Southern Syria

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I. Introduction*[1]

This report provides an analytical snapshot of the military situation in southern Syria, highlighting broader dynamics in this potentially pivotal phase of the war. It addresses the implications and possible policy consequences of key challenges facing Damascus and its backers, including the regime's diminishing capacity to maintain control of territory, and consequently Hizbollah's and Iran's expanding battlefield roles. It also assesses arguments central to ongoing Western policy debates: that the opposition is inescapably dominated by extremists, and that shifts for the worst within the militant spectrum cannot be reversed. It builds and expands upon previous Crisis Group analysis, including the 27 April 2015 Statement on a Syrian Policy Framework.[2] The report draws on fieldwork conducted in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey; discussions with policy makers in Tehran and Washington; previous fieldwork conducted in Damascus; and communications with individuals inside Syria.

II. The Shifting Rebel Landscape in the South

A. *Rebel Spectrum*

The Syrian armed opposition is highly fluid. The membership, alliances, ideology and very identity of individual factions are prone to shift with the tides of external support, leadership turnover and intra-opposition competition, as well as with battlefield fortunes.[3] As a result, categorising them is tricky for outside analysts, policy makers and indeed the rebels themselves. However, a distinction can be made between two general categories: *thawri* (revolutionary) and Salafi-jihadi. *Thawri* groups [*fasa'il thawria*] define their political agendas within Syria's borders, actively seek external-state support and identify explicitly with the "Syrian revolution".[4] Salafi-jihadi groups tend not to mention "Syria" (since it refers to borders they reject) and embrace instead the "Levantine jihad" [*al-jihad al-shami,* or *jihad al-sham*].

Though the political platforms of *thawri* groups range widely from non-ideological to Salafi Islamist, and some coordinate closely on the battlefield with Salafi-jihadis (in particular Jabhat al-Nusra), crucial ideological, political and strategic distinctions between the two categories are clear. In contrast with *thawri* factions, Salafi-jihadi groups embrace a transnational agenda that aims to overthrow not just the Assad regime, but the entire nation-state system; toward that end, they reject partnership with regional and Western states backing the opposition and in

[1] *Plusec-Pluralism, Human Security and Sustainability Centre/Plusec-Centre de pluralism de la sécurité humanine et du développement durable (Plusec) retained the International Crisis Group to conduct this research and analysis and to prepare this report.

[2] The statement is available at www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2015/middle-east-north-africa/statement-on-a-syrian-policy-framework.aspx.

[3] Crisis Group has addressed the dynamics in earlier reports. See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°131, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 12 October 2012; and N°155, *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War*, 9 September 2014.

[4] Crisis Group previously called these groups "mainstream", a term dropped in this report to clarify distinctions among them.

some cases advocate (even pursue) violence against them.[5] The Salafi-jihadi category includes the Islamic State (IS), Jabhat al-Nusra, and the broader al-Qaeda network of which al-Nusra is an affiliate. Though al-Nusra continues to fight alongside *thawri* groups (in some cases against IS) and has a largely Syrian rank-and-file, the long-term transnational agenda to which its leadership remains committed conflicts with *thawri* factions' Syria-specific goals.

B. *Rise of the "Southern Front"*

The intra-opposition balance of power in the south stands out in two ways. First, *thawri* groups are clearly stronger than their Salafi-jihadi counterparts; this differs starkly with Syria's east (mostly controlled by IS) and north (where Jabhat al-Nusra dominates significant territory and is among the strongest groups in Idlib province).[6] Secondly, among *thawri* groups in the south, those with no particular ideology appear stronger than overtly Islamist factions, unlike opposition-held areas in the north west and around Damascus, where *thawri* Islamists (such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam) hold the upper hand. Moreover, the strengthening of southern *thawri* groups since early 2014 contrasts with the apparent status quo that prevailed previously, when frustrated *thawri* representatives complained of battlefield stagnation and a growing Salafi-jihadi threat.[7]

The consolidation of a *thawri* coalition has served as the vehicle for this dynamic, with fuel via improved support from state backers. In February 2014, 49 *thawri* southern factions (including the most prominent), then claiming roughly 30,000 fighters, joined to form the Southern Front (*al-Jabha al-Janoubia*), a loose alliance that signalled a modest, yet significant escalation in engagement by their state sponsors – especially the U.S. and Jordan, whose roles have emerged as particularly influential in the south.[8] In line with that deepening relationship, the

[5] On Jabhat al-Nusra's views on the war's place in the transnational jihad and opposition to support from state backers, see the 26 June 2015 video of its media outlet al-Minara al-Baida', and al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani's 27 May 2015 interview with Al Jazeera, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Akb_e2_jMN4 and www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hwQT43vFZA. There is no conclusive evidence refuting his insistence that al-Nusra neither seeks nor receives state support, but it benefits indirectly from state support to other groups (through sharing, buying or seizing material), and its kidnaps-for-ransom in Syria have netted payments reportedly by Western and regional states, in some cases brokered by Qatar. Ellen Knickmeyer, "Al Qaeda-linked groups increasingly funded by ransom", *The Wall Street Journal,* 29 July 2014.

[6] Estimates of rebel force strength are at best educated guesses and vary significantly. A UN analyst estimated Southern Front membership at around 25,000 in June 2015 and suggested that Jabhat al-Nusra's southern fighting force had fallen from a high of 2,000 to roughly 500, thanks largely to defections after clashes with other rebels (see below). Western diplomats and other analysts covering the south tend to place the Southern Front's membership between 20,000 and 30,000, and al-Nusra's between 1,000 and 3,000. Crisis Group interviews, Amman, April-June 2015. The balance of power among rebel groups in the south is discussed further below.

[7] Crisis Group interviews, activists, a *thawri* representative and defected Syrian army officers, Amman and Irbid, October 2013. A secular activist involved in civil society projects in southern Syria voiced a then-common concern: "If things don't change, in six months Jabhat al-Nusra will be the leading group". A representative of Liwa al-Yarmouk (now known as Jaish al-Yarmouk), then one of the strongest *thawr*i groups in the south, feared IS would break through into the south: "It is them we fear, and there is worry that in several months the south will look like the north. Syria is more complex now than it was in the first year or so; now there are three parties: the regime, the revolutionaries and Daesh". Daesh is the Arabic acronym for Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, as IS was then called; it has a derogatory connotation in Arabic usage.

[8] According to rebel representatives and activists involved in resource procurement, states that actively provide support to armed opposition groups (including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, the UAE, the U.S., France and the UK) are in principle represented in the joint "operations

Southern Front immediately distinguished itself by the tone and content of its rhetoric, emphasising a commitment to pluralism, representative governance and freedom of expression, while avoiding the Islamist vocabulary and references to Islamic law that have come to characterise much rebel discourse elsewhere.[9]

Though the front was initially viewed (including by some beneficiaries) as a public-relations umbrella, members improved their coordination and battlefield performance and in late 2014 began consolidating into more cohesive sub-alliances under its banner.[10] By January 2015, four had emerged: al-Faylaq al-Awwal (First Corps), Saqour al-Janoub (Hawks of the South), Ussoud al-Harb (Lions of War) and al-Jaish al-Awwal (First Army),[11] which front officials claimed comprised the large majority of the broader alliance's fighting force.[12] Southern Front factions took a further step toward consolidation in May 2015, with a joint leadership body to facilitate coordination. It has largely supplanted the sub-alliance structure as the front's organising framework, though its structure is a work in progress and its authority unclear.[13] The specifics, extent and effectiveness of coordination among southern rebels vary battle to battle, but the overall improvement contributed to the gains between August 2014 and June 2015 that expanded rebel control throughout southern Quneitra and much of Deraa.

Unlike other attempts to establish armed opposition umbrella structures (notably the Western-backed, now defunct Supreme Military Council (SMC) led by Salim Idris) and cohesive coalitions (like the Islamic Front, a prominent Islamist alliance also defunct),[14] the Southern Front has no overall leader or established hierarchy.[15] Faction commanders maintain relationships with the Jordan-based

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room" (also known as the Military Operations Command, MOC, discussed below) through which resources are allocated to armed groups. But in practice, rebels receiving such support view Jordanian and U.S. personnel as most directly engaged in determining who gets what, when. Crisis Group interviews, Amman and Irbid, October 2013-June 2015. The 2014 shift in state support is discussed below. See also Najem Salem, "Kulna Shuraka", 13 February 2014, all4syria.info/Archive/130995; and Ben Hubbard, "Warily, Jordan assists rebels in Syrian war", *The New York Times,* 10 April 2014.

[9] Southern Front founding statement, at www.zamanalwsl.net/news/46545.html; Aron Lund, "Does the Southern Front exist?", "Syria in Crisis", Carnegie Endowment blog, 21 March 2014.

[10] While it is difficult to assess each alliance's level of military integration -- and some activists warn that factionalism and personal ambitions continue to weaken the rebel cause -- a range of Syrian and Western observers cited this increasing consolidation as an important step toward greater unity and a factor in the southern opposition's gains in the first half of 2015. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian aid workers, activists, rebel representatives, Western diplomat, Amman and Irbid, January 2015. An activist working with aid programs inside Deraa said, "cooperation [among rebel factions] is improving thanks to the Southern Front, and the consolidation of alliances within it. This consolidation encourages coordination among powerful factions". Crisis Group interview, Amman, January 2015. An aid worker from Deraa added: "Another improvement we see among these groups [as a result of increased coordination] is that more and more often, groups from the west fight in the east, and vice versa".

[11] The four emerged over three months, beginning with the October 2014 formation of al-Faylaq al-Awwal, marking a concerted effort by southern *thawri* groups to improve coordination and present a more united front. The alliances included a number of the most potent, formerly independent factions under the leadership of prominent defectors from the Syrian army, such as Colonel Ziyad al-Hariri of al-Faylaq al-Awwal and Colonel Saaber Sifr of al-Jaish al-Awwal.

[12] Crisis Group interviews, official, Southern Front's communications office, Amman, January, April 2015. He put total Southern Front fighters in April at 40,000, up from 30,000 at creation.

[13] Crisis Group interviews, Southern Front officials and Western diplomat, Amman, June 2015. For background and leadership announcement, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysRuffyNnTk.

[14] For background on the SMC and the Islamic Front, see Crisis Group Report *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs*, op. cit.

[15] Opposition activists voiced concern about need for further centralisation of decision-making; it is possible the joint leadership body announced in May 2015 will be a step toward changing this

body through which the opposition's state backers give material support (see below), while coordinating horizontally among themselves on broader strategy and tactical cooperation. As elsewhere, they maintain no institutional link to (and express little trust in) the opposition's state-backed political umbrella, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.[16]

Inter-faction coordination typically occurs through the creation of joint "operations rooms", in which factions allocate responsibilities for a battle or, in major operations, a front.[17] For reasons addressed below, this has been more effective in the south than the north, where poor coordination among state-backed *thawri* groups enabled Jabhat al-Nusra to pursue a divide-and-conquer strategy, driving the two most prominent U.S.-backed non-ideological factions from Idlib province in late 2014 and early 2015.[18]

Ad-hoc operations rooms tend to reflect the Southern Front components' relative strength, while enabling compartmentalised support from Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist factions.[19] For example, in late 2014-January 2015, the push to capture Sheikh Miskeen and an adjacent military base on a key supply line linking Deraa city to Damascus included three operations rooms, each charged with managing a specific aspect of the battle. Southern Front components led at least two of these, while the third included Jabhat al-Nusra.[20] The latter's role in such operations is well-publicised, often exaggerated, by the group itself and media coverage. It appears that the opposition's state backers tolerate its participation so long as it remains supportive rather than dominant.[21]

Though comparing the relative size, strength and effectiveness of rebel factions is tricky, a variety of stakeholders in the south suggest al-Nusra's role is supportive, and its power relative to Southern Front factions has declined since mid-2014. This is reflected in the shifting mood of Southern Front-affiliated rebels and officials who, in contrast to concern regarding its trajectory in late 2013-early 2014, project

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dynamic. A civilian activist influential within the Southern Front said, "the new joint leadership body is a step in the right direction; it's the beginning of something but isn't yet in a position to assert itself as true leadership. That can happen over time. But the problem, here as everywhere in Syria, is you lack effective leaders". Crisis Group interview, Amman, 10 June 2015.

