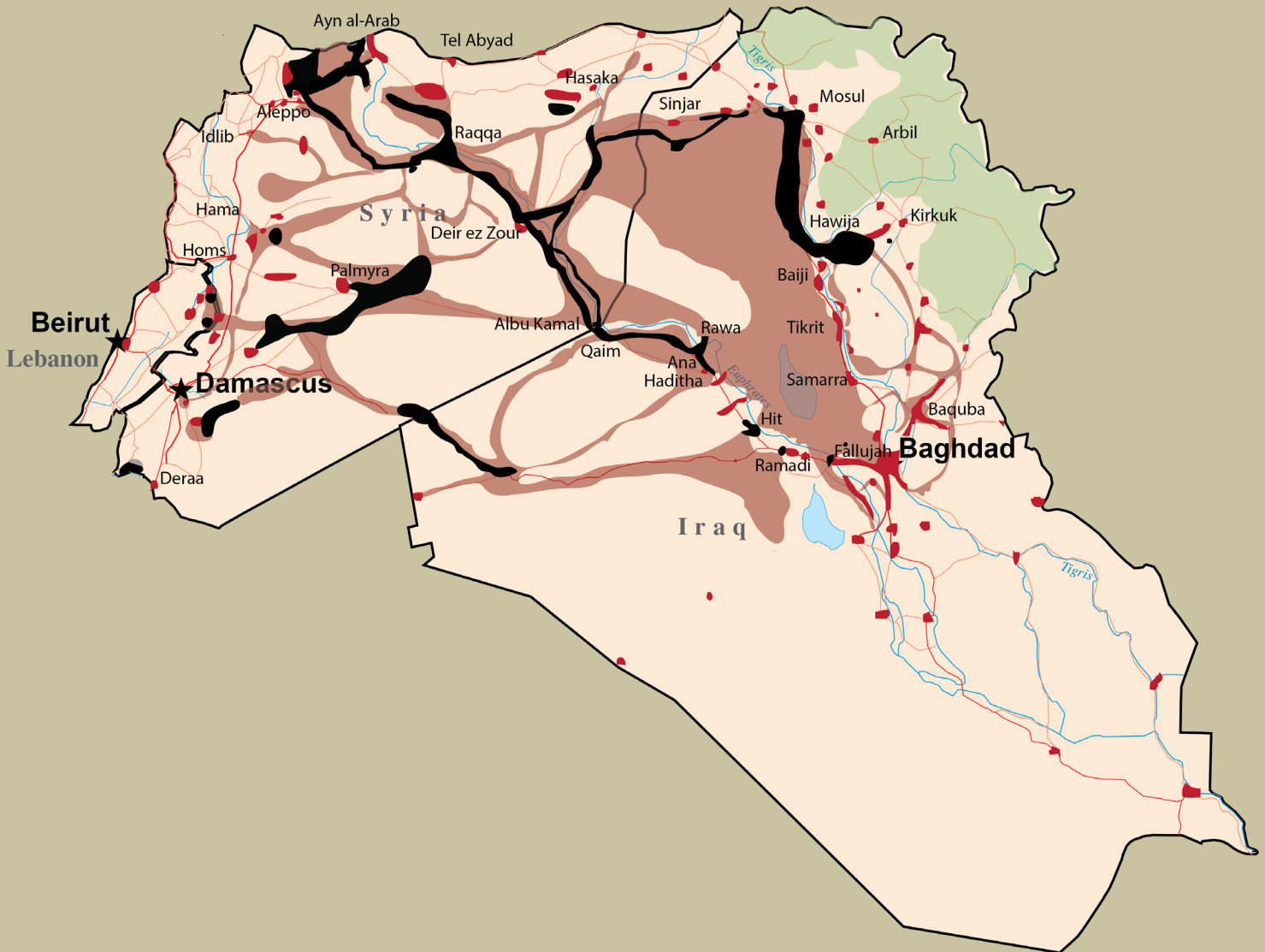


# U.S. GRAND STRATEGY: DESTROYING ISIS AND AL QAEDA, REPORT THREE

## JABHAT AL NUSRA AND ISIS: SOURCES OF STRENGTH



Jennifer Cafarella, Harleen Gambhir, and Katherine Zimmerman





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**U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and al Qaeda,  
Report Three**

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## COVER PHOTO KEY

**CONTROL ZONE:** An area where ISIS exerts physical/psychological pressure to assure that individuals/groups respond as directed.

**ATTACK ZONE:** An area where ISIS conducts offensive maneuvers.

**SUPPORT ZONE:** An area free of significant action against ISIS and which permits logistics and administrative support of ISIS's forces.

-  ISIS Control Zone
-  ISIS Attack Zone
-  ISIS Support Zone
-  Iraqi Kurdistan

Cover: The Institute for the Study of War's "ISIS Sanctuary Map," a signature product depicting ISIS's control, attack, and support zones across Iraq and Syria. This version, dated February 9, 2015, demonstrates the breadth of ISIS's territorial Caliphate.

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

[understandingwar.org](http://understandingwar.org)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jennifer Cafarella is the Evans Hanson Fellow at the Institute for the Study of War where she focuses on the Syrian civil war and opposition groups. Her research focuses particularly on the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and their military capabilities, modes of governance, and long-term strategic vision. She is the author of *Likely Courses of Action in the Syrian Civil War: June–December 2015*, and *Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: An Islamic Emirate for al-Qaeda*. Ms. Cafarella is a graduate of the Hertog War Studies Program and has dealt extensively with the media acting as a resource for NPR’s “All Things Considered,” Voice of America, the BBC, *The New York Times*, CNN, Time, *USA Today*, and others. Ms. Cafarella received her B.A. from the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

Harleen Gambhir is a Counterterrorism Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War. Her work focuses on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and their global strategy, operations, propaganda and digital presence. At ISW, Ms. Gambhir has authored *ISIS Global Strategy: A Wargame*, and *Dabiq: The Strategic Messaging of the Islamic State*. She is a graduate of ISW’s Hertog War Studies Program and has written for *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *Politico* and has appeared on CNN, MSNBC, and BBC. Ms. Gambhir received her B.A. from Harvard University.

Katherine Zimmerman is a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the lead analyst on al Qaeda for AEI’s Critical Threats Project. Her work is focused on the al Qaeda network, particularly al Qaeda’s affiliates in the Gulf of Aden region, and other associated groups in western and northern Africa. Zimmerman is author of *A New Model for Defeating al Qaeda in Yemen* and *The al Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy*. She has testified before Congress about the national security threats emanating from al Qaeda and its network and has been published in outlets such as CNN.com, *The Huffington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. Zimmerman received her B.A. from Yale University.

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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



ISW believes superior strategic insight derives from a fusion of traditional social science research and innovative technological methods. ISW recognizes that the analyst of the future must be able to process a wide variety of information, ranging from personal interviews and historical artifacts to high volume structured data. ISW thanks its technology partner, Praescient Analytics, for their support in this innovative endeavor. In particular, their technology and implementation assistance has supported creating many ISW maps and graphics.

Praescient Analytics is a Veteran Owned Small Business based in Alexandria, Virginia. Its aim is to revolutionize how the world understands information by empowering its customers with the latest analytic tools and methodologies. Currently, Praescient provides several critical services to our government and commercial clients: training, embedded analysis, platform integration, and product customization.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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U.S. GRAND STRATEGY | JABHAT AL NUSRA AND ISIS: SOURCES OF STRENGTH | CAFARELLA, GAMBHIR & ZIMMERMAN | FEBRUARY 2016

---

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	7
INTRODUCTION.....	9
ISIS CENTER OF GRAVITY ANALYSIS.....	11
INTRODUCTION.....	11
CENTER OF GRAVITY.....	12
ISIS GRAND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND CONCEPT OF OPERATION.....	12
ISIS STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES.....	12
ISIS-CONTROLLED TERRAIN AS OF MID-DECEMBER 2015.....	12
ISIS CAPABILITIES, REQUIREMENTS, AND VULNERABILITIES.....	13
CRITICAL CAPABILITIES.....	13
CRITICAL REQUIREMENTS.....	13
CRITICAL VULNERABILITIES.....	14
CRITICAL REQUIREMENTS NOT VULNERABLE TO WESTERN ACTIONS.....	14
CRITICAL CAPABILITIES, REQUIREMENTS, AND VULNERABILITIES TABLE.....	15
INTERFERING WITH ISIS MESSAGING.....	16
TERRITORIAL CONTROL IS THE NEW CENTER OF GRAVITY.....	16
JABHAT AL NUSRA'S CENTER OF GRAVITY.....	17
INTRODUCTION.....	17
JABHAT AL NUSRA'S GRAND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE AND CONCEPT OF OPERATION.....	17
JABHAT AL NUSRA'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES.....	17
JABHAT AL NUSRA'S ORGANIZATION.....	18
JABHAT AL NUSRA'S ORGANIZATIONL STRUCTURE.....	18
JABHAT AL NUSRA'S CENTER OF GRAVITY.....	19
JABHAT AL NUSRA CAPABILITIES, REQUIREMENTS, AND VULNERABILITIES.....	20
CRITICAL CAPABILITIES.....	20
CRITICAL REQUIREMENTS.....	21
JABHAT AL NUSRA'S CAPABILITIES, REQUIREMENTS, AND VULNERABILITIES TABLE.....	22
CRITICAL VULNERABILITIES.....	23
CONCLUSION.....	24

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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U.S. GRAND STRATEGY | JABHAT AL NUSRA AND ISIS: SOURCES OF STRENGTH | CAFARELLA, GAMBHIR & ZIMMERMAN | FEBRUARY 2016

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The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute conducted an intensive multi-week planning exercise to frame, design, and evaluate potential courses of action that the United States could pursue to destroy the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) and al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. ISW and CTP are publishing the findings of this exercise in multiple reports. The first described America's global grand strategic objectives as they relate to the threat from ISIS and al Qaeda. The second defined American strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria, identified the minimum necessary conditions for ending the conflicts there, and compared U.S. objectives with those of Iran, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia in order to understand actual convergences and divergences. This third report assesses the strengths and vulnerabilities of ISIS and al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra to serve as the basis for developing a robust and comprehensive strategy to destroy them. Subsequent reports will provide a detailed assessment of the situation on the ground in Syria and present the planning group's evaluation of several courses of action.

