

From Local Actor to Global Threat

The So-Called Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria

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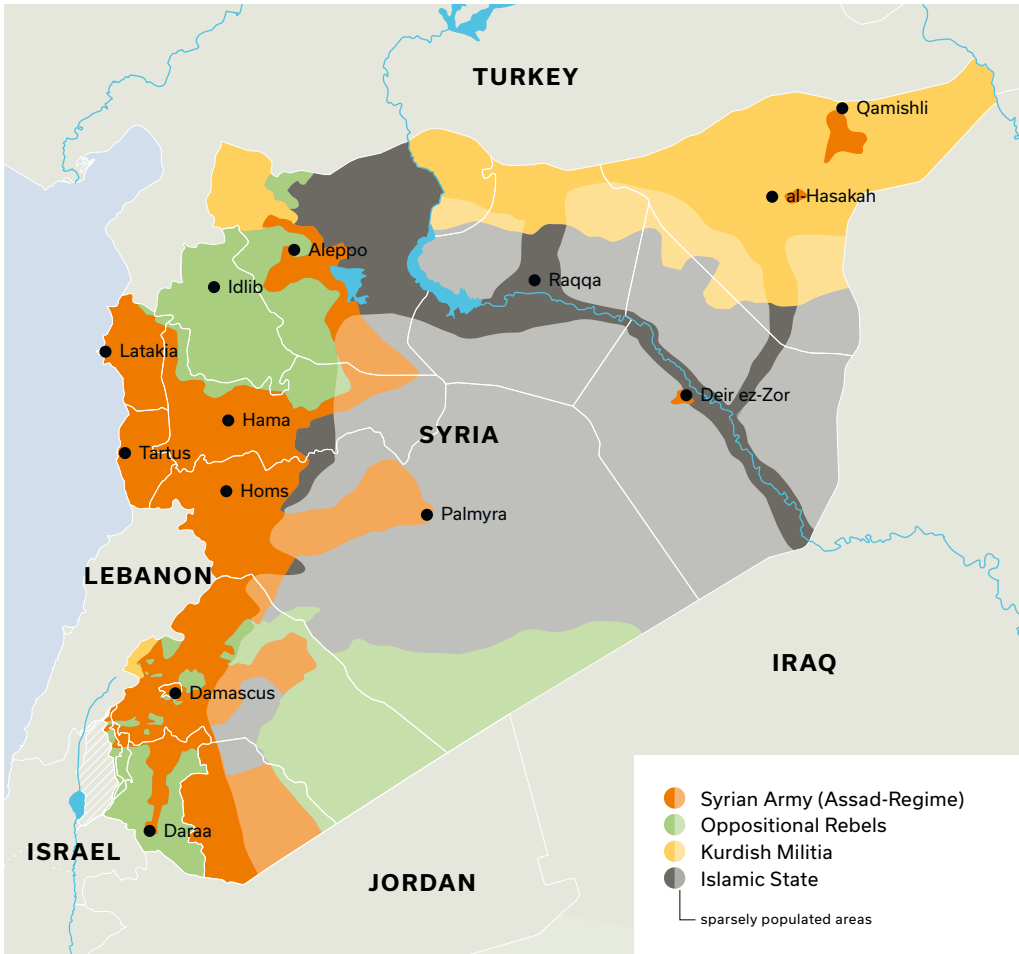
With the onset of the crises in Syria and Iraq, the political environment in the Levant has continued to sustain a steep security decline since 2011. The dreaded prospect of spillovers into neighboring countries at the beginning has now become a reality. The self-styled Islamic State and other international militant Islamist groups operating as belligerents in the Syria and Iraq crisis constitute a grave long-term challenge for the international community.

The so-called Islamic State (IS) recently withdrew from the Syrian city of Palmyra at the end of March due to intensive Russian air strikes and left the city to be conquered by the advancing Syrian troops. Before that, the capture of the Iraqi town of Fallujah at the end of 2013 and Mosul in June 2014, the IS had made considerable territorial gains. Yet, the perspective on conquered territories only allows limited conclusions for the long-term threat potential. As a terror network that is now operating on an international scale, the organisation succeeded in spawning offshoots in the Middle East, Africa and South and Central Asia, while supporters have been mounting terror attacks virtually on a weekly basis throughout the world. To provide a better understanding of the terror wrought by IS, the first purpose of this paper is to describe the rise of IS in its place of origin against the backdrop of the war in Syria. Secondly, problems and risks associated with the measures taken so far to curb and fight IS will be examined as well as the fundamental question as to the available options for future action by the international coalition against IS. Thirdly, IS will be appraised as the successor to al-Qaeda in Iraq after the fall of the Iraqi Baath regime and as a beneficiary of the long-standing local Sunni-Shia conflict. Iraq and with it the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan (ARK) will play a central role over the coming years, not only in the fight against militant Islamist groups but also in the efforts to stabilise the region as a whole. In Iraq, the fight to fend off IS only temporarily generated a collaborative dynamic. The Shia mobilisation in Iraq triggered by the Syria conflict and IS incursions

harbours potential for future conflict, further fuelled by the current political crisis within Iraq.