[16] Crisis Group interviews, Southern Front officials, Amman and Irbid, January-June 2015. Though that body, usually referred to by an English acronym, SOC – for Syrian Opposition Coalition – or the Arabic word for coalition, "Etilaf", continues to receive support and diplomatic attention from state backers (in particular Western countries), both it and its affiliated "interim government" have very low credibility among pro-opposition Syrians, due largely to failures to demonstrate value-added. For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°146, *Anything but Politics? The State of Syria's Political Opposition*, 17 October 2013; and *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs,* op. cit.

[17] For discussion of early "operations rooms", see Crisis Group Report, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

[18] Crisis Group interviews and communications, rebel representatives and activists, southern Turkey, November 2014-April 2015.

[19] A Jordanian journalist with knowledge of rebel coordination explained: "As operations are being planned, Nusra sends a Syrian (as opposed to Jordanian) representative to the operations room to say, 'we want to liberate X portion' [of the area targeted]. Rebels might then let Nusra take responsibility for that portion, with limited if any operational coordination". Crisis Group interview, Amman, March 2015.

[20] A wide array of Southern Front components fought these battles, as did al-Nusra and the Islamist faction Haraket al-Muthenna. According to rebel sources and pro-regime reporting, the Southern Front sub-alliance al-Faylaq al-Awwal's role was particularly significant. Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat, rebel commander whose group played lead role at Sheikh Miskeen, Southern Front official, Syrian aid workers and activists, Jordan, January 2015. See also Hassan Aleiq and Feras al-Shoufi, *Al-Akhbar*, 30 January 2015.

[21] Crisis Group interviews, rebel officials and Western diplomat, Jordan, January 2015.

confidence that their superior numbers are now matched by increased effectiveness.[22] Activists and aid workers in the south tend to agree,[23] as do Western diplomats and journalists.[24] Their assessments are supported by evidence on composition of rebel forces in key battles; for example, Southern Front factions dominated seizure of the Brigade 52 military facility in Deraa in June, a battle in which al-Nusra appeared to play no significant role.[25] Also notable are reports of al-Nusra defections; though impossible to confirm, the perception that many southern fighters have left it since December 2014 contrasts with the north, where it is broadly perceived as gaining strength.[26]

The decline in al-Nusra's willingness and capacity to impose its writ upon other factions is another indication. From May to August 2014, it apprehended three prominent mainstream commanders, insisted on trying them in a court it dominated and brazenly ignored *thawri* factions' demands they be released or tried in a neutral court.[27] Such provocation ceased as *thawri* factions gained strength, and al-Nusra disbanded its court in late 2014 to join a joint body, Dar al-Adl (House of Justice), in which *thawri* factions have steadily gained ground.[28] Rather than using its own court to justify unilateral action against opponents, al-Nusra has since

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[22] Thus, a Southern Front media official who in late 2013-early 2014 expressed concern al-Nusra was gaining strength was more confident by early 2015: "The Southern Front has increased its organisation and coordination, and now [is] the dominant force in the south. It's becoming a real army: it's reasonably well armed, including [U.S.-made anti-tank missiles]. Coordination has improved to the point where meetings that once required five or ten leadership figures now require two. Southern Front fighters are now more professional and better trained than Jabhat al-Nusra". Crisis Group interviews, Irbid, Amman, October 2013- January 2015.

[23] A former activist now involved in aid-provision in Deraa echoed this: "The mainstream armed groups are getting stronger and stronger and are winning more and more territory from the regime. People used to say al-Nusra had the best fighters but no longer ,... A lot of Syrian fighters are now leaving [it] for [*thawri*] groups". Crisis Group interview, Amman, 28 January 2015.

[24] As noted above, Jordan-based analysts and Western diplomats focused on southern Syria tend to estimate the Southern Front as having 20,000-35,000 fighters and al-Nusra's southern fighting force as having 500 to 3,000. As the wide ranges suggest, these numbers should be viewed as educated guesses. A Western diplomat said, "in terms of balance of power, al-Nusra is much more reliant on the Southern Front than vice versa. The Southern Front's strength across the south provides al-Nusra with the space to operate ..., and of course Nusra is very effective as a parasite". Crisis Group interviews, Amman, April–June 2015. Phil Sands and Suha Maayeh, "Al-Qaeda group losing influence in southern Syria", *The National*, 30 November 2014.

[25] Crisis Group observation of rebel social-media material and opposition media, June 2015. Crisis Group interviews, UN analyst, Western diplomats and Southern Front officials, Amman, June 2015.

[26] Rumours abound that al-Nusra suffered defections in the south beginning in December 2015 (when it first clashed with Shuhada' al-Yarmouk, a hardline faction in south-western Deraa; see below), including among southern Syrian fighters who view it as too confrontational with local factions and hardened Salafi-jihadis who view it as insufficiently so. Crisis Group interviews, Southern Front officials, UN analyst, Amman, January-June 2015. The UN analyst estimated in June al-Nusra's southern fighters had dwindled from roughly 2,000 to 500 over six months.

[27] The first and most dramatic case was of rebel commander Ahmed al-Naameh, whom al-Nusra kidnapped and tortured in May 2014 despite *thawri* protests. Sands and Maayeh, "Rebels in southern Syria on the brink of turning on each other", *The National,* 12 May 2014. Another inflammatory instance was al-Nusra's August 2014 arrest and torture of Sharif al-Safouri, a charismatic *thawri* brigade leader it accused of collusion with Israel. www.youtube.com/watch?v=6J1p6HR20_I.

[28] Opposition activists cite al-Nusra's integration into Dar al-Adl as a key turning point in the balance of power among southern rebels. It initially appointed four of the sixteen judges, but its weight within it has reportedly shrunk. Crisis Group interviews, Amman, January-June 2015. Sands and Maayeh, "Rebels' court in southern Syria an alliance of convenience", *The National,* 13 December 2014.

submitted to Dar al-Adl arbitration, which it used to legitimise action against Salafi-jihadi rivals in cooperation with other factions (see below).[29] This move toward pragmatic multilateralism is further reflected in distribution of battle spoils (*ghana'im*): in the first half of 2014, al-Nusra earned a reputation for monopolising these; activists and observers now report a shift toward more equitable distribution dictated primarily by Southern Front groups.[30]

However, while al-Nusra's battlefield importance in the south appears to have declined over the past year, external perceptions have not shifted proportionately. That it continues to play a supportive role in some operations helps explain this, as does selective media coverage. Pro-regime media systematically exaggerate its role (in the south and elsewhere), as part of their narrative characterising the armed rebellion as dominated by "terrorists" and "*takfiris*";[31] international outlets also tend to focus on it disproportionately, partly reflecting bias toward news involving violent jihadis. The result is that those critical of the armed opposition often conflate its *thawri* factions with al-Nusra; this was notable during June 2015 battles near towns inhabited by Druze in Sweida province (see below).

C. *Components of Thawri Strength*

Two factors have facilitated the Southern Front's rise and help explain why non-ideological *thawri* groups in the south are relatively stronger than their counterparts in the north.[32] First, southern rebel groups tend to remain more tightly connected to the social fabric of surrounding communities than armed factions in much of the north, and that social fabric appears particularly cohesive.[33] The south has experienced less geographic cross-pollination within the armed rebellion than the north, where the early emergence of multiple fronts with diverse sources of

[29] The first instance was during the December 2014 clashes between al-Nusra and Shuhada' al-Yarmouk, when al-Nusra touted adherence to Dar al-Adl rulings as evidence of its willingness to embrace a multi-lateral approach (in contrast with Shuhada' al-Yarmouk's refusal). In May 2015, al-Nusra declared victory over another local jihadi faction (Jaish al-Jihad), while noting its cooperation with other groups in the confrontation and specifically referencing a statement issued by Dar al-Adl. See al-Nusra's 5 May statement, at eldorar.com/node/75808.

[30] A Jordanian journalist who follows southern Syria explained: "Al-Nusra is still a key player in the south, but it no longer calls the shots as it previously did, particularly in terms of claiming a disproportionate share of spoils". Crisis Group interview, Amman, 1 March 2015.

[31] For example, see Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar's* 16 June 2015 coverage of opposition gains in eastern Deraa, referring to an "attack by armed *takfiris* [those who denounce other Muslims as unbelievers] belonging to factions in al-Qaeda's orbit", citing the Western-backed, avowedly non-ideological Jaish al-Yarmouk.

[32] For background on northern rebel dynamics, see Crisis Group Report *Rigged Cars*, op. cit.

[33] The swaths of Deraa and Quneitra in which the armed opposition is active are smaller, less populous and more homogenous than the armed opposition's northern strongholds in Idlib and Aleppo provinces. The networks of large extended families span much of the southern Hawran plain; the population is overwhelmingly Sunni Arab, with fewer major concentrations of ethnic and religious minorities than elsewhere in Syria. Relative homogeneity helps explain why tensions and competition between local communities appear less prevalent in rebel-held areas in the south than elsewhere. On Deraa, see Crisis Group Reports *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, op. cit. and N°108, *Popular Protests in North Africa and Middle East (VI): the Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution*, 6 July 2011; see also Kheder Khaddour and Kevin Mazur, "The Struggle for Syria's regions", *Middle East Report*, no. 269, Winter 2013. A Deraa activist and pro-opposition journalist said, "the social fabric in the south is very strong, and [opposition] fighters are from these communities, these tribes, these families. This helps explain why we don't have problems with crime and other chaos like you see in the north; people can't get away with that kind of behaviour here because if they attempted it they would face consequences from their local community". Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2015.

supply encouraged fighters from rebel bastions in Homs and Idlib to play leading roles far from their hometowns; and where, on the Aleppo front, rebels from the poor rural countryside dominated initial efforts to control a city whose inhabitants did not show much revolutionary zeal.[34]

The role played by foreign jihadi fighters and private funders has also been smaller in the south; the Jordanian border with southern Syria is much easier to control than Turkey's border with the north, and the Amman government acted decisively early to prevent foreign jihadis from entering Syria.[35] Israel and Lebanon to the west, regime assets around Damascus to the north and the Druze stronghold of Sweida to the east have further delineated an incubator for a home-grown armed opposition. What jihadi presence endures in the south tends to be indigenously rooted: al-Nusra's southern rank-and-file is predominantly local, while its leadership mostly hails from neighbouring Jordan, so may appear less alien than, say, the Tunisian commanders who are prominent in al-Nusra's northern components.[36]

The southern factions thus tend to better reflect the local population for whom they claim to fight. Perhaps as importantly, the culture of ideological one-upmanship (*muzayadat*) in which Salafi-jihadi and *thawri* Islamist factions compete to demonstrate commitment to Islamic rule, and non-ideological factions feel pressure to keep up, is less prevalent than in the north. This is partly due to Jordanian success in limiting access (thus influence) of jihadi fighters and funders. Local rebels show more interest in keeping strong ties with their popular base (*hadina shaabia*) than ideological purity. Southern Front factions appear relatively successful in the former, thanks in part to limiting interference in civilian affairs,[37] avoiding a reputation for economic exploitation[38] and acting to limit civilian casualties.[39] But one should not over-emphasise the relative and limited nature of this

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[34] See Crisis Group Report, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

[35] Crisis Group interviews, Western, Jordanian, Turkish officials, January-June 2015; also Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, op. cit. Though jihadis were able to cross from Jordan into southern Syria during the conflict's early months, Jordanian authorities took concrete steps to prevent this, forcing would-be foreign fighters to enter Syria via Turkey. Suha Maayeh, "Jordanian Jihadists Active in Syria", *CTC Sentinel*, 24 October 2013.

[36] The exception is a contingent of several hundred foreign fighters who arrived in Deraa with al-Nusra's Iraqi commander Abu Maria al-Qahtani after ouster by IS from Deir el-Zor in July 2014. While he is among al-Nusra's most prominent figures, largely due to prolific social media activity, much of it discrediting IS, the extent of this group's influence in the south is disputed; a Jordanian analyst of jihadi groups said al-Qahtani and his followers had been marginalised by southern al-Nusra's Jordanian leadership. Crisis Group interview, 28 January 2015.

[37] An activist from Deraa said, "there's a strong understanding between military and civilian bodies. There are individual incidents of military interference in civilian affairs, but generally speaking armed groups stay out of governance; they know that military figures cannot rule". Crisis Group interview, Amman, 15 April 2015.