The key findings of this third report are:

- ISIS and al Qaeda are Salafi-jihadi military organizations with distinct sources of strength. The groups interact differently with the populations among which they operate. These differences create distinct requirements for destroying each organization.
- U.S. strategy must operate against both ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra simultaneously. Attacking the source of ISIS's strength—its territorial caliphate—is relatively straightforward to describe. Expelling ISIS's hybrid forces from terrain and setting conditions to prevent their return is a much more complicated task with which American and Western militaries are nevertheless familiar. Jabhat al Nusra, however, is primed to benefit from ISIS's defeat by moving into territories from which ISIS has been cleared. Current efforts that focus on ISIS first and plan to address Jabhat al Nusra second (if at all) have a high probability of facilitating Jabhat al Nusra's expansion.
- Current U.S. policy appears to assume that depriving ISIS of its control of Mosul or ar Raqqa will lead to the organization's collapse. That assumption was likely valid in 2014 and early 2015, but it is no longer true. ISIS has established itself in multiple major urban centers, including Fallujah, Palmyra, and Deir ez Zour. Any of these cities in Iraq or Syria could serve as a de-facto capital for its caliphate were it deprived of Mosul and ar Raqqa. ISIS must be driven from all urban and major rural population centers in Iraq and Syria if it is to be destroyed.
- Jabhat al Nusra draws strength from its intertwinement with Syrian Sunni opposition groups. The slow pace of U.S. strategy and its exclusive prioritization of ISIS are facilitating Jabhat al Nusra's deeper entrenchment within the opposition. It is not possible to attack this intertwinement directly, and even most indirect efforts will likely be counter-productive. Identifying means of separating Jabhat al Nusra from the opposition in order to destroy it is the most difficult intellectual task in developing a strategy for Syria, and the one on which the planning group is continuing to focus.
- All operations against Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS must be integrated into a single coherent strategic concept that takes account of the divergence of interests between the U.S. and its European partners, on the one hand, and Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia on the other. As the recent Russian-Iranian-regime envelopment of Aleppo shows, Moscow and Tehran are pursuing objectives antithetical to American interests and their operations will further radicalize the conflict in ways that entrench ISIS and al Qaeda.
- The U.S. and its Western partners will have to conduct multiple simultaneous and successive operations whose exact course cannot be described fully in advance. The initial operations must focus on altering the conditions on the ground in order to expose Jabhat al Nusra's sources of strength to attack. They must alter the popular narrative that the West has abandoned the Syrian Sunni Arabs in favor of Iran, Assad, and Russia. This task will be impossible as long as the West offers the Sunni no meaningful support in the face of the Assad regime's imminent threat to their survival as individuals and communities.





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## JABHAT AL NUSRA AND ISIS: SOURCES OF STRENGTH

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By Jennifer Cafarella, Harleen Gambhir, and Katherine Zimmerman

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) and the Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute conducted an intensive multi-week exercise to frame, design, and evaluate potential courses of action that the United States could pursue to defeat the threat from the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) and al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. The planning group weighed the national security interests of the United States, its partners, its rivals, and its enemies operating in or influencing the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. It considered how current policies and interests are interacting in this complex environment. It identified the minimum endstates that would satisfy American national security requirements as well as the likely outcomes of current policies. The group also assessed the threat posed by al Qaeda and ISIS to the United States, both in the immediate and long term, and tested the probable outcomes of several potential courses of action that the United States could pursue in Iraq and Syria.

ISW and CTP are publishing the findings of this exercise in multiple reports. This first report examined America's global grand strategic objectives as they relate to the threat from ISIS and al Qaeda.<sup>1</sup> The second report defined American strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria, along with those of Iran, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, and will articulate the minimum required conditions of military-political resolutions to conflicts in Iraq and Syria.<sup>2</sup> This third report assesses the strengths and vulnerabilities of Salafi-jihadi groups operating in Syria and Iraq using a center of gravity analysis framework. Subsequent reports will provide a detailed assessment of the situation on the ground in Syria and present the planning group's evaluation of several courses of action.

### INTRODUCTION

The United States and Europe face mounting threats of terrorist attacks in their homelands directed or inspired by al Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). The conflicts in the Middle East have destabilized the region and are feeding sectarianism globally, creating conditions ripe for al Qaeda and ISIS recruitment and expansion. Current counter-terrorism operations have not contained these threats and will not prevent additional attacks in the West. Al Qaeda and ISIS seek to bring their wars to the West and will succeed in doing so as long as they hold their regional bases in Iraq and Syria.

Al Qaeda and ISIS operate across the Muslim-majority world and are gaining strength. Their local campaigns generate insecurity, drive sectarian conflict, and co-opt local militant Islamist groups into the global Salafi-jihadi movement. Their global insurgency seeks to overthrow the secular international state system, and terrorism is but one tactic among many al Qaeda and ISIS use to advance their objectives.<sup>3</sup> Seemingly local conflicts—such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen—serve to build a global insurgent base. Salafi-jihadi militant organizations that pursue only local objectives for now constitute the core of this base and provide al Qaeda and ISIS with the necessary capabilities the groups need to reconstitute and generate threats against the West.<sup>4</sup>

The Iraq and Syria theater is the primary source of the al Qaeda and ISIS threat. ISIS reconstituted from the remnants of the Islamic State in Iraq (or al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers) in 2011-2013 and began setting the stage for its rapid conquest of Iraqi territory, including the June 2014 capture of Mosul. The ISIS Caliphate is contiguous across the Syrian-Iraqi border, and the group fields an adaptive terrorist army. Its message of victory is resonant: foreign fighters pour into Iraq and Syria to live under and fight for the Caliphate. ISIS media campaigns are nuanced and far-reaching, exploiting publicity from social media and tailoring recruiting messages to specific demographics. Its attraction to would-be recruits is evident in the steady pledges of support and dedications of attacks around the world to ISIS.

Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al Nusra, has established itself within the Syrian opposition over the course of the civil war. ISIS drove it out of its original base in eastern Syria, and it is now thoroughly intertwined in many of the opposition military and governance structures in Western Syria.<sup>5</sup> The safe haven Jabhat al Nusra maintains in Syria is and will remain critical terrain for al Qaeda globally. Jabhat al Nusra leadership signals Syria-focused objectives for the moment, but it has not disavowed future attacks against the West.<sup>6</sup> Already, al Qaeda devotes significant resources to its Syrian base, including having sent a team of veteran operatives to advise, train, and share strategic and tactical expertise.<sup>7</sup>

The public schism between ISIS and al Qaeda over the former's attempt to subsume Jabhat al Nusra in April 2013 divides the global Salafi-jihadi movement into two rival camps, but it has not weakened either group. The competition is instead driving cohesion within the movement and raising the bar for success.<sup>8</sup> The Salafi-jihadi movement is now more capable, more potent, and more resilient as a whole. Destroying either al Qaeda or ISIS alone while leaving the other in place will not secure vital American national security requirements. The U.S. and its partners must also destroy the non-al Qaeda, non-ISIS Salafi-jihadi base on which both groups draw. Any strategy that does not achieve these three aims will ultimately fail, whatever temporary success it might appear to have.

The Obama administration is pursuing a strategy that is not designed to operate against Jabhat al Nusra or other Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria. It initially dismissed the emergence of both ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra as threats to the U.S., describing the groups' objectives as local and highlighting the undesirability of engaging in complex foreign conflicts.<sup>9</sup> The administration framed the initial American intervention in Iraq as one grounded in humanitarian concerns over ISIS's mass atrocities against Iraqi ethnic minorities. It defined America's immediate objectives as degrading ISIS leadership and disrupting its advances to allow the re-formed Iraqi Security Forces to conduct a ground campaign against the group to defeat it. American officials continue to cite leadership attrition and percentage-control of terrain in Iraq as metrics of success against ISIS even as the group strengthens globally.<sup>10</sup> Current discussions surrounding a counter-ISIS intervention in Libya revolve around the same metrics.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. had also been conducting targeted airstrikes against an al Qaeda cell embedded with Jabhat al Nusra in Syria that is or was involved in imminent, direct plots against the U.S. homeland or U.S. interests prior to Russian military intervention.<sup>12</sup>

Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter has framed U.S. objectives against the Islamic State differently since January 2016: "The three key objectives of the counter ISIL military campaign are first, to destroy the ISIL cancer's parent tumor in Iraq and Syria by collapsing its two power centers in ar Raqqa and Mosul. Second, to combat the metastasis of the ISIL tumor worldwide. And third, to protect our people at home."<sup>13</sup> This conceptualization is more accurate, but still insufficient to achieve U.S. vital national interests. The identification of ar Raqqa and Mosul as ISIS's two power centers, or in military technical terms, centers of gravity, in Iraq and Syria might have been accurate in 2014 but is no longer, as this paper will argue.

The U.S. furthermore is not otherwise acting against Jabhat al Nusra or any other non-ISIS Salafi-jihadi group. American

strategy in Iraq and Syria both rest on facilitating diplomatic and political resolutions to the conflict without weakening Jabhat al Nusra or its Salafi-jihadi allies and then relying on local partnered forces to conduct ground campaigns against ISIS. Such a strategy is likely to ensure al Qaeda control over a significant portion of Syria, even if ISIS is defeated.

The current U.S. course of action in Iraq and Syria thus cannot secure U.S. grand strategic interests.<sup>14</sup> ISIS is not contained in Iraq and Syria: it is established in the Sinai and Libya and expanding its influence in Afghanistan. ISIS cells exist in Europe, and there will probably be another organized attack on the continent mirroring the tactics used in Paris in November 2015. ISIS reaches into the U.S., too, with reports of recruiting across all 50 states and the potential for another inspired attack like the December 2015 San Bernardino attack.<sup>15</sup> Jabhat al Nusra is meanwhile strong and growing, and is working to convince other Syrian armed opposition groups to adopt its ideology and objectives. Jabhat al Nusra is a core component of the al Qaeda network and probably poses the most dangerous threat to the U.S. from al Qaeda in the coming years. It cannot be carved away from al Qaeda's global ambitions. Its resources, capabilities, and sanctuary strengthen al Qaeda globally.

The current U.S. approach to Iraq and Syria will thus preserve at minimum a robust al Qaeda safe haven in Syria, and most likely an ISIS safe haven in Syria and continued presence in Iraq. Such an endstate is not acceptable. The planning group assessed in the first two reports of this series, *Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to the U.S. and Europe* and *Competing Visions for Syria and Iraq: The Myth of an Anti-ISIS Grand Coalition*, that the U.S. must pursue a strategy that destroys ISIS, al Qaeda, and the Salafi-jihadi militant base in Iraq and Syria.<sup>16</sup>

Destroying ISIS, al Qaeda, and the Salafi-jihadi militant base in Iraq and Syria is one of the critical requirements for securing American interests. There is no simple solution, and publicly palatable courses of action, such as airstrikes, are inadequate. ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra derive their strengths from different sources in Iraq and Syria, and the planning group assessed that the U.S. will have to define distinct and nuanced approaches to defeat them in different parts of the theater. This paper explores the nature of both groups to identify their centers of gravity, critical capabilities, critical requirements and critical vulnerabilities to serve as the basis for the development of such approaches. The task will not be easy, but neither is it impossible. It is, in any event, essential for securing the American people and way of life.

## ISIS CENTER OF GRAVITY ANALYSIS

### INTRODUCTION

ISIS and al Qaeda enjoy durable and resource-rich safe havens. These sanctuaries provide each organization with all the necessary capabilities to continue to generate threat nodes in Europe and the U.S. for the foreseeable future. The U.S. must develop theater-specific strategies to defeat ISIS and al Qaeda groups, prioritizing among the most dangerous and durable safe havens.<sup>17</sup> These include Iraq, the Egyptian Sinai, and Libya for ISIS as well as Afghanistan, Yemen and Syria for both ISIS and al Qaeda. The first two reports in this series examined the relationship between regional safe havens, the capability of these organizations to conduct spectacular attacks in the West, and the overall conditions required to destroy both ISIS and al Qaeda in Iraq and Syria, the two most critical safe havens.<sup>18</sup>

The purpose of studying the ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra visions, objectives, and way of war in the earlier papers is not only to identify the enemy correctly, but also to allow the framing of a counter-strategy. Jessica Lewis McFate characterized military doctrinal methodology for doing so in 2014.<sup>19</sup>

A counter-strategy requires knowledge of the enemy's sources of power that allow him to act and factor continuously into his strategic calculus. The critical elements of strategic power possessed by ISIS are identifiable through analysis

of its military strategy. The elements of strategic power are doctrinally expressed through a study of an enemy's center of gravity. Center of gravity is a strategic construct introduced by Carl von Clausewitz to describe the primary source of an enemy's strength. The identification of enemy Centers of Gravity emerged into the military craft through the following passage of his master work, *On War*:

*“Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.”<sup>20</sup>*

Center of gravity studies have been expanded in the context of U.S. military planning doctrine to include Critical Capabilities, Critical Requirements, and Critical Vulnerabilities as additional expressions of Strategic Power with which to evaluate a military enemy.

