.S. alignment with the Russo-Iranian coalition will accelerate al Qaeda's rise. ISIS meanwhile has both the opportunity and the capability to resurge, particularly in Iraq. The growing competition for access to resources and for political power between anti-ISIS forces in Iraq creates seams that give ISIS a plethora of opportunities to derail or erode stabilization efforts. ISIS's upward trajectory in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, signals that the threat to stability in both countries will continue to grow in coming months even if ISIS does not manage to execute a "black swan" event.

The overlapping effects of Russia, Iran, Turkey, and ISIS could compel or coerce the U.S. to draw down its troop presence and basing in the region. Such a drawdown would increase instability in the region and cede further opportunity to Salafi-jihadis. Russia's growing efforts to acquire influence in Iraq threaten to constrain the U.S. even further and assist Iran's effort to preclude the necessary level of U.S. involvement in Iraq to complete military operations against ISIS and set conditions that will prevent its return. Turkey could still revoke U.S. access to Incirlik over continued opposition to America's support for the YPG. Radicalization and anti-U.S. sentiment could increase the threat level to U.S. troops in Jordan significantly enough to warrant a

diminution of U.S. reliance upon its bases in the kingdom and a constraint on U.S. ability to expand its force presence in Jordan to support clearing operations in southeastern Syria. The logical redundant position for a strategic base is within Saudi Arabia. Consolidating on a position in Saudi Arabia could drive the region to an extreme that triggers other dangerous and escalatory scenarios, however.

Regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran is on a path to escalation.

Saudi Arabia and Iran could enter a dangerous escalation cycle over the next six months. Saudi Arabia intends to pursue an aggressive stance against Iran in the Middle East following the rise of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Saudi Arabia also intends to pursue its wider crackdown on the foreign backers of political Islamists – particularly Turkey and Qatar. The outcome of Saudi Arabia's policies is likely to be counter-productive. This belligerent stance will likely drive Turkey and Qatar towards closer alignment with the Russo-Iranian coalition in Iraq and Syria. This outcome will strengthen Iran's strategic

President Assad is not sovereign or capable of maintaining long-term security in Syria with or without the sustained support of Russia and Iran.

position in the region and undermine the U.S., which makes further escalation more likely. Further Iranian success consolidating political power in Iraq could drive Saudi Arabia to back Sunni insurgents in Iraq rather than supporting moderate Shi'a and national-level Sunni politicians, ending Saudi Arabia's more enlightened policy toward the upcoming Iraqi elections. ISIS also intends to conduct attacks designed to spark escalation cycles between Saudi Arabia and Iran. A weak U.S. policy on Iran will incentivize growing escalation by Saudi Arabia. A more aggressive U.S. policy toward Iran could have a variety of outcomes, however. It could trigger immediate Iranian reprisals against U.S. forces in the region or against Saudi Arabia or

both. It could embolden Saudi Arabia to conduct unilateral anti-Iranian measures of its own that are not calibrated with U.S. policy and risk provoking further escalation. Saudi Arabia and Iran could ultimately risk crossing a threshold into limited direct conflict in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and the Persian Gulf.

Kurdish quests for independence could result in new wars. Kurdish bids for independence threaten to fuel insurgency, because both Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria control disputed terrain and intend to take it with them when they become independent. Regional actors are also likely to escalate against the Kurdish populations in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and possibly Iran in an effort to preclude or constrain the scope of independence. ISIS also intends to target these seams by conducting attacks along disputed boundaries along Iraqi Kurdistan as well as latent seams between Kurds and Arabs. These overlapping stressors will fuel a widening zone of disorder along the Turkish-Syrian and Turkish-Iraqi borders that further fractures Iraq and Syria, generates new opportunities for Salafi-jihadi groups, and sparks internecine conflict among the preferred local partners of the U.S. anti-ISIS coalition.