[38] Syrian activists and aid workers complain of occasional issues with rebel fighters but generally report crime and economic exploitation apparently substantially lower than in parts of the north, where some factions across the ideological spectrum have warlord reputations. An ex-activist now in aid provision said, "when the [Southern Front] groups are fighting on or manning the fronts, they are good people. But when they hang out around town, [altercations sometimes occur and] they damage their reputations a bit. That said, they have no big [local] problems; … at the end of the day they are sons of the tribes". Crisis Group interview, Amman, January 2015.

[39] Southern Front groups emphasise efforts they have made to relocate military installations from cities to farmland and circulate warnings about offensives in regime-held territory. The actual impact is unclear, but independent pro-opposition activists describe them as a component of generally positive relations between rebels and surrounding communities. Crisis Group interviews

southern success; as addressed below, regime attacks on opposition-held areas render coherent governance there impossible, and civilian activists continue to accuse some local factions of exploiting the chaos.[40]

The second set of factors facilitating the Southern Front's rise is external: the relative effectiveness of state backers' support. Here, too, Jordan's tight control of the border is crucial. It prevents non-state actors from bringing material to rebels, so only governments that work with Jordan to directly supply select southern armed factions are reliable external sources of material support. This gives those states significant leverage over rebel partners; in contrast to support dynamics in the north, they have coordinated effectively. Since at least mid-2013, these state backers have funnelled their support through a single, covert channel, the Military Operations Command (MOC), which is based in Jordan, has representatives from each relevant state backer (though its U.S. and Jordanian components appear most influential) and vets rebel factions to identify reliable, non-extremist recipients.[41] Groups that pass the vetting interact directly with the MOC; their commanders share tactical operational plans, and the MOC decides whether to provide material on an operation-by-operation basis.

As with the MOC's less effective, Turkey-based counterpart that works with northern rebel factions,[42] recipients often express frustration with the process, complaining that the volume and pace of support are insufficient;[43] unlike in the north, however, most have continued to work with the system, despite its limitations, for lack of a better alternative.[44]

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and communications, Jordan- and Deraa-based activists, January-April 2015. An activist summarised: "If [Southern Front factions] did anything to cause the death of a civilian, that civilian is going to be someone's father, brother or son, and they would lose their popular base".

[40] Pro-opposition civilian activists are often sharply critical of rebel factions across the ideological spectrum, indicative of a culture of dissent that spread quickly among uprising supporters in 2011 and remains a defining characteristic among the anti-IS opposition, despite efforts by some rebel factions to suppress it. Southern Syria is no exception, even if relations between armed rebels and local communities generally appear smoother than in other rebel-held areas. For example, a civilian involved in local governance projects in eastern Daraa complained: "The current situation in [my town] is one of total chaos – without internal stability, there's no economic stability, and people can't start to return. Some armed factions are promoting anarchy rather than helping to enforce order, refusing to abide by the rules of the local council and even participating in [criminal activity]". Crisis Group communication, August 2015.

[41] It is important to distinguish covert U.S. support for MOC-vetted rebel groups from the overt program (announced June 2014) to train and equip an explicitly anti-IS force. The former is discussed in this report; U.S. activity within the MOC is administered by the CIA, the latter by the Pentagon, thus far with underwhelming results; Austin Wright, Philip Ewing, "Ash Carter's unwelcome news: only 60 Syrian rebels fit for training", *Politico*, 7 July 2015.

[42] The northern operation command (known by its Turkish acronym, MOM) emerged in early 2014; it proved relatively effective in incentivising a modest shift in the intra-rebel balance during the first half of the year, but coordination among state backers quickly deteriorated. By late 2014, some groups outside the MOM appeared to again be receiving external state support, and rebel perceptions of a MOM monopoly evaporated. Two prominent Aleppo-based groups cut MOM ties to join in forming the Levant Front, a mainstream Islamist coalition with factions that had not passed MOM vetting. Coordination among leading Idlib-based MOM factions (notably the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and Haraket Hazm) and between them and ex-MOM members in Aleppo remained poor, a weakness exploited by al-Nusra, which drove the SRF from Idlib in November and Hazm from Idlib and Aleppo in March 2015. For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Rigged Cars*, op. cit.

[43] Crisis Group interviews, Southern Front officials and commanders of component factions, Amman and Irbid, January-June 2015.

[44] While the MOC is the lone significant source of funding and material support to armed groups delivered across the Jordanian border, groups operating in the south have other means of procuring resources. These are less reliable and insufficient to sustain operations. Most important

In early 2014, the opposition's state backers initiated qualitative and quantitative improvements in MOC support that have proven instrumental in empowering vetted factions. As said, the Southern Front's formation coincided with this. Factions receiving MOC support appear to be drawn exclusively from the Southern Front; this facilitates cooperation among beneficiaries and incentivises consolidation, as small factions seeking help increasingly conclude that the best means of procuring it is to join one of the coalition's vetted components, which receive more substantial and consistent support than pre-2014, including salaries, training and anti-tank weapons.[45]

Engagement with Syrian and outside audiences has also improved. In contrast with leading *thawri* factions in the north, the Southern Front articulates democratic objectives in line with the rebellion's original slogans. A front campaign outlined plans for transition to constitutional democracy and stressed non-sectarian citizenship, transitional justice and preservation of state institutions. [46] Civilian activists connected to local civil society are influential in developing this platform, which leading front military figures openly embrace.[47] That they are comfortable doing so partly reflects the relatively virtuous pressures they face: compared to the north, southern commanders encounter weaker jihadi competition, more coherent state-backer incentives and a social fabric still attached to the uprising's original goals. The prominent roles of defected military officers further strengthen front components' image, in addition to whatever tactical advantages they might provide.[48] This is vigorously promoted by an official spokesman and loosely-affiliated media office, helping the front compete for attention in a pro-opposition media arena in which jihadis punch above their weight.

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among them is seizing weapons and ammunition from captured regime military facilities that abound in Quneitra and Deraa due to the area's strategic location vis-à-vis Israel. See materiel and vehicles from the capture of Brigade 82 outside Sheikh Miskeen, www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbRBZpoC9e0. Such equipment is typically split between participating factions. Funding can also be sent from external sources via intermediaries, a means especially important to non-MOC Islamist groups. Crisis Group interview, activist affiliated with Southern Front member faction, Amman, January 2015.

[45] Crisis Group interviews, activists close to Southern Front components, Amman, Irbid, January 2015. An activist who criticised paltry, inconsistent state support to rebels in late 2013-early 2014 noted the shift: "A huge improvement since the Southern Front's creation has been that the funding is now much better organised; there is a fixed salary for every fighter, and also health services, food and other aid are provided". Tom Perry, "Syria rebels in south emerge as West's last hope as moderates crushed elsewhere", Reuters, 23 November 2014.

[46] See, "Statement #4: The transitional period", 10 December 2014, smo-sy.com/StatementDetails. aspx?SId=ca150e48-bb27-450c-96c7-f8bde5698762. Among northern rebels, democratic-aspiration language is largely supplanted by an emphasis on Islamic law.

[47] Crisis Group interviews, Southern Front commanders and officials, activists and diplomats knowledgeable of Southern Front dynamics. Amman, Irbid, January-June 2015. See a promotional video with al-Jaish al-Awwal leader Colonel Saber Sifr: "We are an army for all Syrians, without exceptions. We are not a sectarian army; we are an army for all sects". www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BaywUZsR4Q.

[48] A senior representative of an Aleppo-based *thawri* faction noted the comparative advantage of southern rebels: "One reason [*thawri*] factions perform better in the south is that a large share of military officers are from there". Crisis Group interview, southern Turkey, April 2015.

D. *Armed Islamists*

1. Overview

The Islamist militant scene in the south differs sharply from that in other parts of Syria thanks largely to the dynamics described above. Especially notable is the limited role played by *thawri* Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, which dominate much of the north west and Damascus countryside, respectively, but have struggled to gain traction in the south. As said, Jabhat al-Nusra, which, unlike Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, embraces a transnational Salafi-jihadi agenda and is linked organisationally to al-Qaeda, appears strongest among the Islamist groups in Deraa and Quneitra. But (as discussed below) since late 2014, it has pursued in the south a less aggressive, more collaborative approach with non-Islamists than its northern counterparts, a reminder of the extent to which operating environments matter.

IS is weakest in the southern Islamist spectrum. It has operated in eastern Sweida but been unable to develop a reliable foothold in Deraa and Quneitra.[49] This is due to widespread consensus among southern factions – including the Southern Front and al-Nusra – on the need to block its expansion, and to the geographic remoteness of its strongholds relative to rebel-held areas of Deraa and Quneitra. IS's best chance to penetrate these provinces lies in the potential for local groups to pledge allegiance to it. This has happened repeatedly in recent months, first in the village of Bir al-Qasseb in the south-eastern Damascus suburbs.[50] More recently, al-Nusra and several Southern Front components accused two local factions, Shuhada' al-Yarmouk (Yarmouk Martyrs) and Jaish al-Jihad (Army of Jihad), of working to advance IS's agenda in Quneitra and western Deraa.[51]

Haraket al-Muthenna (al-Muthenna Movement), an independent faction that defies clean categorisation, rounds out the armed Islamist scene. It is composed of local fighters; enjoys a reputation for focused, effective battlefield contributions, generally in cooperation with others; and has a media presence resembling *thawri* Salafi factions elsewhere. Yet, it raised eyebrows across the rebel spectrum in 2015 for what many consider an ambiguous position on IS. While al-Nusra, Ahrar and some Southern Front components have violently confronted Shuhada' al-Yarmouk and Jaish al-Jihad over suspected IS ties, it has taken the lead in seeking to mediate an end to such fighting and refrained from the anti-IS rhetoric widespread among fellow rebels (including much of al-Nusra).[52]

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[49] Syrian army and loyalist forces repelled IS in April from Khalkhala military airport in eastern Sweida. www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middle \east/2015/04/150411_syria_is_attack_on_airport.

[50] For detail on the December 2014 Bir al-Qasseb clashes, see eldorar.com/node/65217.

[51] Shuhada' al-Yarmouk is a well-armed local faction based in the Yarmouk Valley, where it has strong clan ties. It should not be confused with Jaish al-Yarmouk, a prominent Southern Front component that in May 2015 joined in confronting the group. Shuhada' al-Yarmouk's ideological convictions are ambiguous; al-Nusra charges of IS links were initially met with scepticism in other rebel factions, which suspected a naked power play, though that shifted in early 2015 as the group began to associate with IS symbolism, including by adding a flag resembling IS's to its logo. Fighting with al-Nusra began in December 2014. Many mainstream rebels applied pressure on al-Nusra (through Dar al-Adl and otherwise), which eventually accepted arbitration (see below); the fighting then subsided, yet reignited in May 2015 (see below). Jaish al-Jihad is based in Quneitra; it embraced IS rhetoric and symbolism from its inception, but like Shuhada' al-Yarmouk drew strength from local clan ties; its formation announcement is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkscSHd3bAg.

[52] See 5 May 2015 Muthenna statement calling for a negotiated end to fighting with Jaish al-Jihad, at twitter.com/saleelalmajd1/status/595570507036151808. A nebulous, promptly deleted, Muthenna statement implying at least partial support for IS, twitter.com/abazed89/status/574698068580368386, reinforced suspicions.

2. Jabhat al-Nusra: al-Qaeda in Syria, but hardly monolithic

As the strongest Islamist faction in the south, al-Nusra warrants additional discussion. In a highly fluid rebel scene, three factors best explain its resilience there: capacity for suicide operations, independent financial resources and significant heterogeneity, and thus flexibility, within its leadership and ranks.

The first and second of these are relatively straightforward: given the armament imbalance between regime and opponents, the latter depend on operations in which death is nearly certain – bombings and frontal assaults (*iqtihamat*) -- to penetrate hardened defences. *Thawri* rebel groups, including Salafis, do not conduct suicide bombings; Jabhat al-Nusra does and in general stands out for proficiency in frontal assaults.[53] This makes it invaluable to rebels across the ideological spectrum, giving it a role disproportionate to its numerical weight.[54] Meanwhile, financial resources, garnered independently rather than from the MOC,[55] allow it to offer salaries substantially higher than those of Southern Front fighters; coupled with its well-publicised battlefield efficacy, this allows it to maintain a presence even in areas where its ideological agenda has limited appeal.[56]

A third, more complex factor is al-Nusra's heterogeneous character, a point of both strength and potential vulnerability. It is visible on two distinct planes. The first is a degree of ideological separation distinguishing the consistently Salafi-jihadi leadership (much of which is from Jordan or elsewhere outside Syria) from a mostly-Syrian rank-and-file whose level of commitment to the group's ideology appears to vary considerably. Willingness to embrace these ideologically diverse foot soldiers – many likely drawn by its material resources and effectiveness rather than its distinct agenda – have expanded the group's membership beyond its Salafi-jihadi base and allowed it to deepen ties with local communities;[57] they also, however, are a constituency within al-Nusra whose loyalty may ultimately be to the Syrian uprising rather than al-Qaeda's transnational jihad. That distinction is academic so long as al-Nusra is allied with *thawri* rebel groups but could become strategically important if relations between them deteriorate.

