Syria and the Islamic State

October 1, 2014
Contents

Dynamics of Syria’s Civil War

Local struggles in Syria’s northeast .................................................6
By Kevin Mazur

What’s next for the Syrian regime’s non-state allies ................................10
By Ora Szekely

How should we count the war dead in Syria? ...................................12
By Laia Balcells, Lionel Beehner, and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl

Why are fighters leaving the Free Syrian Army? ..............................14
By Vera Mironova, Loubna Mrie, and Sam Whitt

Would arming Syria’s rebels have stopped the Islamic State ................16
By Marc Lynch

What the evidence on interventions really tells us about Syria ..............19
By Lionel Beehner

How the U.S. fragmented Syria’s rebels .........................................21
By Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl

The ICC may not bring justice to Syria ........................................24
By Mark Kersten

The Islamic State in Syria

Foreign fighters don’t always help ................................................28
By Kristin M. Bakke

The jihadist governance dilemma .................................................30
By Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Amichai Magen

The Islamic State and the politics of official narratives ......................33
By Laurie A. Brand

Wartime sexual violence is not just a ‘weapon of war’ ........................35
By Kerry F. Crawford, Amelia Hoover Green and Sarah E. Parkinson

The logic of violence in the Islamic State’s war ................................38
By Stathis N. Kalyvas

Is this the end of Sykes-Picot? ......................................................40
By F. Gregory Gause III

The Middle East quasi-state system .............................................42
By Ariel I. Ahram

The Islamic State won’t find it easy to wipe away post-colonial borders ......44
By William F.S. Miles

A broad approach to countering the Islamic State ............................46
By Christopher Paul and Colin P. Clarke

Multinational war is hard ..........................................................49
By Stephen M. Saideman
Online Article Index

Local struggles in Syria's northeast

What's next for the Syrian regime's non-state allies

How should we count the war dead in Syria?
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/01/how-should-we-count-the-war-dead-in-syria/

Why are fighters leaving the Free Syrian Army?
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/12/why-are-fighters-leaving-the-free-syrian-army/

Would arming Syria's rebels have stopped the Islamic State

What the evidence on interventions really tells us about Syria

How the U.S. fragmented Syria's rebels

The ICC may not bring justice to Syria
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/12/the-icc-may-not-bring-justice-to-syria/

Foreign fighters don't always help

The jihadist governance dilemma

The Islamic State and the politics of official narratives

Wartime sexual violence is not just a 'weapon of war'

The logic of violence in the Islamic State's war

Is this the end of Sykes-Picot?
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/20/is-this-the-end-of-sykes-picot/

The Middle East quasi-state system

The Islamic State won't find it easy to wipe away post-colonial borders

A broad approach to countering the Islamic State

Multinational war is hard
Syria’s nearly four year civil war took a dramatic new turn this month as the United States and its coalition partners began bombing militants from the Islamic State group (formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. The U.S. intervention opens up profound uncertainties about the objective and targets of the military action, the responses of the dizzying array of actors on the ground, and the potential for escalation. In December 2013, POMEPS published “The Political Science of Syria’s War,” a collection of original essays by many of the top civil wars and insurgencies scholars, which helped to place the Syrian war into a broad theoretical and comparative perspective. This new collection of articles originally published on “The Monkey Cage” explores the evolution of the conflict, the nature of the Islamic State, and key debates about Syria’s horrific war.

Syria’s war itself has evolved into a complex, multipolar, and highly localized struggle. What began as a civic uprising against a repressive regime has long since morphed into an insurgency with a high degree of external involvement on all sides. The enormous complexity of local alliances and power struggles undermines the master narratives, as Kevin Mazur’s detailed examination of northeastern Syria makes clear. Those local complexities are made even more difficult by the uncertain relations between external patrons and local actors, as Ora Szekely notes. Fighters have multiple motivations, as Vera Mironova, Loubna Mrie, and Sam Whitt explore with unique survey data. Even counting the war dead poses real problems, as Laia Balcells, Lionel Beehner, and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl demonstrate. And, as evidence of massive war crimes has mounted, Mark Kersten ponders the implications of referring Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the conflict to the International Criminal Court.

Would earlier U.S. efforts to arm the opposition have made a difference? There has been a spirited debate over this question, with the answers of great relevance to renewed efforts to build a moderate rebel force. I argue that the literature suggests that arming the fragmented rebels would not likely have made much difference, and that Americans had little interest in doing so, at least until confronted with videos of the beheading of two U.S. citizens. Beehner offers an alternative reading of the literature, while Jonah Shulhofer-Wohl argues that it was the failure of the United States to act that fragmented the rebels in the first place.

What about ISIS? Several of these articles explore what is and what isn’t unique about the putative Islamic State. Kristin Bakke notes the long history, and the ambiguous contributions, of foreign fighters. Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Amichai Magen explore the history of jihadist efforts to provide local governance. Laurie Brand investigates the curricula employed in Islamic State schools, and what this says about its “national” identity narrative. Is the Islamic State erasing the Sykes-Picot borders? Gregory Gause, Ariel Ahram, and William Miles offer very different answers.
As the war with the Islamic State group develops, the military dimension and its costs rise to the fore. Stathis Kalyvas roots the extreme brutality employed by the Islamic State in the logic of the war, drawing crucial comparative lessons, which help to uncover the underlying logic of the carnage. Sexual violence has an even more particular logic of its own, argue Kerry Crawford, Amelia Hoover Green, and Sarah Parkinson, which has largely been misunderstood by sensationalist media coverage.

The strategy laid out by the Obama administration to confront the Islamic State ranges across a range of tracks, from airstrikes to counter-extremism programs, humanitarian relief, and financial sanctions. That is just the sort of broad, multi-level approach that Christopher Paul and Colin Clarke find necessary for combating insurgencies of this kind. Though sustaining multilateral cooperation on such campaigns is hard, as Stephen Saideman notes.

We hope you find the timely and deeply informed essays collected in this POMEPS Briefing a useful window into the contributions of political science to the urgent challenges posed by Syria's civil war and the Islamic State.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
October 1, 2014

The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.
Dynamics of Syria’s Civil War
Local struggles in Syria’s northeast

By Kevin Mazur, September 9, 2014

The Islamic State’s spectacular killings of American journalists, persecution of various non-Sunni religious groups and victories against Kurdish forces in Iraq have overshadowed its activities in the lands where it claimed its first victories – northeastern Syria. Yet the struggle continues there, and the manner in which forces on the ground are resisting the Islamic State is laying bare alliances among local forces and the Syrian government. Many of these alliances accord with political science orthodoxy about civil wars, while others raise important questions about how civil war processes should be understood.

Groups organized around regional identities – between the national level narrative of sectarian conflict and town or neighborhood level enmities – play a central role in the fighting in Syria’s northeast, a role that has not been extensively studied by political scientists. The continued importance of these regional identities during the conflict suggests a degree of structure and continuity to the fight for Syria’s northeast that should surprise observers of the conflict and political scientists studying civil wars alike.

My observations about conflict in Syria’s northeast and the enduring importance of sub-national regions are based on a year spent interviewing Syrians residing in neighboring countries.

Any policy calculation about arming opposition groups within Syria or other forms of intervention must take into account regional identities and the local relationships underlying them. Many actors fighting alongside the Syrian government are doing so only to defend their locality, and the same can be said of groups pledging loyalty to the Islamic State or the Free Syrian Army. This point should give policymakers pause in expecting aid to localized forces allied with a particular side in the conflict to produce desired change on a broader scale.

The political science literature on civil wars has begun to examine local dynamics. In his pathbreaking work on violence in civil wars, Stathis Kalyvas has suggested that the “master narrative” of a conflict – that is, what the two major sides in a conflict stand for and what they are fighting over – often maps poorly onto local patterns of violence. These local patterns have a highly endogenous character, meaning that they do not follow directly from preexisting factors like the ethnicity or economic class background of the actors, but take shape in response to events occurring on the ground. Fotini Christia has pushed the importance of local, material interests one step further, arguing that the alliances animating civil wars, as well as the groups comprising them, are “not merely imagined but rather constantly reimagined communities” reflecting the material self-interest of forces on the ground.

In the case of Syria, the master narrative is that the conflict pits Sunni Muslims – whether those desiring liberal governance like the Syrian National Council or those championing religious rule like the Islamic State – against a government controlled by one particular religious minority, the Alawites. If this master narrative was operating on the ground, we would expect to see all Sunni Muslim groups fighting together against the Alawite government (and, potentially, its allies in the country’s other minority groups).

The cracks in the master narrative are manifest. For one thing, the Islamic State has come into conflict with virtually all of the largely Sunni Muslim groups fighting the Syrian government, including the Free Syrian Army and the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. In addition, there can be little question of the endogenous character of events in Syria’s northeast. The Islamic State itself emerged from elements of rebel groups fighting the Syrian government and groups coming from abroad. Neither the identities of, nor the alliances between groups fighting the government, could have been imagined before the beginning of the uprising, as none of them existed in Syria until fighting commenced.
Also emergent in the conflict are several new actors formed in response to weakened state control over much of the northeast. First, the most powerful Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) has set up its own army, the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The Syrian government withdrew from most of the Kurdish areas of the country in July 2012, which allowed the PYD to control the territory. Members of the other principal non-Arab ethnic group in the northeast, Syriac Christians, have set up a security organization called Sutoro. Far smaller than the Kurdish forces – unsurprising given the relatively smaller size of the Syriac population and its lack of a political apparatus equivalent to the PYD – Sutoro coordinates its activity closely with the PYD.

In addition, National Defense Forces (NDF) militias operate in areas outside of PYD and Islamic State control. These militia groups defend the locality from which they are recruited, rather than venturing to faraway frontlines, and are organized under the umbrella of the Syrian government. Their emergence has been a gradual response to increasing violence in Syria. When violence first began to threaten their neighborhoods, residents of many Syrian cities set up popular committees (lijan shabiya) to defend their local areas. As fighting deepened, these groups were turned into NDF militias. The militias receive uniforms and arms from the central government.

Members of the opposition often speak of NDF brigades interchangeably with shabiha (a term used to deride Alawite thugs looting and plundering parts of the country), but NDF forces are at least as much a regional as a sectarian phenomenon. Many branches of the NDF are comprised of members of the Alawite religious sect to which President Bashar al-Assad belongs and some fight away from their home area. The great majority of NDF brigades, however, were created to defend local communities and many of the local communities remaining loyal to the Syrian government are Alawite. NDF brigades thus reflect the ethnic make-up of the population from which they come. In northeastern cities like Hasakah and Deir al-Zour, which have significant populations of Sunni Arab tribal background, NDF brigades come from Sunni Arab tribes and are organized along tribal lines.

The “master cleavage” of the Syrian conflict suggests that the Kurds and tribes (both of which, religiously speaking, are nearly all Sunni Muslim) should align against the incumbent, minority-held Syrian government. Syriac Christians, by contrast, should seek the state’s protection. The micro-level theories suggest that, because no group is powerful enough to dominate the others independently, alliances between fighting groups should be fluid and the identity-based justifications for them (e.g. “We are Arabs combating a Kurdish threat,” “We are Sunnis fighting unbelievers”) ephemeral. On the ground in Syria’s northeast is something between these extremes; identities below the level of the Alawite-Sunni division and above the level of local grudges between neighborhoods are a driving force in the current conflict.

The fighting in Hasakah, the epicenter of the Islamic State’s bid to enlarge its area of control, exemplifies this dynamic. Hasakah, the capital of Syria’s far northeastern province of the same name, is the intersection of several social groupings. The majority of the population is of Arab tribal background, and the city has significant Kurdish and Christian populations as well.

Historically, the Baathist Syrian government has ruled Hasakah as a colonial power might: By working through intermediaries and treating the groups the intermediaries represent differentially. The Syrian government never sought a direct relationship with its subjects in the northeast, preferring to deal with local leaders and important tribal figures. The name of the longtime head of security for Hasakah province, Mohamed Mansoura, immediately calls to mind for many Hasakah residents the government’s tactic of pitting local groups against one another. This pattern of control endures during the current conflict; Mansoura, who had been promoted to head of General Security for all of Syria, was called back to serve in Hasakah during the conflict, this time as governor.

In addition, the Syrian government marginalized and
discriminated against Kurdish people while cultivating good relations with many of the tribes of the northeast, their Sunniness notwithstanding. The official ideology of the Syrian government is Arabist, denying the existence of Kurds as a component of the nation. Symbols of Kurdish identity, including flags and teaching of the Kurdish language, were prohibited, and Kurds were denied all but menial positions in the military and civilian administration. By contrast, a significant number of the Arab tribes were loyal allies of the government in the confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s and stood again by the government while it put down a Kurdish uprising in the region in 2004. The Syrian government continues to cultivate the support of the tribes of the northeast. It recently dropped leaflets over tribes it is trying to keep from siding with the Islamic State, with the following written on them: “A note from the Syrian Arab Army to the heroic men of the tribe, to whose place in the Euphrates valley history testifies. Respect and esteem are sent to you from your Army for the heroism you have shown and we call on you to continue in it.”

In the present conflict, this intermediate, regional level of social relations between the state and local populations continues to structure the flow of political events, as a recent battle for control of a major military base in Hasakah shows. In late July, the Islamic State began an assault on the headquarters of the Maylabiya Battalion (Fawj al-Maylabiya). Army forces in the base were unable to withstand the assault and withdrew, leaving a number of soldiers stranded in the base. With its nearest reinforcements also under siege, the government turned to the NDF to liberate the remaining soldiers, and the PYD sent its military forces (YPG) to fight the Islamic State there as well. Once the Islamic State took full control of Fawj al-Maylabiya, NDF and YPG forces surrounded the base to cut off supplies to the Islamic State fighters controlling it. In the aftermath of the events, the government set up a shared operations room coordinating the operations of the army, the state’s four security agencies, Sutoro, YPG and NDF forces, and a parallel tribal militia called the Dignity Army.

These surprising constellations of actors fighting the Islamic State are marriages of convenience, not based on ideology or personal ties of elites. There is no natural affinity between the parties. First, the official Baathist, Arabist doctrine denies that Kurds and Syriacs are legitimate residents of the ostensible Arab homeland they are defending alongside the Syrian “Arab” Army. Second, though the PYD is widely accused of collaborating with the Syrian government, there is no direct evidence of any agreement and the organization has all the reason to despise the government. The government had long hosted Abdullah Ocalan, the founder of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) out of which the PYD emerged, and expelled him in 1998 when seeking rapprochement with Turkey. He was captured by Turkey soon thereafter, and the Syrian government began arresting and harassing Syrians associated with the PKK.

Each of the groups allying with the Syrian government needs the latter to protect the group’s population and the land it occupies. The Syrian government similarly needs the groups to help repel the greatest present threat to its power, the Islamic State. Tensions in these alliances – coming from the divergent interests and intermediate level identities of the groups – are beginning to show through. The newspaper al-Araby al-Jadeed reported that members of the Syrian security service were upset at the Hasakah NDF for its lackluster effort to save stranded government forces at Fawj al-Maylabiya. The security forces’ complaint was that, because the majority of the military officers at the base were of Alawite background, the NDF fighters were happy to have Alawites killed. Similarly, 200 NDF fighters in Hasakah recently turned on their commanders for assenting to the government’s decision to give the Kurdish YPG forces authority over the military facilities of the NDF. PYD checkpoints throughout the city and sweeps inside non-Kurdish neighborhoods have agitated local residents and caused NDF fighters to give up fighting in parts of Hasakah city.

Fighting in Hasakah has continued since the battle for Fawj al-Maylabiya and regional identities continue to structure
the conflict. At present, the combination of PYD, NDF and Syrian government forces have succeeded in repelling Islamic State fighters from all but one neighborhood of the city. The government is coordinating with local notables to give fighters three choices: come to a settlement with the government, leave the neighborhood or have the neighborhood stormed by government forces.