Concluding Recommendations:

The U.S. is not powerless to avert the outcomes detailed in the forecast. The U.S. could forestall and reverse many of these scenarios through prudent and timely action. The U.S. must generate and implement policies that support its clear and proactive strategic objectives in the Middle East. These objectives include the containment of Iran and Russia; the defeat of the Salafi-jihadi movement; the protection of regional allies; and the establishment of independent, representative, and unitary states in Iraq and Syria. These objectives remain integral to advancing wider U.S. grand strategic objectives to secure the American people and homeland; protect, retain, and promote by example our free and democratic way of life; retain and promote a free market international economic system, which relies

on the free global flow of people and goods; protect and strengthen a rules-based international order; and retain and strengthen our alliances to survive and prosper in the face of common dangers.¹³²

The U.S. will need to reset several policy frames to achieve these objectives. First, the U.S. must recognize that President Assad is not sovereign or capable of maintaining long-term security in Syria with or without the sustained support of Russia and Iran. Assad remains one of the primary drivers fueling radicalization and recruitment for ISIS, al Qaeda, and the wider Salafi-jihadi movement. The existence of his regime perpetuates the regional sectarian conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which will likely escalate over the next six months. The removal of Assad is a necessary condition to achieve a durable solution to the Syrian Civil War. Any solution will also require a commitment from the international community to secure the country with professional and non-sectarian security forces committed to installing a democratic and representative government. The U.S. must identify ways to apply meaningful pressure against Assad, Russia, and Iran rather than pursuing avenues for cooperation and accommodation.

Second, the U.S. must recognize that Assad and the Russo-Iranian Coalition are destabilizing actors in the Middle East. Their definitions of meaningful security do not require them to defeat Salafi-jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria. Their actions, in fact, increase ethno-sectarian tension in ways that fuel the radicalization among local Sunni Arabs. They remain incapable of securing Iraq and Syria to a degree acceptable to the U.S. and Europe. The U.S. cannot rely on the Russo-Iranian Coalition to defend American national security at home even as Russia and Iran escalate against U.S. interests abroad. The U.S. will face greater risk over the coming months to its forces in Iraq and Syria at the hands of proxy forces backed by Iran. The U.S. will need to establish a meaningful deterrence posture in Iraq and Syria to constrain the actions of Russia, Iran, and Assad as a necessary condition to pursue other vital policy objectives.

Third, the U.S. must withstand the temptation to endorse diplomatic solutions that partition Iraq and Syria. These proposals serve only to aid regional adversaries and accelerate regional instability. The patchwork of ‘de-escalation zones’ promoted by Russia, Iran, and Turkey in Syria, for example, generates local spheres of influence that impede rather than advance a path to long-term stability. The U.S. should also avoid becoming ensnared in the various separatist projects promoted by Kurds in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. will need carefully to weigh its support for local partners in the fight against ISIS to avoid providing de facto or official endorsement of new state structures in northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan should they emerge. The U.S. will need to reverse its deepening partnership with the Syrian Kurdish YPG to prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdish Rojava in northern Syria. The further or permanent disintegration of Iraq and Syria would accelerate the hegemonic interests of Iran as well as the continued dominance of Salafi-jihadis within the ungoverned regions held by Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria.

The U.S. must consider how to reinforce its own military positions in the region in the face of a deliberate and expanding threat from Russia in the Middle East.

Fourth, the U.S. must consider how to reinforce its own military positions in the region in the face of a deliberate and expanding threat from Russia in the Middle East. Turkey and Jordan are particularly vulnerable to cooptation by the Russo-Iranian coalition. The U.S. could begin to stabilize its regional position by retaining and expanding its presence in Eastern Syria. The U.S. could leverage this footprint to build a capable ground partner among local Sunni Arabs against ISIS, block further consolidation by the Russo-Iranian coalition, and delay the separatist project of the YPG in Northern Syria. The U.S. should also remove itself as a signatory to any ‘de-escalation zone’ outlined by Russia and refuse to engage in similar future agreements brokered by the Russo-Iranian coalition.

The U.S. retains the diplomatic weight and military might to dictate the terms of long-term security in Syria and Iraq. It must not surrender this role to adversaries that intend to undermine its own national security.



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