Military Escalation Despite Diplomatic Efforts

With the signing of the Vienna Communiqué and the adoption of UN Security Council resolution 2254 as well as agreements made at the Munich Security Conference, the International Syria Support Group, whose members include the USA and Russia as well as representatives from Iran and Saudi Arabia, had no doubt made some progress by the end of 2015 towards establishing the political conditions that will allow the implementation of a ceasefire to bring an end to the devastating civil war in Syria.¹ However, hopes for rapid progress this had raised were overshadowed by a marked increase in hostilities at the beginning of the year, which finally led to a temporary suspension of the third round of the Geneva talks between the opposition groups and regime representatives. There are some key issues that are likely to remain unresolved for some time to come, such as the fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, particularly over the areas the regime continues to hold on to, and – in the light of frequently voiced demands for a partial revocation of Iraq’s de-Baathification law – the integration of the public institutions comprising more than 1.5 million employees. In connection with the most recent agreements, the fight against IS, which is in the security interest of all parties involved in the negotiations, can be seen as the only common denominator. However, the sluggish pace



The front line and the conflict parties in the Syrian Civil War. Source: Own illustration after Thomas van Linge, The situation in Syria, 13 Mar 2016, <https://t.co/n43Vda67qE> [16 Mar 2016]; Liveuamap, 15 Mar 2016, <http://syria.liveuamap.com> [16 Mar 2016], Natural Earth ©, <http://naturalearthdata.com> [7 Mar 2016].

of the Geneva talks is another stark reminder that a conclusive agreement on a joint strategy against IS and its implementation, which will involve the identification of partners on the ground, will depend above all on military developments in Syria.

IS as a Militia in the War in Syria

By the time it captured the provincial capital of Raqqa at the latest, IS had become one of the main actors in the Syrian Civil War. As one of the first provincial capitals to be liberated by opposition forces with scant resistance in March 2013, control over the town was initially maintained

by troops of the moderate opposition under the command of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) backed by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces,² the Nusra Front (*Jabhat an-Nusra li-Ahli ash-Sham*) and the Salafist *Ahrar ash-Sham* (Free Men of the Levant) alongside IS. Raqqa's infiltration by IS advancing forces until the organisation had taken control of the entire town within a few months has come to serve as a model for IS's approach to subjugating the civilian population and pushing out rival groups, which enabled the organisation to conquer large parts in the east and north of the country. As of 2012, the increasingly confused military situation has

involved fluctuating loyalties and strategic alliances among the groups fighting the regime. Besides *Jabhat an-Nusra*, IS was one of the two main jihadist opposition groups which initially coordinated their activities with FSA units. After the split between the two militias, which was due to a falling out between the leader of the Nusra Front, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, and the IS “Caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a dispute about allegiance to al-Qaeda, *Ahrar ash-Sham* has made a name for itself as an important military actor, even beyond the country’s borders. Funded and equipped by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, it plays a crucial role in coordinating the operations of the Islamic Front alliance, which is one of the strongest opposition alliances fighting in northwestern Syria.

By the end of 2015, IS had lost control of large areas in the Kurdish region in northern Syria to the Syrian-Kurdish forces supported by the USA and now Russia as well, and retreated south into territory controlled by the regime. Russian air support for the troops of the regular Syrian Army and its paramilitary support units had resulted in the opposition groups under the umbrella of the FSA in the north of the country losing territory to IS. There were several reports in 2015 that the remaining troops of the regime, whose permanent core is still mainly comprised of the Republican Guard and the Fourth Division of the regular Syrian Army, have been reinforced by foreign Shia forces from the Afghan Hazara minority as well as Pakistani fighters deployed by Iran. The indications of increased Iranian involvement are afforded credence on account of a recent statement by the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Major General Muhammad Ali Jafari, according to which the IRGC has trained no fewer than 200,000 young men as Shia volunteer fighters for deployment in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen and some of them are already on the field in the above-mentioned conflict zones.³ In Syria and in Iraq, the IRGC’s elite special operations force – the *Quds Force* – commanded by Major General Qasem Sulaimani has already suffered heavy losses. Funeral ceremonies in Tehran, at which there is rarely any official mention of place and

cause of death, indicate that at least twelve officers of the rank of general have been killed since 2014.⁴ Although there has been no official confirmation, it is said that regular IRGC units have also been deployed in Syria since Russia started intervening in the conflict on 30 September 2015.

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As the third round of the Geneva negotiations between the different opposition groups and the regime got underway in January, there was a marked increase in the number of airstrikes by Russian fighter aircrafts across the country. Besides targeting densely populated residential areas, hospitals and schools, Russian airstrikes were aimed at positions of the FSA, the Nusra Front, the Islamic Front and, on rare occasions, IS. This massively assisted the Syrian regime in its efforts to consolidate the territory under its control along the Damascus-Homs-Hama-Latakia line. Triggered by a new major offensive launched by remaining regime forces in collaboration with foreign Shia militias, the four-year battle over the city of Aleppo with a population of over two million flared up again in early February. Here, one can see yet again that the Russian involvement in the Syria conflict entailed close military cooperation with the Syrian regime and with Iran. There are also clear indications that Russia has learnt lessons from Iran’s approach to supporting the regime in Damascus since the popular uprising began in 2011. While Iran may be securing the survival of the Assad regime through financial and military assistance, but has not been able to ensure the military supremacy of the pro-Assad forces, Russia is now attempting to generate an positivion of military strength for the regime,