Critical Capabilities are essentially the enemy's means; Critical Requirements are his constraints; and Critical Vulnerabilities are his deficiencies. These concrete planning factors translate directly into an enemy's strategy, and they can be targeted directly to achieve linear battlefield effects. A center of gravity, on the other hand, requires a broader understanding of the behavior of the enemy system, and thus it requires a comprehensive assessment of the other elements of the enemy's strategic power. Targeting a center of gravity

### ELEMENTS OF STRATEGIC POWER<sup>21</sup>

<b>CENTER OF GRAVITY</b>	> The source of power that provides an enemy with moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.
<b>CRITICAL CAPABILITIES</b>	> A means that is considered a crucial enabler for a center of gravity to function and is essential to the accomplishment of the specified or assumed objective(s).
<b>CRITICAL REQUIREMENTS</b>	> An essential condition, resource, or means for a critical capability to be fully operational.
<b>CRITICAL VULNERABILITIES</b>	> An aspect of a critical requirement which is deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack that will create decisive or significant effects.

achieves nonlinear destructive effects against an enemy. This study will therefore identify the Critical Capabilities, Critical Requirements, and Critical Vulnerabilities of ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra before providing an assessment of their Centers of Gravity, which may be targeted in order to achieve exponential effects upon the enemy.

## CENTER OF GRAVITY

**Control of terrain to serve as a physical caliphate is now the principal center of gravity of ISIS because it provides religious legitimacy, military capacity, the ability to impose governance, and a globally resonant message.**

The Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham's declaration of its caliphate in June 2014 fundamentally altered the basis of its own legitimacy. It also changed the global discourse within the Salafi community about how to advance the movement. The declaration of the Caliphate has created an ideological split within the global Salafist movement, in fact, with al Qaeda leaders and loyalists rejecting the validity of the Caliphate and, thus, of ISIS. ISIS previously alternated between being an insurgent group that did not control territory and a quasi-conventional force that did. The declaration of the Caliphate requires ISIS to continue to control and govern terrain, however. ISIS without territory and people to rule is no longer ISIS. Control of terrain to serve as a physical caliphate is now the principal center of gravity of ISIS because it provides religious legitimacy, military capacity, the ability to impose governance, and a globally resonant message.

The control and governance of terrain is also a center of gravity from the standpoint of the threat ISIS poses to the West. Possession of uncontested safe-havens; populations from which to extract resources and recruits; and terrain in which to conduct advanced training, weapons development, planning, intelligence, and media functions all constitute the core capabilities that allow ISIS to generate attack groups to operate within the West at will, as discussed in the first report of this series.<sup>22</sup> Depriving ISIS of territory it can govern will severely degrade the organization's ability to support frequent and sophisticated attacks against Europe and the United States.

ISIS is a resilient organization, however, and depriving it of terrain is not tantamount to defeating, let alone destroying it. The planning group assesses that the loss of all of its territory will drive ISIS back into a terrorist-insurgent mode, possibly with a significant number of ISIS members rejoining local al Qaeda affiliates, thereby strengthening them. The elimination of ISIS control and governance

of territory is thus a necessary but not sufficient condition for defeating ISIS itself and must be part of a larger effort to defeat al Qaeda affiliates and the Salafi-jihadi groups with which they are allied in order to achieve lasting success.

## ISIS GRAND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES AND CONCEPT OF OPERATION

ISIS aims to expand its caliphate to include all historically Muslim lands and to provoke and win an apocalyptic war with the West.<sup>23</sup> ISIS pursues these objectives through mutually supporting campaigns in Iraq and Syria; in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia; and in the wider world. ISIS maintains affiliates in nine countries and supporters in many more. This global presence allows ISIS to project a narrative of constant victory. Operations outside of Iraq and Syria give ISIS strategic resiliency. Control of territory outside of Iraq and Syria will allow ISIS to survive even if it loses control of governed spaces in Iraq and Syria, as we shall see.

## ISIS STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

### ISIS STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

- > Maintain the physical caliphate
- > Expand the caliphate to include all of "Dar al-Islam," or historically Muslim lands
- > Assert unchallenged authority as a caliphate
- > Win an apocalyptic war with the West

## ISIS-CONTROLLED TERRAIN AS OF MID-DECEMBER 2015

ISIS controls and governs a large area in Iraq and Syria and has expanded its area of control outside of that region. ISIS affiliates in Libya and Afghanistan control territory, and its affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula maintains robust sanctuary and freedom of movement. ISIS has integrated these groups into a cohesive campaign for regional expansion and given them more advanced military capabilities and additional funding.<sup>24</sup>

Sirte, Libya is the principal ISIS hub in North Africa, and U.S. officials have suggested that Libya could serve as refuge for the group should it lose its terrain in Mesopotamia.<sup>25</sup> ISIS core leaders, including experienced Iraqis who have migrated to Sirte, directly command and control its Libyan affiliate. This affiliate generates revenue from taxation and smuggling, and ISIS has successfully called for foreign fighters to travel there and fight.<sup>26</sup>

Defeating ISIS completely now requires depriving ISIS of the ability to govern terrain anywhere, even beyond Iraq and Syria, that will allow it to claim it has a caliphate. ISIS can use its terrain in Libya, the Sinai, or Afghanistan to claim that the Caliphate continues if it loses all of its terrain within Iraq and Syria. ISIS has already referred to these areas as part of the Caliphate, and ISIS core leadership is taking steps to ensure that regional affiliates could carry on its claims by seeding them with members of its own Iraqi and Syrian leadership.<sup>27</sup>

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*The elimination of ISIS control and governance of territory must be part of a larger effort to defeat al Qaeda affiliates and the Salafi-jihadi groups with which they are allied.*

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ISIS is also continuing to develop nascent affiliates in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the North Caucasus, and Algeria. The organization will likely declare new affiliates in Bangladesh, Tunisia, and possibly Somalia over the next fifteen months. Boko Haram in Nigeria is an anomaly among ISIS affiliates. The ISIS leadership has been inconsistent in describing its formal affiliation with Boko Haram and likely has not exported more than media capability to the group. Boko Haram is deadly in its own right, but it does not appear to be operationally linked to ISIS leadership in the same way as the other affiliates. The planning group assesses that defeating ISIS in the Arab world and South Asia would likely cause Boko Haram to break off from ISIS and operate independently, as it had before.<sup>28</sup> Defeating ISIS does not therefore require defeating Boko Haram at this time.

## CRITICAL CAPABILITIES, REQUIREMENTS, AND VULNERABILITIES

### *Critical Capabilities*

Critical capabilities are those that ISIS must maintain in order to perform its core functions and survive as the organization is currently defined.<sup>29</sup> They are the means by which ISIS pursues its strategic objectives, and include the ability to:

- Control terrain
- Govern
- Claim religious authority based on the declaration of the Caliphate
- Maintain offensive and defensive military forces and
- Project a globally resonant message

### *Critical Requirements*

Critical requirements are the essential conditions, resources and means for a critical capability to be fully operative.

Controlling terrain requires:

- Forcing the submission of local populations to ISIS by intimidation, locally-directed terrorism, brutal policing, preaching, and other forms of social control
- Defending against opposing military forces

Governing requires:

- A resilient military leadership that can replace losses rapidly
- A religious leadership that can claim religious and ruling legitimacy and interact with supporting and competing religious views
- The ability to indoctrinate the population, particularly children, in the Caliphate's ideology
- Financial resources to pay for the basic functions of governance; and
- An educated elite to provide essential services (doctors, engineers, etc.)

Maintaining religious authority requires the religious leadership described above, but also requires sufficient worldly success to support the claim that the group operates with Allah's blessing. Sustaining the authority of the Caliphate requires continuing to hold territory on which ISIS can plausibly claim to be governing.<sup>30</sup>

Sustaining military forces capable of both offensive and defensive operations requires the abilities to:

- Recruit
- Train
- Equip
- Pay
- House
- Provide medical care
- Provide death benefits to families and
- Maintain lines of communication within and across theaters

Projecting a globally-resonant message requires:

- A dedicated media agency to equip and direct filming and photography crews
- Staff and advanced capabilities to collate, produce, and distribute high-quality media in several languages

- A robust social media network to disseminate and amplify the group's message; and
- Success on the ground to form the basis of a resonant message

### *Critical Vulnerabilities*

Critical Vulnerabilities are the “critical requirements or components thereof which are deficient, or vulnerable to neutralization, interdiction, or attack...in a manner achieving decisive or significant results, disproportional to the military resources applied.” ISIS is especially susceptible to the targeting of some of these abilities.

**Control of terrain.** ISIS has demonstrated its ability to control populated areas despite local opposition if no external military force intervenes. It has shown that it can retain this ability despite air campaigns of varying degrees of intensity. It has even managed to defeat the efforts of local conventional military forces to drive it out of critical terrain, particularly when those local forces do not receive significant asymmetric capabilities from advanced industrial powers such as the U.S. or Russia. Well-prepared and -conducted attacks by Peshmerga or Iraqi Security Forces, robustly-supported by Western air power and other enablers, have sometimes been able to expel ISIS from ground it sought to hold. The planning group assesses with high confidence that ISIS could not hold terrain in the face of determined military operations conducted by Western ground forces in partnership with local fighting groups.

**Provide basic functions of local governance that meet local expectations.** ISIS is struggling badly on this count in Mesopotamia, where local populations generally have relatively high expectations of the services their governments should provide. ISIS has had difficulty in retaining or recruiting educated elites to keep hospitals operating, for example.<sup>31</sup> We assess that ISIS will not readily improve its ability to perform the functions of local governance, and that this failure will create continued vulnerabilities that a coherent strategy to defeat ISIS could exploit. Targeting ISIS governance capabilities alone will not defeat it, however. The group's highly-capable media wing is adept at falsifying externally-directed reports of prosperity, while its religious police and internal security brutally crush any domestic resistance arising from a lack of services. Action against ISIS service provision must be nested within an overall strategy to defeat ISIS.

**Maintain popular acquiescence to its rule.** ISIS has succeeded in deterring and defeating all efforts by alienated local populations and groups to throw off its rule in areas that it dominates. Intense and sophisticated assassination campaigns have deprived such local groups of the individuals who could unite and lead them against ISIS. The ability of ISIS to shift military resources relatively

rapidly to areas in which uprisings against its rule emerge has allowed it to crush all such efforts quickly and decisively. Yet ISIS enjoys little affirmative support for its ideology among the populations it controls, and its brutality and governance failures will continue to create large pools of discontent that could in principle form the basis for armed opposition to the group if the balance of military power on the ground shifted.