The second plane of heterogeneity exists among al-Nusra's leaders, who enjoy a high degree of local autonomy and pursue strikingly different strategies around

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[53] Crisis Group interviews, rebel officials, Turkey, Jordan, October 2013-April 2015. IS, too, is highly proficient in suicide attacks and frontal assaults, but in late 2013-January 2014 its relationship with the rest of the armed opposition shifted from uneasy cooperation to violent hostility due to its pursuit of unilateral territorial control, disregard for local norms, attacks on other factions and general brutality. See Crisis Group Report, *Rigged Cars*, op. cit.

[54] A Syrian aid worker knowledgeable of rebel operations described the relationship: "The Free Syrian Army [FSA, a term used for state-backed, non-ideological groups] continue to use al-Nusra for *iqtihamat* [frontal assaults, suicide attacks], but … it's actually the FSA groups who have the upper hand. They will continue to coordinate with al-Nusra because they don't have enough advanced weapons to forego its help". Crisis Group interview, Amman, January 2014.

[55] Al-Nusra's finances depend largely on external donor networks and, to a lesser extent, exploiting captured oil fields, hostage-taking and black-marketeering. However, these resources have reportedly been on the decline due to an international crackdown on private funding pipelines coupled with al-Nusra's loss of Syria's eastern oil fields to IS in June 2014. See Charles Lister, "Cutting off ISIS' cash flow", Brookings, 24 October 2014. On al-Nusra's external financing, see Elizabeth Dickinson, "The case against Qatar", *Foreign Policy*, 30 September 2014.

[56] For example, in January 2015 Southern Front officials claimed al-Nusra was paying fighters $185/month, compared with the $50-$70 paid to Southern Front fighters. Crisis Group interviews, Amman..

[57] On al-Nusra's flexible approach to its membership's ideology, see Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammad Abu Rumman, "The 'Islamic State' Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism", Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015, Chapter 2.

the country. They have demonstrated differing preferences in addressing questions central to the group's long-term prospects: whether IS should be treated as competitor or enemy; how much priority should be put on imposing al-Nusra's conception of Islamic law; the terms and scope of cooperation with *thawri* factions; and the sanctity of the al-Qaeda affiliation.[58] This helps explain why in a single month, al-Nusra forces on the Damascus outskirts stood by as IS seized large chunks of the besieged Palestinian neighbourhood of Yarmouk,[59] while a prominent al-Nusra commander in the south rallied Islamist and mainstream forces to attack suspected IS affiliates in Deraa and Quneitra (see below).[60]

This flexibility and decentralised decision-making has recently enabled al-Nusra to chart a course in the south that is more conciliatory toward *thawri* rebels (including non-ideological factions) and hostile toward IS than that pursued by al-Nusra branches elsewhere. As noted above, in late 2014 al-Nusra in southern Syria agreed to merge its court with one run by mainstream rebels to form the joint Dar al-Adl judicial body, and it curtailed unilateral action against fellow rebel factions in subsequent weeks. This conciliatory shift coincided with a lurch in the opposite direction by its forces in the north, which withdrew from joint rebel courts, expelled prominent non-ideological factions from parts of Idlib and Aleppo provinces and tried to assert unilateral authority, including imposing al-Nusra's conception of Islamic law.[61]

Fellow rebels attribute al-Nusra's more conciliatory approach in the south to a range of factors, including perceived weakness vis-à-vis the Southern Front coalition and the moderating influence of its local fighters, who remain closely tied to surrounding communities in which al-Nusra's transnational jihadism does not appear to have taken root.[62] The differing approach may also reflect a strategic (ar-

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[58] For an exploration of these divergent strategic choices across al-Nusra's local branches, see Ahmad Abazeid, *Zaman al-Wasl*, 4 August 2014, zamanalwsl.net/news/52205.html.

[59] Anti-IS rebels and activists accuse al-Nusra, among the strongest armed factions in Yarmouk, of allowing IS fighters to enter the neighbourhood (a Palestinian refugee camp) on 1 April from an adjacent IS stronghold in the (also besieged) al-Hajr al-Aswad neighbourhood. While that is impossible to confirm, al-Nusra clearly refrained from confronting IS during the latter's successful effort to drive the leading pro-opposition Palestinian faction from much of the camp. As fighting subsided in mid-April, al-Nusra joined IS in asserting control over roughly two-thirds of Yarmouk. A Palestinian NGO worker in Yarmouk noted: "In our view, at this point, in Yarmouk al-Nusra and IS are one and the same". Crisis Group communication, May 2015.

[60] Al-Nusra commander Abu Maria al-Qahtani (see below) publicly urged southern rebel factions to join with al-Nusra in confronting Shuhada' al-Yarmouk and Jaish al-Jihad. See posts on his frequently removed Twitter account, at twitter.com/abo_hmza_g. The phenomenon of separate branches of a single group pursuing apparently contradictory approaches in different parts of the country is not unique to al-Nusra; see, eg, Ahrar al-Sham's reaction to the outbreak of rebel war with IS in January 2015, described in Crisis Group Report *Rigged Cars,* op. cit. Yet this tendency currently appears most prevalent in al-Nusra, as some groups originally active in multiple theatres have dissolved, and others acted to unify their strategic approach. For example, Ahrar al-Sham reacted to failures by its south-Damascus affiliates to sufficiently confront IS by severing ties with them and firing the regional commander who oversaw them. Ahrar al-Sham's 27 June 2015 statements, at slnnews.co/?p=26794.

[61] For background on al-Nusra's increasingly aggressive posture in the north, see Charles Lister, "The 'Real' Jabhat al-Nusra Appears to Be Emerging", The Huffington Post, 7 October 2014.

[62] A Southern Front media official claimed: "Al-Nusra in the south is less aggressive than al-Nusra in the north, partly because most of their members are from the area and joined not out of ideological commitment but for material reasons, or because al-Nusra was the strongest group at the time". When the group participates in battles, he added, "it is essentially because those elements were already there – they live in the area". Crisis Group interview, Amman, 27 January 2015. The commander of Southern Front component al-Faylaq al-Awwal added: "The Nusra fighters who

guably personality-based) fault line within the organisation; one of its highest-profile southern figures, Abu Maria al-Qahtani, has consistently taken public positions more conciliatory to non-Islamist rebels, hostile toward IS and critical of unilateralism than is typical of its policy and discourse elsewhere.[63]

Al-Nusra is thus both a threat and an asset to *thawri* southern factions. The two edges of its sword often cut swiftly in opposite directions, complicating the calculations of *thawri* rebels and their state backers. In April 2015, for example, al-Nusra outraged Southern Front components by seeking to reap spoils and a propaganda boon from the rebel seizure of the Nassib border crossing, a high-profile gain in which the significance of its contribution is disputed.[64] Its presence (and ensuing looting) severely undermined rebel efforts to convince Jordan to reopen the crossing; in response several leading Southern Front components said in coordinated statements they would sever cooperation with it.[65]

Yet, as often among rebel factions, conflict on one front was quickly set aside in favour of shared interests on another. In less than a month, a main Southern Front faction behind the anti-Nusra statements joined it to fight common foes: the allegedly IS-linked Jaish al-Jihad and Shuhada' al-Yarmouk in Quneitra and southwestern Deraa, respectively.[66] Some other Southern Front components abstained, apparently judging the IS threat not sufficient to justify helping another (albeit less extreme) jihadi group combat it.[67] As of August 2015, one of the two alleged IS-affiliates, Shuhada' al-Yarmouk, maintained its foothold; it is likely to continue to do so in the absence of a broad alliance to uproot it, though the distance separating it from the nearest IS stronghold may render it containable.

III. Dealing with the Regime's Erosion

In addition to the setbacks in the south described above, the regime lost significant ground during the first half of 2015 to a coalition of *thawri* and Salafi-jihadi rebels in Idlib province and, separately, to IS in central Syria. These losses are indicative of a steadily growing problem for it: having thoroughly alienated much of society, the pool from which it can recruit motivated fighters is shallow and grows more so as a result of the high attrition its forces suffer. Put simply, it cannot replace fallen

participated in the battle for Brigade 82 were locals from [nearby] Sheikh Miskeen; that's typical for them". Crisis Group interview, Irbid, January 2015.

[63] Al-Qahtani, a veteran of Saddam Hussein's military elite and then the Islamic State in Iraq (as IS was known prior to 2013), was al-Nusra's top commander in the east from mid-2012 until his defeat by IS in July 2014. He went with several hundred fighters to Deraa, where he is rumoured to have clashed with al-Nusra's predominantly Jordanian leadership over his obsessive focus on purging the south of IS loyalists. Hamza Mustafa, "Nusra's tactics to confront IS's mounting power", *Zaman al-Wasl*, 22 August 2014; also, Abo Bakr al-Haj Ali, "Abu Maria: The Nusra leader behind the split with IS in Syria?" *Middle East Eye*, 14 November 2014.

[64] While the details of this operation are contested, a widespread *thawri* account holds that Southern Front fighters rejected al-Nusra's participation, only to have it storm the crossing in the Southern Front's wake to claim spoils and media attention, *al-Araby al-Jadid*, tinyurl.com/q97fa7n.

[65] For background and text of statements, see www.all4syria.info/Archive/206859.

[66] Bashar al-Zoaby, leader of the non-ideological Southern Front component Jaish al-Yarmouk, took the lead in publicly criticising al-Nusra after the Nassib incident, then trumpeted his forces' contribution to the joint fight against Jaish al-Jihad. twitter.com/BasharAlzouabi/status/588068949671157760 and twitter.com/BasharAlzouabi/status/593704568594259968. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat and Southern Front media official, Amman, April 2015.

[67] Crisis Group communication, Southern Front media official, May 2015.

soldiers and militia fighters with comparably reliable Syrians.[68] This steady erosion of combat capacity raises questions for its allies, communities residing under its authority and the armed opposition and its backers.

A. *Damascus, Quneitra and the "Resistance Axis"*

1. Strategic stakes

Defending Damascus is the top priority of the regime and its backers; protecting the southern approach to the city is critical toward that end.[69] Were the opposition's state-backed components ever to raise military pressure on the capital, doing so from the south would provide the best avenue: it is there that supply lines from supporters are shortest, the secondary threat posed by jihadi factions weakest and the regime's defensive buffer thinnest (though particularly dense).[70]

That is not to say the opposition could take Damascus militarily; the volume and positioning of regime and allied defences make that all but impossible without a dramatic escalation in external military involvement that, combined with the regime's indiscriminate and collective punishment tactics, would likely come at the prohibitive cost of destroying what is left of the capital more than what remains of the regime.[71] Rather, were they able to expand their contiguous territory in Deraa and Quneitra to link with besieged rebel-held pockets in the city's south-western outskirts, opposition forces could increase their capacity and effectiveness in the latter, forcing the regime and its allies to dedicate more resources in response, thus reducing their capability in other parts of the country. Given that regime and allied forces are already stretched thin and have been losing ground on multiple fronts in 2015, that could shift the strategic landscape.[72]

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[68] The regime's manpower constraints were exposed during defeats in the south, north and east, January-May 2015. The importance of Iran-backed fighters in compensating for these limitations has been clear since at least early 2014. Explaining in April 2014 why the regime welcomed a growing, increasingly public Hizbollah and Iraqi Shiite role, a regime military official said, "numbers count. We have around 350 fronts or flashpoints around the country, not to mention all the road, pipelines and other infrastructure that need to be guarded. So Shiites from Iraq, even if incompetent, can be used in secondary positions to free better troops for combat. We face limitations in terms of human resources, as seen for instance in [the March rebel capture of] Kassab", a town in the regime's coastal stronghold. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, April 2014. Assad acknowledged manpower shortages limit territorial defence during his 26 July 2015 speech, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dyw1mfm0TqI.