relying purely on the military option. Russia's announcement on 16 March of the partial withdrawal of its armed forces suggests that Russia currently does not intend to do more than to backup the military and political survival of the Syrian regime. By increasing the pressure on the representatives of the opposition and the Syrian regime in the ongoing negotiations in Geneva, Russia is keeping all option open, even with the US. The sluggish pace of the Geneva III talks and the deliberate military escalation of the conflict have not only made a political solution unlikely any time soon. The Russian air supremacy over large swathes of Syrian airspace and the stationing of surface-to-air missiles are in effect also seriously restricting the scope of action for creating and securing humanitarian corridors. Instead of fighting IS structures as it had announced it would, Russia was openly aiming the destructive power of its airstrikes, which have increased dramatically in number since February, at military opposition groups and the civilian population in the areas thought to be under the influence of the groups fighting against the Assad regime. This had the effect of taking the pressure off IS by concentrating the fighting on the area around Aleppo in northern Syria. The fact that the Nusra Front is fighting side by side with moderate opposition groups in the north-west of Syria and is targeted by Russian airstrikes as they are further plays into the hands of IS.

Increasingly Difficult Search for Allies

While the U.S.-led coalition once again increased the frequency of its airstrikes against IS targets particularly in the second half of last year, the fundamental long-standing question remains as to which party to the conflict can be deployed on the ground to retake Raqqa and Mosul with support from the international coalition. This is linked to the question about which options are available to intervene in the Syrian conflict generally. Russia's air supremacy over large parts of Syria and particularly the northwest of the country has also placed severe restrictions on the scope of action of the U.S.-led international coalition. It is therefore likely

that the U.S. will shift its military engagement against IS to northern Iraq.

In the past, Kurdish *Peshmerga* troops active in northern Iraq and Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) with close links to the PKK that dominates the semi-autonomous Kurdish quasi-state of Rojava, had been able to curb the advances by IS forces in the respective areas and even push them back far beyond Kurdish territory. At the same time, the establishment of the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) backed by the USA was meant to strengthen Kurdish forces under the leadership of the YPG ahead of a possible ground offensive in Syria. That said, the deployment of Kurdish units in the event of a ground offensive to retake at least Mosul appears doubtful, and the ARK has issued several statements recently indicating that it would at most play a supportive role ahead of a ground offensive by the Iraqi Army. For one, *Peshmerga* forces advancing further into Iraqi territory could reignite territorial status disputes with the government in Baghdad, particularly as there still is no final resolution regarding the town of Kirkuk, which has been taken by *Peshmerga* forces. Furthermore, there is a risk of exacerbating the existing ethnic conflict in the area whose population is predominantly Sunni-Arab.

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The deployment of Shia Iraqi militias, *Hashd ash-Sha'abi* (Popular Mobilization Forces), probably harbours an even greater risk of escalation.





Aleppo: The Russian air strikes were also directed against the civilian population in regions with groups fighting against the Assad regime. Source: © Abdalrhman Ismail, Reuters.

These forces had previously played a significant role in the capture of Tikrit, capital of Saladin Governorate, and of the Baiji industrial zone. In the course of the fighting for Tikrit and in the aftermath of battles with IS forces in Dyalah Province, there had been occasional attacks on Sunnis⁵ and Sunni refugees, who were not allowed to return to their homes in villages that were now under the control of *Hashd ash-Sha'abi*. Accusations of deliberate ethnic cleansing, for instance by targeting entire villages with artillery fire, are regularly levelled not only against the Shia militias but also the other conflicting parties in the two countries, in some instances the FSA as well as the Kurdish YPG and the *Pesh-merga*.⁶

In view of the unpromising options of cooperating with one of the conflicting parties already active on the ground, the U.S. has made attempts at building a new moderate Syrian group. At the height of the debate about the failed U.S. training program for one of the selected moderate opposition groups, which came to an end for the time being with the total annihilation and capture of “Division 30”,⁷ *Ahrar ash-Sham* had attempted to become involved as the USA’s predestined partner in Syria. Since that time, the group has continued in its efforts to run down its links with al-Qaeda and from the Islamist post-war visions of its former leadership around the Islamist Hassan Aboud,⁸ who had been released from Sednaya prison by the regime in 2011.



← A Peshmerga fighter: The advance of Kurdish ground forces is not without controversy. Time and again territorial disputes arise – for example, with the government in Baghdad. Source: © Azad Lashkari, Reuters.

Fundamental Risks of the Campaign against IS

Considering the high cost the battle from the air conducted by the coalition has exacted to date, the need for an effective and long-term fight against IS in collaboration with a reliable partner on the ground appears more urgent than ever. After the recapture of the Kurdish town of Kobane in northern Syria and that of Sinjar in the north-west of Iraq, which Kurdish units were able to retake after a year of airstrikes against IS by the international coalition, it transpired that the towns had suffered widespread destruction, with between 60 and 80 per cent of residential property and infrastructure affected, depending on estimates. In part, this had been due to IS carrying out planned detonations of infrastructure targets to cover its retreat. There were also numerous reports of civilians and prisoners of war being used as human shields by IS as well as by groups of the Islamist opposition fighters.⁹ All conflicting parties in Syria and IS in Iraq are now purposefully relocating military infrastructure and fighting units into mosques and hospitals.