**Manage friction between its central leadership and regional affiliates.** ISIS affiliates in Libya, Afghanistan, Sinai, and Nigeria were all coherent and independent Sunni jihadist organizations before joining ISIS. Integrating those groups into an ISIS command structure entails inherent friction, particularly as ISIS has sent Mesopotamian leaders to these groups to support and guide them. ISIS appears to have been successful in managing the inevitable tensions that emerge from this situation, but those tensions will persist.<sup>32</sup> They constitute a potential vulnerability if Western strategy can attack key links and change conditions on the ground in the various theaters in order to stress the relationship between the affiliates and the center.

**Control its fighters.** The ISIS brand sells in part because of its brutality and the promise of instant gratification. Al Qaeda affiliates and local jihadist military organizations like the Taliban and Ahrar al Sham generally proceed strategically, operating on a longer time-horizon than ISIS. They are willing to be patient, to lie low when conditions are not suitable for action, and to take losses without immediately responding. They are also concerned about the risks of alienating local populations through excessive brutality—lessons that groups like Jabhat al Nusra learned from experiences in Iraq and that the Afghan Taliban drew from their understanding of the culture within which they operate. ISIS is much less patient, less willing to suffer losses without retaliating, and less concerned about alienating a population that it (rightly) believes it can intimidate into the necessary degree of submission. It is therefore more attractive for angry, testosterone-driven young men eager to fight and to earn both earthly and heavenly rewards right now. But even ISIS must set limits on what its fighters do, lest they begin to alienate the larger Salafi community through actions that even that extremists cannot tolerate. Controlling angry young men is difficult, however. ISIS fighters will certainly transgress even the distant bounds of acceptable behavior, and the organization will have to find ways to punish and control them without losing one of its most important recruiting appeals.

## CRITICAL REQUIREMENTS NOT VULNERABLE TO WESTERN ACTION

ISIS must have significant financial resources and the ability to move them around. It must have media centers and the ability to operate freely on the Internet and social media. It must be able to lay some plausible claim to religious legitimacy

## ISIS CAPABILITIES, REQUIREMENTS, AND VULNERABILITIES FEBRUARY 2016

**Center of Gravity: Control of terrain to serve as a physical Caliphate is now the principal center of gravity of ISIS.**

### Capabilities

- > Control terrain
- > Govern
- > Claim religious authority based on the declaration of the Caliphate
- > Maintain offensive and defensive military forces
- > Project a globally resonant message

### Requirements

- > Ability to force submission, intimidation, locally-directed terrorism, brutal policing, preaching, and other forms of social control
- > Defense against opposing military forces
- > A resilient military leadership that can replace losses rapidly
- > Leadership that can claim religious and ruling legitimacy and interact with supporting and competing religious views
- > The ability to indoctrinate the population, particularly children, in the Caliphate's ideology
- > Ability to pay for basic functions of governance
- > An educated elite to provide essential services (doctors, engineers, etc.)
- > Continuing to hold territory ISIS can claim to be governing
- > Ability to recruit, train, equip, and pay
- > Ability to provide housing, medical care, and death benefits to families
- > Ability to maintain lines of communication within and across theaters
- > Advanced capabilities to produce and distribute high-quality media in several languages
- > A robust social media network to disseminate and amplify the group's message
- > Success on the ground to form the basis of a resonant message

### Vulnerabilities

- > Holding terrain
- > Providing basic functions of local governance that meet local expectations
- > Maintaining popular acquiescence
- > Managing friction between central leadership and regional affiliates
- > Controlling fighters

and authority. It must be able to move fighters and material within theaters, between theaters, and between regional support bases and targets in the West. The planning group has considered all of these requirements and the measures that would be needed to deprive ISIS of access to them, and has concluded that no feasible effort could degrade them sufficiently to disrupt the group's continued ability to operate at something near its current level. The group nevertheless recommends that the U.S. and its allies take all reasonable steps to attack these requirements in order to strain ISIS, distract its leadership, and erode the group's capabilities over the long term to set conditions for its ultimate destruction.

## INTERFERING WITH ISIS MESSAGING

The U.S. and its allies can do more to counter ISIS's ability to digitally project its resonant message with a change in approach. ISIS maintains a large community of online followers. These supporters are prolific on both public social media platforms and private jihadist forums. They have developed effective techniques to defeat Western efforts to shut down social media accounts. A digital campaign cannot therefore hope to drive ISIS supporters from the Internet and social media. It is not clear that any such campaign can even degrade the operations of those supporters significantly.

It may be possible to degrade the clarity and resonance of ISIS messaging, however, using a different approach aiming to sow confusion and doubt amongst ISIS followers online through active measures. Such a strategy would emulate the current Russian approach of fostering internal argument within an enemy force by constantly disseminating divisive and contradictory messages. Fighters who have defected from ISIS could be encouraged and assisted to publish frequent messages about ISIS's failure to govern and defend the Caliphate. Defected fighters could help redirect some potential recruits away from ISIS by undermining the utopian vision of the Caliphate that it portrays. They would force forum users to focus on counter-arguments supporting the legitimacy of ISIS claims instead of projecting the primary ISIS message in unison. One could also flood ISIS online distribution channels with questionable claims of insignificant, demeaning, or un-Salafist activity in order to "drown out" ISIS's claims rather than defeating them directly.

The Western approach to information operations has generally been extremely linear, focusing on rebutting and refuting ISIS's claim of power, success, and legitimacy. This approach has failed and will continue to fail, but more sophisticated and thoughtful efforts could be more successful and should be pursued. But information operations, however successful, cannot be decisive in the struggle against ISIS as long as it retains its other core capabilities, particularly control of terrain and populations.

## TERRITORIAL CONTROL IS THE NEW CENTER OF GRAVITY

The assessment that Caliphal control and governance is the principal center of gravity of ISIS is a change from previous ISW assessments. An analysis conducted in July 2014, shortly after the fall of Mosul, concluded that ISIS had two centers of gravity:

*The first is a classical military center of gravity that ISIS uses to wrest physical control from modern states and hold what it has gained. The second ISIS center of gravity is a political capacity to provide essential state functions within the territory that ISIS controls. ISIS strength emanates from the ability to translate military control into political control, and thereby to claim that the Caliphate is manifest.<sup>33</sup>*

The existence of two centers of gravity in the 2014 report required a strategy to defeat ISIS militarily, deny ISIS political control, or break the synergy of the two essential poles. Early action along these lines could have prevented ISIS from consolidating its military and social control and power in its newly-won lands.

But ISIS has now consolidated that control and built its power considerably beyond what it had in July 2014. The significance of its declaration of the Caliphate has both grown and become more apparent since then. Its willingness to fight other al Qaeda affiliates over the righteousness of its declaration has made the preservation of the Caliphate central to the self-definition of ISIS.

It is becoming a global recruiting tool as well. The existence of a declared caliphate generates clear requirements for action by those inclined to the violent Salafi world-view. The righteous are obliged to migrate (perform *hijra*) to the Caliphate and defend it. They must leave the atomized and unrighteous societies in which they live once the righteous Caliphate has been restored, according to ISIS's leaders.<sup>34</sup> That message has meaning only as long as there is a territorial caliphate to which to migrate, however, making ISIS's control of terrain both a critical requirement and a critical vulnerability.

Depriving ISIS of territory on which it can claim to be maintaining the Caliphate has thus become significantly more important over the last 18 months, which is why the planning group now assesses that ISIS control of terrain and populations is its singular center of gravity. It is also one of the only critical requirements that the West could definitely deny ISIS. Western military action could deprive ISIS of territorial control in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan



without any question. In the absence of powerful al Qaeda affiliates, the intervention of Russia, Iranian activities, and the regional sectarian war that creates the conditions for continued radicalization and mobilization of populations behind Salafi military organizations, the development of a plan to defeat ISIS by attacking this center of gravity would be relatively straightforward. Those complexities make the construction of such a strategy much more difficult and risky, however, and they ensure that any such ISIS-focused strategy will fail to achieve vital U.S. and European national security interests.

The balance of this exercise thus seeks to place a sound counter-ISIS strategy within the context of an over-arching strategy in order to ensure that efforts to defeat ISIS do not create even greater dangers than the one they aim to eliminate.

## JABHAT AL NUSRA'S CENTER OF GRAVITY

### INTRODUCTION

The ISIS threat has eclipsed Western concerns about al Qaeda and its affiliates. President Obama began American re-intervention in Iraq, and then Syria, in response to the ISIS seizure of Mosul. President Obama has restricted American operations and support in Syria to targeting ISIS and only those elements of Jabhat al Nusra that Western intelligence has identified as directly plotting attacks against the West.<sup>35</sup> The coalition that the U.S. has been forming involves an explicitly counter-ISIS endeavor, rather than a broader effort against Salafi-jihadi military organizations based in Iraq and Syria. The ISIS attacks in Paris and San Bernardino have solidified this ISIS-only focus in the West.

Jabhat al Nusra and al Qaeda writ large have vanished from the headlines partly by their own choice. Al Qaeda is pursuing phased, gradual, and sophisticated strategies that favor letting ISIS attract the attention—and attacks—of the West while it builds the human infrastructure to support and sustain major gains in the future and for the long term. When Jabhat al Nusra does attract media attention, its purpose is to send a tailored message that casts the organization as a legitimate, reasonable, and humane actor in Syria. Its carefully crafted media strategy seeks to brand al Qaeda as a populist movement in striking contrast to the brutality of ISIS.

America's counter-ISIS strategy has thus strengthened Jabhat al Nusra while allowing other al Qaeda affiliates to grow and expand in Yemen, Libya, and the Sahel. A more muscular counter-ISIS strategy along the current lines will strengthen Jabhat al Nusra and other al Qaeda affiliates even more, because these actors are intentionally positioning themselves to gain from an ISIS defeat. a strategy to defeat both ISIS and

Jabhat al Nusra, along with other major al Qaeda groups, is essential for securing the vital American national interests articulated in the first section of this paper.

## JABHAT AL NUSRA'S GRAND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE AND CONCEPT OF OPERATION

Jabhat al Nusra's grand strategic objective is to establish an Islamic Emirate in Syria that will become a component of al Qaeda's global Caliphate in the future. It seeks to unify the global Salafi-jihadi movement under the al Qaeda umbrella. It pursues a long-term strategy using political and military means to generate popular support for al Qaeda's vision of Islam while laying the structural foundation for an Islamic state in Syria. It positions itself as an anti-Assad actor in order to embed itself within the Syrian opposition, and then leverages its contributions to the war against the Assad regime as a vehicle to achieve other objectives. It uses sophisticated tradecraft to identify and exploit weaknesses in the control or popularity of Syrian rebel groups and civil society that can allow it to edge out competitors. It adapts its activity to local requirements in order to gain popular acceptance in different areas of rebel-held Syria. It embeds itself within civil and military institutions and begins to transform them. Jabhat al Nusra aims to transform Syrian society by gradually shifting social norms to match those of al Qaeda. It targets moderates lethally, appeals to Islamists, and leverages other Salafi-jihadi groups in pursuit of this aim.