[69] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, February 2015.

[70] In contrast, regime and Hizbollah-controlled territory in and around Homs and the Qalamoun Mountains (at the Lebanon border) gives the capital a significant buffer against attacks from the north; vast desert and IS dominance render the eastern approach unviable for the state-backed opposition. For more on the south's strategic importance, see Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, op. cit., Section II.D.

[71] Damascus is ringed by military bases, including a virtual wall of facilities from the mountains on its western edge to its southern outskirts (some themselves abutted by Alawite neighbourhoods whose residents are prominent in the military, security forces and local militias). Those portions of the military considered most effective and loyal – the Alawite-dominated 4th Armoured Division and Presidential Guard – are based in Damascus and are pillars of its defence, as are Hizbollah personnel who have steadily deepened and expanded their presence in the city. Sam Dagher, "Syria's allies are stretched by widening war", *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 July 2014; Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Metastasising Conflicts*, op. cit.; and Joseph Holiday, "The Assad regime: from counterinsurgency to civil war", Institute for the Study of War, March 2013.

[72] The strategic nature of this potential threat was plainly discussed in pro-regime media coverage at the start of a counter-offensive (discussed below) aimed at strengthening regime and allied positions south west of the capital. Haider Mustafa, *Al-Akhbar,* 11 February 2015.

Yet, the geopolitical stakes in the south transcend its importance to the capital's defence, especially from the perspective of the regime's principal allies, whose weight on the ground is increasing. The regime's manpower constraints and high attrition render it ever more dependent on them to maintain control in sensitive areas and gain on priority fronts;[73] as a result, the combat role of Hizbollah, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel and pro-Iran Shiite militias (including Iraqi and Afghan units, some facilitated by the IRGC) is expanding.[74] This increase in the share of the military burden coincides with a steady rise in the regime's dependence upon Tehran for financial solvency.[75] The inevitable result is that the balance of power within the pro-regime camp is gradually shifting from the regime leadership to Iran and Hizbollah.[76]

This is significant, because Iran's and Hizbollah's strategic interests are distinct from the regime's. They share the primary goal of defending Damascus and the strategic zone stretching north from there through Homs and the coast, contiguous territory that includes most people, all ports and border areas vital to Hizbollah's security and supply lines.[77] Other priorities differ. The regime tries to keep footholds throughout the country, including cities in northern, eastern and southern provinces otherwise dominated by armed opponents; this enables it to continue to provide some services there (notably state employees' salaries) and is central to its narrative conflating its fate with that of the state throughout Syria.[78]

Iran and Hizbollah embrace that narrative rhetorically but in practice focus their resources in western areas of highest strategic relevance (and, in some cases, defend pockets of Shiites), while investing little manpower toward maintaining

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[73] A Hizbollah official said, "the balance between the regime and its allies is shifting in favour of its allies, as their role on the ground continues to increase. In some places, the regime is now completely dependent upon its allies' forces". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2015.

[74] Though Shiite foreign fighters tend to characterise their role as defence of the Saida Zeinab shrine in Damascus (a site of Shiite pilgrimage), in practice they are deployed to priority fronts throughout Syria. See, for example, pro-militia coverage documenting Iraqi fighters twenty km north of the Jordan border in Deraa province, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZaKzD2jvmc#t=600. For analysis of the role of Afghan militiamen, see Ali Alfoneh, "Analysis: Shiite Afghan casualties of the war in Syria", *The Long War Journal*, 12 March 2015. For an example of IRGC training and combat activity, see 2013 footage by an embedded Iranian filmmaker and seized by rebels, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LV2xgh2CM58.

[75] In July 2013, Iran agreed to give the regime $4.6 billion credit, including $3.6 billion for oil imports and $1 billion for other imports. This was essential in enabling the regime to meet its energy needs and has supported what semblance of stability the Syrian pound enjoys. Iran reportedly provided an additional $1 billion credit in May 2015. David Butters, "Syria's economy: picking up the pieces", Chatham House, June 2015. Hugh Naylor, "Syria's Assad cuts subsides, focuses ailing economy on war effort", *The Washington Post*, 29 November 2014; *Al-Akhbar*, 20 May 2015; and *Tishreen*, 8 July 2015, tishreen.news.sy/tishreen/public/read/342906.

[76] This trend, long emphasised by regime foes, is increasingly acknowledged in the regime camp. Noting growing battlefield dependence on Hizbollah and Iranian personnel, a Hizbollah official said, "it is getting to the point where these allies can compel the regime to do things they couldn't before. This can be in the interest of [eventual political] resolution [of the war], as the regime's allies are more reasonable than the regime". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2015. An Alawite businessman with close ties to (and supportive of) the regime said in frustration (and likely some exaggeration): "Hizbollah controls 80 per cent of Damascus. They openly wear their insignia at checkpoints, which is too much". Crisis Group interview, January 2015.

[77] For further discussion of population distribution, see Aron Lund, "The political geography of Syria's war: an interview with Fabrice Balanche", "Syria in Crisis", Carnegie Endowment blog, 30 January 2015.

[78] For background, see Kheder Khaddour, "The Assad regime's hold on the Syrian state", Carnegie Middle East Center, 8 July 2015.

wider control.[79] This distinction is apparent in the south, where in 2015 Iran and Hizbollah escalated support trying to regain ground just south of Damascus and in Quneitra (Section IV below), but have shown less interest in strengthening the regime's remaining holdings further south in Deraa province.

The importance of Quneitra, bordering the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, bears emphasis. The regime and its backers share a clear interest in preventing rebel expansion in the province toward the Damascus outskirts. Unlike the regime, however, for Iran and Hizbollah the area, especially the border with Israel, embodies not only a potential threat if lost, but also an opportunity. Regarding the former, Hizbollah officials and friendly media highlight the danger of a "security belt" in Quneitra and western Deraa, akin to that in southern Lebanon 1985-2000, through which Israel could project power within Syria via local proxies;[80] they describe the escalation of Hizbollah and Iranian involvement in southern Syria in 2015 (see below) as a pre-emptive measure to prevent emergence of such a buffer zone.[81] Whatever the validity of that concern, activity in Quneitra also offers an opportunity to emphasise the familiar narrative of "resistance" to Israel, a welcome shift of messaging for Hizbollah,[82] whose opponents in Syria view it as supporting their oppressor and often deride it as an occupying force.

2. A failed counter-offensive

Prior to 2015, Hizbollah's combat role in Syria appeared focused in areas it considered of highest strategic value: Damascus and the corridor linking it to Homs and the coast. In public messaging, Hizbollah was careful to highlight activity only within this zone and that fit neatly with the initial public narratives it used to justify its military role: towns and hills along the Lebanese border and the area around the Saida Zeinab shrine in Damascus, a major Shiite pilgrimage site.[83] Insofar as Hizbollah fought elsewhere, the activity received little if any attention in sympathetic media, and officials quietly attributed it to an effort to strengthen protection of Shiite communities near rebel strongholds.[84] Hizbollah and Iranian public messaging said even less about Iranian personnel, whose presence in Syria was framed

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[79] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, February 2015.

[80] After withdrawing from most of south Lebanon in 1985, Israel maintained a security belt within Lebanon along the border until 2000. This was done by coordination with a Lebanese proxy, the South Lebanon Army. On Israeli strategy, see Thomas Friedman, "Israeli army quits a hostile district in south Lebanon", *The New York Times,* 12 April 1985.

[81] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah officials, Beirut, February 2015. Officials acknowledge Hizbollah's growing role in southern Syria, but describe it as to protect Damascus and "prevent Israel from building a security belt". An official explained: "Hizbollah has no plan to open up the Golan front [with Israel]; that's up to the [Syrian] regime. Hizbollah's presence there is part of the Syrian war". See also Hizbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's 30 January 2015 speech, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQF7n1S-Hm0. For media coverage amplifying this theme, see, for example, Haider Mustafa, *Al-Akhbar*, op. cit.

[82] See Nasrallah's 30 January speech, op. cit., and January-February coverage in media affiliated with Hizbollah (such as Al-Manar television) and sympathetic to it (such as *Al-Akhbar* newspaper and Al-Mayadeen television).

[83] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°153, *Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria,* 27 May 2014.

[84] Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, February 2015. Hizbollah describes its combat role as smaller (in real terms and relative to regime forces) than claimed by its opponents, and it has invoked the need to defend Shiite communities as justification for activity that appears to serve its broader goal of protecting the regime's hold on strategically important areas (such as along the Lebanese border, in greater Damascus and around Aleppo). But the volume and impact of its battlefield participation cannot be conclusively assessed independently. See also Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward,* op. cit., Sections I-II.

within the context of longstanding advisory support to the regime, despite mounting evidence of IRGC members taking part in combat.[85]

The value of rebel gains in Quneitra and Deraa, however, drew Iran and Hizbollah deeper into battles south of Damascus in early 2015, signalling a new, more public and expansive phase in their interventions. As regime and allied forces initiated a major surprise offensive on 11 February in the "triangle" of territory where the south-western outskirts of Damascus meet Quneitra and north-western Deraa, media outlets close to Hizbollah described an escalation in the battlefield roles of the regime's non-Syrian partners, in some cases explicitly describing Hizbollah and Iranian fighters (including "prominent IRGC officers") as fundamental components of the campaign.[86] This was a notable shift.

Hizbollah officials identified two goals for the offensive: strengthening the defence of Damascus and preventing consolidation of a hostile "belt" that Israel could exploit.[87] They characterised this as a response not only to rebel progress toward Damascus, but also to a perceived increase in the Israeli role, including through support to rebel factions and an 18 January air strike on a Hizbollah convoy in Quneitra that killed several members as well as an IRGC officer.[88] In practice, the extent and nature of Israeli aid to rebels is difficult to verify; both acknowledge humanitarian support (notably hospital services in Israel for wounded rebels).[89] In any case, it appears clear that the most substantial lethal help to southern rebels is delivered via Jordan by Arab and Western backers.

Yet, Hizbollah appears correct in assessing that the Israelis prefer Quneitra remains under control of rebel factions – even including Jabhat al-Nusra – than falls to pro-regime forces among which Hizbollah and IRGC personnel are increasingly influential.[90] The shift in power within the pro-regime camp means recapture of Quneitra territory by pro-regime forces would give Iran and Hizbollah unprecedented clout on the border, from which they could potentially build capacity to attack Israeli-controlled territory. An Israeli official explained:

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[85] See Secretary-General Nasrallah's 6 April 2015 interview with the Syrian Al-Ikhbariya satellite channel, www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?eid=1163413. For an example of IRGC training and combat activity near Aleppo, see 2013 footage by an embedded Iranian filmmaker, op. cit.

[86] See, for example, headline stories by Ibrahim al-Amin and Mohammad Balout, al-akhbar.com/node/226226 and assafir.com/Article/63/401110.

[87] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah officials, Beirut, February 2015. A lead article by the prominent editor of a pro-Hizbollah daily heralded the escalation and conveyed the justifying shift in narrative: "The Resistance Axis . . . has decided to launch the battle to liberate southern Syria from the armed groups, and to draw a new political, military and security reality along the entire border with Jordan and occupied Palestine [Israel] .... The decision to prevent the fall of southern Syria into the hands of Israel's agents is more strategic than any other decision, and is comparable in importance to the decision to prevent the fall of Damascus into those same agents' hands". Ibrahim al-Amin, *Al-Akhbar*, 11 February 2015.

[88] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah officials, Beirut, February 2015; also "Top Iranian general and six Hezbollah fighters killed in Israeli attack in Syria", *The Guardian,* 19 January 2015.

[89] See Colum Lynch, "Israel is tending to wounded Syrian rebels", *Foreign Policy* (online), 11 June 2014; also interview, *Al-Ghad al-Arabi*', 13 January 2015, with Bashar al-Zoaby, leader of Jaish al-Yarmouk, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xsZxsaXgJY. Crisis Group interview, Israeli defence official, Tel Aviv, March 2015.

[90] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah and Israeli officials, Beirut, Tel Aviv, February-June 2015. An Israeli official explained: "Al-Nusra are our enemies. We don't want to see them succeeding or even growing stronger. But their priority is defeating Assad, whereas Hizbollah, in order to gain public legitimacy, would more easily strike us in parallel to waging a war over Syria". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, April 2015. In February, Israeli officials monitored the counter-offensive closely and considered imposition of a no-fly or full-fledged buffer zone of some twenty km east of the Israeli-Syrian ceasefire line in order to prevent Hizbollah from taking over Quneitra. Crisis Group interviews, Israeli defence officials, Tel Aviv, March-April 2015.