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All instances where urban centers have been recaptured from IS have illustrated the risks to be faced in the event of an offensive on Raqqa or Mosul. In Tikrit as well as in Sinjar and Ramadi, IS forces, whose snipers were still putting up

resistance weeks after the towns had been retaken, had mined or booby-trapped access roads, entrances to houses and even street lamps, refrigerators and copies of the Quran kept in mosques. This resulted in a correspondingly high loss of life as well as serious injuries and lost limbs. Previously, IS as well as the Nusra Front had already made strategic use of suicide bombers during the capture and defence of towns and villages. This enabled IS, which had been involved in the fight for Ramadi by the Sunni insurgency against the central government from as early as 2011, to take the city in mid-May 2015. The IS units had compensated for their lack in numbers by using up to 30 vehicles, including a bulldozer, filled with explosives.

From a European and German perspective and in view of the waves of refugees arriving from the receiving countries in the region, which have increased hugely in volume since mid-2015, highest priority must therefore be given to providing assistance with the reconstruction work in the affected areas and with measures to guarantee the safe return of refugees as part of the support efforts for Syria¹⁰ and Iraq.¹¹ In addition, the Iraqi government must be supported in its efforts to build on its successful recapture of Ramadi and to offer the region's Sunnis the prospect of being permanently integrated into the defence sector. The approach of involving a wide range of parties in the common Arab-Kurdish fight against terrorism in Iraq may, importantly, help create a significant counterbalance to *Hashd ash-Sha'abi*, which had not been involved in the fight for Ramadi under pressure from the USA. The recapture of Ramadi by anti-terror units of the Iraqi security forces and Sunni-Arab tribal fighters with support from U.S. airstrikes at the end of December represented an important victory for the Iraqi government and the Iraqi Army. However, as the army had prematurely abandoned the fight for the city seven months earlier, similar to what happened at the fall of Mosul, leaving behind sophisticated U.S.-manufactured armaments and equipment, this achievement only had a temporary effect in easing the pressure on the al-Abadi government.¹²



Kobane: The city could only be recaptured at high human and material costs. Source: © Kai Pfaffenbach, Reuters.

Alienation between Baghdad and the Sunnis

Iraq will play a key role, albeit not the decisive role, in the future war against IS because the country is the base from which the organisation extends its structures into Syria. While IS's control of Raqqa makes this city the center and declared capital of the Islamic Caliphate in Syria, Iraq remains IS's refuge. The western Anbar Province, which borders Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, has a majority Sunni Arab population¹³ and is mainly defined by tribal structures. Since 2003, it has been the breeding ground for Sunni extremist groups and an area of refuge for the nationalist, strongly *Baathist* resistance against U.S. troops, which is mainly composed of former officers and soldiers of the Iraqi Army, secret service personnel and *Baath* cadres. The largest Sunni tribe, the *Dulaim*, is considered to be loyal to the *Baath* regime.

Similar to the *Baath* regime under Assad, the Iraqi regime had secured the tribal leaders' loyalty through a system of patronage that had endowed selected tribes with a certain level of autonomy as well as with positions in the public sector and the armed forces. In post-war Iraq, the increasing mistrust among the population in the Sunni Triangle¹⁴ of the new central government under Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, which was by then openly pursuing a sectarian policy of marginalisation and discrimination of Sunnis, secured the Sunni Islamists' local support. Previously, the population had in fact fought precisely those insurgency groups and al-Qaeda as part of the so-called *Sahwa* program ("Awakening", also known as the "Sons of Iraq" program), cooperating with the central government and U.S. troops. However, the promised integration into the Iraqi armed forces did not materialise, which prompted the first instances



of local unrest in early 2011 and subsequently riots and terror attacks in the north and west of the Sunni areas and the larger cities. The central government clamped down hard on the initially peaceful Sunni demonstrations, which destroyed any prospects of negotiations. In this situation akin to civil war, which reached its violent climax in 2013, al-Qaeda in Iraq was able to present itself as a supporter of the Sunnis by attacking Shia targets and to consolidate its influence in wide parts of Iraq by gaining acceptance among the population and forging local alliances with other actors with a violent agenda.

Domestic Political Crisis and Loss of Trust in the Central Iraqi Government

Quite apart from the continuing high level of violence due to an increase in ethnic-religious tensions under the influence of the Syria conflict,¹⁵ Iraq is being destabilised further by its domestic political crisis. This is part of the damaging legacy Haider al-Abadi took on as Nuri al-Maliki's successor after the Iraqi general elections in April 2014. The new head of government, whose inauguration was quickly followed by the advance of IS, which has dominated the government's political agenda ever since, is facing pressure from within and from outside the country to rectify the mistakes made by his predecessor by implementing comprehensive reforms. Demands for forceful measures to fight corruption and for a solution to the energy supply crisis turned into nationwide demonstrations in July 2015. There were also demands for reductions in government spending, particularly for public sector employees and members of parliament. This included the scrapping of the posts of the three vice presidents and three vice prime ministers. The fact that former Prime Minister al-Maliki, a vice president himself, was personally affected by the abolition of the posts, which had been sanctioned by the Iraqi parliament, and boycotted the step by making reference to it contravening the constitution widened the gulf between al-Maliki supporters and al-Abadi supporters within the *Da'wa* Party further. At the end of October 2015, over 60 MPs belonging to the governing State of Law coalition

signed a letter threatening to withdraw their support because of the lack of consultation on the government's reform package. It is telling that for a long time, the Prime Minister's most reliable supporters were to be found outside the State of Law Coalition among the forces in the Shia bloc closest to Iran. The *Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq* (ISCI) under Ammar al-Hakim and the Sadrist camp under Muqtada as-Sadr with the *Al-Ahrar* Bloc have publicly voiced their support for the government's reform plans and for its role in the military campaign against IS. However, even in these circles there has been increasing criticism voiced lately and even threats of leaving the coalition, as in the case of Muqtada as-Sadr's party.