## JABHAT AL NUSRA'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

### JABHAT AL NUSRA STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

- > Destroy the Assad regime
- > Transform Syrian society from secular nationalism to an Islamic theocracy
- > Establish locally-accepted governance as a precursor to an eventual Islamic Emirate
- > Build an army to protect the Islamic Emirate by partnering with Syrian opposition groups
- > Resolve the *fitna*, or schism, with ISIS
- > Counter U.S. influence in Syria
- > Set conditions for expansion into Lebanon and Jordan <sup>36</sup>

## JABHAT AL NUSRA'S ORGANIZATION

### *Jabhat al Nusra's Fighting Force & Geographical Footprint*

Jabhat al Nusra's organization consists of

- A fighting force of at least 3,000-5,000 fighters, according to open sources in 2013. The planning group estimates but cannot assess from open sources that this number has likely grown by several thousand fighters as of December 2015
- At least 19 training camps in Western Syria<sup>36</sup>
- Foreign fighters, comprising at least 30% of its force<sup>37</sup>
- Ethnic subunits,<sup>38</sup> including Chechens, Uighurs, Moroccans, Saudis, Uzbeks, and Europeans.

Jabhat al Nusra operates

- Across eight of Syria's nine western provinces in rural and urban terrain, including Damascus. Primary zones of military strength include
  - Aleppo City
  - Jabal Turkman region of Northeastern Latakia Province
  - Jabal Zawiya region in Southern Idlib Province
  - Quneitra Province along the Golan Heights.
- In Lebanon, including primarily
  - the Sunni-majority Bekaa Valley, bordering Syria
  - Tripoli

- the Palestinian Ayn al Hilweh refugee camp in Sidon.

Jabhat al Nusra also likely has latent influence in Jordan, and draws fighters from Jordan's Salafi community.<sup>39</sup>

## JABHAT AL NUSRA'S ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

### *Senior Shura*

Jabhat al Nusra has a senior shura council, comprised of military and religious figures, that advises its leader, Abu Mohammed al Joulani.<sup>40</sup> This council includes at least three members of the al Qaeda core that al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri sent to help develop and implement the Syrian affiliate's strategy and policy.<sup>41</sup> Two of these members were also involved in developing Jabhat al Nusra's attack cell, referred to as the "Khorasan Group."<sup>42</sup>

### *Military Command*

Jabhat al Nusra likely has a central military command that provides strategic guidance to sub-commands that operate with relative autonomy on a roughly provincial level.<sup>43</sup> There are probably at least five such sub-commands in Syria, in addition to a separate command in Lebanon. In Syria, the organization's military force designs and executes operations against the Assad regime and conducts recruiting, military training, and outreach to rebel brigades. It is also involved in governance and policing functions. In Lebanon, it recruits from refugee camps and disenfranchised Sunni populations in Tripoli and the Bekaa Valley and conducts spectacular attacks against Hezbollah and the Lebanese state. Its Lebanon network appears to be intertwined with an ISIS network in Lebanon, which conducts similar activities.<sup>44</sup>



(Left) The photo shows a Shari'a class for women held by the Aisha Mother of Believers Institute, operated by Jabhat al Nusra's Jihad Callers Center in northwestern Syria. (Right) The photo shows Shari'a classes for young girls held by Jabhat al Nusra's Jihad Callers Center in northwestern Syria. Photos from social media available from author upon request.

### *Judiciary*

Jabhat al Nusra also has a robust religious administration that works in close coordination with its military leadership. The organization contributes religious expertise in the form of highly qualified jurists who sit on rebel shari'a courts across Western Syria. It also created as many as five formal judiciary bodies, called Dar al Qada'a, in which local Syrian rebel groups participate. The courts perform formal mediation between quarreling rebel groups and uphold shari'a law in rebel-held terrain, constituting the group's primary mode of governance across Western Syria. The specifics of these courts are explored below in the section on Jabhat al Nusra's institutions.

### *Public Outreach*

Jabhat al Nusra runs numerous institutionalized outreach programs. The most prolific is called Maktab Dawa wa al Irshad, which has offices conducting outreach activities in at least 17 known locations across all eight provinces in Syria in which the group is present. These offices hold outreach events for local civilians and distribute Jabhat al Nusra's religious propaganda, humanitarian supplies, and zakat.<sup>45</sup> Numerous Dawa wa al Irshad offices appear to operate under the authority of Jabhat al Nusra's Dar al Qada'a.<sup>46</sup> Many other Dawa wa al Irshad offices operate in areas without a local judiciary, which could indicate that the offices are integrated with new judiciary structures as these structures are established. Jabhat al Nusra also runs numerous shari'a institutes and other institutions under a structure called Markaz Duat al Jihad that provide Islamic dress for women and conduct religious classes for Syrian women and children.<sup>47</sup> This activity is primarily concentrated in Aleppo and Idlib Provinces, where the group's social control is greatest.

### *Jabhat al Nusra's Military and Religious Institutions*

Jabhat al Nusra is at an advanced phase of implementing its strategy to intertwine itself with and reshape the Syrian opposition. It is a component of at least nine out of 20 significant formal "joint military operations rooms" (operational headquarters), 10 joint governance bodies, and two administrative bodies across eight provinces in rebel-held Syria. It is therefore able to influence the development of security and governance over a majority of rebel-held Syria. It does not have unilateral control over these structures and does meet genuine resistance from Syrian rebels. It adapts its structures, chameleon-like, to reflect the unique character of the Syrian rebel landscape in different Syrian provinces. A strategy to counter Jabhat al Nusra must likewise be designed to adapt to the unique characteristics of its linked institutions in each of Syria's different provinces.

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*The two most significant institutions with heavy Jabhat al Nusra involvement are the military coalitions that it leads with Ahrar al Sham named Jaysh al Fatah and Dar al Qada'a.*

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The two most significant institutions with heavy Jabhat al Nusra involvement are the military coalitions that it leads with Ahrar al Sham (Harakat Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya or HASI) named Jaysh al Fatah and Dar al Qada'a. These institutions are concentrated in Aleppo and Idlib in Northern Syria and in Dera'a and Quneitra in Southern Syria, although the planning group assesses that Jabhat al Nusra intends to expand these structures into Homs and Hama Provinces soon. Syria's largest rebel power brokers, including Syria's two major Salafi-jihadi groups, Ahrar al Sham and Jaysh al Islam, participate in these structures. The composition of these structures is unique in different provinces because the spectrum of local rebel brigades varies. Ahrar al Sham and Jaysh al Islam are involved in more than one of these structures, signaling the alignment of these groups with Jabhat al Nusra's objectives, although Jaysh al Islam only participates in these structures in areas outside of its main power base in Eastern Ghouta, Damascus.

It is unclear whether the Jaysh al Fatah and Dar al Qada'a structures are linked across provinces. At a minimum, Jabhat al Nusra's senior shura council likely coordinates its involvement. Ahrar al Sham is a highly organized, bureaucratic organization. Ahrar al Sham's participation in numerous structures provides a second source of cohesion and potentially cross-front coordination.

## JABHAT AL NUSRA'S CENTER OF GRAVITY

**Jabhat al Nusra's center of gravity is its entanglement with the Syrian opposition's military and governance structures at the local and provincial level in ways that make the opposition tolerant of its presence and susceptible to its ideology.**

Jabhat al Nusra's center of gravity is its entanglement with the Syrian opposition's military and governance structures at the local and provincial level in ways that make the opposition tolerant of its presence and susceptible to its ideology.

Jabhat al Nusra's commitment to the full destruction of the Assad regime ensures this center of gravity and its durability so long as the war continues. A strategy that unravels Jabhat al Nusra's local networks and disrupts its ability to combine multiple elements of power on local levels would produce

asymmetric effects against the organization in Syria. The following sections explore its critical capabilities, critical requirements, and critical vulnerabilities, which should also influence the design of a counter-Nusra campaign. Most of these critical factors relate to Jabhat al Nusra's role as an anti-Assad actor, demonstrating that the Syrian Civil War itself is the single largest enabling factor for the group in Syria.

## CRITICAL CAPABILITIES, REQUIREMENTS, AND VULNERABILITIES

### *Critical Capabilities*

Jabhat al Nusra's critical capabilities are the set of unique competencies that distinguish the organization from a majority of armed actors in Syria and that it leverages to pursue its strategic objectives.

- It is an elite military force that can make military operations decisive and successful, including suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs) and suicide vests
- It mediates disputes among factions by establishing judicial bodies
- It has provincial and local influence throughout rebel-held Syria
- It can weight military efforts within sectors by resourcing operations
- It has administration and governance capabilities to implement court decisions and distribute humanitarian aid
- It receives resources and support from the al Qaeda network

**Elite Military Force.** Jabhat al Nusra has a small, elite, and disciplined military force that can generate asymmetric and sometimes decisive effects in battle. Its most important critical capability is using this force to support larger rebel military operations against the Assad regime. It intentionally builds an elite set of fighters that are highly trained and capable of performing difficult battlefield tasks.<sup>48</sup> It retains the rare but not unique capability of providing SVBIEDs and suicide vests, the terrorists' precision-guided munition, to penetrate fortified defensive positions. Because it contributes uniquely and disproportionately in Syria, many other opposition groups consider Jabhat al Nusra an asset and tolerate the divergences between the group's al Qaeda agenda and their own. The group also maintains excellent operational security.

**Role as mediator between the factions.** Jabhat al Nusra's role as a mediator is a lynchpin of its success in Syria. It sets up temporary shari'a court panels to mediate specific

disputes between quarreling rebel groups under the pretext of maintaining unity of effort against the Assad regime. Other rebels also perform this role, but Jabhat al Nusra is often accepted as a legitimate mediator because its high level of discipline generates local respect and sets the organization apart from quarreling and often corrupt rebel groups. The participants of these panels then implement and enforce the ruling.

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*Jabhat al Nusra's role as a mediator is a lynchpin of its success in Syria.*

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Jabhat al Nusra leverages such disputes in order to deepen its relationship with rebel groups and commanders, gain legitimacy, socialize Syrian rebels to its religious views, and gain a foothold within proto-security and governance structures. It often transitions these temporary courts into more permanent structures that can implement its religious agenda. These temporary shari'a court panels are therefore the first step toward the formation of joint governance structures by Jabhat al Nusra and Syrian rebel groups.

**Provincial and local influence throughout rebel-held Syria.** Jabhat al Nusra's visible presence across rebel-held Syria is a critical capability that enables the group to maintain its image as a local Syrian force. It is present on nearly every front line against pro-regime forces in Western Syria. It is also widely active across the rebel-held countryside, where it conducts religious outreach and is involved in governance. The perception that Jabhat al Nusra is truly Syrian despite its al Qaeda affiliation is central to the group's acceptance on the ground.<sup>49</sup> Sustained social contact also positions its leadership to recognize immediately signs of local unrest or distrust of its fighters and respond preemptively.

**Ability to weight efforts by resourcing operations.** Jabhat al Nusra's ability to deploy reinforcements to different front lines within provinces is an important military capability that contributes to the organization's effectiveness. It has the command and control capability both to maintain an operational-level view of the Syrian theater and to direct reinforcements between tactical and likely adjacent provincial-level commands. It also can move fighters and weapons rapidly among different sectors within a province, and thereby weights the military efforts of Syrian rebel groups on disparate front lines. It deploys small units of highly capable fighters that perform a role that Syrian rebel groups cannot perform, achieving decisive effects.