Two aspects of this tactic taken by the government speak to the importance of intermediate identities. First, the government took measures to avoid harming local residents. When rebel groups were similarly taking over neighborhoods of the central city of Homs and entire towns on Homs’s periphery in 2012, the government made a habit of indiscriminately shelling these areas. Second, the government asked local leaders to flush out fighters. This reliance on local social structures — including leaders who are ambivalent about both the Islamic State and the incumbent government — shows a degree of continuity with patterns of rule from before the uprising.

Two of the processes political scientists have identified in civil wars are clearly operating in Syria’s northeast. First, the set of alliances and tactics in Hasakah bear little resemblance to the ideological, black-and-white narratives offered for the conflict as a whole. Second, the alliances and patterns of contestation emerge out of events in the conflict itself, not just preexisting factors like religious or racial divisions, social classes or agreements among national and local elites.

Yet the dynamics in northeastern Syria sit uncomfortably with political scientists’ theories that assign combatants narrowly individualistic, material motivations. The various groups cooperating with the Syrian government are not maximizing their control of territory and resources but defending their territory, their region. As soon as Fawj al-Maylabiya fell, several groups rushed to prevent the Islamic State from taking control of the city. NDF and Sutoro forces secured their respective neighborhoods, and the YPG set up checkpoints on the periphery of the city and within many neighborhoods. The controversy over whether the NDF allowed Alawite army officers to be slaughtered by the Islamic State at Fawj al-Maylabiya further suggests the importance of region; NDF fighters rallied to hold a military base protecting their area but made little effort to save officers unconnected to their local area.

The regional identities along which these groups form and act — between national-level sect and individual-level self-interest — reflect not so much groupings made on the fly according to leaders’ self-interest or the peculiar motivations of actors (i.e., a Kurdish or tribal mindset driving group action) as the local networks and relationships compelling fighters to act. A Syriac Christian finds his most important social relations, from the neighborhood he resides in to his intimate life, overlapping with his religious identity. Thus, to defend these networks is to join Sutoro, the militia associated with the Syriac identity, and vice versa.

The first several years of the Syrian conflict have seen numerous surprising alliances and, in the rise of the Islamic State, the emergence of an entirely new social force. Many of the armed groups entering into alliances with the Syrian government arise out of existing social forces; some, like the Kurdish PYD, break with the historical stance of the social group they represent vis-à-vis the state, while others, such as the NDF comprised of tribal Arabs, exhibit continuity in the relationship of local groups and the government. Dynamics within the civil war may yet rearrange the alliances among groups in Syria’s northeast, but the intermediate identities rooted in the country’s regions will have enduring importance no matter who controls the state apparatus based in Damascus.

Kevin Mazur is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Politics at Princeton University. His research was supported in part by a Travel-Research-Engagement grant from the Project on Middle East Political Science.
What’s next for the Syrian regime’s non-state allies

By Ora Szekely, September 10, 2014

Since the late 1960s, the Syrian government has backed a range of militant organizations in the Middle East, from an assortment of leftist Palestinian factions in the 1960s and 1970s, to the Lebanese Amal movement in the late 1970s and 1980s, and to Hezbollah and Hamas beginning in the early 1990s. In recent years, Syria has provided crucial funding, weapons and training to the latter two organizations in particular, often in concert with Iran. As the Syrian civil war continues to alter the balance of power in Syria (and the region), what effects can we expect the war to have on these organizations?

One way to answer this question, as I argue in a recent article in Foreign Policy Analysis, is to use a principal-agent model. Most commonly used to explain things like congressional oversight, principal-agent models focus on the relationship between the party giving orders (the principal) and the party receiving and carrying out those orders (the agent). The interaction between a sponsor state and the militant groups it supports can be understood as just such a relationship.

From an agent’s point of view, there are three basic types of principal: single principals (a single, cohesive entity giving one set of orders), multiple principals (two or more separate principals giving separate orders) and collective principals (in which multiple actors comprise a single principal and give a single set of orders.) A tough, cohesive, authoritarian regime in which all decision-making happens at the top is a single principal. A fragmented authoritarian state, with many competing voices fighting for control over the agent is a collective principal. (Democracies often fall into this category as well.) And a militant group with several sponsors (of either sort) is an agent with multiple principals.

Of course, each arrangement has both upsides and downsides for the agent. An agent of multiple principals may be able to play its sponsors against one other, much as the child of feuding parents may try to provoke a bidding war in hopes of obtaining a new bike for her birthday. On the other hand, being pulled in multiple directions by different sponsor states can lead to divisions within the organization. This can also be a danger with collective principals, if factions within the sponsoring regime sponsor rival factions in the client organization. Conversely, single principals may be less likely to cause this kind of factionalization, but may be better able to control their clients, leading to possible mission creep or a loss of autonomy for the agent.

So what does this imply for Syria’s non-state clients? Syria has at various points functioned as all three types of principal. At times when the regime was less consolidated, such as the 1960s, it functioned more as a collective principal. In recent years, the Syrian regime functioned as a single principal for some clients (like Amal and a number of smaller Palestinian armed groups) and one of multiple principals for others (like Hamas and Hezbollah). Looking to the future, the outcome of the civil war will likely determine what sort of principal (if any) Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime will continue to be to its various clients. Broadly, there are five options:

Scenario 1: The Assad regime triumphs, emerges as a fully consolidated unit, and remains a single principal for some of its clients and one of multiple principals for others.

Scenario 2: The regime retains power, but becomes fragmented and becomes a collective principal.

Scenario 3: The opposition is strengthened into a serious actor in its own right, leading the regime and the opposition to become multiple principals, or warring single principals.

Scenario 4: The regime is overthrown and its former agents are left without a principal at all.
Scenario 5: Syria’s various client militias elect to end their relationship with Syria of their own volition.

If Assad is able to fend off the threat posed by the Islamic State and the other rebel groups, the continuation of Syria’s role as a single principal is possible, in which case we can expect its relationship with Hezbollah to remain strong and the inherent tradeoffs to remain much the same. So far, for Hezbollah this has meant fighting openly in Syria, at some domestic cost. But if the rest of the regime begins to lose confidence in Assad, the situation may come to resemble the chaotic 1960s, when frequent military coups resulted in the overthrow of successive governments. If different factions in the Syrian military begin fighting for control, then Syria may come to resemble a collective principal, as in the second scenario. This would prove difficult for all of Syria’s clients but particularly for Hezbollah, which would probably like to avoid possible internal upheaval and the inconvenience of having to negotiate with multiple factions in the Syrian state. This partly explains Hezbollah’s decision to double down on its support for the Assad regime by fighting openly in its defense.

The third possibility, that the civil war produces several established poles, each sponsoring its own clients, is perhaps the most likely in the short term. Even before the Islamic State’s conquest of territory in Iraq and northern Syria, various Islamist factions had begun building alliances with Sunni factions in Lebanon, while Hezbollah and Amal had signaled their loyalty to Assad, leading to violent clashes in Tripoli, Beirut, and elsewhere. Conversely, the least likely outcome is the fourth scenario, that the regime is overthrown altogether. If it were to occur, however, it would mark the end of the Iranian-Syrian axis, and would especially problematic for the smaller Palestinian factions for whom Syria is the sole sponsor.

Finally, agents can in some cases choose to sever their relationship with their sponsor entirely. In April of 2012, Hamas severed its relationship with the Assad regime, reorienting itself toward the emerging Qatari-Muslim Brotherhood axis, although this alliance was weakened by the military coup in Egypt. Other factions, however, may not have this option – for instance, the regime’s assault on the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus placed Palestinian groups who had no alternative sponsor in a tricky position. In sum, the civil war in Syria will likely require some adjustment on the part of Syria’s non-state clients, but what kind and to what degree will largely be shaped by the outcome of the war for Syria itself.

Ora Szekely is an assistant professor of political science at Clark University.
How should we count the war dead in Syria?

By Laia Balcells, Lionel Beehner, and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, May 1, 2014

In February, John McCain denounced on the Senate floor what he called an “apocalyptic disaster” in Syria, citing “more than 130,000 people dead” there. The number he cited came from just one of the jumble of NGOs tabulating casualties in Syria.

Counting the dead during war has always been an inexact science. There are obvious methodological hurdles verifying the data in a conflict setting like Syria, with poor security and few impartial witnesses. There are also potential biases among the organizations doing the counting, which are frequently human rights groups loosely aligned with the opposition. Recent civil wars have occurred in places that have not seen a census in decades. And in situations where territory changes hands and citizens find it difficult to predict whether the government or rebels will ultimately prevail, many refuse to report casualties for fear of repercussions. Nor does it help that the U.S. government and United Nations have basically thrown in the towel on publicizing such data.

Micah Zenko and Amelia Wolf of the Council on Foreign Relations recently blogged that the actual number of people killed in Syria is vastly different from what is portrayed in the media. They suggest the level of civilian fatalities is in fact lower than what is being reported, and that pro-regime forces are dying in greater numbers than civilians. Their claims are not merely speculative, but based on data released by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR).

At first glance, the data indeed paint a puzzling depiction of violence. How can it be safer to be an unarmed civilian caught in the middle than a trained soldier behind fortified walls? After all, according to SOHR, the number of civilians killed (51,212) is lower than pro-regime forces, including both soldiers and militia members (57,511).

Herein lies the problem with counting the dead in Syria’s civil war: different methods to identifying casualties, different standards, and different agendas can lead to starkly contrasting interpretations of the violence on the ground.

Consider just the conflicting enumerations of fatalities in Syria. SOHR claims to be able to account for 99 percent of all violence in Syria and provides video or photographic evidence in 70 percent of its cases. No death gets recorded unless there is an accompanying name. Its 150,000-plus-casualty figure is the one most often cited by the international media and NGO community, even though the number could be well above 220,000, SOHR’s director Rami Abdel-Rahman told Lebanon’s Daily Star.

By contrast, the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) relies on a loose network of a few dozen reporters and activists located abroad and on the ground in Syria. Its data, which is periodically audited, is vastly different from the SOHR’s and presents a much more one-sided picture of the violence. VDC claims to be able to document 60 percent of the instances of violence comprising its data. (Moreover, in light of the escalating number of foreign extremist fighters being killed on the rebel side, it is reportedly going to be doing away with the culturally loaded term “martyr”).

Table 1: VDC Data on Fatalities in Syria (3/11-2/14)

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<th>Pro-rebel</th>
<th>Pro-regime</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combatants</td>
<td>20,365</td>
<td>10,755</td>
<td>31,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilians</td>
<td>57,298</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>57,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>77,663</td>
<td>11,147</td>
<td>88810</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A few patterns jump out: First, VDC numbers are much lower than SOHR’s. Given that the SOHR does not collaborate or share its documentation with the other groups, which it accuses of being financed by Gulf donors and therefore lacking credibility, it is difficult to verify its data or explain the discrepancy.
Second, the number of pro-regime fighters killed is far lower than SOHR’s estimates (57,511 in SOHR vs. 10,755 in VDC), while the tally of pro-rebel fighters is roughly the same (24,275 in SOHR vs. 20,365 in VDC). Finally, the number of civilians killed is more lopsided in VDC (57,690) than in SOHR (51,212), though probably more accurate, based on what we know about violence trends in Syria. But the SOHR’s figure excludes rebel fighters. If we add the 18,000 civilians unaccounted for but believed to be either in prison or killed, then the number soars to nearly 70,000 dead. Again, that is not including 24,275 rebel fighters, the 2,286 dissident fighters, and the 11,220 foreign fighters. Presumably, then, the total dead on the rebel side eclipses 100,000.

Zenko and Wolf also challenge an assumption that 90 percent of those killed in civil wars tend to be civilians. But this claim does not correspond to the empirical regularity that civilians are often much more targeted than combatants in civil wars. In the case of Syria, it is erroneous to suggest that pro-regime fighters are dying in greater numbers than civilians. Violence is not only targeting the frontlines. The use of car bombs, airstrikes, and barrel bombs often target civilian locations, and they fall disproportionately in pro-rebel strongholds near major population centers like Aleppo and Homs.

Again, based on qualitative evidence from the conflict, and from what we know of past civil wars, the distinction between a civilian and a rebel is often murky at best, which makes tabulating civilian casualties so controversial. Recall the confusion in counting the war dead during the height of the Iraq War. The common practice among policymakers was to rely on independent monitors like IraqBodyCount and compare its numbers with those of the Iraqi government and United Nations, which relied on figures from hospitals, morgues and municipalities. A controversial 2006 *Lancet* study that relied on cluster sampling estimated that over 600,000 Iraqis had been killed in postwar violence.

The U.S. government and UN still reportedly keep data on civilian casualties in Syria, presumably which is audited and verified regularly, but does not release it to the public or to the academic community. This means we are reliant on third-party sources like SOHR and VDC for our data and documentation. Oxford Research Group is reportedly working on a project to document and name every war-related casualty, not just in Syria but across the globe. Moreover, the Human Rights Data Analysis Group has shown in settings ranging from Guatemala to Kosovo that multiple systems estimation, a statistical technique that exploits overlap between multiple lists of fatalities, can generate more comprehensive estimates of total deaths than simply enumerating the known dead.

Zenko and Wolf’s larger point that we should be suspicious of the casualty reports, given the hostility between the groups collecting the information, is a valid one. The danger is that somebody who knows little about the complexities of Syria – say, an American lawmaker voting on whether to authorize the provision of aid or arms there – might presume based on the SOHR data that the violence in Syria is one-sided, but inflicted primarily against the regime. Yes, the number of pro-regime casualties is probably higher than what outside media report. But we need sanguine analysis of what existing data actually show us about the war, and to strive to advance credible and systematic ways of counting the dead in Syria, not just for academic purposes but also for the sake of transitional justice. If we cannot accurately establish the patterns of violence in Syria, we cannot hope to craft smart policies, whether to advance U.S. strategic interests in a narrow sense, or to stem the bloody tide of this wrenching civil war.

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*Correction:* “The original post misstated the basis of multiple systems estimation. Multiple systems estimation can be used whether data samples are random or non-random. Its key features are that it uses multiple lists and exploits the overlap between them to model the process by which deaths are included in the lists, therefore accounting for unreported deaths.”
Why are fighters leaving the Free Syrian Army?

By Vera Mironova, Loubna Mrie, and Sam Whitt, May 12, 2014

Why do some fighters who join insurgencies decide to quit? Why do some continue to fight but switch between insurgent groups? We began a survey in August 2013 in Syria to shed light on who leaves insurgencies and why. We have conducted interviews with over 250 rebel fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA), civilians in FSA-controlled territory, as well as refugees in FSA-backed camps in Turkey. In April, we completed interviews with 50 former FSA rebels who have abandoned the conflict and moved to Turkey. What were the most common reasons for leaving? They were generally lost hope in the possibility of victory and disarray within the FSA.

These findings offer important insights into the challenges facing the Syrian rebellion, now in its third year – particularly deteriorating morale and attrition. There are growing concerns within the FSA that the organization is losing strength due to the high attrition inside its brigades, jeopardizing its ability to continue the fight against President Bashar al-Assad’s forces as well as rival Islamist rebel groups. According to Abo Hasan, a commander of the al-Abrar group in Hama, who has been fighting with the FSA since 2011, “fighters start losing hope in the war and are leaving their brigades in large numbers.”

The most frequent responses the former rebels selected for leaving the conflict included:

1) Declining Prospects for Victory: While some ex-fighters still support the goals of the revolution in principle, many have lost hope that victory can be obtained through fighting. About half of surveyed ex-fighters felt it was impossible to win in the current environment, and some openly questioned whether fighting is now worth the risks. Furthermore, most ex-fighters we interviewed did not plan to take up arms again in the future; two-thirds of respondents said that they do not see themselves ever returning to Syria again to fight. Virtually all ex-fighters we interviewed also blamed Western indecisiveness for protracting the conflict, dimming former hopes of a quick, decisive end to the conflict through Western military backing or intervention.