> There is enormous concern about Iran and Hizbollah setting up a front against Israel in Syria. That would reverse the situation that existed before 2011: then, Syria and Iran attacked Israel though Lebanon; now, Hizbollah and Iran might attack Israel through Syria. There is also concern that Iran could facilitate the transfer of weaponry to the West Bank. Israel is determined not to allow this front to emerge.[91]

For leaders in both southern Beirut and Tel Aviv, then, the February pro-regime offensive – as with any potential future attempt by the "Resistance Axis" to regain ground in Quneitra and western Deraa – had direct ramifications for the informal "rules of the game" regulating conflict on Israel's borders with Lebanon and Syria.[92] In the event, however, it fizzled. Regime and allied forces made modest gains in the countryside south west of Damascus but failed to win back any significant rebel territory in Quneitra and western Deraa. The offensive thus quietly concluded in March without progress toward its second goal, recapture of ground in the rebel-held "belt" bordering the Golan. Given the intense pro-regime media focus and elevated Hizbollah and Iranian military role, the results were underwhelming.[93]

Rebel forces quickly regained momentum, and by June regime ability to hold territory in Deraa appeared very in question. In late March-early April, a mix of Southern Front and Jabhat al-Nusra seized the regime's final holdings in south-eastern Deraa, the city of Bosra al-Sham and the Nassib border crossing with Jordan; two weeks later, Southern Front factions led in seizing Busr al-Harir, another eastern Deraa town bordering Sweida province, capturing several Afghan fighters from an Iran-backed pro-regime militia in the process. After a relatively quiet May, rebel progress resumed with capture by Southern Front forces of Brigade 52 in north-east Deraa, the second-largest regime military facility in the south. These losses coincided with defeats in the north and centre from a coalition led by Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra in Idlib, and IS at Palmyra.

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[91] Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, March 2015. Among Israel's concerns is the threat of rocket fire from territory controlled by pro-regime forces. On 20 August 2015, four rockets reportedly fired from a regime-held area in Quneitra landed without casualty in Israel's Upper Galilee and the Israeli-held Golan Heights; Israel responded with strikes on regime military assets. Notably, Israel accused Islamic Jihad (a Palestinian armed faction, a portion of which has links to Iran) of launching the rockets, and claimed the attack was orchestrated by an IRGC operative. Islamic Jihad denied the allegations. See "IDF: Iran's Quds Force responsible for rocket fire", Ynet News, 21 August 2015.

[92] For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°97, *Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance"*, 2 August 2010. In a 30 January 2015 speech two days after Hizbollah retaliated against an Israeli military convoy near the Lebanese border for the 18 January Israeli strike killing Hizbollah and IRGC personnel in Quneitra, Secretary-General Nasrallah suggested the "rules of the game" had already changed: "We no longer recognise the separation of arenas and battlefields, and it is our right . . . to confront aggression wherever, whenever, and whatever that aggression may be . . . and in any way. The scenario of 'I hit you here, you respond here' is over …. The scenario of 'you hit me in this way, I respond in that way' is over". www.mediarelations-lb.org/article.php?id=13837&cid=94#. VRPl1yg3H8E.

[93] The gap between expectations and ground gained was acknowledged in some pro-regime coverage; Hassan Aleiq, *al-Akhbar*, 25 March 2015. A Western diplomat explained: "The joint pro-regime offensive made pretty limited gains; the rebels' ability to withstand it demonstrated the Southern Front's staying power. They stopped regime and allied progress, then successfully counter-attacked by taking Bosra al-Sham and Nassib. The regime/allied offensive basically entailed the regime pounding rebels with artillery and air power, then sending Hizbollah and Iranian personnel in …. They did this until they [in effect] ran out of ordinance, and the gains were pretty minimal". Crisis Group interview, Amman, April 2015.

Amid indications in June that Iran and Hizbollah were increasing their strength in Syria in an effort to shore up their faltering ally,[94] the scope of recent regime defeats and the minimal gains achieved by their February escalation suggest it would take huge, potentially unsustainable investment to stop the regime's erosion. Iranian and Hizbollah officials would be wise to learn from those setbacks, rather than optimistically pointing to recent gains along the Lebanese border, where proximity to Hizbollah's strongholds and the absence of significant rebel supply lines play strongly to the regime's and its allies' favour.[95] Most difficult will be preventing continued loss of ground on the periphery of regime territory, in areas outside its western zone of dominance. Remaining regime holdings in Deraa, notably the provincial capital's northern half, are among the hardest to maintain, given the strength of the rebel campaign there.

B. *Sweida and the Druze*

The erosion of regime forces raises serious questions regarding the majority-Druze province of Sweida. With Deraa, Quneitra and the Damascus countryside separating it from the Israeli and Lebanese borders, it has less geostrategic importance than its western neighbours. Its value to the regime is significant, but largely symbolic: "protecting" the Druze-majority province from "terrorist" armed groups is central to its narrative as defender of the country's minorities.[96]

Sweida remains under regime control, but relations with Damascus are complicated. Though it is economically dependent upon the capital (not least because the state employs its residents), many fighting-age males, more than 25,000 by some counts, have refused to report for mandatory military service.[97] They have been encouraged (in some cases protected) by a popular cleric, Sheikh "Abu Fahed" Waheed al-Balaous, who has steadily intensified his criticism: questioning regime willingness to protect Sweida, declaring an end to forced conscription in the prov-

[94] See, for example, reporting in pro-Hizbollah media on significant infusions of Lebanese, Iranian and Iraqi fighters in support of the regime. Eli Hanna, *Al-Akhbar*, 1 June 2015; Muhammad Balout, *As-Safir,* 2 June 2015.

[95] Gains by Hizbollah and regime forces near the Lebanese border in May and early June 2015 were highlighted in sympathetic media as evidence that the pro-regime camp had regained the military initiative following recent setbacks. A senior Hizbollah official privately conveyed similar optimism. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2015.

[96] Until early 2015, Sweida also had clear economic value to Damascus, as the regime's lone routes to its last remaining border crossing with Jordan, Nassib, ran through the province. That path closed, however, with the rebel capture of Nassib in April.

[97] See Elijah J. Magnier, *Al Rai*, 14 June 2015; also Hassan Hassan, "Druze unrest could transform Syria conflict", Chatham House, 22 June 2015.

ince and even accusing regime intelligence of orchestrating shelling of the provincial capital.[98] His network has established independent local defence forces rivalling those controlled by the regime or loyal to it, challenging Sweida's pro-Damascus religious establishment in the process.[99]

But al-Balaous and his supporters express little affinity for the armed opposition. They tout Sweida's embrace of displaced Deraa residents, while emphasising protection of Druze areas from aggression, be it from IS to the north east or opposition factions from Deraa. Regarding the latter, occasional tit-for-tat kidnappings between residents of Sweida and Deraa provinces and Jabhat al-Nusra's continued role beside *thawri* Deraa rebels have undermined attempts to build trust.[100] Thus, when Southern Front factions tried in June to seize the Thaala airbase on the province's eastern edge used to shell rebel-held parts of Deraa, forces loyal to al-Balaous deployed to deter any attack on nearby Druze villages.[101] Local regime-backed militias rallied to defend the base, their recruitment aided by an incident in Idlib province that month in which Jabhat al-Nusra members under a Tunisian commander killed more than twenty unarmed Druze civilians during a property dispute.[102] Southern Front factions made little progress against the airbase and halted the offensive, saying they needed to avoid inflaming sectarian tensions.[103]

Yet, amid steady regime losses and an increasingly tangible threat from IS forces establishing a presence in the province's sparsely populated north east, al-Balaous's public questioning of the regime commitment to protect Sweida has

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[98] An array of regime internal intelligence [*mukhabarat*] directorates are active in the war, including by facilitating militia activity. While generally critical of regime intelligence and allied militias, al-Balaous assigned particular blame in this case to Wafiq Nasser, head of the Military Security directorate in Sweida. See his 11, 14 and 22 June 2015 statements and remarks, at www.facebook.com/swaida5/photos/a.154253279268785 4.1073741828.154101152617331 4/160164277677685 5/?type=1; www.youtube.com/watch?t=20&v=XKa-FbkgLuE; and www. facebook.com/swaida5/photos/a.154253279268785 4.1073741828.154101152617331 4/160757750 2_850049/?type=1; also Firas al-Shoufi, *Al-Akhbar*, 16 June 2015, al-akhbar.com/node/235692.

[99] Pro-Balaous activists claim that forces loyal to him number up to 15,000 fighters and report they have intervened to prevent the regime from removing heavy weapons from the province. www.facebook.com/video.php?v=833597773398917&fref=nf and www.facebook.com/ permalink.php?story_fbid=482604965237543&id=339796582851716. Also Firas al-Shoufi, *Al-Akhbar*, 25 April 2015, al-akhbar.com/node/231378.

[100] Al-Balaous acknowledges indirect communications with *thawri* rebels in Deraa and has called for ceasefire between that province and Sweida; Southern Front officials are also keen to stress efforts to reach out to anti-regime and neutral Druze figures in Sweida. Crisis Group interviews, Southern Front officials, January-June 2015. Heba Muhammad, *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 16 June 2015, and *Orient News*, 10 June 2015, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0om GlYSvzM&list=PL906Y6OrlAXjndhe4NqBnbQDR3hcNwbpC&index=49. Yet, distrust is substantial. A Druze activist and al-Balaous follower said, "the Free Syrian Army are the ones kidnapping the sons of Sweida and negotiating with us at the price of their blood. Our position is clear: any armed movement that sets foot on Jabal al-Druze [Druze Mountain] will be buried along the border [between Deraa and Sweida]". Crisis Group communication, 8 February 2015.

[101] A Facebook page linked to al-Balaous posted pictures of affiliated armed men in al-Thaala village, adding: "In accordance with the example of our righteous ancestors, we forbid aggression by us and … against us". www.facebook.com/339796582851716/photos/a.343040579193983.1073741827.339796582851716/483963548435018/?type=1; www.facebook.com/ swaida5/photos/a.154253279268785 4.1073741828.154101152617331 4/160122323348547 6/?type=1.

[102] See *Orient News* coverage, 11 June 2015, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWz__OrKc74; also Firas al-Shoufi, 16 June 2015, op. cit.

[103] See Jaish al-Yarmouk (prominent Southern Front component) commander Bashar al-Zoaby's 19 June interview with *Al-Hadath*, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR33xZz_V0s.

fuelled speculation of a potential push to break the security ties with Damascus.[104] Southern Front factions have sought to assure Sweida residents that they will not target populated areas and that their military goals there are focused on driving regime forces from facilities (in particular Thaala airbase) used to attack rebel-held areas in Deraa.[105] It is thus in theory possible that local Sweida forces could themselves end such attacks (notably shelling) as part of an arrangement that Deraa rebels refrain from further action inside the province.

Though Sweida's economic dependence on Damascus renders a clear break difficult, pressure on the regime to shift manpower and additional military assets from Sweida may increase if rebel gains elsewhere continue. Iran's and Hizbollah's preference to focus on areas of highest strategic importance could potentially add to such pressure, as could any increase in Sheikh al-Balaous's strength or assertiveness. It is thus in the interest of the Southern Front and its backers to better demonstrate an alternative to Sweida's regime reliance. That would require assuring communities not only that Deraa's *thawri* rebels harbour no hostile intentions, but also that they are willing and able to prevent emergence of a Salafi-jihadi threat from the west and to join in fighting the shared IS foe to the east.

IV. A New Approach in the South

A. *Thawri Gains and Support for Local Governance*

Erosion of regime forces presents challenges as well as opportunities for the opposition's backers if the ground situation is to be shifted to one conducive to a negotiated settlement. This is particularly true for Washington, which is most capable of transforming the status quo but most reluctant to do so, and whose principal aim remains preventing the spread of Salafi-jihadi groups within and beyond Syria. To the extent IS, Jabhat al-Nusra or sectarian, Iran-backed militias supported by regime barrel bombs fill the vacuums created by the regime's eroding military capacity, Salafi-jihadi power in Syria will likely continue to rise.