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Since 2014, the war on terrorism has fragmented the political camps even further. The project to set up a new multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian National Guard to be deployed against IS, which is to include both Sunni tribal fighters and Shia militiamen, has resulted in considerable tension. Having learnt a lesson from the failure of the Sunni Awakening militias armed for the fight against al-Qaeda with U.S. support, which ended with the al-Maliki government clamping down on the militias with accusations of the "illegal bearing of arms" among other things, the status of the National Guard is to be legally formalised. The suggestion to hand supreme command over the planned brigades to the provincial governors evoked strong criticism from the Shia, Kurdish as well as Sunni sides, accompanied by comments that the loss of control by Baghdad would entail would strengthen separatist and sectarian movements in the provinces.

The Prime Minister's popularity has now hit rock bottom, and his dependence on the Islamist spectrum of Shia parties and therefore on the future development of Iraq-Iran relations also harbours many risks for the government, for instance with respect to the provincial elections scheduled for next year. The situation is exacerbated by a budgetary crisis caused on the one hand by rising expenditure in the fight against IS and on the other by the fact that the central government and ARK were hit particularly hard by the effects of falling oil prices at the beginning of the year, which meant that the government saw its oil revenues fall by 70 per cent within a month, representing a loss of some five billion U.S. dollars.¹⁷

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Shia Mobilisation against IS Harbours Conflict Potential

The dominant position of the Shia political bloc in Iraqi politics and the support it receives from Iran have been strengthened by recent developments. This trend was accelerated by the response to the advances made by IS in Iraq, which were not brought to a halt until IS forces had moved close to Baghdad. This threat scenario was exacerbated by the proximity of IS's territorial gains in Anbar Province to the holy Shia sites in Karbala and Najaf. The leading Shia clerics of Iraq are exerting an increasing amount of influence on the debate about the fight against IS and the government's reforms. The public Friday prayers led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and his top aides have become a political institution that is capable of mobilis-

ing support for the government. This means that the top Shia authority in Iraq represents a more important partner for the government than ever, seeing that trust in the government is continuing to wane among large parts of the population.

The Shia clerics also play a major role in the Iraqi fight to fend off IS. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani responded to the fall of Mosul on 10 June 2014 by calling upon Iraqi Shiites to take up the fight against IS, stressing that all holy sites and Baghdad had to be defended against the threat from the advancing IS units. *Hashd ash-Sha'abi* was founded in response to the IS expansion. Within weeks, numerous militias formed under its umbrella; so did subgroups of the militias that had occupied important institutions in the political and defence sectors immediately after the overthrow of the Baath regime in 2003, some of them having returned from exile in Iran where they had received support and training. Specifically – and forming the core of today's *Hashd as-Sha'abi* as the most influential groups – these include the militia *al-Badr*,¹⁸ the former Mahdi Army, now active under the designation of Peace Companies (*Saraya as-Salam*) under the cleric Muqtada as-Sadr, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (League of the Righteous), who are rumoured to be close to former Prime Minister al-Maliki, and the Iraqi offshoot of Hezbollah (*Kata'ib Hizballah*). Between them, these militias, which have strong links to Iran, and up to 40 further militias are thought to comprise between 60,000 and 100,000 armed fighters. In April 2015, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi had formalised the PMF militias, which now operate beside the Iraqi Army as paramilitary units under the command of the Ministry of the Interior and are funded by the central government.¹⁹ It appears that *Hashd ash-Sha'abi* has monopolised the government's fight against IS in line with its own objectives and has successfully established itself as the only force – besides the Kurds – that can put up an effective fight against IS, whose ideology is clearly anti-Shia. The upgrading of its capabilities and particularly the extent to which it is funded and equipped by Iran and the Iraqi central government (approx. one billion U.S. dollars in the 2015 budget) also affect the



Kerbala: Shiite clergy play an important role in the Iraqi struggle against the IS.
Source: © Stringer Iraq, Reuters.



Al-Nusra fighters: Sunni extremists target mostly other Muslims that do not follow their religious beliefs and declare them infidels. Source: © Hosam Katan, Reuters.

sensitive and tense relationship with the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, whose *Peshmerga* had demanded support from the central government for years.