2) Lack of Discipline and Organization: In addition to despairing over the prospects for victory, some ex-fighters were also frustrated by the lack of organization and cohesion inside the FSA. Many indicated they left because of problems specifically within their unit and...
Chain of command. Nearly half of the respondents reported that a lack of discipline in the group played an important role in their decision to leave and one-third left for lack of teamwork, suggesting that the FSA continues to face organizational and managerial challenges as the war drags on.

3 Social and Family Pressure to Leave. Many ex-fighters acknowledged that social pressure played an important role in their decision to join the FSA. Compared to active fighters who have reported strong political grievances against Assad’s regime, we have found that many ex-fighters were more drawn to the FSA due to family and peer pressure. With declining public support for the FSA, social identity and social capital pressures have eroded. Ex-fighters no longer consider fighting with the FSA synonymous with protecting their families and supporting their communities and have transitioned back into civilian life.

Losing hope in the revolution, dissatisfaction with FSA and realization of the slim chances of a military victory have led some former fighters to support a peace deal, but large majorities continue to support the armed struggle. Roughly one-third of ex-fighters support an immediate cease-fire, engaging in negotiations with Assad and making concessions in the interests of peace. Only 3.5 percent of active fighters we interviewed voiced support for negotiations and appeared firmly committed to a military victory in the conflict.

What about those who are disillusioned with the FSA, but still have high morale and a strong drive to continue the fight? Unless the FSA is committed to internal reforms, one option for these fighters is to shop for other groups to join. Islamist brigades are almost always the strongest alternatives, promising disaffected FSA fighters better treatment, organization and unit cohesion to entice them to leave the FSA. One rebel fighter we interviewed (“Abo Farouk”) is currently fighting for the FSA’s Aabr brigade as well as the Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham, but is considering whether to leave both groups and fight instead with al-Nusra Front, which the United States has designated as a terrorist organization. His stated reasons for switching are almost entirely organizational rather than ideological – commanders of Islamist groups are mostly based in Syria (rather than Turkey) and are actively engaged with soldiers in the field. Though ideologically indifferent to the goals of the Islamists, some FSA fighters see the Islamists as a more effective organization for defeating Assad’s forces, and switch for strategic purposes. Although such fighters are a small fraction of those leaving the FSA, their numbers are growing.

There is an urgent cry for better leadership among FSA rebels we interviewed in the field. As one disgruntled FSA fighter put it, “the revolution is now about politics; all big commanders are based in Turkey [rather than Syria]; and corruption is persisting.” Although there is greater confidence in lower-level FSA commanders, who are still based in Syria and are perceived as more fair and open with their soldiers than the top leadership, reforms in the chain-of-command and organizational structure of the FSA could be critical to sustaining an on-going military engagement with Assad’s forces, and preventing moderate fighters from defecting to the ranks of the Islamist groups. The failure to reform could make the FSA increasingly obsolete in the field and marginalized in its ability to speak on behalf of Syrian rebels if negotiations resume in Geneva.

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Would arming Syria’s rebels have stopped the Islamic State

By Marc Lynch, August 11, 2014

Former secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton made news this weekend by suggesting that the rise of the Islamic State might have been prevented had the Obama administration moved to more aggressively arm Syrian rebels in 2012. Variants of this narrative have been repeated so often by so many different people in so many venues that it’s easy to forget how implausible this policy option really was.

It’s easy to understand why desperate Syrians facing the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad hoped for Western support, especially by early 2012 as the conflict shifted inexorably from a civic uprising into an insurgency. It is less obvious that U.S. arms for the rebels would have actually helped them. Arming the rebels (including President Obama’s recent $500 million plan) was, from the start, a classic bureaucratic “Option C,” driven by a desire to be seen as doing something while understanding that there was no American appetite at all for more direct intervention. It also offered a way to get a first foot on the slippery slope; a wedge for demanding escalation of commitments down the road after it had failed.

There’s no way to know for sure what would have happened had the United States offered more support to Syrian rebels in the summer of 2012, of course. But there are pretty strong reasons for doubting that it would have been decisive. Even Sen. John McCain was pretty clear about this at the time, arguing that arming the rebels “alone will not be decisive” and that providing weapons in the absence of safe areas protected by U.S. airpower “may even just prolong [the conflict].” Clinton, despite the hyperventilating headlines, only suggested that providing such arms might have offered “some better insight into what was going on on the ground” and “helped in standing up a credible political opposition.” Thoughtful supporters of the policy proposed “managing the militarization” of the conflict and using a stronger Free Syrian Army as leverage to bring Assad to the bargaining table.

Would the United States providing more arms to the FSA have accomplished these goals? The academic literature is not encouraging. In general, external support for rebels almost always make wars longer, bloodier and harder to resolve (for more on this, see the proceedings of this Project on Middle East Political Science symposium in the free PDF download). Worse, as the University of Maryland’s David Cunningham has shown, Syria had most of the characteristics of the type of civil war in which external support for rebels is least effective. The University of Colorado’s Aysegul Aydin and Binghamton University’s Patrick Regan have suggested that external support for a rebel group could help when all the external powers backing a rebel group are on the same page and effectively cooperate in directing resources to a common end. Unfortunately, Syria was never that type of civil war.

Syria’s combination of a weak, fragmented collage of rebel organizations with a divided, competitive array of external sponsors was therefore the worst profile possible for effective external support. Clinton understands this. She effectively pinpoints the real problem when she notes that the rebels “were often armed in an indiscriminate way by other forces and we had no skin in the game that really enabled us to prevent this indiscriminate arming.” An effective strategy of arming the Syrian rebels would never have been easy, but to have any chance at all it would have required a unified approach by the rebels’ external backers, and a unified rebel organization to receive the aid. That would have meant staunching financial flows from its Gulf partners, or at least directing them in a coordinated fashion. Otherwise, U.S. aid to the FSA would be just another bucket of water in an ocean of cash and guns pouring into the conflict.

But such coordination was easier said than done. The Qatari-Saudi rivalry was playing out across the region, not only in Syria. Their intense struggles over the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt and the overall course of the Arab
Dynamics of Syria’s Civil War

uprisings were peaking during the 2012–13 window during which arming the rebels was being discussed. Their competition largely precluded any unified Gulf strategy. Turkey and Qatar channeled money and support to a variety of Islamist groups. Meanwhile, U.S.-Saudi relations were also at their nadir, before fears of jihadist blowback began to concentrate Saudi minds. Riyadh showed no more interest in following the United States’ lead in Syria than it did on Egypt or Iranian nuclear talks. External backers of the rebels didn’t even agree on whether the goal was to protect civilians, overthrow Assad, bring the regime to the table, or to wage a region-wide sectarian war against Iran. It is difficult to see Gulf capitals embroiled in these regional battles becoming more receptive to American guidance just because the United States had some “skin in the game.”

Meanwhile, huge private donations from the Gulf flowed toward mostly Islamist-oriented groups. These were massive public mobilization campaigns, mostly led by popular and ambitious Islamist figures who framed support for Syria along religious and sectarian lines in increasingly extreme ways. (Incidentally, the magnitude of those campaigns reveals the absurdity of recent claims that Arabs had ignored Syria’s war compared to Gaza.) Kuwait became the key arena for collecting money, as other Gulf states more tightly controlled private donations for Syria, but Islamists from across the region and especially Saudi Arabia continued to play a prominent role in the campaigns. Fears of jihadist blowback have led Gulf states to crack down on these private efforts, including Kuwait’s recent stripping of the citizenship of Nabil al-Awadhy, one of the most prominent of these Syria campaigners. But at the time Clinton’s plan was under discussion, those campaigns were peaking, with massive public support built around Islamic and sectarian identity.

That intra-state competition and popular mobilization is the regional context within which U.S. efforts to arm the FSA would have unfolded. The FSA was always more fiction than reality, with a structure on paper masking the reality of highly localized and fragmented fighting groups on the ground. Charles Lister’s comprehensive recent survey of the current Syrian military battlefield should quickly dispense with the simpler versions of the conflict. Syria’s civil war has long been a dizzying array of local battles, with loose and rapidly shifting alliances driven more by self-interest and the desires of their external patrons than ideology. Even at the height of the conflict between the Islamic State and its more secular rivals, local affiliates fought side by side in other theaters of the war. No one should be surprised that, as Hassan Hassan reports, some U.S.-backed and vetted groups have aligned with the Islamic State.

The idea that these rebel groups could be vetted for moderation and entrusted with advanced weaponry made absolutely no sense given the realities of the conflict in Syria. These local groups frequently shifted sides and formed alliances of convenience as needed. As MIT’s Fotini Christia has documented in cases from Afghanistan to Bosnia, and the University of Virginia’s Jonah Shulhofer-Wohl has detailed in Syria, rebel groups that lack a legitimate and effective over-arching institutional structure almost always display these kinds of rapidly shifting alliances and “blue on blue” violence. A “moderate, vetted opposition” means little when alliances are this fluid and organizational structures so weak.

The murkiness of the “terrorist group” line in this context is apparent in these changing alliances and conflicts. For instance, the United States recently designated two key Kuwaiti Islamists as terror financiers, accusing them of channeling funds to Jubhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. But both were better known as backers of Ahrar al-Sham, a large Salafist organization that then worked within the Saudi-backed Islamic Front. And as recently as June, when they were allegedly funding the Islamic State and al-Nusra, one of them was holding events with FSA commander Riad al-Assad. These complexities, so deeply familiar to everyone who studies the conflict, deeply undermine the assumptions underlying plans resting on identifying and supporting “moderate rebels.”

Many have argued that the United States might have changed all of this by offering more support for the FSA.
But based upon his outstanding recent book “Networks of Rebellion,” the University of Chicago’s Paul Staniland urges caution. Initial organizational weaknesses have long-lasting implications. “Pumping material support” into them, he observes, “might buy some limited cooperation from factions that need help, but is unlikely to trigger deep organizational change. This means that foreign backing for undisciplined groups will not do much.” Syria’s famously fractured and ineffective opposition would not likely have been miraculously improved through a greater infusion of U.S. money or guns.

In short, then, discussion of U.S. support for Syria’s rebels overstates the extent to which such aid would matter given the diverse sources of support available. U.S. arms would have joined a crowded market and competed within an increasingly Islamist and sectarian environment. Even the argument that Islamist fighters would shave off beards and follow the money if the United States got involved is self-defeating, since it admits that they would just as easily flip back when a better offer comes along. Both state financing and the public campaigns exacerbated rebel fragmentation on the ground as each group jockeyed for access to lucrative external patrons. The United States had far less money to offer rebels compared with the Gulf states, and placed far more conditions. It might have been able to offer uniquely privileged access to advanced weaponry, which many rebels did dearly want. Anti-tank missiles did find their way to rebel groups anyway, of course, presumably with U.S. support. But it’s difficult to imagine any responsible U.S. official signing off on providing surface-to-air missiles, for reasons made graphically apparent by the shooting down of the Malaysian Flight MH17 over Ukraine.

Finally, the idea that more U.S. support for the FSA would have prevented the emergence of the Islamic State isn’t even remotely plausible. The open battlefield and nature of the struggle ensured that jihadists would find Syria’s war appealing. The Islamic State recovered steam inside of Iraq as part of a broad Sunni insurgency driven by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s bloody, ham-fisted crackdowns in Hawija and Fallujah, and more broadly because of the disaffection of key Sunni actors over Maliki’s sectarian authoritarianism. It is difficult to see how this would have been affected in the slightest by a U.S.-backed FSA (or, for that matter, by a residual U.S. military presence in Iraq, but that’s another debate for another day). There is certainly no reason to believe that the Islamic State and other extremist groups would have stayed away from such an ideal zone for jihad simply because Western-backed groups had additional guns and money.

Had the plan to arm Syria’s rebels been adopted back in 2012, the most likely scenario is that the war would still be raging and look much as it does today, except that the United States would be far more intimately and deeply involved. That’s a prospect that Clinton frankly acknowledged during her interview, but that somehow didn’t make it into the headline. As catastrophic as Syria’s war has been, and as alarming as the Islamic State has become, there has never been a plausible case to be made that more U.S. arms for Syrian rebels would have meaningfully altered their path.
What the evidence on interventions really tells us about Syria

By Lionel Beehner, August 18, 2014

A number of analysts, including Marc Lynch recently in the Monkey Cage, have looked at political science research on interventions to make the case that an earlier U.S. intervention in Syria would not have stopped the Islamic State’s rise. To be sure, the available evidence appears to paint a bleak picture of the track record of outside interveners – whether unilaterally or multilaterally – to end hostilities and achieve lasting peace. Yet, on closer inspection, much of this literature draws more nuanced conclusions than simply lamenting the efficacy of outside interventions. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, there are no studies detailing the linkages between third-party interventions and the rise of transnational actors like the Islamic State. Finally, the bulk of the quantitative literature only examines post-1945 civil wars, thus ignoring previous eras when outside interventions, which tended to be more forceful and one-sided, actually made wars much shorter. The interventions of the 19th century may offer better guidance to understanding the effects, as well as unintended consequences, of an intervention in Syria than the proxy wars of the Cold War.

To recap: Since 1945 nearly three-fifths of all civil wars have experienced a third-party intervention, making self-contained civil wars the exception, not the norm. The bulk of them have entailed the supply of arms, aid, and bases, not the deployment of boots on the ground. Of the conflicts with no third-party intervention, the average length of conflict was 1.5 years. By contrast, those with outside intervention saw an average length of seven years. The longest of these wars were typically framed as part of a larger (and often nonexistent) Cold War narrative (not all were – Lebanon, Ethiopia, to name just a few). There are obvious selection effects present: Much of the conflict data is drawn from the Correlates of War (COW) dataset, which may be heavily skewed because of a few “never-ending” conflicts — namely civil wars in places like Angola that saw no shortage of external involvement. These analyses also suffer from selection issues. For instance, it is possible that outside powers select into civil wars because they are protracted, not that the act of arming factions makes war last longer.

Scholarship generally finds that third-party intervention on the side of rebel forces makes conflicts longer, bloodier, and more difficult to resolve through peaceful means. There is some dispute over the mechanisms: Some point to the proliferation of “veto players” which gives rise to more spoilers of any eventual settlement. Others suggest that outside interventions, especially for humanitarian purposes, create moral hazards, which actually encourage rebellion, not vice versa. Another line of argument argues that it is the spread of refugees, diaspora networks and other transnational communities that sustain conflicts.

There is some new and enterprising research that paints a more nuanced and mixed picture of the effects and unintended consequences of external interventions. Fotini Christia, for example, examines the impact of shifting alliance formations in Afghanistan and other war zones (e.g. Bosnia). She argues in her 2013 book (p.330-331):

I have suggested that in absence of a warring actor that can win the war on its own, the vicious cycle of alliance shifts and fractionalization is likely to go on until the intervention of a powerful and determined external arbiter who can enforce peace. Though this book is by no means a work on external intervention or civil war termination—subjects that span rich literatures in their own right—it does put forth the claim that for a civil war deadlock to come to an end, it may often require a credible external intervener willing to commit massive resources. This should not be interpreted as a case for imperialism or encouragement of third party actors to meddle in the internal affairs of sovereign states. It just recognizes that external meddling is almost ubiquitous in civil wars, and that the resultant deadlocks and quagmires are unlikely
to come to an end without the involvement of a credible external guarantor.