If the U.S. is finally to break from this vicious cycle, it will require empowering *thawri* rebels to the point where they, not their jihadi rivals, can fill the military and civil vacuum left by regime retraction. The dynamics described above make the south an ideal starting point for such a policy. Given the radicalising capacity of the war's broader trajectory, it is difficult to envision a better opportunity in the foreseeable future and easy to imagine this opening quickly narrowing.

U.S. and Jordanian backing in particular has aided a rise in *thawri* power relative to Salafi-jihadis in the south, but at existing levels of support that progress appears to be reaching the limits of its military and civil potential. The opposition's touted June campaign to capture the regime-held half of Deraa city faltered; there as in Aleppo (the regime's most significant northern foothold), the combination of regime reinforcements and relentless aerial bombardment render it very difficult for rebels to gain urban territory in a strategically valuable provincial capital.[106]

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[104] Such speculation has featured in both pro-opposition and pro-regime media. See *Orient News*, 10 June 2015, pro-opposition coverage, op. cit. For pro-regime coverage see Firas al-Shoufi, *Al-Akhbar,* 16 June 2015, op. cit.

[105] See, for example, 11 June 2015 video of Southern Front commanders emphasising brotherhood with Sweida and offering assurances, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWIhoAgA9XY; also Bashar al-Zoaby's 19 June interview, op. cit.

[106] Crisis Group interviews and communications, Western analyst and diplomat, Amman, June-July 2015. The effectiveness of regime defences in Aleppo and Deraa cities contrasts to failure to

Meanwhile, in areas from which it has already withdrawn, the regime's continuing air attacks prevent *thawri* opposition elements from effectively filling voids in civil administration and service provision.[107]

For *thawri* rebels and their backers, the combination of stalled battlefield progress and unsatisfied civil opportunity is dangerous. Success against the regime in the south is a primary part of their local appeal and credibility; if they cannot continue to gain, or enable similar progress in improving quality of life in areas they control, an opening may quickly emerge for a Salafi-jihadi resurgence.

Denying jihadi groups that opportunity is not simply a matter of maintaining *thawri* momentum; it requires establishing effective civil administration in opposition-held areas. This will prove especially daunting if rebels succeed in capturing the half of Deraa city now outside their control, through which the regime continues to administer some services.[108] While armed factions and civil society groups already provide a semblance of rudimentary governance in opposition-held areas, their administrative and service capacities are decidedly limited.[109] To fill the vacuum left by the regime's erosion, *thawri* opposition elements must develop governance that is more organised and institution-based.

Taken together, such military and civil progress would substantially improve the *thawri* opposition's strength and credibility vis-à-vis Salafi-jihadi foes (IS) and competitors (al-Nusra). It could also improve dire humanitarian conditions in the south and address challenges that are essential to resolving the conflict: deepening cooperation between armed and civil components of the opposition, incentivising their development as responsible political actors and improving their credibility in the eyes of both fellow citizens and external players.

Just as sustained *thawri* military and civil progress could yield great rewards, failure could deeply damage prospects for political resolution. With Salafi-jihadi groups having seized the initiative in much of the north, the south has in effect become the final stronghold and lone proving ground for non-ideological *thawri* factions. If Southern Front components falter – by, for example, seizing Deraa city but failing to restore a semblance of normalcy, while chaos and destruction continue as state institutions withdraw and collective punishment escalates[110] — fence-sitters might choose the regime or more radical opposition elements. Such failure

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defend Idlib's provincial capital, which fell quickly in March. While that damaged regime morale and weakened its narrative, Deraa's proximity to both Damascus and the opposition's Jordan-based supply line gives it higher strategic value.

[107] Crisis Group communications, Deraa-based activists, July 2015. An activist said Deraa civil affairs are managed by town-level local councils, divided into twelve offices, the most important of which are responsible for administering aid, medical services, education and maintaining data on local conditions. Effectiveness is limited by financial backing, much of which comes from worker's remittances, and an often chaotic operating environment, including regime bombing.

[108] Crisis Group communications, Deraa-based activists and NGO workers, July 2015.

[109] Crisis Group communications, Deraa-based activists, July 2015. An activist and NGO worker voiced a particularly bleak view: "Local councils lack the administrative and organisational experience ... to work effectively. They can't provide public services due to their lack of funding, structural weaknesses and lack of institutionalisation. This renders them, in essence, relief committees rather than local councils". Crisis Group communication, July 2015.

[110] The Deraa-based activist and NGO worker added: "If Deraa city is liberated, it will lead to a number of state institutions ceasing work there, and there will be an administrative vacuum in most such institutions. It will also create a new challenge for opposition forces in managing the city and the budget required to maintain services .... Opposition forces are essentially unqualified to run the city; they lack administrative and organisational expertise". Crisis Group communication, 25 June 2015. Administrative challenges could be compounded by Deraa residents returning from Jordan and, particularly, Za'atari camp. Crisis Group interview, NGO worker active in Deraa city, Amman, July 2015.

would at the least create more ungoverned space on which Salafi-jihadis could capitalise, and mean a further step in Syria's long cycle of radicalisation.[111]

Realising the benefits of a strengthened *thawri* opposition while minimising the risk of governance vacuums would require strategic shifts by the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, Jordan. If they are serious about preventing an expanding IS presence or Jabhat al-Nusra resurgence in the south, they may wish to examine such measures as the following, which, as discussed below, might also influence the decisions of other state actors in ways that would undermine Salafi-jihadi groups and improve conditions necessary for an eventual resolution of the war.

- The U.S. would need to dissuade, deter, or otherwise prevent the regime from conducting aerial attacks within, at minimum, those opposition-held areas in which this governance would be based. As has become clear throughout rebel-held areas, *thawri* opposition elements cannot build effective governance amid the death, destruction and general chaos wreaked by the regime's aerial collective-punishment tactics, particularly as they tend to target precisely those facilities (local government offices, hospitals, schools, etc.) necessary for it to emerge.[112] These attacks are a key factor driving the vicious cycle of radicalisation; stopping them would appear to be a necessary principal short-term objective of Syria policy (and indeed the broader strategy to counter violent extremism). Such an effort might begin in the south, where conditions for an enhanced U.S. role seemingly are currently most favourable, but ultimately would need to encompass the entire country.

  Ending regime air attacks on opposition-held territory would ideally be achieved through diplomatic means. If the Iran-P5+1 nuclear deal has indeed opened space for positive engagement on regional issues, perhaps Iranian and Russian officials who privately voice distaste for the regime's more unsavoury tactics could be convinced to finally press it to stop pummelling civilian neighbourhoods from the air. No such will, however, is yet evident in Tehran or Moscow, and the matter is already too deadly to await a laborious negotiation process. If no immediate diplomatic path is visible, the U.S. would need to pursue other means to ensure that such attacks cease and consider a range of concrete actions that might convince the regime and its backers that continued aerial attacks carry an increasingly high price.

- Jordan would need to shift its border policy, including reopening an official crossing point to facilitate trade, so as to allow higher volumes of reliable supply and access to an opposition authority.

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[111] The danger is pronounced given the fates of the two provincial capitals the opposition has won: Raqqa (2013) and Idlib (2015). The former has become IS's de facto Syrian capital; an Islamist coalition in which al-Nusra is among the strongest elements controls the latter.

[112] For example, an international NGO monitoring attacks on medical facilities noted a significant uptick in regime attacks on hospitals as it lost ground on several fronts in spring 2015, including multiple direct strikes in Idlib city after rebels captured it. Of 44 observed January-May attacks on medical facilities, 95 per cent were by aircraft. "Worst month yet for attacks on hospitals in Syrian conflict", Physicians for Human Rights, 18 June 2015. Referring to the prospect of rebel seizure of the rest of Deraa city, a Southern Front official active in civil society projects explained: "We will do our best to put things together on the civil side in newly liberated areas, as we have done elsewhere; we have a plan for civil administration of Deraa city, and the armed groups are on board. But the result [under present conditions] would not be a unified, coherent structure; to provide more effective civil governance in the south (as elsewhere) would ultimately require a no-fly zone". Crisis Group interview, Amman, June 2015.

B. *Perspectives in Amman and Washington*

If diplomacy proved insufficient to halt regime aerial collective punishment tactics in the south, additional steps by the U.S. and Jordan to deter or prevent such attacks and expand the flow of resources to opposition authorities would amount to significant escalations. Amman has sought to avoid open conflict with the regime and to place geographic limitations on rebel advances, out of concern for both regime retaliation and the prospect of renewed refugee flows that could result from stepped-up regime air strikes on populated areas of southern Syria.[113]

While a U.S.-led push to stop regime aerial attacks in the south could mitigate the latter risk, Jordanian officials express a range of views as to whether the potential benefits would justify the risk of publicly joining in such an escalation.[114] There is consensus among them, however, regarding the need for a southern Syria in which friendly opposition elements are stronger, Salafi-jihadis weaker, and living conditions sufficiently secure and sustainable to enable some refugees to return, thus reducing a huge burden on Jordan's society and economy.

The White House's calculus is more complicated. It has sought to avoid deeper involvement in the Syrian conflict and in particular is reluctant to escalate its role against the regime. This is due both to an assessment that the risks of a more robust policy are too high and the rewards too uncertain, and to the more specific concern that the regime's allies – in particular Iran or its proxies – might retaliate against U.S. personnel or interests elsewhere.[115] While the spread of IS throughout much of eastern Syria and western Iraq in 2014 led the U.S. to escalate its role inside both countries, it appears only to have reinforced the reluctance to further confront the regime. U.S. officials acknowledge publicly and privately that the regime's brutality fuels radicalisation, enabling IS's growth, but they cite concern that regime collapse would open additional space for Salafi-jihadi expansion as a principal reason why Washington should not put muscle behind rhetorical opposition to Assad's continued rule.[116]

Though Washington's concerns are understandable, the approach to which they have given birth arguably is counter-productive. The strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" IS announced in September 2014 added two components to U.S. Syria policy: air strikes targeting IS (and occasionally Jabhat al-Nusra elements) and an overt program (in addition to the covert support discussed above) to train and equip an exclusively anti-IS opposition fighting force. Yet, a year later, Salafi-jihadi power in Syria has not diminished and has probably risen. The approach of attacking IS while ignoring regime bombardment of civilian areas is strengthening

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[113] Crisis Group interviews, rebel, Jordanian, Western officials, October 2013-June 2015. Jordan hosts more than 625,000 registered Syrian refugees, but since mid-2013 (and in particular since July 2014) it has shifted border policy to dramatically limit refugee crossings into Jordan. See "Jordan: Syrians blocked, stranded in desert", Human Rights Watch, 3 June 2015.

[114] It is difficult to discern Jordan's position on the hypothetical prospect of a U.S.-led effort to halt regime aerial attacks in the south, as official messaging does not directly address this, and interviewees express a variety of views as to whether it would be in Jordan's interest and whether the government would welcome it. Crisis Group interviews, Jordanian and Western officials, October 2013-June 2015.

[115] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, October 2014-January 2015. The U.S. is especially concerned Iran-backed militias in Iraq might strike U.S. personnel there. Scepticism over what a more proactive U.S. policy could achieve is a common theme of White House public and private thinking on Syria and centres on the notion the impact of an increased role, particularly involving military force, is too unpredictable to justify costs (and perceptions of increased ownership) it might entail. See Philip Gordon (the most senior White House official focused on the Middle East, 2013-2015), "The Middle East is falling apart", *Politico*, 4 June 2015.

[116] Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington October 2014-July 2015.

important aspects of the Salafi-jihadi narrative and predictably attracting few Syrian recruits. It is a strategy with little prospect of success in the absence of a major overhaul. Finding ways to dissuade (or otherwise prevent) the regime from carrying out aerial attacks could be a key component of a better one.

C. *Improving Prospects for a Resolution of the War*

As described above, a U.S.-led effort to end aerial attacks in opposition-held areas of Deraa and Quneitra might enable largely non-ideological armed and civil opposition elements to strengthen their governance and overall political capacities, filling some of the vacuum left by the regime's withdrawals and erosion, while improving humanitarian conditions in the process. In addition to those direct benefits, there arguably would be potential to influence the behaviour of other external actors in ways that would aid both the struggle against Salafi-jihadis and improve overall prospects for an eventual resolution of the conflict.