**Administration and governance.** Jabhat al Nusra's administrative capability to plan and execute social outreach and governance activities across a majority of rebel-held Syria is an important component of the group's success in generating local popular support. Jabhat al Nusra is able to adapt its forms of outreach according to local requirements or strategic guidance

from Joulani. It currently maintains a large volume of social outreach activity, particularly in Idlib Province.

**Resources and support from the al Qaeda core.** Jabhat al Nusra also receives resources and other support from the al Qaeda network such as expertise, foreign fighters, funding, and possibly supplies. The al Qaeda core also contributes to Jabhat al Nusra's religious legitimacy by maintaining high-ranking religious leaders in Syria to advise it. This capability enables Jabhat al Nusra to maintain its current scope of operations and retain influence over the foreign-fighter population in Syria amidst expanding ISIS activity in Syria.

### *Critical Requirements*

Jabhat al Nusra's critical requirements are:

- Enough time and territory to become integrated into Syrian structures and gain acceptance of its religious agenda
- Freedom of movement
- Freedom of maneuver
- Partnered relationship with Ahrar al Sham that magnifies its military, judicial, and administrative effects
- Syrian rank-and-file
- Islamist groups' recognition of legitimacy as mediator
- Religious authority over competing Salafi-jihadi groups
- Control over humanitarian aid distribution
- Foreign fighters and the infrastructure that supports them, including lines of communication
- High-end recruiting, vetting, and training from extant opposition forces and the Syrian civilian population
- Local popular support
- Willingness to adapt governance and judicial standards in order to coopt support
- Ability to eliminate competition and remove threats to its leadership by planning and executing assassinations without attribution

**Time and Territory to Gain Traction.** Jabhat al Nusra requires time and territory sufficient for its transformational agenda to take root. It relies on the continuation of violence to gain traction within the opposition by leveraging military capabilities, mediating disputes, providing social support, and championing a revolutionary narrative. A cessation of violence would force

it to rely exclusively on its administrative and judicial capabilities to gain traction. Jabhat al Nusra is nearly certain to oppose violently efforts at establishing ceasefires or any settlements of the Syrian conflict that do not leave it fully in control.

**Freedom of Movement.** Jabhat al Nusra enjoys both freedom of movement and freedom of maneuver, which are requirements for its capabilities as an elite military force, presence across Syria, and ability to weight military efforts. It has such freedom in both urban and rural terrain, including internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and likely refugee camps.<sup>50</sup>

**Freedom of Maneuver.** Jabhat al Nusra can also deploy combined armed forces on battlefields across Western Syria in support of military operations in both urban and rural terrain. It has mechanized forces, including tanks captured from the state's Syrian Arab Army, and vehicles used to transport fighters, weapons, and supplies. U.S. strikes targeting high-ranking Jabhat al Nusra members connected to the "Khorasan group" have been too infrequent to disrupt Jabhat al Nusra's freedom of maneuver even though they have likely prompted changes in its operational security measures.

**Partnered relationship with Ahrar al Sham that magnifies its military, judicial, and administrative effects.** The cross-front Salafi-jihadi group Ahrar al Sham is Jabhat al Nusra's primary vehicle for generating military relationships with other rebel groups. The two groups coordinate their military operations and cooperate in shari'a courts in multiple Syrian provinces. Ahrar al Sham magnifies the effect of Jabhat al Nusra's small, elite contribution to rebel offensives by providing complementary ground forces. The two groups likely plan operations that include wider rebel forces. The two have some competing shari'a courts, but generally work together to implement governance in rebel-held Syria. Ahrar al Sham has strong local support and its participation in numerous Jabhat al Nusra-linked shari'a courts helps generate local acceptance for Jabhat al Nusra.

**Syrian rank-and-file.** Jabhat al Nusra's rank-and-file is largely Syrian, sustaining the organization's image as an organic Syrian revolutionary group despite its al Qaeda affiliation and incorporation of foreign fighters. This Syrian face legitimizes Jabhat al Nusra's presence across a majority of rebel-held Syria and allows its fighters to blend in with the local population when necessary. Jabhat al Nusra must therefore continue to recruit Syrians in order to preserve its current status as an indigenous social and military component of the Syrian revolution.

**Religious authority over competing Salafi-jihadi groups.** Jabhat al Nusra must ensure that Salafi-jihadi groups regard it as a religious authority on the basis of its interpretation of Islam. Their acceptance normalizes Jabhat al Nusra's extreme religious views as an acceptable alternative interpretation of Islam within governance structures that expose other

## JABHAT AL NUSRA CAPABILITIES, REQUIREMENTS, AND VULNERABILITIES FEBRUARY 2016

**Center of Gravity:** Jabhat al Nusra's center of gravity is its entanglement with the Syrian opposition's military and governance structures at the local and provincial level in ways that make the opposition tolerant of its presence and susceptible to its ideology.

### Capabilities

- > Elite military force that can make military operations decisive and successful, including SVBIEDs and SVESTs
- > Mediation of disputes among factions by establishing judicial bodies
- > Provincial and local influence throughout rebel-held Syria
- > Ability to weight military efforts within sectors by resourcing operations
- > Administration / governance to implement court decisions and distribute humanitarian aid
- > Resources and support from the al Qaeda network

### Requirements

- > Time and territory to integrate into Syrian structures
- > Freedom of movement
- > Freedom of maneuver
- > Relationship with HASI that magnifies its military, judicial, and administrative effects
- > Syrian rank-and-file
- > Islamist groups' recognition of legitimacy as mediator
- > Religious authority over competing Salafi-jihadi groups
- > Control over humanitarian aid distribution
- > Foreign fighters and the infrastructure that supports them, including lines of communication
- > SVBIED/SVEST infrastructure
- > High-end recruitment, vetting, and training from extant opposition forces and the Syrian civilian population
- > Willingness to adapt governance and judicial standards in order to coopt support
- > Ability to eliminate competition and threats to its leadership by planning and executing assassinations without attribution

### Vulnerabilities

- > Endstate not shared with much of the Syrian opposition
- > Desire of Syrian rebels and civilians to reach a settlement
- > Internal differences between rank-and-file and leadership
- > Alienation of moderate forces
- > Small military force
- > Dispute or fitna with ISIS

parties to these views. It must also maintain its religious authority in order to prevent its current network of allied Salafi-jihadi brigades from defecting to ISIS.

**Control over distribution of humanitarian aid and services.** Jabhat al Nusra must distribute aid and administer services such as water and electricity in order to gain local support and to govern inside of Syria. It both exploits and ameliorates the humanitarian crisis in Syria and in the Syrian refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. The poor quality of life in many refugee and IDP camps also produces a receptive environment for its recruitment and religious outreach, although the group must compete with other movements for adherents.

**Suicide Vests and Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Devices.** Jabhat al Nusra requires access to the materiel to produce improvised explosive devices, logistic infrastructure, and the engineering capability to manufacture these devices on a large scale in order to maintain the current scope of its contribution to rebel military offensives against the Assad regime.

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*Jabhat al Nusra must distribute aid and administer services such as water and electricity in order to gain local support and to govern inside of Syria.*

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**Foreign Fighter Pipeline.** Jabhat al Nusra requires steady access to foreign fighter recruits, which perform many, if not most, of its suicide attacks. This includes connectivity to al Qaeda's global recruiting process as well as the physical lines of communication (LOCs) that enable foreign fighters to enter Syria. These LOCs are primarily based in Turkey, where Jabhat al Nusra is known to operate a series of safe houses, and require a porous Turkish border.

**Willingness to adapt governance and judicial standards in order to coopt local support.** Gaining local popular support in Syria requires Jabhat al Nusra to adapt its governance and judicial standards rather than imposing the strict interpretations of shari'a law that it seeks to make the norm. Its willingness to tolerate local norms is a critical condition that allows the organization to gain and maintain its support within the armed opposition and population, mediate disputes effectively, create courts that socialize its ideas, and allow it to transform society.

**Ability to eliminate competition and remove threats to its leadership by planning and executing assassinations without attribution.** Jabhat al Nusra requires a way to remove formidable opponents who resist co-optation,

create resistance to its institutions, and are too strong to defeat. Jabhat al Nusra has removed leaders of moderate groups and opposing factions by having them assassinated, usually without full attribution. The assassinations have often removed systemic resistance.

### *Critical Vulnerabilities*

Jabhat al Nusra's critical vulnerabilities are:

- Endstate not shared with most of the Syrian opposition
- Desire of Syrian rebels and civilians to reach a settlement
- Internal differences between rank-and-file and leadership
- Pragmatic rather than ideological acceptance
- Alienation of moderate forces
- Small military force
- Fitna with ISIS

**Endstate not shared.** Syria's original revolutionaries in 2011 did not seek to implement shari'a law and pursued a nationalist agenda. Jabhat al Nusra's global and religious agenda runs contrary to these original ideas. Its agenda is inherently vulnerable because many Syrians still reject its core principles. The pragmatic rather than ideological acceptance of Jabhat al Nusra by many groups exacerbates this vulnerability.

**Desire of Syrian rebels and civilians to reach a settlement.** The desire of many Syrian rebels and civilians to end the Syrian Civil War quickly is a critical vulnerability for Jabhat al Nusra because it jeopardizes the time and space, as well as violent means, that implementing its agenda requires. Jabhat al Nusra demands the full surrender of the Assad regime for both ideological and pragmatic purposes. Ceasefires between pro- and anti-regime forces occur on tactical levels in numerous Syrian provinces. These ceasefires strengthen the regime because they free up regime military resources and blows to rebel morale. The willingness of civilian populations and some rebels to agree to these local truces despite the advantages they offer the regime is an early example of this vulnerability. Jabhat al Nusra's extreme reactions to these ceasefires, including assassinating local civilian leaders and otherwise coercing civilian and rebel leaders, demonstrate that it regards settlement with the regime on any level as dangerous to its own agenda in Syria. Jabhat al Nusra also propagates a sectarian narrative in an attempt to undermine any negotiated settlement with the regime by increasing the overall sectarianism of the war.

**Internal differences.** Reports of dissatisfaction within Jabhat al Nusra's rank-and-file over the restraint required to implement Joulani's patient strategy in Syria could indicate that internal

differences are a critical vulnerability that could increase if the organization faces considerable pressure in Syria.<sup>51</sup>

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*Jabhat al Nusra's force size is too small to maintain its current scope of operations without the support of both local populations and rebel groups.*

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**Alienation of moderate forces.** Jabhat al Nusra became increasingly uncompromising about “Western influence” after the U.S. initiated airstrikes in Syria in September 2014. It attacked the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and Harakat Hazm, two Western-backed groups, and forced both to disband in late 2014 and early 2015. It also began to police the behavior of moderate groups under the guise of “countering corruption.” It kidnapped at least seven members of the first group of vetted rebels trained by the U.S. in July 2015, demonstrating both its willingness to openly attack nodes of western influence and its ability to do so without suffering major blowback.<sup>52</sup> It later coerced the second group of trained rebels into handing over U.S.-provided weapons.<sup>53</sup> The overtness of these attacks has likely begun to alienate smaller moderate groups that were previously comfortable with their partnership with Jabhat al Nusra. The group risks generating sufficient alienation to provoke some moderate forces to call for its immediate removal from the battlefield. This vulnerability is not an opportunity for the U.S., however, unless these moderate groups receive meaningful assistance from the West in ways that both protect them on the battlefield and make the rejection real.