Recent unpublished research by Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl finds that it is not outside intervention that prolongs fratricidal infighting among rebel actors. Rather, it is weak and inconsistent outside support which can prompt these groups turn against one another by ensuring their survival but not improving their odds of winning – a case in point being the Lebanese civil war. Paul Staniland in his new book provides a very useful typology of insurgent networks. He finds that outside support does not change their organizational structures, but adds, “It may be better to sponsor particular sub-factions that look fairly effective and integrated rather than relying on ineffectual central leaders.” That advice sounds remarkably similar to the 2012 plan backed by Hillary Clinton and General David Petraeus to arm and train select groups of rebels (but ultimately nixed by Obama).

Moreover, there is other research on interventions that often goes unmentioned. Nile Metternich, for example, finds that interventions by international organizations (e.g. NATO), especially those with democratization mandates, are associated with shorter conflicts, provided rebel leaders come from ethnic groups representing more than 10 percent of a country’s population (which would fit Syria’s largely Sunni opposition). Likewise, Clayton Thyne looks at unobserved variables – such as high levels of resolve among the combatants – that contribute to the resolution of conflicts even with third-party interventions. Finally, as Ann Hironaka finds, Cold War civil wars were protracted not because of the presence of third-party interventions per se, but because outsiders – namely the United States and Soviet Union – were intervening in weak states with relative parity on both sides (Interestingly, neither is the case in Syria; the Russians and Iranians are far outspending us, and until 2011 Syria was a relatively strong and secure state, ranked just above Israel in the 2010 Failed States Index). By contrast, she argues, 19th century interventions resulted in shorter civil wars, not longer ones, because they were typically one-sided affairs and more forceful. Civil wars back then also did not flare up again post-intervention, unlike today where we see repeated ceasefires and renewals of violence (see Chechnya, Sri Lanka, etc.).

Perhaps, then, the question we should be asking is not whether third-party interventions are, on average, helpful or harmful to civil war termination. The answer invariably is: Well, it depends. Rather, we should be asking: Is the world back in a 19th century multipolar paradigm, whereby civil wars were primarily fought between pro-democracy versus conservative/monarchist forces, and the latter typically won because their interventions were more robust and one-sided? As Hironaka and some historians (Sperber 2000) find, during 19th century interventions, the side most willing to use greater force was the anti-democratic side (in this case, typically the Concert of Europe).

In the current context, the anti-democratic axis as it were – that is, the Russia’s and Iran’s of this world – appear more willing to go “all in” to support their “proxies” than their pro-democracy counterparts in the West. That means we may be getting into bidding wars not that we can’t win – we have the bank and arms to outspend and out-supply just about anyone – but which we lack the will to win, whether due to flagging public support, setting too high a bar of excellence for our rebel or regime proxies (or fear of Mujahidin-like blowback), or – and this is where the 19th century comparison may be apt – because the stakes for us are perceived to be lower than they are for the Putins of this world.

In this sense, those like Marc Lynch who opposed intervention in Syria may be right: Maybe we do lack the political will to compete and should get out of the proxy-war business. I also agree with his point on the folly of trying to screen these rebels, who will say anything to get more arms, as we have seen, and, having interviewed several ex-rebels, the myth of a unified Free Syrian Army. Then the takeaway becomes effectively: If we want such wars – and I would put Ukraine in this basket – to burn out quickly, then our policy of doing nothing is in fact
a smart one. There is no point in getting into a larger proxy war with Putin, who treats every sliver of land as an existential claim. But if our goal is for our side to win, then we are deluding ourselves that a slow trickle of non-lethal support will have any impact on the balance of power on the ground.

To be sure, we should not dismiss the findings of existing studies, which provide a very useful starting point for how to think about the unintended consequences of interventions. Nor should we hold it up as Exhibit A to stay out of Syria (or by extension, Ukraine). It is incorrect to claim that there is a scholarly consensus on third-party interventions, when in fact the findings are far more nuanced and in dispute. To make the point from a scholarly perspective would require findings that outline under what conditions external support for rebels, or lack thereof, can provide space for transnational groups like ISIS to thrive. To my knowledge, no such research exists (Idean Salehyan’s research on refugee flows probably comes the closest; also see Jeffrey Checkel’s book of essays from a more qualitative perspective).

It is impossible to know whether a more robust U.S. intervention in Syria would have ended the war or prevented the rise of the Islamic State. Former ambassador Robert Ford still believes there is enough of a “moderate” wing of the opposition that can still depose Assad. Yet, we should not be drawing the wrong conclusions from the civil war literature, which draws heavily from the Cold War era at the expense of 19th century interventions, which may be more applicable of this new multipolar era. Nor should we treat it as scripture, given its thinness on mechanisms, its data shortcomings (i.e. selection effects), and so forth. Indeed, the literature on interventions in civil wars, as well as their unintended consequences, is a work in progress and anything but settled.

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How the U.S. fragmented Syria’s rebels

By Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, September 22, 2014

Last week’s votes in Congress brought the Obama administration one step closer to taking military action in Syria as part of its new strategy for confronting the Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS). American failure to take early, decisive action to prevent a power vacuum in Syria was a significant factor in the rise of ISIS. Such action could have been taken far earlier. One of the main sources of U.S. reluctance to do so has been the fragmentation and radicalization of the armed Syrian opposition. But this concern over acting in Syria mistakenly identifies the character of the opposition as the source of that fragmentation and radicalization.

In fact, dynamics within the war itself and not the inherent nature of the opposition have contributed significantly to the current disarray. In an ongoing research project on alliances and infighting between Syrian armed groups, I show how infighting among the opposition’s military formations increases when and where the fighting against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has become stalemated or indecisive. The implications are two-fold. Fragmentation and radicalization in Syria were driven by factors that allowed the proliferation of armed opposition groups and by the absence of military support designed to bolster their offensive capabilities.
When the sources of the state of the armed opposition are weighed against U.S. policy on Syria since the war's outset, the picture is clear: A hesitant U.S. role was central to the fragmentation and radicalization of the opposition. Particularly to blame are the combined failures to coordinate the actions of other pro-opposition states, to provide timely financial and military support to the opposition, and to use military support to produce qualitative changes in the opposition’s capabilities vis-à-vis the regime.

Such a causal story offers a different reading of ISIS’s swift organization of a militarily effective force, its barbaric violence and its consolidation of territory from Syria into northern Iraq. While the rise of ISIS might appear to confirm the worst fears of those who argued that the United States should not support the armed Syrian opposition, in fact it shows the opposite.

For the skeptics, Syrian moderates were few and far between; the organizational and military success of extremist groups showed the true face of Syrian society. With radical Islam clearly – and naturally – ascendant in Syria, efforts to support the Syrian opposition would only undermine U.S. interests.

But that persistent belief in the need to divine the true nature of Syria’s opposition, with the nagging suspicion that perhaps there were never really any moderates for the United States to partner with – see the outcry over a Free Syrian Army-affiliated fighter’s cannibalism in May 2013 – obscures four processes that shaped fragmentation and radicalization, and created the conditions out of which ISIS emerged as a threat to U.S. interests in the region.

First, the armed opposition formed within a strategic environment favoring the creation of autonomous groups with loose, decentralized relationships. The initial extreme military asymmetry favoring the Assad regime meant that a dominant, hierarchical group would have led the opposition to a swift demise. Fragmentation was not a sign that the armed opposition was inept, but rather that it understood the challenge it faced and adapted accordingly.

Second, the bonanza of uncoordinated financing, from an array of states within the region and private individuals created incentives for a further proliferation of armed groups, and facilitated their ability to continue to operate independently from one another. Private fundraisers often collected money for specific offensives that the opposition was to carry out. For their part, commanders requested funding piecemeal, advertising the amounts needed to produce tactical outcomes, from attacks on checkpoints to the use of car bombs.

Third, foreign governments and private donors often brought their own Islamist agendas to the table. The Islamic political platforms, symbols and rhetoric of the majority of the armed opposition groups show much about the available sources of support. Islamist groups built stronger organizations and obtained weapons and funds more consistently than their secular or so-called moderate counterparts. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey channeled resources to Islamists – albeit ones of different stripes – who could rely on steady funding from private sources in the Gulf states if support from these governments dried up. Secular groups that looked to the United States and European states for support were weakened when little of it materialized, either mired in a vetting process that delayed aid from the United States, or due to a frequent Western insistence on going through the leadership in exile rather than directly to the commanders on the front lines. At the individual level, fighters moved to join well-resourced Islamist groups. Given this instrumental component to the Islamization of the opposition, higher levels of Western military and financial support – if provided expeditiously – could have prevented radical Islamist groups from occupying a dominant position within the opposition.

Fourth, as the armed opposition wrested control from the Assad regime and managed to secure defensible positions in some areas of the country, particularly the north, relative security from the regime removed that principal driver of cooperation between groups: The pressing, common military threat. Groups often cultivated the same local constituencies, a budding political competition that they
could now resolve through force of arms. The ensuing infighting favored those Islamist groups that could draw on deep coffers and plentiful weaponry. After a coalition of opposition groups seized Raqqah from the regime in March 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra drove the forces of the weaker al-Farouk Brigades from the area. ISIS repeated this pattern in August 2013 when it targeted a smaller group, Ahfad al-Rasoul, destroying the latter’s headquarters in Raqqah and prompting its withdrawal from the area.

A United States invested in success in Syria could have worked to great effect to promote cohesion and ward off the radicalization of Syria’s armed opposition. Rather than stepping back and trying to gauge whether groups in Syria could overcome centrifugal forces, the United States could have prevented fragmentation by providing timely military and financial support and coordinating the large flows of military aid and funding from rival regional powers that otherwise worked at cross purposes. Coordinated, large-scale assistance would have limited the opportunities for such a large number of opposition groups to operate independently. In addition, by dwarfing the efforts of private donors, coordinated state support would have also sidelined this pernicious radicalizing force.

Finally, the war in Syria has been characterized by stalemates in some areas, fleeting gains and losses in others. U.S. airstrikes could have been used to knock the Syrian air force out of play and degrade the regime’s advantage in artillery, allowing the opposition to pursue lasting offensives. An opposition engaged in taking the fight to the regime could have avoided the infighting trap and thereby staved off radicalization.

Why emphasize a litany of “could haves”? Beyond providing an accurate accounting of the processes of fragmentation and radicalization within the war, this analysis challenges the notion that the state of the armed Syrian opposition evolved independently of the American stance on Syria, that a U.S. policy of cautious deliberation had no harmful, unintended consequences. In the coming days, the policy debate over President Obama’s new strategy to take on the Islamic State will establish the perception that any ultimate success or failure stems from the merits of the strategy itself. Yet if it is judged a success, we will not understand the responsibility the United States bears for the further implosion of Syria witnessed over the last year and the factors that allowed ISIS to flourish and become a threat to the region. And, if it is judged a failure, we will wrongly conclude that disengaging from the Middle East is the most prudent future course of action. In sum, we will fail to grasp the dangers of a policy of hesitance and inaction.

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The ICC may not bring justice to Syria

By Mark Kersten, May 12, 2014

Calls for justice and accountability in Syria emerged as swiftly as the civil war itself. But after three years of brutal bloodshed, unsuccessful mediation and perhaps the worst ongoing humanitarian crisis in the 21st century, justice has remained evasive. The United Nations Security Council has been locked in a stalemate – not only on how to end the conflict, but how and when to pursue accountability for atrocities committed during the civil war. With the Obama administration throwing its support behind a draft Security Council resolution referring Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC), many believe – and hope – that the deadlock on justice may soon be broken.

Proponents of the court are undoubtedly excited about the prospects of an ICC intervention in Syria. Facing obvious pushback from the Security Council, many, including former ICC chief prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo, had previously concocted creative approaches to getting the court involved. Now their hope is that the council will grant the court the ability to open an investigation into crimes committed in Syria.

But the growing feasibility of a referral calls for sober reflection. Pursuing international criminal justice in Syria is a much more complex affair than it may first appear. At least three separate, albeit related, questions need to be answered: What does the change in U.S. policy mean with regards to a potential referral of Syria to the ICC? Is an ICC intervention into the ongoing conflict a good idea? And, if requested to do so, should the ICC intervene in Syria?

First, does the U.S. administration’s volte-face really change anything? There are two competing opinions on the matter. First, some believe that the United States’ much delayed support for a referral of Syria to the ICC is simply political grandstanding. Knowing that Russia (and perhaps China) will veto any referral, the cost of throwing support behind the ICC is low, but the benefits are high: Being able to slam Russia as being on the wrong side of history – and justice. Conversely, the Obama administration’s change in position can be seen as a “conversation changer.” While it may not automatically translate into a referral, it is an obvious and necessary condition for eventually having Syria investigated by the ICC. There is no denying that there can be no backtracking on the part of the United States and that the discussion of an ICC referral has been reinvigorated.

No one, however, is willing to suggest a referral is forthcoming – at least not any time soon. The most obvious barrier is Russia’s recalcitrance. However, there is also another reason why the ICC is unlikely to be asked to investigate Syria. There is widespread recognition – and growing evidence – that both the Syrian government and Syrian opposition forces have committed war crimes. In order for the Security Council to agree to a referral, there needs to be a consensus within the council on precisely whom the ICC should target for prosecution. Previous investigations demonstrate that the court tends to target only one side of the ongoing and active conflicts in which it intervenes (see here for reasoning). Without a consensus on the council as to who should be targeted, it is hard, if not impossible, to imagine a referral being achieved.

Second, would it be wise to refer Syria to the ICC? Proponents and critics of the court have long engaged in the so-called “peace versus justice” debate. While the ICC’s supporters believe that the court can have positive effects on conflict resolution and that justice is absolutely necessary for establishing and maintaining peace, critics argue that international criminal justice can undermine peace processes and prolong violence. These fears have been played out in every ICC intervention into an ongoing and active conflict.

The truth is that we don’t know as much as we would like to about the effects of the ICC on conflict resolution. The claims made by both sides within the “peace versus
justice” debate tend to be persuasive and intuitive. But the effects of the ICC are also often overstated. Had the court intervened in Syria two years ago, would the current situation be any worse? The negative effects attributed to the court’s interventions – that ICC targets will fight to the bitter end, that the conflict will become protracted and that negotiations will flounder – have all been realized – without any help from the court!

Third, would it be good for the ICC itself to intervene in Syria? Few issues have defined the first 10 years of the ICC’s existence more than its relationship with the Security Council. The court was created, in part, in order to transcend the power politics of the council. To date, however, it has done quite the opposite.

The Security Council has previously referred two situations to the ICC – Darfur in 2005 and Libya in 2011. In both instances the council severely restricted – and politicized – the court’s mandate. Both referrals exempted citizens of states that are not members of the ICC from the court’s jurisdiction. Both referrals guaranteed that the ICC would be saddled with the entire financial burden of any subsequent investigation. In both cases, the ICC focused primarily on consensus opponents of the council: The government of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan and the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Moreover, and this is the real kicker for the court, in both cases the ICC ended up empty-handed, without a single “big fish” from either situation in its dock.

Any referral of Syria to the ICC would seek to repeat all three of these conditions: Exempting citizens of non-state parties from investigation or prosecution; ensuring that the court foot the bill for its work at the behest of the council and prodding the ICC to focus on specific targets. To varying degrees, these conditions all hinder the capacity, legitimacy and independence of the court. History suggests that the ICC also tends to be fleeced – with the vast majority of those it targets as a consequence of Security Council referrals evading justice and council members lackadaisical about enforcing arrest warrants.

This is not to say that the ICC should reject a referral. It shouldn’t. And given what it would say to victims in Syria, it is impossible to think that it would. But there is a need, on the part of the court’s supporters and especially the ICC’s prosecutor, to think very clearly about the costs of another highly politicized referral. Officials and proponents of the ICC consistently reiterate that states need to respect the independence of the court. But the ICC needs to respect its own independence too. Syria is a big test – for justice and for the ICC itself.