First, U.S. action to halt regime air attacks in the south might provide a model for incentivising a change of tack by the rebels' state backers in the north. Ankara has long advocated a zone free of such attacks there, but poor coordination and divergent priorities with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. – including a reluctance in Ankara in particular to marginalise Jabhat al-Nusra[117] – has contributed to opposition inability to bring the regime to collapse or stem the growth of Salafi-jihadi groups. Washington accuses Ankara of insufficient effort to weaken Salafi-jihadis, and Ankara accuses Washington of lacking a coherent plan to address the main drivers of radicalisation in Syria. Rather than continue that exchange, a U.S. move to end regime aerial attacks in the south might send a more practical message of willingness to confront the regime if it means keeping out or pushing back Salafi-jihadis, its primary concern; if U.S. allies can help bring about a similar shift away from Salafi-jihadis in the northern balance of power, replicating the southern zone in the north would seem to become a viable option.

The southern dynamics also provide lessons for how it might be possible to accomplish such a shift in the intra-rebel balance. As previous Crisis Group reports noted, the armed opposition scene can change quickly in response to shifts in external support and ground performance. The Southern Front's rise is indicative of the potential for state backers to improve performance of vetted *thawri* opposition factions and shift the intra-rebel balance of power, when and where they coordinate their support and limit alternative streams of lethal aid. The north is more difficult, but the shift favouring non-ideological groups there in the first half of 2014, when support briefly was better coordinated, suggests the same rule can apply.[118] The south also shows what Salafi-jihadi groups learned early, but Western

[117] While Turkish officials identify IS as a threat, they express much less concern over Jabhat al-Nusra than U.S. and Jordanian counterparts. They emphasise that much of its ranks is composed of Syrians motivated by its effectiveness, not its Salafi-jihadi ideology, and they appear more optimistic that the group (or at least major elements) can ultimately be absorbed within the *thawri* rebellion or otherwise contained. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, April 2015. As a result, and in light of al-Nusra's battlefield effectiveness, policy has neither prioritised weakening it nor attempted to deter *thawri* rebels from tactical coordination with it.

[118] For analysis, see Crisis Group Report, *Rigged Cars*, op. cit. The northern intra-rebel balance in 2014 gives both positive and cautionary lessons: shifts in early 2014 by state backers to better coordinate their support (as in the south, via a single channel to vetted groups) contributed to the rapid rise of non-ideological factions (notably the SRF and Haraket Hazm) and constrained the resources of *thawri* Islamist groups, thus encouraging the latter to moderate their platforms so as to better appeal to state backers. Yet, the SRF and Hazm worked poorly together and failed in some cases to win local trust; as state-backer coordination deteriorated in the second half of 2014,

policy makers appear inclined to play down: the opposition spectrum is competitive; the best way to earn credibility and attract and maintain manpower is to demonstrate effectiveness against the regime. This has proven true for the Southern Front in 2014- 2015, as it did for Salafi-jihadi groups rising to prominence in 2012-2013.

The second potentially positive external impact of an effort to deter (or otherwise halt) regime air attacks in the south is that it would signal resolve to the regime's backers. While Russia attracts the most attention from Western policymakers, Iran and Hizbollah appear more influential on the ground and are becoming more so as the conflict continues.[119] Their calculations thus bear particular emphasis.

Officials in Tehran and southern Beirut recognise that the regime's erosion requires them to continually increase ground contributions, yet they view the price of the status quo as preferable to other options. This appears based on three assumptions: that Assad is most capable of holding the regime together (indeed is perhaps the only such figure);[120] that potential alternatives, including a political transition in which leadership shifted from Assad to some combination of his state-backed opponents, would dislodge Syria from Iran's "Resistance Axis";[121] and that the regime's backers can outlast states supporting the opposition in a proxy war of attrition, so that any negotiated end to the war would be on terms favourable to Tehran.[122]

Asked how such a resolution would look, Iranian and Hizbollah officials tend to describe a scenario in which the opposition's backers, having acknowledged that the war will not lead to Assad's removal, accept a gradual process of reform in which he would continue as president indefinitely, then stand for re-election at some future point; the result would be a Syria that remained in the "Resistance Axis" with a marginally more representative, less totalitarian government.[123]

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these non-ideological factions lost their comparative advantage and were vulnerable to Jabhat al-Nusra's divide-and-conquer campaign, which drove them from the country.

[119] Though Russian support is substantial, particularly in protecting the regime from attempts to pressure it via the UN Security Council and in providing military supplies (including for its aircraft), its importance is diminishing relative to that provided by Iran and Hizbollah as the latter's combat roles deepen and expand. Notably, Moscow has generally been unwilling or unable to elicit even minor concessions from Damascus, except on the September 2013 chemical weapons deal in which the threat of imminent U.S. military action was decisive. See Crisis Group's "Statement on a Syria Policy Framework", 27 April 2015.

[120] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah officials, Beirut, December 2013-May 2015.

[121] Crisis Group interview, senior Iranian official, Tehran, May 2015.

[122] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah and Iranian officials, Beirut and Tehran, February-June 2015. Iranian and Hizbollah officials do not believe the regime and they will recapture much lost territory militarily, but rather that they can maintain military stalemate long enough to convince at least some opposition backers, beginning with the U.S, that they need to negotiate an end to the war along the lines envisioned by Tehran. A senior Hizbollah official asserted: "It is a war of attrition for both sides, and I promise you: we will not be outlasted. Even if the war continues for another one to three years, the balance will remain the same". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, June 2015. Iranian and Hizbollah officials express confidence this war of attrition will be resolved in their favour. A senior Iranian official explained: "The war won't last another five-to-ten years. A political solution is coming, and this is now accepted by the Americans. The U.S. administration doesn't want more military involvement …. Sure, the U.S. may provide training and logistical support, but not more". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2015.

[123] Crisis Group interviews, Iranian officials, Tehran, May 2015; senior Hizbollah official, Beirut, June 2015.

That third assumption – that they can outlast the opposition's backers – is central to their assessment that the status quo is not only sustainable, but even favourable. It appears based in large part on their belief that Washington's increasingly narrow focus on IS and reluctance to confront the regime indicate that U.S. policy is shifting toward accepting continued Assad rule.[124] Progress toward a nuclear deal with Washington and fellow members of the p5+1 may have strengthened their overall impression of a U.S. effort to distance itself from current regional allies. If distance increases and the U.S. grows less insistent on Assad's departure, the thinking goes, the opposition's regional backers would eventually have to reassess their own positions.[125]

This confidence is difficult to square with the war's reality. Iranian and Hizbollah officials appear to be misreading the U.S. position. White House reluctance to escalate does not imply an openness to reverse policy on Assad; that would carry tremendous political costs, domestically and internationally, and further exacerbate the jihadi problem.[126] Moreover, the conflict's trajectory, erosion of regime combat capacity and possibility of a more hawkish U.S. president in January 2017 suggest Iran's negotiating leverage in Syria is more likely to deteriorate than improve, even as its costs continue to rise.

It would appear in Tehran's interest to seek a negotiated resolution soon, while its influence on the ground is formidable, rather than risk ending with little at the end of a long, costly war in which several key factors work against it: Iran lacks a loyal power base in Syria (unlike in Lebanon); is working against the country's demographic composition (unlike in Shiite-majority Iraq); has thoroughly alienated the majority of the population; and faces, in Saudi Arabia and Turkey, regional powers whose determination to avoid defeat in Syria appears to match its own. Yet, that is not how Iranian and Hizbollah officials view the conflict. So long as they maintain their optimistic assumption regarding the potential for a U.S. shift leading to resolution in their favour in the near term, they will have little reason to reconsider what they can reasonably hope to achieve and sustain in Syria, or their strategy for doing so.

A U.S.-led effort to end the regime's aerial attacks in southern Syria might help refute that assumption. It would demonstrate U.S. willingness to back rhetoric with meaningful action, but within a geographic scope that might dampen Iranian incentive to retaliate. Beyond indicating that the U.S. will not accede to Iran's preferred outcome, such an escalation would signal to Iran that the marginal returns on its investment in the status quo will further diminish. It would also send a signal that the cooperative relationship sought with Iran on nuclear matters should not be misinterpreted as the acceptance of a dominant role for Tehran in the region. As Crisis Group suggested in its 27 April statement on Syria, that message of resolve might usefully be paired with another indicating willingness to take the interests of the regime's external backers into account as part of a political resolution.

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[124] Crisis Group interviews, Hizbollah, Iranian officials, Beirut, Tehran, February-June 2015. A senior Iranian official said, "it is very significant that much of the world is now coming to accept Iran's nuclear capability. There is also rising acceptance of Iran's position on Syria: we have consistently said that this crisis does not have a military solution, and now others acknowledge this. They are coming to see the extremist threat as we do, and are questioning whether Assad is really a bigger threat than the opposition". Crisis Group interview, Tehran, May 2015.

[125] Prior to the July nuclear agreement, an Hizbollah official said it "may lead [opposition regional backers] to revisit some of their calculations on Syria; some of the expectations they have bet on, including the expectation of U.S. military intervention, will crumble. This might push them toward considering a deal [on Syria]". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2015.

[126] See Crisis Group's "Statement on a Syria Policy Framework", op. cit.

V. Conclusion

The Syria conflict presents policymakers with excruciating choices. Available options for shifting course tend to be limited and unappealing. Decision-makers within and outside the country have generally preferred to stick with status-quo approaches. Yet that, too, is a choice, and the status quo – it cannot be emphasised enough – is disastrous. Hundreds of Syrians continue to be killed each week, in addition to well over 200,000 already dead in the conflict. More than twelve million need assistance inside the country, and there are more than four million refugees. The war fuels radicalisation, generating a boom in extremism and sectarian polarisation with capacity to destabilise the surrounding region far beyond Syria's borders. As the war goes on, the viciousness of that radicalising cycle increases; so long as the military stalemate continues, we should expect that to remain the case.

Ending this war and escaping that vicious cycle is not a matter of time – it is a matter of decisions. Resolving the conflict would require fundamental shifts in approach by state backers on both sides: by the U.S. that it cannot contain Salafi-jihadi flames while ignoring the regime's role in stoking the fire; by the opposition's regional backers that neither they nor their rebel allies can eliminate Iran's influence in Syria via military means; and by Iran that the costs of upholding Assad's rule through the expanding military intervention of its Revolutionary Guard Corps and proxies are unsustainable.

It is the United States that is best placed to take the initiative to positively transform the status quo. Provided the July 2015 nuclear deal survives its test in Congress in September, the White House will have a fresh opportunity to turn to the Syrian portfolio. Steps to deter (or otherwise halt) aerial bombardment of civilian areas arguably would help create conditions on the ground more conducive to an eventual negotiated resolution and also help answer critics at home and abroad who doubt its will to address the role of Iran and its proxies in Syria. These steps would need to be paired with a diplomatic initiative aimed not only at Moscow (with which Washington is more comfortable engaging on Syria) but also at Tehran, building on relationships developed during nuclear negotiations.

Iran and the opposition's regional backers are less capable themselves of shifting the status quo. That the former will receive (via sanctions relief) additional resources to spend in Syria if it so chooses, and that the latter fully expect Tehran to do so suggests that their short-term incentives to invest in current approaches will continue to overshadow the long-term imperatives of addressing the fundamental shortcomings of their respective strategies.[127]

In southern Syria, the U.S. appears to have an opportunity to build on a positive local trend whose reinforcement might strengthen alternatives to Salafi-jihadis while clarifying the incentives and constraints perceived by the conflict's other external players. Both are probably vital if prospects of a negotiated resolution are to be improved. Given the prevailing currents of this war, however, there is no reason to assume that the conditions creating this opening will remain for long.

[127] Both the opposition's regional backers and Tehran escalated support to their respective Syrian allies prior to the nuclear deal and have signalled since that they will continue to do so. See, for example, June 2015 reports in pro-Hizbollah media of significant escalation in Iran-backed foreign fighters entering Syria to reinforce the regime's war effort; Eli Hanna, *Al-Akhbar*, 1 June 2015; Muhammad al-Ballout, *As-Safir*, 2 June 2015. See also the statement by Ali Akbar Velayati (senior foreign policy adviser to Iran's supreme leader) that Tehran's capacity to support Resistance Axis elements will increase following the nuclear deal; *Tasnim*, 15 August 2015, www.tasnimnews.com/english/Home/Single/829078. For a discussion of escalations by the opposition's regional backers, see Hassan Hassan, "Could the Iran deal lead to a Syria deal?" *Foreign Policy*, 15 July 2015.

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