Until the summer of 2014, many of the Shia militias had fought in Syria on the side of the regime; but they subsequently followed al-Sistani's call to defend the holy sites in Iraq, which initially significantly impaired the fighting strength of the Assad regime. From 2015, there have been reliable indications of militia fighters returning and becoming involved once again in the fighting in Syria, for instance during the most recent February offensive to take back Aleppo, where Iraqi *al-Badr* fought. The fact that the Syrian regime is receiving support from groups oper-

ating from within Iraq is not least an indication of the pressure Iran is exerting on the Iraqi government to provide backing to Tehran's support for the Assad regime despite historic rivalries between the Iraqi and the Syrian *Baath* parties and acute security tensions. Observers have rightly pointed out that the decline in recruitment to the Iraqi Army and security forces has resulted in a loss of legitimacy of the Iraqi Armed Forces as an institution and potential engine of a nationwide integration and reconciliation process. Linked to this are concerns about the future loyalty of the militias to the Iraqi government and the question of the options available to the government for controlling militias that may threaten to get out of hand sometime in the future.²⁰

Last but not least, the growing presence of paramilitary groups increases the existing risk of escalation of the Islamic sectarian conflict in the region significantly, with Syria and Iraq as the flashpoints. Many of the groups fighting under the umbrella of *Hashd as-Sha'abi* have declared the destruction of the “*takfiri* terrorists” or *nawasib* – meaning IS, the Nusra Front and further Sunni-Salafist or jihadist groups – a top priority alongside the protection of the region’s Shiites and holy sites.²¹ These terms denote those Sunni extremists who declare all Muslims – meaning Shia – who do not subscribe to their own religious conviction to be infidels and kill them. In Lebanon, *Hezbollah* has repeatedly defended its intervention in the Syria conflict on the side of the Assad regime by referring to the risk of this conflict spilling over into Lebanon. Since his speech on 25 May 2013,²² in which he admitted the presence of Hezbollah fighters in Syria for the first time, Hezbollah’s leader and Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, has stressed repeatedly that *Hezbollah* was protecting the religious groups in Lebanon against the “storm of the *Takfiri*”, which could potentially provoke Israel to intervene.²³

In the most recent development, Russia entering the war prevented the impending military collapse of the Syrian regime in the late summer of 2015.

Assessment and Outlook

The security situation in the Levant has deteriorated dramatically within just a few years during the course of the Syria conflict. The radicalisation of the Syrian popular uprising and of the main opposition actors, particularly from 2012 and then anew from 2015, has to some extent spread to the bordering countries, where existing divides are deepening considerably, threatening not only national unity, such as in Iraq for

instance, but also stability in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey – adding to the challenges posed by the currently 4.6 million war refugees of the last five years now and in the foreseeable future.²⁴ Particularly from a European and German perspective, a further gradual destabilisation of the Levant would have catastrophic consequences that would have a direct impact on Western security interests.

The active intervention by the regional powers and the increasing internationalisation of the conflict this has entailed has made it considerably more difficult to achieve a ceasefire and a political resolution of the conflict. In the most recent development, Russia entering the war prevented the impending military collapse of the Syrian regime in the late summer of 2015. While it has become apparent in recent years that none of the actors in the civil war is strong enough to win the conflict by military means, the Russian-Iranian intervention has resulted in overcoming the military stalemate to the benefit of the Syrian regime. This has resulted in the window for direct negotiations between the Syrian parties, which had opened up due to the threatening fall of the regime, closing for the time being. It is conceivable that the political process may resume after a phase of the regime expanding and consolidating its control over wide swathes of the country. But the process would then be conducted under conditions favouring the Syrian regime and its allies, Russia and Iran, to the disadvantage of the Syrian opposition and its supporting countries, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. One question that remains totally unanswered and depends on the realities on the ground is whether this development would benefit further conflicting parties such as IS and the Syrian-Kurdish forces in the long term as well.

The massive foreign presence in Syria and Iraq in the fight against IS and in the Syrian civil war is promoting the continuation of the conflict, radicalising elements of the moderate opposition groups and ultimately strengthening Islamist forces such as IS. This development also harbours the risk of the Syrian revolution

being reinterpreted from being a local rebellion against the *Baath* regime to being a religiously motivated war of liberation against foreign forces of occupation and intervention, such as Iran, Russia and the Lebanese *Hezbollah*. The Russian-Iranian intervention on the side of the Syrian regime and a serious weakening of the military capabilities of the anti-Assad opposition forces could easily set off an unprecedented escalation of the conflict through action by Turkey or Saudi Arabia. Besides a direct intervention in the conflict with troops of their own, long-term indirect military support of the Syrian opposition groups would also be conceivable with the intention of creating the conditions for what could amount to years of fighting against the regime and its allies using strong guerrilla elements.²⁵

Despite some common positions and partial successes, which have resulted in the recapture of some territories in Iraq, the fight against IS in Syria and Iraq is still marred by disagreements between the parties involved, particularly with respect to the way to conduct the unavoidable military action on the ground. In looking at the outcome of the campaign to date that has been conducted almost exclusively from the air, one is forced to conclude that this is an approach fraught with risk. This is mainly due to the complex conflict scenarios within the two countries, which illustrate that there can only be hope for a military campaign against IS to succeed if there is a simultaneous humanitarian, political and economic stabilisation of the region. As long as the Syria conflict – which acted as the main catalyst for the rise of al-Qaeda and IS – continues, creating a vacuum that allows militant groups such as IS to consolidate, the options for intervening in Syria remain limited.

Iraq will play a central role in the fight against IS and any successor terrorist organisations over the coming years. The Kurdish troops of the ARK are of huge importance, particularly for curbing IS by military means, and the ARK has also made a considerable humanitarian contribution by accepting large numbers of Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Against this backdrop, it is vital

that international support for the ARK continues and is intensified. However, the long-term political stabilisation of the region, including the fight against the causes of Islamist extremism, can only be achieved with the involvement of a strengthened central Iraqi government. But the dynamic triggered by the Shia mobilisation, which is threatening to exacerbate the political instability within Iraq, will probably prove more difficult to deal with.