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The Islamic State in Syria
Foreign fighters don’t always help

By Kristin M. Bakke, May 28, 2014

One of the policy concerns about violent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Pakistan, Russia’s North Caucasus region, Somalia, and the ongoing war in Syria has been that these struggles could attract and breed foreign fighters. Yet we know relatively little about the ways in which foreign fighters, once they arrive, influence the struggles they join. I argue, in my article in the spring 2014 issue of International Security, that foreign fighters may actually weaken the rebel movements they come to support.

Foreign fighters, or transnational insurgents, are fighters without affiliation to a formal army who voluntarily join the rebels in a civil war outside their own home country. Contemporary policy debates focus on Islamist insurgents, but research by David Malet shows that foreign fighters can have other ideological or ethnic attachments to the struggles they join (think of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War).

Western governments are concerned about foreign fighters for a number of reasons. For starters, they worry that by participating in wars abroad, foreign fighters will radicalize and gain skills they can put to use back home. However, research by Thomas Hegghammer, a leading specialist on violent Islamism, questions this concern, and others suggest it might even lead to misplaced policies.

Another worry, shared with governments of states fighting insurgencies within their borders, is that foreign fighters bring along manpower, weapons, know-how and access to financial resources, all of which may strengthen the domestic rebels and potentially prolong and spread the war. As noted by Peter Bergen and Alec Reynolds about Iraq in the early 2000s, “The Jordanian Anu Musab al-Zarqawi, another alumnus of the Afghan war, is perhaps the most effective insurgent commander in the field.” For domestic rebels, the added expertise is precisely why they might welcome the outsiders in the first place.

Yet, as we have come to see in Syria, domestic rebels and the population may grow skeptical of their foreign helpers. Indeed, it is not a given that foreign fighters strengthen the domestic rebel movements they join. While foreign fighters may boost a domestic rebel movement’s coercive force through added resources and expertise, they can also weaken the movement’s organizational cohesion and ability to mobilize supporters by introducing new ideas about goals and tactics.

As I show in an in-depth study of the influence of foreign fighters on the Chechen separatist movement, the entry of new goals and tactics can cause divisions within the movement – and even outright defection – if local resistance leaders are not on board. The introduction of new goals and tactics can also make it more difficult for the movement leaders to garner public support.

Building on insights from research on peaceful transnational relations of how ideas spread, I suggest that central to whether and how foreign fighters strengthen or, conversely, weaken the rebel movement they join is the ability of domestic resistance leaders to foster local acceptance of the ideas brought along by the outsiders.

In Chechnya, as Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty have shown, the first foreign fighters, mainly from the Middle East, entered in January 1995, a couple of months into the 1994 to 1996 war against the federal government in Moscow. By 1996, foreign fighters had set up training camps in the republic’s mountainous eastern part. They also came with new ideas of what the struggle was about and how it should be fought. Although the change cannot be attributed exclusively to the foreign fighters, they certainly contributed to transforming a nationalist struggle for Chechen independence into one dominated by the goal of establishing an Islamic emirate in the Caucasus. The same goes for tactics. The responsibility for the turn to radical tactics involving civilian targets, such as suicide
terrorism, lies not only with the foreign fighters, but the timing suggests the foreign fighters played a central role.

However, these new ideas about goals and tactics got only a lukewarm reception from the local population. Some locals even claimed that the views imposed on them by the outsiders contradicted their local traditions and values just as much as the views imposed on them by the Russians. Some local resistance leaders tried to make the case that these ideas were not wholly in contradiction with local ideas about what the struggle was about and how it should be fought, but other resistance leaders outright rejected them. That is, even though the foreign fighters who arrived in Chechnya may have strengthened the local resistance movement’s coercive force in their fight against Moscow, they ultimately helped weaken the movement. The foreign fighters contributed to a formal split of the original movement into an Islamist and a nationalist branch, as well as outright defection to the Russian side under Akhmad Kadyrov, the father of the republic’s present pro-Russian president, Ramzan Kadyrov.

Similar dynamics seem to be at work in Syria. News reports suggest that not only has the influx of jihadists led to outright clashes between foreign and local groups, but the influence of the jihadists, some of whom have tried to impose strict Islamic codes, have alienated the local residents. A fuller understanding of how the foreign fighters have shaped the Syrian struggle requires detailed analysis of how local resistance leaders have (or have not) tried to “localize” the outsiders’ ideas.

The point is, it might well be that foreign fighters prolong civil wars and contribute to their spread across borders. But not necessarily because they strengthen the domestic rebel movement, rather because they weaken it. Indeed, given the growing body of work pointing to how weak and fragmented rebel and opposition movements are likely to foster violence, lengthen conflict duration and complicate mediation and negotiation efforts, the subversive effect that foreign fighters may have on a domestic rebel movement’s strength is potentially bad news all around. It is bad news not just for the domestic rebels, but also for states fighting insurgencies within their borders and for (international) actors engaged in conflict resolution.

To the degree that it is in the power of local resistance leaders to “sell” goals and tactics brought along by outsiders to the local population – and local support matters for the domestic movement’s strength – policymakers concerned about foreign fighters should focus their efforts on alleviating both the wish and need for such outside help among local resistance leaders.

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The jihadist governance dilemma

By Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Amichai Magen, July 18, 2014

After making astounding territorial gains in its war against the Iraqi government, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – which has refashioned itself “the Islamic State” – declared that it had reestablished the caliphate. The group’s gains put a spotlight on several questions related to Salafi jihadists’ efforts at building states. Can jihadists govern? Can they sustainably control and extract resources from territory and populations? As Ariel Ahram recently wrote for the Monkey Cage, insurgent groups face a “resource curse” that has a significant impact on their conflicts; this is true of Iraq, where the Islamic State has gained momentum in its efforts to control oil and water resources. But beyond these factors that confront any insurgency, jihadist groups face distinctive governance problems that they won’t be able to overcome in the near future, and will struggle mightily to address in the longer term.

Academics have grown increasingly interested in non-state actors’ attempts at governance. In Inside Rebellion, Jeremy Weinstein finds that a violent non-state actor’s discipline is central to determining whether it will build governance structures and protect populations from violence or kill indiscriminately. Weinstein concludes that richer organizations have a harder time maintaining discipline because they attract opportunists obsessed with immediate gain, and thus predisposed to violence, while resource-poor organizations instead attract committed individuals with a shared sense of purpose. Thus, Weinstein believes resource-poor organizations are more likely to establish governance and provide services. In Rebel Rulers, Zachariah Cherian Mampilly examines the variance in governing strategies among insurgent groups, focusing on the groups’ initial leadership decisions and subsequent interactions with various actors. Among other things, he argues insurgent groups are more likely to establish governance if the state had significant penetration prior to insurgent takeover of a region.

Jihadists have now had several experiences with governance: In Iraq (2006-08), Somalia (2007-12), Yemen (2011-12), North Mali (2012-13), and again in Iraq (2014-??). There have been some efforts by scholars to examine jihadist governance, but given how important governance is to jihadists, this is an area ripe for more detailed examination.

Jihadists are afflicted by a fundamental dilemma: They cannot attain their goals if they don’t govern, yet the record shows them repeatedly failing at governance efforts. Paradoxically, when these groups appear strongest – when they gain control of state-like assets – their greatest weaknesses are exposed.

One well-established Salafi jihadist goal is the forcible imposition of sharia (Islamic law). The late al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden said in 1998 that al-Qaeda’s struggle should continue until “the Islamic sharia is enforced on the land of God.” This goal has remained constant, as a militant’s notebook that Reuters journalists recently unearthed near the Yemeni town of al-Mahfad memorializes similar goals: “Establishing an Islamic state that rules by Islamic sharia law.”

Jihadist groups’ rigid religious outlook drives their belief that sharia must be imposed and also the shape that sharia takes for them. Washington Institute for Near East Policy scholar Aaron Y. Zelin notes that the Islamic State’s city charter after the group captured Mosul on June 10 provided for amputation of thieves’ hands, required timely performance of all required prayers, and forbade drugs and alcohol. Further, “all shrines and graves will be destroyed, since they are considered polytheistic.”

This charter has much in common with previous jihadist governance efforts: They tend to have a legalistic and all-encompassing interpretation of sharia, insisting upon even obscure rules. In a previous period of jihadist rule over Mosul – when the Islamic State’s predecessor, Al-
The Islamic State in Syria

Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), controlled the city until May 2008 — citizens were required to follow intricate and bizarre rules. AQI banned the side-by-side display of tomatoes and cucumbers by food vendors because the group viewed the arrangement as sexually provocative, in addition to banning a local bread known as *sammoun*, the use of ice, and barbers’ use of electric razors. These restrictions might be Monty Python-esque, but the punch line was grim: Iraqis were killed for violating them.

Jihadist groups’ rigid understanding of Islamic law and brutal methods of coercing populations give rise to the governance challenges they confront: Those of legitimacy, effectiveness and sustainability.

Jihadist groups face a double test with respect to the *legitimacy* of their rule. The first test relates to the degree of acceptance by the subject population. Sociologist and political economist Max Weber defines legitimacy as a relationship of authority between ruler and ruled that both sides perceive as binding. Jihadist groups will be legitimate in the eyes of the population if that population comes to see these groups as having the right to dictate behavior, and views the groups’ rules as worthy of being obeyed.

Jihadist groups’ alienation of the population caused them deep problems during the Iraq war, when AQI was the dominant actor in Anbar province and ruthlessly imposed its will, torturing, slaughtering and even beheading citizens to eliminate dissent. This sparked a backlash among Sunni Anbari tribes, and in September 2006 a number of sheikhs publicly announced their plan to fight al-Qaeda, calling their movement the *Sahwa*, or “Awakening.” The turning of tribes and former insurgents made a significant difference in Anbar, and the program was expanded beyond that province. Though it later made a comeback, al-Qaeda’s Iraqi affiliate had been largely defanged by early 2009 — a victim of its excesses and the surge in U.S. troops.

AQI eventually tried to ameliorate this vulnerability. A letter that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb emir Abdelmalek Droukdel wrote to his fighters in North Mali when they controlled territory there warned of “the extreme speed with which you applied *sharia*, not taking into consideration the gradual evolution that should be applied in an environment that is ignorant of religion.”

Internal legitimacy problems don’t mean hard-line jihadist rule will automatically trigger a successful “awakening”-style movement. AQI might have wiped out the Anbari Sahwa, as it did to previous uprisings, had it not been for the U.S. military’s ability to defend the movement. Jihadists have been able to suppress resistance in places like the Syrian city of Raqqa, where the Islamic State has dealt with dissent by imprisoning, torturing and killing opponents.

In addition to this internal legitimacy challenge, jihadists face external challenges to their legitimacy because neighboring states, global powers and major NGOs view jihadist rule as illegitimate. Jihadist groups’ adversaries mobilize as these groups begin to govern because the urgency of the jihadist threat is heightened once these groups seize territory. Further, taking on state-like qualities makes them more vulnerable to military operations.

Jihadist groups additionally face the challenge of *effectiveness*. One aspect of a political actor’s effectiveness is determined by whether it can assume basic functions of government, including delivery of services (such as trash collection, water and electricity, and road maintenance). Commentators have noted jihadist groups’ increasing provision of social services, but actually governing territory is a different matter.

Jihadist groups have trouble replacing the state as the primary service provider because they lack experience in service delivery and the will to refocus on more mundane aspects of governance, and also because their rule is vulnerable. A letter that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi wrote recently acknowledged these problems. In explaining AQAP’s decision not to declare an emirate in southern Yemen, Wuhayshi stated that al-Qaeda’s senior leadership advised against it because “we wouldn’t be able to treat people on the basis of a state since we would not be able to provide for all their needs, mainly because our state is vulnerable.”
Governments also frequently cut revenue to areas under jihadist control, forcing jihadists to pay civil servants or lose a valuable portion of the workforce. While jihadists frequently lose the support of the population because of brutal coercive measures, there is also a more gradual process of disillusionment when the groups fail to effectively provide goods and services.

A final governance challenge that jihadists face is sustainability – the ability to govern over significant periods. Sustainable governance generally requires reaching some modus vivendi with other actors, domestic and international, and at least minimal capacity to control borders, territory and populations. The Islamic State’s failure to achieve such a modus vivendi is apparent in Syria, where it has spent more time locked in combat with other rebel groups than with President Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

Further, jihadist groups’ aforementioned inability to provide services effectively undermines the sustainability of their governance efforts. Jihadist groups’ lack of capacity generally forces them to try to capture preexisting institutions or work with others who are able to provide these services. Regardless of their success, sustaining the population’s support becomes more difficult for jihadist groups as time passes.

Governance will continue to be a challenge for jihadist groups. These actors have grown more competent at what may be described as “pre-governance” efforts – such as undertaking sophisticated dawa (proselytism) efforts or providing limited social services. Yet legitimate, effective, and sustainable governance has eluded them.

Can jihadist groups become more “legitimate” in the eyes of the international community? For now the answer is no, in part due to their inflexibility. Most Salafi jihadists are uninterested in acquiring legitimacy because they view the international system as illegitimate. But this may change: Jihadists may develop strategic principles that seek to ameliorate their governance disadvantages. Another factor that may help make jihadist rule more lasting is the increasing number of places where jihadist groups are locked in a cycle of governing territory, retreating as their enemies advance, and then regrouping. Even when major jihadist groups seem to have been defeated – as AQI and Nigeria’s Boko Haram did in 2009 – they prove resilient. As the number of these destructive cycles grows, jihadist groups could find themselves maintaining power for extended periods as the international system is overwhelmed.

This risk makes it important for Western countries to exploit the jihadists’ governance dilemma. Given the brutality of jihadist rule, this is an area ripe for sophisticated information-operations campaigns that starkly illustrate life under their dictates. Western countries should also carefully examine lessons learned from localized resistance to jihadists, by groups like the Sahwa or Ahlu Sunna wal Jamaa in Somalia, and develop new ways to support them. Local resistance depends on opportunities for success: If groups agitate against jihadists but are crushed, they might serve only as a cautionary tale. Any examination of these uprisings should focus on effective points of intervention. For example, during the Islamic State’s recent advance, it relied on an awkward coalition of ex-Baathists, tribesmen and other groups whose goals clashed with the jihadists’. Is such a coalition more likely to fall apart early, or after jihadists have established their rule? When will the United States attempting to support local resistance groups have the opposite effect from that intended, and delegitimize rather than bolster them?

Moreover, since a dominant path by which jihadist groups can enjoy long-term rule is widening circles of instability, Western countries should be reluctant to take actions likely to produce regional chaos. A quintessential example is NATO’s war in Libya, which was partly designed to speed up the Arab Spring, but has proved advantageous to jihadists: It left behind a country beset by instability, whose chaos had a destabilizing effect on such neighbors as Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria.

Though the jihadist impulse to brutal excess presents opportunities, this vulnerability will not automatically
result in setbacks for the groups responsible. As jihadist groups gain power, their weaknesses are exposed – and Western states’ goal as jihadists gain strength should be more ambitious than just pushing them back. The goal should be to deliver a killing blow.

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The Islamic State and the politics of official narratives

By Laurie A. Brand, September 8, 2014

While its exploits in battle and crime in conquest have captured most of the headlines regarding the group formerly referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), since the June declaration of the Islamic State, increasing attention has turned to how it governs, most specifically how much actual “state” there is and how its state-like institutions function.

The sources of the Islamic State’s budget – from ransoms of foreign hostages and “foreign aid” from wealthy Gulf Arabs to the sale of oil from production facilities that have come under its control – have been widely reported. Its high profile destruction of the border crossing between Iraq and Syria, which the Islamic State framed in terms of overturning the legacy of Sykes-Picot, demonstrated its ideological rejection of existing state boundaries as it extended its own realm. Recent developments in Mosul, the largest Iraqi city to be conquered by the Islamic State, certainly call to mind Charles Tilly’s famous piece “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime;” however, it is in the Syrian city of Raqqah, where the Islamic State established its first major seat of power, that the basic institutions of its nascent state can be most effectively observed.