**Small military force.** Jabhat al Nusra's force size is too small to maintain its current scope of operations without the support of both local populations and rebel groups. It furthermore cannot win against potential adversaries on the ground such as ISIS or powerful Syrian rebel groups through the use of its military force alone. Its partnership with Ahrar al Sham mitigates this vulnerability.

**Conflict with ISIS.** The ongoing conflict with ISIS undermines Jabhat al Nusra's religious legitimacy with other Salafi-jihadi groups. Jabhat al Nusra must compete with ISIS on a religious plane in order to preserve its network of allied brigades and likely international supporters. As ISIS's military gains continue, Jabhat al Nusra is vulnerable to recalculation by these groups.

## CONCLUSION

ISIS and al Qaeda are military organizations with distinct sources of strength and ways of operating. These distinctions inform the requirements to destroy each organization in Iraq and Syria. Each has unique capabilities that the U.S. must counter or neutralize and vulnerabilities that the U.S. can exploit. Commonalities between these organizations meanwhile produce additional options for the U.S. to achieve asymmetric effects. Both have access to shared resources readily available in Syria and require that Syria's Sunni population tolerate their presence. Both also pursue expansion into neighboring states by fostering disorder and radicalization amongst Sunni populations. Well-crafted courses of action will navigate these complexities to chart a course to achieve American national security interests rather than simplifying the problem set to engender a linear approach.

ISIS derives its strength and legitimacy from the territorial Caliphate under its control. This territory provides resources for ISIS and actualizes the religious vision of the Salafi-jihadi movement. Possession of a physical caliphate allows ISIS to invoke religious obligations to defend it that appeal strongly to Salafis and other radical Muslim groups. The resonance of this call offers ISIS potential leadership of the global Salafi-jihadi movement and gives ISIS military campaigns in Syria and Iraq momentum. The brutal methods by which ISIS controls the populations it governs, however, require ISIS to dedicate significant resources to maintain its rule. The need to retain territory to serve as the reification of the Caliphate also makes ISIS much more vulnerable to attack by conventional forces. This tension between the costs and advantages of maintaining its territorial control shapes how ISIS behaves as an organization.

Jabhat al Nusra derives its strength from its intertwinement with Syrian groups that represent much of Syria's majority Sunni population. Jabhat al Nusra is part of a network of armed opposition groups, civil society elements, relief organizations, and civilian populations that rely on it for support.

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*Commonalities between ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra produce additional options for the U.S. to achieve asymmetric effects.*

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Its acceptance by non-Salafi opposition groups gives it greater legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Syrian Sunni. It leverages those relationships to create formal structures to serve as the foundation of a future Islamic Emirate for al Qaeda



in Syria. It also conducts religious outreach to transform the ideology of Syrian civilian populations. Its sustained military contributions to the war against the Assad regime ensure its continued acceptance by many Syrian Sunni in the near term even when disputes arise about how local governance should operate. Jabhat al Nusra's prosecution of mutually reinforcing religious and military campaigns in Syria makes it an unusually dangerous and adaptive threat.

Syrian regime military operations supported by Russia strengthen Jabhat al Nusra by driving other opposition groups to rely on it for military assistance. Russia's intervention is thus expediting Jabhat al Nusra's transformation of Syrian society by increasing Jabhat al Nusra's relative role within the armed opposition. Russia's intervention meanwhile validates the narrative of Jabhat al Nusra and other hardline Salafi-jihadi groups such as Ahrar al Sham that argue that the West has allied with Assad and Iran and that the Sunni opposition must instead rely on the *mujahideen* as its only protectors in the face of an existential threat.

Jabhat al Nusra's campaign to transform Syrian society into a population ready to accept a Salafi-jihadi emirate is extremely dangerous to the U.S. in the long term. Jabhat al Nusra benefits from the manner in which ISIS rules. ISIS implements a barbaric form of shari'a law, which it teaches through a religious educational system in the terrain it controls. Jabhat al Nusra seems moderate in comparison, which allows it to gain support from populations liberated from ISIS or the regime even as it imposes a similar system of governance of its own. The success of Jabhat al Nusra's transformational campaign would shift Jabhat al Nusra's center of gravity from its intertwinement with opposition groups that it does not directly control to the active support of Syria's Sunni population. Such a development would exponentially increase the requirements for American and Western action to destroy Jabhat al Nusra.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN COURSES OF ACTION (COAs)

Attacking the center of gravity of ISIS is superficially more straightforward than dismantling Jabhat al Nusra's intertwinement with the Syrian opposition. The U.S. and the West have many military capabilities for expelling hybrid forces from terrain they control. Setting conditions to ensure that such forces will be unable to return to areas from which they have been driven out is a more complex task, but still one that is familiar from recent conflicts.

Jabhat al Nusra's strategy requires the U.S. to develop careful phasing. The difficulty of designing a campaign to disentangle Jabhat al Nusra from the opposition in contrast to the relative ease of constructing a campaign to deprive

ISIS of the terrain it holds might tempt the U.S. to focus first on ISIS and then turn to Jabhat al Nusra. Such a phasing construct would be a fatal mistake. Jabhat al Nusra is poised to benefit from the defeat of ISIS while consolidating its position among rebel groups. Allowing Jabhat al Nusra to deepen its support within Syrian communities while focusing on ISIS risks turning the fight against an extremist group intertwined with opposition structures into a conflict with a significant population actively supporting Jabhat al Nusra. A successful U.S. strategy must therefore operate against both enemies simultaneously in order to ensure that it does not merely install Jabhat al Nusra as the successor to ISIS.

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*Mosul and ar Raqqa are important territorial objectives in a military campaign to destroy ISIS, but seizing both will not be sufficient to collapse the organization.*

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Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter has increasingly presented American strategy against ISIS as operating against its territorial center of gravity. He and other military briefers, however, generally present Mosul and ar Raqqa cities as that center of gravity, and some imply that retaking Mosul in itself could cause the defeat and collapse of ISIS.<sup>55</sup> The planning group rejects this view. Mosul and ar Raqqa are important territorial objectives in a military campaign to destroy ISIS, but seizing both will not be sufficient to collapse the organization.

The situation has changed since 2014, for one thing. Had Iraqi and American forces been able to retake Mosul at the end of 2014 or even the beginning of 2015 they might have dealt a crippling blow to ISIS. The organization's spread and success in Iraq and Syria, as well as its global expansion since then, however, mean that regaining Mosul is no longer likely to be a decisive blow. ISIS leadership can claim that the Caliphate survives even if it loses Mosul as long as it retains at least one significant urban center in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere.

The counter-ISIS campaign must therefore liberate Mosul, ar Raqqa, Fallujah, Palmyra, and Deir ez Zour as well as consolidate the liberation of Ramadi. ISIS can retain a plausible claim to a Caliphal capital as long as it holds any one of those cities. The campaign must also prevent ISIS from gaining control of or even establishing a major presence in major urban areas outside its current Caliphal boundaries, particularly in Damascus, Aleppo, Idlib, or Dera'a in Syria. Finally, the campaign must liberate the Libyan city of Sirte and deny ISIS's powerful affiliates in

Afghanistan and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula control of major urban centers. The ISIS center of gravity is its control of terrain on which it can claim to have a physical caliphate, but it is NOT control of any specific piece of territory.

It is not possible to attack Jabhat al Nusra's center of gravity directly. Most options to attack the center of gravity indirectly would be counter-productive at this time, furthermore. Jabhat al Nusra maintains a small fighting force with which it augments the capabilities of armed opposition groups.

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*The West must persuade Syria's Sunni Arabs that it will be a better defender of their survival than Jabhat al Nusra to expose the group's center of gravity to direct or indirect attack.*

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It does not, for the most part, hold terrain itself. Attempts to attack Jabhat al Nusra's intertwinement with the opposition by clearing terrain will thus bring the West into a conflict with those armed opposition groups receiving Jabhat al Nusra's support. Such attempts are more likely to solidify that intertwinement than to weaken it unless the U.S. first sets conditions to convince opposition groups to choose a partnership with the U.S. over continued allegiance with Jabhat al Nusra. Current conditions favor Jabhat al Nusra.

The West might also take direct action to target all the joint military control, judicial, and governance structures on which Jabhat al Nusra sits as a way to persuade or compel other opposition groups to distance themselves from Jabhat al Nusra. The planning group assesses that such an attempt under current conditions would further alienate the armed opposition and probably drive it even deeper into Jabhat al Nusra's influence, however. The structures that Jabhat al Nusra uses to govern and assist the civilian population and its opposition military partners are legitimate military targets because they support this al Qaeda affiliate. The dominant narrative within the Sunni Arab population of Syria, however, is that the West is backing the Alawites and Iranians in their efforts to subjugate and oppress the Sunni and is completely uninterested in the suffering and deprivations of that community. Attacking the structures that are providing even minimal levels of assistance to desperate Sunni populations will strengthen that narrative and validate Jabhat al Nusra's claim to be the true defender of the interests and well-being of the Syrian Sunni population. Even confining Western attacks to purely military Jabhat al Nusra targets will likely reinforce this narrative, since the Sunni Arab population sees Jabhat al Nusra's combat power as part of its own defense

against the existential threat of Alawite-Iranian aggression.

The West must alter this narrative and persuade Syria's Sunni Arabs that it will be a better defender of their survival and interests than Jabhat al Nusra in order to expose the group's center of gravity to direct or indirect attack. Many Syrian Sunni reject Jabhat al Nusra's ideology—although the group's campaigns to transform Syrian society will change that condition over time—but ideological differences pale in the face of the threat of physical destruction of communities. Many also do not share the same vision for a future Syrian state as Jabhat al Nusra. Yet the group has tremendous credit in the eyes of many Syrian Sunni as reliable *mujahideen* who have fought the Assad regime from the start of the conflict in 2011, have lost many martyrs, and have consistently helped the Sunni community attempt to stave off devastating Alawite attacks. Convincing the people whom Jabhat al Nusra has helped to survive that they should turn against this group because of its ideology will be extremely difficult. It will be impossible as long as those people still face an imminent threat to their survival as individuals and communities.

Jabhat al Nusra's intertwinement with Syrian opposition groups presents the West with a seemingly intractable conundrum, therefore. Attempts to help those opposition groups on a broad basis at this time would funnel resources and capabilities into the hands of Jabhat al Nusra's allies. Helping those allies make progress against the Assad regime under current conditions will allow Jabhat al Nusra to benefit from the gains both materially and psychologically as it will claim credit for them while denouncing any Western aid that is provided. This conundrum is the principal obstacle to developing a feasible strategy to destroy Jabhat al Nusra in Syria and resolving it is the main effort of the planning group's continued deliberations.