Even if it will initially not prove possible to totally defeat IS militarily, but only to weaken it gradually, pushing it back into small territories within Syria and Iraq will allow the military, humanitarian and economic stabilisation of the recaptured areas and the integration of the respective local groups into the political process with the effect of permanently denying IS new recruits and support. However, one cannot exclude the possibility of IS going underground in areas of refuge with support structures and backing among the local population looking back at the emergence of the organisation over ten years ago and the limited resources it had access to at the time. Even assuming the recapture of Mosul by the Iraqi Army, massive loss of fighters and equipment as well as having some of its sources of income cut off, IS would still be capable of organising a prolonged terror campaign against sectarian targets in Iraq. Similar scenarios in the neighbouring states of the Levant cannot be ruled out either.

In September 2015, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung established its new Syria/Iraq Office with bases in Beirut and Erbil (cf. <http://kas.de/syrien-irak/en>).

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- 1 In addition, UN resolutions 2253 and 2258 were adopted in December; they relate to further measures to disrupt the funding streams of IS and al-Qaeda as well as measures to improve the humanitarian situation in Syria.
- 2 Opposition in exile recognised in 2012 as a “legitimate representative of the Syrian people” by Germany, acting as a member of the so-called Group of Friends of the Syrian People. Based in Gaziantep/Istanbul, Turkey with the Syrian interim government.
- 3 Alsalmi, Adil 2016: Tehran Acknowledge 200 Thousand Armed Youth in Five Countries, Asharq Al-Awsat, 14 Jan 2016, in: <http://english.aawsat.com/2016/01/article55346512/tehran-acknowledge-200-thousand-armed-youth-five-countries> [22 Feb 2016].
- 4 This included a former bodyguard of former President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Other high-ranking officers of the IRGC, including prominent war heroes of the Iran-Iraq war such as Brigadier Hamid Taqavi, who was killed by IS snipers in Samarra, Iraq at the end of December 2014, fell during fighting with IS and FSA groups near Aleppo, Damascus, Homs and Quneitra.
- 5 Instances of prisoners being beheaded and occasionally even burnt alive were documented by fighters of the Imam Ali brigades. In mid-January, Sunni MPs demanded the militias be disarmed as they suspected them of being behind the latest attacks on Sunni mosques in Muqdadiya, Diyala Province. Al-Badr militia leader Hadi al-Amiri responded by offering his assistance with the reconstruction of the mosques. See Rudaw 2016: Sunni parliamentarians call on Abadi to disband Shia militias, Rudaw, 20 Jan 2016, in: <http://rudaw.net/mobile/english/middleeast/iraq/190120162> [22 Feb 2016].
- 6 According to a report by Amnesty International, *Peshmerga* destroyed thousands of houses in Kirkuk and Diyala after retaking areas on the Nineveh plains in order to prevent the displaced ethnic Arab population from returning. In an early statement, the Ministry of *Peshmerga* referred to the destruction of infrastructure as part of the combat operation. See Todays Zaman 2016: Amnesty: Peshmerga destroyed thousands of houses to displace Arabs, Todays Zaman, 22 Jan 2016, in: http://todayszaman.com/diplomacy_amnesty-peshmerga-destroyed-thousands-of-houses-to-displace-arabs_410136.html [22 Feb 2016].
- 7 It was not least because of their inferior combat capability that the fighters in this group, which had been trained under the U.S. training program and deployed in northern Syria, were totally wiped out shortly after the beginning of the operation in August/September 2015 by units of the Nusra Front and during airstrikes by the Syrian Air Force. The multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces alliance, established officially in October 2015, is tasked with conducting targeted strikes against IS in the Raqqa area in close cooperation with the USA, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and Turkey.
- 8 Abud and virtually the entire leadership of the group were killed on 9 November 2014 in what was one of the largest politically motivated attacks of the war to date.
- 9 A video presumably published by the Islamist *Jaish al-Islam* is purported to show a group of captured Alawite units loyal to the regime and their families in cages set up in a public space in the eastern Al Ghouta region on the outskirts of Damascus to deter airstrikes by the regime and the Russian Air Force. See Joscelyn, Thomas 2015: Syrian rebels use caged civilians, fighters to deter airstrikes, Threat Matrix, 1 Nov 2015, in: <http://longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/syrian-rebels-use-caged-civilians-fighters-to-deter-airstrikes.php> [22 Feb 2016].
- 10 The Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF) was set up in September 2013, initially under the chairmanship of the Federal Republic of Germany and the United Arab Emirates, to provide support for humanitarian aid activities in the Syrian areas controlled by the National Coalition. Subject to a resolution of the conflict, the fund is intended to serve for the reconstruction of civilian infrastructure.
- 11 The World Bank, for instance, promised a further loan of 200 million U.S. dollars on 13 January 2016 in addition to the loan of 350 million U.S. dollars announced in July 2015 for the purpose of reconstruction in the areas liberated from IS. Cf. Iraqi Dinar News Today 2015: World Bank lends Iraq \$1.2 billion to face oil, security shocks, Iraqi Dinar News Today, 18 Dec 2015, in: <http://iraqidinarnewstoday.net/world-bank-lends-iraq-1-2-billion-to-face-oil-security-shocks> [22 Feb 2016]; Xalid, Gulala 2016: World Bank to lend \$200M to Iraq, Kurdistan 24, 13 Jan 2016, in: <http://kurdistan24.net/en/news/4f98bf0d-52c5-4fdb-8d93-8f7ff26bba6c/World-Bank-to-lend-200M-to-Iraq> [22 Feb 2016].
- 12 A similar approach is to be used in the recently announced offensive to retake Fallujah. Regular Iraqi Army units would then not be tied up in Anbar and could be readied for an offensive on Mosul.
- 13 According to official figures, Iraq’s population comprises 32 to 37 per cent Sunnis and 60 to 65 per cent Shiites. Cf. figures from Pabst, Martin 2015: Power Struggle or Religious War? The Confessionalisation of Conflicts in the Arab World: The Situation in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, in: KAS International Reports 6, 2015, p. 40, in: http://kas.de/wf/doc/kas_41991-544-2-30.pdf?150713155216 [22 Feb 2016].
- 14 The area predominantly populated by Sunnis between Baghdad in the south, Mosul in the north and Rutba in the east, comprising the Governorates of Baghdad, Anbar, Salah ad-Din and Nineveh.
- 15 According to the latest report by the UN Mission in Iraq, 18,802 Iraqis were killed and 36,245 injured through war and sectarian violence between January 2014 and October 2015. 3.2 million people, including a million school-age children have been internally displaced. Cf. UNHCR/UNAMI 2016: Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq, 19 Jan 2016.