Courts, prisons, tax collection, a complaints department (diwan al-mazalim) and the morality patrols (hisbah) – the Islamic State’s version of Saudi Arabia’s religious police (mutawwain) – are obvious manifestations of its assumption of control over regulating daily affairs. Most recently, however, the Islamic State has turned its attention to what Ernest Gellner once claimed was “more central than the monopoly of legitimate violence” to the state: the monopoly of legitimate education. Reports from Raqqah during the last week in August detailed a “General Directive to all Educational Institutions” issued by the Islamic State’s Bureau of Curriculum, on official stationery and with its own official stamps, which sets preliminary guidelines for instruction. The first order in the directive is that all of the following subjects are to be annulled: music, art, civics, social studies, history, math, philosophy and social issues, and Christian and Islamic religious education. However, the directive also states that the Bureau of Curriculum will “compensate” for their removal, a phrase that suggests that what is underway is not the wholesale abolition of most courses of study, but rather the first stage in a massive reworking of the curriculum.
Decades ago, the need for an educated population was widely recognized by the first generation of post-independence leaderships in the developing world as one means of confronting the myriad challenges of post-colonial economic and political development. Just as important, however, was the role that education was to play in inculcating a new national narrative, one that would “correct” the history and mission promulgated by the former colonial power. In their place, an heroic story would be constructed, aimed at building a unified national identity, establishing the vision of that nation, and – crucially – consolidating power through reinforcing the regime’s legitimacy to rule. Thus, taking control of the curriculum in the early stages of state development, what the Islamic State appears to be engaged in, has been a common policy across regions and over time.

My research on national narratives in the Middle East and North Africa bears this out. One of the most basic tasks of narrative reconstruction undertaken by new leaderships is establishing a new founding story. In both Egypt and Algeria, as part of this process, the name of the country was changed, a different flag was introduced and revised history, civics and other texts were developed that promoted the vision and values of the revolutionary leadership. In the case of Egypt, while the Free Officers who overthrew King Farouk in July 1952 by no means rejected the role of Mehmet Ali in establishing the bases of the modern Egypt state, the textbooks that were produced shortly after the revolution constructed the overthrow of the monarchy as the beginning of a qualitatively new era in Egyptian history. In the case of Algeria, it took longer for indigenous textbooks to be produced, in large part because of the sorry state of indigenous schools at the time of the French departure, but when they were, the bloody war of liberation was clearly marked as a glorious and heroic rebirth for the Algerian people.

Previous work has shown that the constituent elements of national narratives are often open to multiple interpretations, hence allowing for investing them with altered or new meanings as the polity evolves and as the leadership may need. As a result, even deeply rooted narratives have a degree of flexibility, leading to relative stability in most tropes over time. Only during periods of crisis – economic, political, military, etc. – does it appear that sufficient “space” opens up for major revisions or reconstructions of basic story lines and values. My research revealed that in the cases of Egypt, Algeria and Jordan, certain types of regime transition – particularly unexpected leadership changes, as with Gamal Abdel Nasser’s death in 1970 and Houari Boumediene’s death in 1978 – seemed to open the way for significant, if not sudden, narrative revisions. However, only in the cases of the implantation of a completely new ruling group does it seem that attempt is made to generate a wholly new founding story.

What we see now with the Islamic State is in keeping with these examples. If one reads the entirety of its recent curriculum directive, the outlines of a new narrative under the declared caliphate can be discerned. The term “Syrian Arab Republic” is to be removed completely and replaced with “the Islamic State,” and the Syrian national anthem is to be discarded or suppressed. There is to be no teaching of the concepts of national patriotism (wataniyyah) or Arab nationalism (qawmiyyah); rather, students are to be taught that they belong to Islam and its people, to strict monotheism and its adherents, and that the land of the Muslim is the land in which God’s path (shar’ Allah) governs. The words “homeland” (watan), “his homeland,” “my homeland,” or “Syria” are to be replaced wherever they are found with the phrases “the Islamic state,” “his Islamic state,” “land of the Muslims” or the “Sham (or other the Islamic State-governed) Province.” The teacher is instructed to replace any gaps in Arabic language and grammar instructional materials that may result from the suppression of these terms with examples that do not conflict with sharia or the Islamic State. In addition, all pictures that violate sharia are to be removed, as are any examples in mathematics that involve usury, interest, democracy or elections. Finally, in the science curriculum anything that is associated with Darwin’s theory or evolution is to be removed and all creation is to be attributed to God.
Thus the nascent narrative has several key bases that reveal its radical nature. First is the change, not only of the name, but also of the form of state – for it is not really “national” – affiliation. Second is the rejection of the national anthem and all of the history and values it represents. Third is the suppression of existing types of belonging, well established in the Arab world – qawmiyyah and wataniyyah – and their replacement with a particular version of a religious creed. A new founding narrative is clearly in the process of being constructed and inculcated.

While it may be tempting, upon seeing the brutal videos of the Islamic State’s campaign of “shock and awe” to call it a “death cult” as some commentators recently have, much of what it is currently engaged in has clear parallels in other historical examples of conquest aimed at securing control over both territory and people. How far the Islamic State will be able to extend its aspirations to state-like control, and to what extent it will be able to consolidate those structures currently in place remain to be seen. For those keen to counter and defeat it, as well as those simply intent upon understanding its origins and prospects, nascent entity-consolidating activities like the promulgation of a new narrative through, among other means, a reconstructed educational curriculum, demand closer attention and analysis.

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Wartime sexual violence is not just a ‘weapon of war’

By Kerry F. Crawford, Amelia Hoover Green and Sarah E. Parkinson, September 24, 2014

Sexual violence has played a prominent role in recent media treatments of wars in the Middle East. In Syria, reports of a “massive” rape crisis strongly suggest that government forces are using rape as a military tactic against communities associated with the rebels. In Iraq, rape by Islamic State forces is said to be used as a weapon of war and as a tool of ethnic domination. These stories are horrifying, but they also serve a political narrative: Forces of evil in the Middle East are using rape as a weapon in terror campaigns against natural allies of “the West,” including ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and anti-regime communities in Syria.

To scholars of sexual violence, these media narratives look typical in three related ways: They are selective and sensationalist; they obscure deeper understandings about patterns of wartime sexual violence; and they are laden with false assumptions about the causes of conflict rape. The narrative in play here carries concrete implications for politics and policy, including the inadvertent aiding of perpetrators and worse outcomes for survivors. Policies that prevent and mitigate the effects of sexual violence require attention to the whole problem – not just one media-friendly subset – and to solid research on wartime rape.

Selective, sensationalist stories about rape can be useful. Scholars have argued that extreme numerical claims can galvanize the supporters of activists and humanitarians, cut through donor fatigue and spur policy changes. But there are downsides: Inaccurate or unverifiable extreme claims can make accurately-reported epidemics of wartime rape seem minor by comparison, skewing policy
responses. They also marginalize other forms of sexual violence (including, for example, sexual torture, forced incest, forced abortion and forced perpetration of sexual violence), disincentivize programming focused on other types of suffering and victimhood during conflict, and – perversely – make other wartime atrocities harder to prosecute.

These narratives influence both understandings of and reactions to sexual violence in Syria and Iraq. Reports of Islamic State imprisonment and rape of Yazidi women have effectively erased more common and complex patterns. For example, the International Rescue Committee has documented patterns of sexual violence by landlords and potential employers who exploit Syrian refugees’ economic vulnerability in host states like Lebanon and Jordan. In many wars, intimate partner sexual violence is significantly more common than sexual violence by combatants. Yet these victims are receiving neither attention nor needed resources. Ultimately, the selectivity of media reports feeds into policy responses that target stereotypical perpetrators (like Islamic State) rather than underlying problems (such as refugee poverty).

Focusing only on the most visible victim groups compounds the challenges that survivors face. Media narratives about Iraq and Syria are almost exclusively focused on women, concealing and marginalizing male and LGBT victims who may be equally in need of help. Syrian and Iraqi refugees must cope with extremely limited access to health-care services, which are frequently underfunded and unprepared to treat survivors of sexual violence. Restricting treatment and services to particular categories of victims makes access to these services even more fraught for others. Moreover, focusing exclusively on rape and rape survivors, as if these crimes occur in isolation, masks other forms of suffering and ignores other vulnerable groups. For example, advocates and policymakers tend to ignore children born of wartime rape. Children whose mothers suffered sexual violence in Syria, Iraq and the refugee diaspora are no exception to this rule.

Graphic, selective narratives about patterns of sexual violence carry weighty foreign policy implications. The impulse to “save” Syrian and Iraqi women from sexual violence has been repeatedly used to justify intervention. This rhetorical tactic is not unique to the current crises. Yet wars fought partially in the name of “saving women” in the Middle East have produced disastrous results for those very women – and for civilians in general. Military interventions add to refugee flows and contribute to unstable economic conditions, placing more civilians at risk for sexual violence and exploitation.

In addition to giving us the wrong idea about patterns of wartime rape, selective narratives strengthen false assumptions about the causes of wartime rape, encouraging policymaking that addresses symptoms rather than root causes. Press reports and punditry about sexual violence in Iraq and Syria continually employ the phrases “weapon of war” and “tool of terror.” Without a doubt, some wartime rape is a weapon of war: Some commanders use rape or the threat of rape strategically to punish enemy communities, induce compliance, or demoralize opponents. But the “weapon of war” narrative is disastrously incomplete. Research suggests that rape has multiple causes, and is more closely associated with fighting forces’ internal practices (like forced recruitment, training practices, or the strength of the military hierarchy) than with strategic imperatives, ethnic hatred, or other “conventional wisdom” causes. In short, to assume that wartime rape is always “rape as a weapon of war” is to ignore the majority of cases.

Moreover, to the extent that wartime rape is a weapon of war, policymakers who invoke the “weapon of war” narrative may actually strengthen belligerents’ strategic positions. Commentary about the Islamic State’s sexual “brutality” – exemplified in a recent policy recommendation aimed at “shaming” the organization – risks reinforcing the Islamic State’s intimidating reputation (which is already well-known on the ground and in the refugee camps). Reputations and rumors matter in conflict; recent research in Lebanon has suggested that fear
of rape has become an important reason for refugees to leave Syria. Playing into combatants’ rhetorical strategies could result in increased refugee flows, contribute to efforts to diminish women’s involvement in public life, or even increase the incidence of wartime rape.

Research also shows that “bad guys,” such as the Islamic State and the Syrian regime, aren’t the only perpetrators of wartime sexual violence. While the United States, Britain, France and other interventionist countries may identify themselves as “good guys” fighting “good wars,” the idea that only the United States’ enemies rape is simply incorrect. The United States and its allies have frequently perpetrated sexual violence in war. The U.S. military itself has a record of sexual violence, both against civilians and within its ranks. Moreover, while the majority of sexual violence in Syria appears to be perpetrated by government forces, reports to the United Nations suggest that Syrian opposition factions – the very groups U.S. officials intend to train and arm to fight against the Islamic State – have also committed acts of sexual violence. Put briefly: The United States has a credibility problem on this issue in this region.

Narratives that focus on a narrow subset of sexual violence – strategic rapes, with rhetorically convenient perpetrators and victims – are powerful but dangerous. They encourage policy elites to ignore a growing body of research on wartime sexual violence more broadly. Thankfully, other policymakers and scholars themselves have proposed research-informed policy solutions that would both benefit survivors and work toward prevention. For example, the former administrator of USAID has argued in favor of clarifying the “Helms amendment” via executive order; this move, along with increased funding and training for medical providers, would improve healthcare access and quality for survivors of sexual violence in war. Another suggestion, advocated among humanitarian agencies in Lebanon, is to broaden cash aid programs for refugees, which would help to protect them from some forms of sexual coercion and violence. Research on armed group structures and practices implies that, to prevent sexual violence, countries advising Syrian or Iraqi forces should incorporate training programs that teach rank and file soldiers that sexual violence is incompatible with the role of resistance fighter – and with military success.

We also have to ask: “Are We Listening?” Often the voices of survivors themselves, particularly survivors in Syria and Iraq, are sidelined in Western debates. Policymakers must seek out unfiltered perspectives from the ground. (An excellent example is the work of Mohammed A. Salih, a journalist who recently published a minimally edited interview with a 14-year-old survivor in Iraq). Scholarship on local organizing against sexual violence in countries like Egypt has cleared the way for more genuine solidarity and brought to light the oversimplified – and often racist – treatment of Arab and Muslim men frequently embodied in women’s rights campaigns directed from outside the region.

It is essential that policymakers understand the experiences and priorities of people they are ostensibly “saving” and the broader facts about patterns and prevention of wartime sexual violence. It is imperative to ask whether interventionist stories and actions ease or exacerbate the situations of victims and those at risk. And, moving beyond Syria and Iraq in particular, it is time for a policy discussion of wartime sexual violence that moves beyond the “weapon of war” narrative to encompass the full range of perpetrators, tactics, victims, survivors, causes and consequences.

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The logic of violence in the Islamic State’s war

By Stathis N. Kalyvas, July 7, 2014

When North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam and overran its army, most observers and analysts expected a bloodbath to follow. The Vietnam War had been going on for a long time and the communist insurgents had suffered enormous losses, as well as inflicted considerable damage on their enemies, both on various battlefields and most importantly across thousands of hamlets. There, the war had acquired a character common to many civil wars – that of vicious neighbor on neighbor violence. To top it all, the South Vietnamese state and military apparatus was huge, having being fed by the United States at a clip of billions of aid. Revenge, communist practice and the necessity of repressing a large-sized ancien régime all converged to suggest an enormous outbreak of violence. It didn’t happen. To be sure, hundreds of people were executed, tens of thousands sent to “re-education” camps, and many more were forced to flee the country. But a bloodbath of epic proportions failed to materialize. One did, however, take place next door in Cambodia, where virtually no one had expected it.

This vignette illustrates the pitfalls of trying to make sense of violence in the context of civil wars, a tendency that has already emerged with regards to the latest round of fighting in Iraq. The temptation is great to see patterns where none may exist. For example, the current fashion of the day is to predict a sectarian bloodbath in Iraq stoked by the jihadist onslaught. The previous wave of sectarian killings in Iraq, the bloody record of the Islamic State, formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria, and its own pronouncements after it took over Mosul, all appear to confirm these expectations. However, we should be skeptical about such interpretations and predictions.

For starters, data on violence in civil wars is almost always incomplete: Sometimes it overcounts and sometimes it undercounts, while almost always much information is missing. Most importantly, the context is almost always absent. Even in an era of seemingly plentiful, real-time data availability, a lot more may be going on (and is almost certainly going on) under the radar – and this is crucial for making sense of what is happening. For example, I have shown that the part of violence that tends to be undercounted consists of individualized “selective” killings of suspected collaborators of the enemy, which may exceed in size spectacular, collective massacres. Indeed, a recent U.N. report appears to suggest such a pattern, pointing to at least 757, mostly civilian, fatalities from June 5 to 22, in the provinces that have seen the bulk of insurgent activity. At the same time, initial reports about mass executions of close to 2,000 Iraqi army prisoners by the Islamic State appear to have been overstated by the organization, an indication that we should take self-reported claims with much more than the proverbial pinch of salt. Indeed, recent analysis suggests that the mass executions around Tikrit may have been lower than the numbers claimed.

The actual numbers, and their actual allocation between indiscriminate and selective killings, matter because they have vastly different implications about the nature of the conflict. If it turns out that the bulk of violence meted out by the Islamic State consists of randomly targeted Shiite fighters and civilians, this would be in line with an interpretation of their main strategic goal as being about provoking an all-out sectarian war between Iraq’s Sunnis and Shiites. The logic is pretty obvious: Random violence against Sunnis would provoke equally random retaliation by Shiites against Sunnis, activating the sectarian cleavage and forcing Sunnis and Shiites, irrespective of either their initial or true preferences, to side with the most radical representatives of their sects. According to this logic, the Islamic State would emerge as the champion of the Sunnis and acquire a much larger base of support than it could otherwise claim.