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*The West must alter its approach to fight ISIS from one that relies on the Alawite, Kurdish, and Shi'a communities around the periphery of Sunni areas in Iraq and Syria to one that operates within the Sunni Arab community.*

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This conundrum is also part of the largest obstacle to constructing a campaign plan to destroy ISIS because it severely hinders the West's ability to attract Syrian Sunni Arabs to join the fight against ISIS. The development of such local Sunni Arab forces is absolutely essential to any sensible campaign plan, however. The past fifteen years of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated that efforts to clear enemy-held terrain without sizable and credible local forces will fail. Even when local forces have played relatively limited

roles in the actual clearing operations themselves, moreover, their presence or absence is decisive in determining whether or not the cleared terrain can be held. The West cannot, thus, succeed in the clearing operations needed to deprive ISIS of its territorial Caliphate without substantial Sunni Arab support and certainly could not sustain any temporary successes it might achieve without that support. The West is highly unlikely to attract sufficient assistance from Sunni Arabs, however, as long as they believe that it is aligned with Assad and the Iranians and opposed to them. The West's need to avoid helping Jabhat al Nusra severely hinders the West's ability to support portions of the Sunni opposition, which makes even more difficult the task of persuading Syria's Sunni that the West is with them against Assad.

The planning group thus concludes that the West must fundamentally alter its approach toward the fight against ISIS from one that relies on the Alawite, Kurdish, and Shi'a communities around the periphery of Sunni areas in Iraq and Syria to one that operates within the Sunni Arab community itself. Doing so will help set favorable conditions for a fight against Jabhat al Nusra and prevent the group from easily exploiting ISIS's destruction.

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*It is impossible to design campaigns that will accomplish the United States' strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria in a single effort. Successful strategy will have to pursue many efforts simultaneously and consist of many phases.*

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The current strategy of helping non-Sunni groups on the margins of ISIS territory attack ISIS-held Sunni areas is a littoral approach. It will fail to achieve intended results because it will bind Sunni Arab communities to their Salafi-jihadi defenders by provoking these communities into calculating on sectarian terms; as such, it will alienate Sunni Arab communities from both the West and the governments of Iraq and Syria. The West must instead pursue a strategy to supplant **both** Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS as the defenders of Sunni Arabs while establishing itself as a reliable interlocutor between them and the regimes in Damascus and Baghdad.

Such a transformation in the West's relationship with the Sunni Arab community is essential regardless of whether Iraq and Syria remain unitary states or are partitioned in some way. Stable partition requires negotiated agreements among the various groups that can only occur in conflicts such as this through mediators trusted by both sides to pursue their interests. As long as Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS remain among

the most powerful forces in Sunni Arab communities and are seen as the defenders of those communities, there can be no negotiated settlement.

The U.S. and its allies can operate against many of the critical capabilities, critical requirements, and critical vulnerabilities of both Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS in the meantime, and the U.S. should design campaigns to reduce the military power and abilities that Jabhat al Nusra uses to help the opposition and ISIS uses to oppress the population it claims to govern. Western airpower can and should interdict the movement of vehicle columns belonging to both groups, for example, particularly in areas such as eastern Syria where there is little likelihood of hitting non-ISIS targets.

Examination of the enemy's center of gravity normally provides the basis for a coherent campaign plan to attack and destroy it. This review has instead highlighted the enormous obstacles to designing any such plan. It has revealed that any straightforward effort to strike Jabhat al Nusra's center of gravity in conditions as they are today will likely be counter-productive, while a campaign to deprive ISIS of the territory it controls in Iraq and Syria will have to be larger and more complicated than current strategy appears to accept.

The planning group concludes from this review that it is impossible to design campaigns that will accomplish the United States' strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria in a single effort. Successful strategy will have to pursue many efforts simultaneously and consist of many phases. The initial phases of a counter-Jabhat al Nusra strategy will have to focus on altering conditions on the ground in ways that expose Jabhat al Nusra's center of gravity to attack. They will require recalibrating the West's diplomatic and political approaches as much as its military operations.

But all phases and simultaneous operations must be integrated into a single coherent strategic concept. Counter-ISIS strategy cannot be separated from counter-Jabhat al Nusra strategy either in time or in intellectual construct. Both must be interwoven with diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflicts in Iraq and Syria in ways that advance core American national security interests. They must also be inseparably bound to American and European interactions with Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. can only accomplish its vital security requirements by developing and executing a single comprehensive strategy. The planning group hopes to offer such a strategy in coming publications.

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28. Boko Haram was an independent Salafi-jihadi group, but it was not an isolated group. Boko Haram received support from al Qaeda affiliates, including explosives training from al Shabaab and training and finances from al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. See Katherine Zimmerman, “From Somalia to Nigeria: Jihad,” *The Weekly Standard*, June 18, 2011, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/from-somalia-to-nigeria-jihad/article/574838>;

Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram’s International Connections,” *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, January 14, 2013, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-harams-international-connections>;

Office of Press Relations, “Background Briefing on Designation of Boko Haram and Ansaru as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists,” U.S. Department of State, November 13, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/11/217532.htm>;

and Office of Foreign Asset Control, “Treasury Sanctions Senior Boko Haram Leaders,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 1, 2015, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0290.aspx>.

29. All definitions of critical capabilities, requirements, and vulnerabilities come directly from military doctrine. See: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, Doctrine for Planning Joint Operations (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], December 2002, draft 2), IV-12 ; Joe Strange, *Centers of Gravity & Critical Vulnerabilities* (Quantico, VA: U.S. Marine Corps Association, 1996), 93-96.; Colonel Dale C. Eikmeier,

Center of Gravity Analysis, Military Review, July-August 2004, <https://media.8chan.co/pdfs/src/1421025342047-1.pdf>.

30. ISIS's leadership attempts to minimize the vulnerability associated with this critical requirement by publishing Qur'anic explanations of the religious legitimacy of temporary defeat. ISIS's Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emphasized the possibility of military defeat in a speech on December 25, 2015, saying "[Allah] promised us one of two good things [victory or martyrdom], for he did not task us with victory...if we are killed and the wounds are numerous and the problems amassed against us and the hardships were great, then it is no surprise either, for it is the promise of Allah unto us." See "IS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Criticizes Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance, Threatens Enemy States," SITE Intelligence Group, December 26, 2015, available by subscription through SITE Intelligence Group at <http://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/is-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-criticizes-saudi-led-islamic-military-alliance-threatens-enemy-states.html>.

31. Mona Alami, "ISIS's Governance Crisis (Part II): Social Services," Atlantic Council, December 24, 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/isis-s-governance-crisis-part-ii-social-services>.

32. Some members of the ISIS affiliate in Yemen, which probably includes defected members of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula commanded by ISIS-appointed leadership, publicly petitioned ISIS leader Abu Bakr Baghdadi to replace the local Yemen-based leader and listed their grievances with him. An ISIS shura council member arbitrated the issue, and it seems as though the response was sufficient. See Emily Estelle, "2015 Yemen Crisis Situation Report: December 30," AEI's Critical Threats Project, December 30, 2015, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/yemen/yemen-crisis-situation-reports-december-30-2015>; and Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "More Islamic State Members Reject Governor of Yemen Province," The Long War Journal, December 28, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/more-islamic-state-members-reject-governor-of-yemen-province.php>.

33. Jessica D. Lewis, "The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State," Institute for the Study of War, July 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Lewis-Center%20of%20gravity.pdf>.

34. "Islamic State Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi Encourages Emigration, Worldwide Action," SITE Intelligence Group, July 1, 2014, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/islamic-state-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-encourages-emigration-worldwide-action.html>.

Relevant quotes: "So let the world know that we are living today in a new era...you have a state and a khalifah (Caliphate), which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership...rush O Muslims to your state. Yes, it is your state...the State is a state for all Muslims...hijra to the land of Islam is obligatory."

35. These elements are actually components of al Qaeda "core," but they also serve leadership roles within Jabhat al Nusra. Katherine Zimmerman, "The Khorasan Group: Syria's al Qaeda Threat," AEI's Critical Threats Project, September 23, 2014, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/alqaeda/zimmerman-khorasan-group-syrias-al-qaeda-threat-september-23-2014>; Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: CENTCOM draws misleading line between Al Nusra Front and Khorasan Group," The Long War Journal, November 7, 2014, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/11/centcom.php>.

36. Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Over 100 jihadist training camps identified in Iraq and Syria," The Long War Journal, June 21, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/06/over-100-jihadist-training-camps-identified-in-iraq-and-syria.php>.

37. See JN leader Abu Mohammad al Joulani's statement in an interview with the Jabhat al Nusra media outlet "Manara al Bayda" on November 4, 2014. Translation available from SITE Intelligence Group at: <http://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/al-nusra-front-leader-speaks-in-audio-interview-on-international-coalition-recent-events-in-syria.html>.

38. Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra, A Strategic Briefing," The Quilliam Foundation, January 8, 2013, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>.

39. Suha Philip Ma'ayeh, "Jordanian Jihadists Active in Syria," Combatting Terrorism Center Sentinel, October 24, 2013, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/jordanian-jihadists-active-in-syria>.

40. The UN designates terminology used when Jabhat al Nusra members as terrorists explicitly confirm the existence of a Jabhat al Nusra shura council. For example, see: "Security Council al Qaeda Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to its Sanctions List," United Nations SC/11575, September 23, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm>.

41. Thomas Joscelyn, "Head of al Qaeda 'Victory Committee' in Syria," The Long War Journal, March 6, 2014, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/head-of-al-qaeda-victory-committee-in-syria.php>.

[longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/\\_at\\_first\\_nasr\\_staye.php](http://longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/_at_first_nasr_staye.php).

42. Katherine Zimmerman, "The Khorasan Group: Syria's al Qaeda Threat," AEI's Critical Threats Project, September 23, 2014, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/alqaeda/zimmerman-khorasan-group-syrias-al-qaeda-threat-september-23-2014>; Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: CENTCOM draws misleading line between Al Nusra Front and Khorasan Group," The Long War Journal, November 7, 2014, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/11/centcom.php>; Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda official in Syria was extremist preacher in Australia," The Long War Journal, March 21, 2014, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/former\\_islamic\\_preac.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/former_islamic_preac.php).

43. Al Qaeda in Pakistan, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb each have a named military committee that produces overall strategic guidance, supporting the assessment of a Jabhat al Nusra military committee. JN designates military emirs for zones as large as an entire province, appearing to indicate this structure. See Abdullah Suleiman Ali, "Internal divisions lead to 'hemorrhaging' of Jabhat al-Nusra leaders," al-Monitor, July 23, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/07/syria-jabhat-al-nusra-dismissal-leaders-secrets.html>.

44. Jennifer Cafarella, "Syrian Jihadists Signal Intent for Lebanon," Institute for the Study of War, March 5, 2015, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrian\\_Backgrounder\\_approved\\_0.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrian_Backgrounder_approved_0.pdf).

45. See Jabhat al Nusra Twitter posts about Dawa wa al Irshad outreach activities, sources available upon request.

46. For example, see: Facebook post by the local Dar al Qada'a court house on the role of the local Dawa wa al Irshad office in the legal process in Huraytan, Aleppo, on February 24, 2015, source available upon request.

47. Jabhat al Nusra Twitter posts on promotion of hijab and religion classes, sources available upon request. The official twitter account for the structure is: [https://twitter.com/mujahed\\_lens](https://twitter.com/mujahed_lens).

48. For more on Jabhat al Nusra's training, see: Jennifer Cafarella, "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: an Islamic Emirate for al-Qaeda," Institute for the Study of War, December 2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/JN%20Final.pdf>. 49. For more on Jabhat al Nusra's strategy to maintain a "Syrian face," see: Jennifer Cafarella, "Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria: an Islamic Emirate for al-Qaeda," Institute for the Study of War, December

2014, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/JN%20Final.pdf>.

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54. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 595-596.

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