- 16 Since the last elections, the governing coalition headed by Haider al-Abadi has consisted of a number of Shia parties. The National Iraqi Alliance occupies 155 of the 328 seats. This alliance includes the State of Law coalition with the *Da'wa* Party of Nuri al-Maliki/Haider al-Abadi, the *Al-Ahrar* Bloc of the Sadrists and the ISCI, which heads the al-Muwatin alliance in collaboration with smaller partners.
- 17 Iraq Tradelink News Agency 2016: Iraqi oil revenues declined by 70%, spokesman, Iraq Tradelink News Agency, 13 Jan 2016, in: <http://www.iraqtradelinknews.com/2016/01/iraqi-oil-revenues-declined-by-70.html> [22 Feb 2016].
- 18 It was founded in 1982 in Iran and has since split from the ISCI. The Badr leadership under Hamid al-Amiri is showing clear political ambitions; after the 2014 elections, Badr commander Muhammad Gabban took over the Ministry of the Interior, for instance.
- 19 The steering committee of the militias reports to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, since 2006 an Iraqi MP and according to his own statements a former member of the Iranian IRGC. He is accused of having participated in terror attacks on the U.S. and Kuwaiti embassies (1987).
- 20 Not least because the militias enjoy great popularity as they pay monthly salaries of 500 U.S. dollars and more, far exceeding regular army pay. In the international media, "Abu Azrael", a commander of the Imam-Ali Brigades gained notoriety through his involvement in the activities of Muqtada as-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Abu Azrael, who has since risen to become something of celebrity of the new Shia militancy in Iraq via social media, and other militia leaders are regularly courted by the government and Shia clerics.
- 21 There is a counterpart to this in the Sunni-Salafist or Saudi-Wahhabi camp in the form of demands for a legitimate fight against IS as the new "Khawarij". Groups with links to al-Qaeda, such as the Nusra Front and *Ahrar ash-Sham*, have been using this rhetoric since 2014, probably partly due to their seeing themselves in competition with IS. Originally, the term referred to a special sect of Islam positioned between Sunni and Shia, which moved away from what it considered the illegitimate ruling principle of the caliphate from the time of the rule of Caliph Uthman (644-656), at times engaging in active opposition to this principle. The Ibadism of present-day Oman (approximately 75 per cent of the population) represents a moderate version of this belief system.
- 22 Cf. Khitab as-Saiyid Nasrallah fi mahrajan al-muqawima wa't-tahrir [Sayyed Nasrallah's speech on the occasion of the Day of Resistance and Liberation], <https://youtube.com/watch?v=nQ67BQBd8Pg> [22 Feb 2016].
- 23 Wehbe, Batoul 2015: Sayyed Nasrallah to those Who Criticize Hezbollah on Syria Fight: Join Us, Al-Manar, 16 Feb 2015, in: <http://almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?fromval=2&cid=19&frid=21&seccatid=19&eid=195953> [22 Feb 2016].
- 24 Specifically, the countries have taken in the following numbers of people according to the official UN figures for registered refugees (as at: 17 Feb 2016): Turkey (2.5 million), Lebanon (1.1 million), Jordan (630,000), Autonomous Region of Kurdistan (250,000). According to unofficial estimates, there are close to two million Syrian refugees living in Lebanon alone. Cf. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> and <http://syria.unocha.org> [22 Feb 2016].
- 25 The supply of U.S.-manufactured anti-tank missiles (TOW) to selected rebel groups – funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar and delivered with Turkey's assistance – has been ramped up rapidly since Russia entered the war at the end of September 2015. The use of anti-tank missiles by the opposition has made a major contribution to slowing down the regime's ground offensives. On the first day of the regime offensive north of Hama alone (7 Oct 2015), several rebel brigades are said to have used TOWs to destroy between 15 and 22 Syrian Army tanks. So far, the supporting parties have stopped short of supplying the rebels with surface-to-air missiles (MANPADS) as well, but this cannot be excluded in view of the current tensions.