The Islamic State experience in Syria, however, may be suggesting a different story. Although there is a lack of a
systematic and reliable account of violence that also takes into account its targeting logic, there have been several processes at work. First, it has been killing, in often graphic and highly publicized ways, enemy fighters – primarily regime fighters but also members of its insurgent rivals. The killing of prisoners was a common feature of pre-modern warfare, a tactic intended to scare enemies and cause defections. It is also designed to project resolve, a tactic often used by weaker military actors and, in the case of the Islamic State, it has apparently been used as a recruitment strategy. Second, it has been killing suspected collaborators of its enemies, including the Syrian regime or most commonly its insurgent rivals. “Selective” killings of suspected enemy collaborators are the most common tactic employed by both insurgents and governments in civil war contexts. Third, it has been targeting “misbehaving” individuals in areas it controls, from petty thieves to those disrespecting its authority. Again, this is a common practice for rebel rulers and state-builders, from “stationary bandits” to incipient states, one intended to build up support from the community. When not implemented in an excessive way, this tactic does fulfill this goal.

Lastly, it appears to have engaged in indiscriminate massacres of civilians who belong to a different religious sect (Alawites and Christians in Syria, Shiites in Iraq). Possibly, the intention may be of stoking a sectarian war, along the lines described above. However, alternative (or complementary) interpretations may be offered as well. For example, it may be that these instances reflect local conflict dynamics rather than a grand strategy of sectarian war, a response to specific battlefield contexts. Relatedly, this violence may result from local commander initiatives, or even reflect chain of command breakdowns, both common occurrences in the fragmented battlefields of civil wars. Or it may result from long-standing feuds between competing local communities and groups that happen to be members of different sects, rather than the sects per se. In all these instances, this violence may be understood as local and fail to escalate at the sect level.

What should we make out of all this? I would like to stress three points. First, violence is not a transparent process and we should be careful about drawing easy conclusions from what transpires from the fog of the civil war battlefield. Second, there is nothing particularly Islamic or jihadi about the organization’s violence. The practices described above have been used by a variety of insurgent (and also incumbent) actors in civil wars across time and space. Therefore, easy cultural interpretations should be challenged. Third, if the Islamic State ought to be characterized, it would be as a revolutionary (or radical) insurgent actor. These groups project a goal of radical political and social change; they are composed of a highly motivated core, recruit using ideological messages (although not all their recruits or collaborators are ideologically motivated – far from it) and tend to invest heavily in the indoctrination of their followers. They tend to prevail over their less effectively organized insurgent rivals (see the examples of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front or the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka), but their Achilles heel lies in their radical proclivities which often turn local populations against them if the opportunity arises, as happened in Iraq with al-Qaeda in Iraq. Revolutionary groups can appropriate a variety of other causes (nationalism, ethnic or sectarian identities), but their revolutionary identity is central and helps make sense of much of their activity. In that respect, we have much to learn from revisiting the action and strategy of the last generation of insurgent revolutionary actors, those of the Cold War.

In short, analyzing the Islamic State as a revolutionary actor that happens to be Islamist is a much more promising avenue of interpretation than seeing it as either simply an Islamist actor or a sectarian one.

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Is this the end of Sykes-Picot?

By F. Gregory Gause III, May 20, 2014

The intensity of the civil war in Syria, combined with the continued upheavals in Iraq and the endemic instability of Lebanese politics, has naturally led to speculation that the famously “artificial” borders in the eastern Arab world, drawn by Britain and France in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, are on their last legs. Are the state entities created by European colonialism in the 1920s about to collapse? Are we about to see a grand redrawing of the borders in the Middle East? The short answer to this question is no. While none of these three states will be able to claim effective governance within their borders anytime soon, the borders themselves are not going to change. They are devolving into what the political scientist Robert Jackson perceptively referred to as “quasi-states,” internationally recognized de jure as sovereign even though they cannot implement de facto the functional requisites that sovereignty assumes – control of territory and borders. Real governance in the eastern Arab world is certainly up for grabs, but the borders themselves will be the last things to change, because almost none of the actors, either regionally or internationally, really want them to change.

“The end of Sykes-Picot” is the tagline used by those who argue that the borders themselves are on the verge of substantial change. This is something of a misnomer. The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 made a preliminary division of the Arab (and some Turkish and Kurdish) territories of the Ottoman Empire between Britain and France, but the final borders were determined by the two powers at the San Remo conference in 1920. Sykes-Picot, for example, gave what is now northern Iraq to France and foresaw an international regime for the Holy Land. San Remo gave League of Nations approval to the borders that France and Britain subsequently worked out – Lebanon carved from the French mandate of Syria, Transjordan separated from the British mandate of Palestine, and the British mandate of Iraq created from the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra. It would be more accurate historically to refer to the prospective collapse of the regional order in the Fertile Crescent as “the end of San Remo,” but that is not a semantic fight worth fighting.

Google returns 14,700 results when queried on “the end of Sykes-Picot.” Former diplomats, respected journalists and academics have all recently used the phrase to express their doubts that the territorial state status quo can be sustained. But we should be leery about jumping to the conclusion that the geopolitical dispensation created by France and Britain nearly a hundred years ago is not much longer for this world. These “artificial” entities have had remarkable staying power. Their borders are basically unchanged from their post-World War I creation. Transjordan is now Jordan, and the old mandate of Palestine is now completely under Israeli control (with Gaza a partial exception and the West Bank in an uncertain limbo regarding sovereignty). Iraq, Lebanon and Syria (with the exception of the cession of Alexandretta/Hatay by France to Turkey in 1939) remain as they were created.

The prospects that the map will continue to look as it does now remain strong. First, no one questions the longevity of either Israel or Jordan. Palestinian statehood, which would have been a major shift in the map, looked closer to realization in 1999 than it does now. If anything, the British-drawn border between “Palestine” and “Transjordan” seems more stable now than it has been for years. Second, the deconstruction of the Iraqi state began not recently, but back in 1991 with the establishment of the Western-protected (under a United Nations Security Council resolution) Kurdish region in the north and northeast of the country. That soft partition of Iraq became a constitutional element of the post-Saddam Iraqi state, with the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government. The KRG has had most of the attributes of statehood – effective control of territory, its own military and an ability to conduct foreign relations – for more than 20 years, yet the map of the Iraqi state remains unchanged.
The anomalous status of the KRG, effectively sovereign but lacking international recognition, leads to the third and most serious weakness of the “end of Sykes-Picot” argument. The international powers constructed the post-Ottoman eastern Arab world. They created territorial shells in which colonial authorities, local elites in league with the colonialists and then independent state rulers, tried, with varying degrees of success, to build real states. But the success or failure of those efforts has not determined whether outsiders grant diplomatic recognition to those entities or not. The Lebanese government has not been able to claim effective control over all its territory since the civil war began in 1975. Yet not a single state granted diplomatic recognition to any sub-state Lebanese entity during the civil war, nor did a single state withdraw diplomatic recognition from Lebanon as a state. The KRG effectively governs a good chunk of Iraq, but no foreign government has recognized it as a state or limited its recognition of the Iraqi state to the territory that Baghdad effectively controls. Knowing that it is unlikely to receive international recognition, the KRG will very likely continue to maintain the fiction that it is a part of Iraq, despite the fact that most Kurds would rather have an independent state. Syria might end up, like Lebanon in its civil war, in a state of de facto partition, but it does not look like any foreign power would be willing to recognize the independence of any of those Syrian statelets. Nor is it clear that the Syrian leaders of such statelets would claim formal independence.

This is the ultimate analytical flaw of the “end of Sykes-Picot” argument. Outsiders drew those borders. No outsiders seem to have any interest in redrawing them, or recognizing the redrawing of them, at this time. The United States certainly does not. It has patronized the KRG for nearly 25 years while never encouraging the Kurds to declare independence. No Russian, Chinese or European leader has suggested an international conference to remake the Middle Eastern map. The states themselves might fragment internally. De facto governing authorities might emerge. But the international borders themselves do not look like they are going to change. All the action in the Middle East is bottom-up, as various domestic and regional groups fight for control of these states and regional powers aid their allies in these fights. But these fights look to remain, at least formally and in terms of international law, within the borders that the French and the British drew nearly a hundred years ago. “Sykes-Picot” lives, as fragile as governance within those borders is.

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The Middle East quasi-state system

By Ariel I. Ahram, May 27, 2014

Many of the challenges of the Middle East appear to stem from the region’s artificial, misshapen and ill-conceived borders. Beginning with the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 and the subsequent San Remo conference in 1920, European powers delineated (however roughly) the political boundaries of the Fertile Crescent. Designing a “better” map, revising or reversing Sykes-Picot and its siblings, has served as a political rallying cry and something of a parlor game ever since. In a recent Monkey Cage article, F. Gregory Gause III offers a compelling case for the continued durability of the colonially-imposed territorial system. But some of the very points Gause makes about the persistence of “quasi-states” and juridical borders in the Middle East actually highlight the reasons why Sykes-Picot and San Remo died many years ago.

The European powers did not just inscribe new political borders, but more importantly, elevated and implanted local rulers within new polities. In this respect, Sykes-Picot and San Remo have already been upended, at least partially. The problem is that the region is still struggling to find a coherent system to replace them.

The colonial arrangements began to break down when a series of coups in Syria unseated the urban Sunni elites and ushered into power military regimes that drew increasingly on the ethno-sectarian minorities of the periphery. The last of these coups, in 1968, brought Hafez al-Assad and the Alawis, a heterodox Shiite sect from the hinterlands, definitively to power. Lebanon came next. Conceived by the French as a Levantine Christian homeland, the unwritten National Pact of 1943 guaranteed the Christians the republic’s presidency and with it, the preponderance of political power, while Sunni Muslims got the secondary position of prime minister. At the time, the Shiites were so inconsequential that they did not even warrant a seat at the confessional table. Decades of civil war, invasions and foreign occupations finally dispensed with this gentlemen’s agreement. Now Hezbollah and the Shiites, who hold a clear demographic preponderance, maintain effective hegemony over the state. In Iraq the reckoning began in 1958, when a coup overthrew the Sunni Hashemite monarchy, longstanding British protégés. It was not until 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, though, that Sunni dominance was conclusively replaced by a Shiite-sectarian government, an eventuality that would have been inconceivable to Sykes, Picot and their ilk.

Overturning of foreign designs has come about through protracted civil wars, external intervention and repressive dictatorship. It is thus no coincidence that Syria, Iraq and Lebanon have difficulty maintaining effective control within their own territories. Political instability revolves around two diametrically opposed political impetuses: on one hand is the desire on the part of the dethroned to return to power. On the other hand, newly-ascendant groups, like Hezbollah, Nouri al-Maliki’s Shiite alliance or Bashar al-Assad’s Alawi core, have an equally powerful drive to defend their newly-won prerogatives to rule. As Gause correctly assesses, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon (plus the nascent state of Palestine) are all, to varying degrees, quasi-states. They enjoy de jure international standing as sovereigns but lack the functional requisites that sovereignty entail in the ability to maintain a monopoly over force across their territory. Yet, the term quasi-statehood can also denote the exact opposite phenomena: a polity denied international recognition but possessing effective de facto control over territory, for instance, Somaliland or Nagarno-Karabkh. The faltering of one type of quasi-state provides the impetus for the appearance of the other. The Kurdistan Regional Government that separated from war-ravaged Iraq in 1991 and the Palestine Liberation Organization-controlled “Fatahland” enclaves in Lebanon in the 1970s are cases in point.

The last five years have provided opportunities for a new crop of quasi-states to emerge, each articulating alternative visions of governance and regional order. Consider the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a splinter...
The Islamic State in Syria group originating as al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. Many observers see ISIL at best as an organized crime syndicate, at worst a terrorist group so viciously anti-Shiite that even al-Qaeda has disowned it. Both descriptions are correct, but incomplete, as they overlook ISIL’s ambition to be a state (and the extent to which all states resemble organized crime rackets). ISIL explicitly rejects the political divisions inherited from Sykes-Picot. At the same time, though, ISIL’s self-description as an Islamic state (dawlah), instead of merely organization, movement or army, is important and controversial. Indeed, despite a rocky beginning, ISIL today in many ways looks and acts like a state. In Mosul, according to reports, ISIL enforced taxes on a variety of commercial activities, including telecommunications companies that had relay towers in ISIL-controlled zones. Those who refused to pay risked abduction or murder. In Syria’s Raqqa province ISIL imposed the jizya (poll tax), the same tax the prophet Muhammad placed on non-Muslim communities in return for protection.

In addition to taxation, ISIL has also asserted itself in two domains that have long been critical to successful state-making. First, it has sought out alliances with tribes on the Syrian and Iraqi sides of the Jazeera desert. Extending a territorial foothold from Deir Ezzor in Syria to Fallujah in Iraq, ISIL has resuscitated demands made during the French mandate in Syria for an autonomous, and perhaps even independent, Jazeera. Second, ISIL has become, in its own way, a hydraulic state. After seizing control of Fallujah with the help of tribal allies, ISIL has used dams, canals and reservoirs as a weapon, denying water to areas outside of its control and flooding areas to block the encircling Iraqi army. Yet ISIL’s progress has been hampered by its rivalry with the Nusra Front, al-Qaeda’s designated champion in Syria, and other Islamist factions, as well as by general antipathy from the Syrian opposition.

Farther north, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, PYD), a Syrian affiliate of the Turkish PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), unilaterally announced the enactment of a Kurdish autonomous zone near the Turkish and Iraqi borders. Like ISIL, PYD took steps to assume state-like administrative functions, including subsidizing fuel and seed crops, restoring electricity and most importantly, deploying a militia that pushed back encroachment from Islamist rebels and essentially established a monopoly over force. The Kurds were among the main losers at the post-World War I negotiating table. Again, though, infighting more than external pressure hem in the effort to establish a broader Kurdish base, as other Syrian Kurdish factions and Iraq’s Kurdish Democratic Party oppose PYD.

The prospects for the territorial re-division of the Middle East and conclusive territorial rectification of Sykes-Picot appear slim. As has long been the case among the perennially weak states of Africa, none of the relevant regional or extra-regional powers at this point have an interest in changing European-installed boundaries. But political boundaries are just the skeleton of Sykes-Picot and San Remo. At the levels of governance and political authority the colonial system has already been substantially gutted. The outstanding question has been what will emerge instead. In contrast to “real” states of questionable capacity, quasi-states represent possible answers to these questions, however miniscule in scale, amorphous in territory, or thuggish in rule. Territorial change and much less the outright demise of a state are rare. But they are not impossible – take the examples of Crimea, South Sudan, Eritrea, East Timor and the former Yugoslavia. These changes almost always come about bloodily. Still, the option of territorial realignment appears improbable at the onset of violence. As violence drags on, though, even outlandish notions gain credibility. If and when realignment does come, quasi-states will offer important instruction for how to fashion political boundaries that more closely map to political aspirations.

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The Islamic State won’t find it easy to wipe away post-colonial borders

By William F.S. Miles, September 10, 2014

Does the triumph of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq herald the undoing of colonial-era boundaries elsewhere in the Middle East and Third World? Are other graves turning than those marked “Here Lies Sir Mark Sykes and Cité François Georges Picot” – those of their partners in partition? It should not be overlooked: Nearly 40 percent of the entire length of today’s international boundaries were traced by France and Britain. The division of this part of “the Levant” into a French-dominated Syria and a British-controlled Iraq – and, for that matter, between le Liban and (British) Palestine – was but a small part of the larger parceling of the colonial world into Anglophone and Francophone imperial spheres. Were the logic of pre-colonial reunification to spread, for reasons fundamentalist and not, cartographers and atlas designers would be looking ahead to a busy time of map redrawing, indeed.

But I wouldn’t buy stock in world map publishing just yet. For while many trees have been felled to decry in print the continuing injustice of the colonial split up of ethnic groups, on the ground, in borderlands throughout the developing world, the inheritors of today’s borders have adapted quite nicely to the opportunities afforded by border economies. More importantly, so have their rulers, who have vested interests in preserving the legitimacy and sovereignty of their post-colonial borders and domains. For all the Islamic State’s declarations of a new caliphate, even Islamist radical groups generally eschew colonial boundary nullification.

Take the case of Boko Haram, the murderous terrorist group operating in the predominantly northern region of Nigeria. Not even Boko Haram, for all its bombings, murders, and schoolgirl kidnappings, aims to fuse Anglophone Nigeria with its Francophone neighbor Niger (which has an even higher percentage of Muslims). Al-Shabab (of formerly British Somaliland) leaves Djibouti (formerly French Somaliland) alone. A century since the original ethnic sin of British-French empire carving, the vast majority of post-colonies have perpetuated in some form the institutions, languages, and even mentalities of their erstwhile colonizers. Neither elites nor borderlanders pine to return to the early 19th century map. Even in the name of ethnic or religious irredentism, as a rule border dissolution is inherently disruptive.

Even one of the most failed states on earth – the so-called “Democratic” Republic of the Congo, or DRC – has survived despite itself. Many Africa-watchers attribute the continuity of this gargantuan hodge-podge of a post-colonial state to the strong-armed tactics (greased by state-sanctioned kleptocracy) of Mobutu Sese Seko, when the country was known as Zaire. But even after Mobutu’s forced abdication and the assassination of his successor Laurent Kabila – and despite continuing bloody reverberations from the 1994 genocide in nearby Rwanda – the DRC manages to hang together. With or without strongman Bashar al-Assad, Syria, too (like the former Belgian Congo, with or without a Mobutu), will emerge sovereign from its current crisis, the Islamic State notwithstanding. When it comes to territorial sovereignty and national identity, radical, extremist Islamism is no match for the legacies of colonialism.

So how to interpret the purported re-caliphization of Iraq and Syria? The Sykes-Picot agreement stipulated the respective spheres of interest that Britain and France would exercise in this portion of the colonial world. But unlike in Sub-Saharan Africa, Indochina (Burma-Laos) and their respective islands in the West Indies and South Pacific, the French and British did not set out to remake the Arab societies of the Middle East in their own images – certainly not to the same extent. Temporary or long lasting, the recent disintegration of the Sykes-Picot line (which has been debated previously on the Monkey Cage by Ariel Ahram and Gregory Gause) that initially differentiated Iraq from Syria is an aberration. Indeed, the
Islamic State’s “competitors” in the jihadist and Salafist leagues generally exploit existing state boundaries rather than subvert them. Such was the case with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which started out (as the Armed Islamic Group) in the early 1990s strictly in opposition to the regime in Algiers, until the Algerian military pushed it out of its sovereign territory into the Sahara of neighboring Mali. Additionally, the Muslim Brotherhood, despite similarly named organizations in various countries, has really confined its activities and objectives to Egypt. Even the terminological equivalent to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan – strives to achieve tactical gains and political leverage in each of those countries, rather than actually trying to merge them into one. Even in the world of Islamist extremism, in terms of boundary nullification the Islamic State is an outlier.

There are multiple mechanisms holding inherited colonial borders in place. For one, politicians, both national and local, have a vested interest in maintaining the territorial status quo. Attributions of office, and their related resource-extracting powers, which adhere to century-old spatial and administrative delimitations, are predictable and lucrative. Second, the inhabitants of the borderland themselves, even if of the same ethnicity and split into separate national states, have contrived cross-border trade activities that exploit the boundaries more than the boundaries disturb them. Call it informal economy or smuggling, borderlanders know how to subvert borders. But the most powerful mechanism for boundary continuity is the post-Enlightenment (including post-colonial), universal appeal of national identity. As collectivities and as individuals, we all yearn to be secure within the boundaries that define our sense of nationhood. Shake up those demarcators of identity and you disturb the sense of who we are, where we belong. It is precisely those people who are deprived of a nation-state who have a legitimate stake in the redrawing of state boundaries; in the case of Iraq and Syria, it is the Kurds – not the Islamic State militants – who have the strongest claim to undo colonial-imposed borders. And the Kurds certainly don’t wish to merge (formerly-British) Iraq and (formerly-French) Syria through a disintegration of their respective frontiers. If borders are to be tinkered with, the Kurds will demand more borders to define a new Kurdistan, not fewer ones to combine Iraq and Syria, as per the Islamic State.

While some jihadists and diehard anti-colonialists would (albeit for different reasons) celebrate the Islamic State’s purported liquidation of this particular Anglo-French demarcation, partitioned borderlanders elsewhere will neither jubilate nor emulate. For all of the injustice it represents, the world map drawn by the colonial superpowers of yesteryear is basically still the one we inhabit today. Even as we are bound to understand why it looks the strange way it does, we’ve still got to make the best of it.

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A broad approach to countering the Islamic State

By Christopher Paul and Colin P. Clarke, September 2, 2014

In 2013 we completed “Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies,” a study of 71 counterinsurgencies since the end of World War II that quantitatively tested the performance of 24 concepts, or building blocks, for specific counterinsurgency (COIN) approaches, against the historical record. Some of the concepts were drawn from classical perspectives on COIN from the previous century, such as pacification and resettlement; others were contemporary concepts suggested for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as “boots on the ground” and the concept implicit in U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Counterinsurgency.

The selected cases are the 71 most recent resolved insurgencies, spanning the period from World War II through 2010. In addition to being perfectly representative of the modern history of insurgency, these cases represent geographic variation (mountains, jungles, deserts, cities), regional and cultural variation (Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, the Balkans, the Far East), and variation in the military capabilities and tactics of COIN forces and insurgent forces alike.

The study resulted in a definitive set of findings about historical cases of counterinsurgencies, several of which are detailed below.

First, we found that in every case where they succeeded, counterinsurgent forces managed to substantially overmatch the insurgents and force them to fight as guerrillas before getting down to the activities traditionally associated with counterinsurgency.
This means that step one in defeating militants from the Islamic State, formerly referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), is to overmatch them and defeat their conventional aspirations. While this has not happened yet in Iraq, U.S. air power could make a significant contribution toward that end. Airstrikes will help curb Islamic State advances in strategically important parts of Iraq and thus, help bolster the Iraqi government and security forces, at least in the short term.

Second, we concluded from the research that “effective COIN practices tend to run in packs,” meaning that governments that managed to defeat insurgencies implemented numerous effective practices rather than just a few. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) techniques identified three COIN concepts critical to success. These three concepts were implemented in each and every COIN win, and no COIN loss implemented all three: Tangible support reduction; commitment and motivation; and flexibility and adaptability.

The recent Islamic State military offensive throughout northern Iraq has generated debate about what the U.S. role should be in countering the group. The broader strategy to defeat the growing insurgency in Iraq – and ISIS does represent an insurgency, as its stated goal is to topple the Iraqi and Syrian governments and replace them with a sharia state – will have to involve U.S. support on several levels, though the Iraqi security forces must be in the lead.

U.S. support to an Iraqi counterinsurgency strategy to defeat the Islamic State must focus on reducing tangible support to the insurgents, increasing the commitment and motivation of the Iraqi military and security forces and increasing the government’s legitimacy among Iraqi Sunnis.

Every counterinsurgent force since the end of World War II that won managed to substantially reduce the ability of the insurgents to maintain needed levels of recruits, weapons and materiel, funding, intelligence and sanctuary. Unless the Iraqi security forces are able to identify and eliminate sources of insurgent support, the conflict will only intensify and push the country closer toward all-out civil war.

In other words, part of the counterinsurgency strategy must include interdicting fighters and materiel flowing into the country along ratlines and breaking the logistics chain that allows the Islamic State to sustain the ability to plan and execute attacks.

Even with U.S. air support, disrupting external tangible support to the insurgents will be difficult for two major reasons. First, the ongoing civil war in Syria provides the Islamic State with nearly unfettered access back and forth across the Iraqi-Syrian border. Unless U.S. air power is extended into Syrian territory, the insurgents will be able to execute attacks on Iraqi soil before escaping back across to Syria to rest, recuperate and rearm. The Iraqi security forces have no control over what happens west of the Iraqi-Syrian border.

Second, Iraqi security forces have been either unwilling or incapable of engaging the insurgents in direct combat. U.S. air power can help in this regard, but only Iraqi security forces working on the ground are in a position to gather the intelligence necessary to determine how insurgents are moving arms, cash and fighters throughout the region.

Another interesting thread of our research found that in all historical counterinsurgent successes, both the government and counterinsurgency force demonstrated high levels of commitment and motivation, whereas the insurgents won every case in which government commitment and motivation were lacking.

Commitment and motivation as a concept for counterinsurgency considers the extent to which governments and their forces were actually committed to defeating the insurgency, rather than to other goals like maximizing their own personal wealth and power, bilking external supporters by extending the conflict, engaging in sectarian tit-for-tat violence, or avoiding (or fleeing) combat, as the Iraqi army divisions did by melting away from the fight with Islamic State militants.

This concept pertains both to the threatened government and its indigenous forces, but not to the commitment and
motivation of any external supporters. Historically, the motivation of external forces hasn’t mattered; this means that it doesn’t help if the United States wants to defeat the Islamic State more than the Iraqi security forces do.

Regardless what contributions the United States makes to the fight and how and whether the Iraqi government marshals the support of its people and increases legitimacy, the Iraqi government and Iraq’s military forces need to be committed and motivated to defeat the insurgency. If they are not, history suggests that they won’t be successful.

Finally, flexibility and adaptability captures the ability of COIN forces to adjust to changes in insurgent strategy or tactics. While some historical COIN forces failed to adapt in (and lost) early or intermediate phases in conflicts that they still managed to eventually win, all successful COIN forces made any necessary adaptations in the decisive phase of each of the historical cases.

Overwhelming firepower and sophisticated technology have never been guarantors of victory in COIN operations. At no time has this been truer than in today’s operating environment, where insurgents use the Internet to great effect and use rudimentary materials to construct increasingly deadly improvised explosive devices to counter COIN forces. John Nagl’s “Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife” emphasizes the importance of the COIN force’s ability to adapt quickly and effectively to changes in warfare.

This practical advice (flexibility and adaptability) extends to other, broader concepts for COIN, including COIN as a two-player game against an adaptive adversary and that successful COIN forces must learn and adapt. In our study, all 28 COIN forces that prevailed avoided failure to adapt in the decisive phase, as did 11 of the losing COIN forces, which constitutes strong evidence in support of the importance of flexibility and adaptability.

In Iraq, the insurgents have been more adaptive than the Iraqi counterinsurgent forces. The recent Islamic State offensive only further confirms this conundrum facing the Iraqi government.

Still, military force is merely one part of a sound counterinsurgency approach. To make lasting progress, the newly designated Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, must focus on the legitimacy of the Iraqi government. To do this he will have to reach out in some way to aggrieved Sunni groups – including Baathist militias operating alongside ISIS – to bring the Sunnis back into the fold in something that could resemble an Anbar Awakening-lite.

The Islamic State is benefiting from the support of disenfranchised Iraqi Sunnis who are either joining the insurgency, providing tangible support, or simply not resisting and providing passive support. Even tacit acceptance of the insurgency undermines a government in Baghdad that has repeatedly demonstrated a tendency toward sectarianism and an overall unwillingness to assuage ethnic and religious minorities.

Legitimating reforms and a sincere effort at power sharing can make this existing Iraqi government a preferred alternative to what the Islamic State offers to Iraq’s Sunnis. These reforms should include forming a coherent national unity government and minimizing Iranian influence over Dawa party loyalists entrenched in Baghdad’s bureaucracy. The continued marginalization of Sunni and Kurdish politicians will only serve to prolong the morass.

Clouding what should be a genuine policy debate, much of the recent analysis about how to defeat the Islamic State tends to be based on no more than intuition, a general sense of history, or a small number of historical cases of questionable comparability, rather than solid and systematically collected historical evidence. The research findings from “Paths to Victory” should help provide empirical evidence to an increasingly important debate.

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Things are suddenly moving quickly as various allies start to commit to the American-led effort in Iraq and Syria. David Cameron was able to get a vote through parliament supporting combat operations in Iraq. The Danes, Belgians and Dutch have all announced plans to send fighter planes to the conflict. The Canadian government apparently asked the American government to produce a letter asking the Canadians to provide more help than just the 70 or so Canadian Special Operations Forces engaged in training in Iraq, and the cabinet will meet soon to discuss participating in the air campaign.

I cannot help but see many parallels with the Libyan air campaign. As David Auerswald and I found in our book on NATO in Afghanistan, this all starts with one key reality: Countries have a variety of choices about not only what to send to the campaign but what those units will do once they get there.

When NATO members and partners became involved in the Libyan Civil War in 2011, they had many choices. Some NATO countries stayed out of it entirely (Germany, Poland). Some participated in the low-risk naval embargo (Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Romania) which actually required less change than opting out as most were already participating in NATO naval operations in the Mediterranean to counter terrorism. Eight NATO countries and a few partners (Qatar, United Arab Emirates) were willing to drop bombs on Libya. Among those, there was another distinction. Some would only strike targets that they had vetted before the planes left the ground. A few were willing to send their planes to fly to a specific area and then be directed to targets of opportunity as they arose including mobile ones.

For the new effort against the Islamic State, there are many options that countries can choose. We will probably only know the full menu after this campaign proceeds much further. Right now, countries are starting to decide what to contribute. The obvious choice is to provide fighter planes to facilitate air strikes – F-16s from many European countries, F-18s perhaps from Canada – mostly in packages of four to six planes (the Danes might be sending a spare since they are committing seven). Some countries, such as Canada and Germany, have committed to training Kurdish forces and/or the Iraq military. Nobody is committing to putting their own troops on the ground although it is never really clear what the Special Operations types are doing. In Afghanistan, many countries deployed Special Operations units that operated outside of the limits imposed upon their regular forces.

The less obvious choice is much harder and more political – what to actually do? So far, the pattern that seems to be emerging (but could easily change) is that the Arab partners – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Bahrain and Jordan – will strike Syria (although still don’t know which ones are actually dropping bombs and which ones are just flying into Syrian airspace as escorts), while the European partners (and probably Canada) will attack targets in Iraq. The British vote was only on operations in Iraq, so do not expect British planes to join the bombing of targets in Syria. Little of this is clear. It can change especially where legislatures may opt to impose restrictions, but the pattern is suggestive.

For the Libyan operation, domestic coalitions developed in support of the effort. Left-wing parties saw the war as a “Responsibility to Protect” effort, while right-wing parties saw it as part of supporting the United States and NATO. The coalition politics of many countries will influence not just whether they send planes or trainers, but the rules under which they will operate. Again, there is the shiny line between Syrian and Iraqi air space, but the decisions back home will shape whether particular countries’ planes will drop bombs only on fixed targets or on moving targets, that certain targets may be okay for some countries and not others, that countries will vary in how much expected...
collateral damage is acceptable and so on. Every pilot has the power to say “no, I will not drop on this target right now” if they think that doing so is counter to the explicit or implicit instructions from back home.

Multinational coalitions always have these kinds of complexities, whether it is a NATO effort or not, which makes some people prefer unilateralism. In this case, the gains from increased legitimacy, especially the Arab participation, are likely to greatly outweigh the inconvenience. The European participation might also quell the complaints in the United States about free-riding and burden-sharing in NATO. Those debates usually center on what countries are willing to pay, but as this campaign reminds us, it is the doing that matters most.

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.