Senate Testimony

Syria Spillover: The Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the Middle East

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross
Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies
Adjunct Assistant Professor, Georgetown University

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FDD
FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES
1726 M Street NW ● Suite 700 ● Washington, DC 20036

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies,it is an honor to appear before you to discuss the spillover effect of the Syria conflict.

The war in Syria has already produced tremendous ripple effects internationally, and they will only widen over time. The impact the Syria war will have on this generation of jihadists will be every bit the equal of what the Afghan-Soviet war meant for militants coming of age in the 1980s. Both conflicts should be considered first-order humanitarian disasters, justifiably inflaming passions throughout the Muslim world and beyond. Because of the devastation wrought by both wars, the various violent non-state actors who showed up to defend Muslims against their antagonists gained legitimacy from the clerical class and popularity at the street level. Unsurprisingly, both conflicts attracted a large number of Sunni Muslim foreign fighters from abroad, most of whom were drawn to the battlefield by grisly representations of what was happening and the desire to battle repressive forces who willingly shed innocent blood.[1] Despite the often noble intentions for being drawn to the battlefield, many foreign fighters joinedjihadist factions.

In the Afghan-Soviet war, relationships among jihadists were forged on the battlefield that endured for decades and profoundly changed the security environment in many countries: Al-Qaeda (AQ) itself was, in fact, one of the outgrowths of these relationships.But while Communists were the enemy in the Afghan-Soviet war, the Syrian war has taken on a more sectarian hue. Iran has steadfastly supportedSyrian president Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime, and the Quds Force, an elite unit within the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), has deployed in support of Assad's government. Hizballah militants and Shia irregular fightersfrom multiple countries have also entered Syria to support Assad. This dynamic has already produced sectarian ripples that did not exist in the Afghan-Soviet war.

In addition to the foreign fighters who have been drawn to the battlefield—estimated at as many as 11,000 by a recent International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) report[2]—two of Syria's neighbors, Lebanon and Iraq, have been hit particularly hard. The Syria conflict has bolstered Sunni jihadists in Lebanon and reignited sectarian tensions, manifested in shootings on the streets, bombings, and assassinations. Iraq has experienced even more troublesome sectarian violence than Lebanon, and in addition a major Iraq jihadist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), experienced a stunning revival due in significant part to events in Syria.

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[1]This testimony focuses on Sunni foreign fighters because they will have a profound impact on the future shape of the jihadist movement. However, the conflict has also attracted Shia foreign fighters to the battlefield, as well as other non-state actors who chose to enter the battle on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's side. For some of the best work on this subject, it is worth following Phillip Smyth's excellent feature "Hizballah Cavalcade" at the website *Jihadology* (www.jihadology.net). As of the writing of this testimony, the last foreign fighters in Syria to attract major media attention were fighting on Assad's side: They were a couple of L.A. gang members who swore they would fight Assad's "enemigos." One of the men, identifying himself as "Creeper from the G'd up 13 Gang," explained his role in Syria: "I'm gangbanging, homie." Middle East Media Research Institute, video clip #4170, March 1, 2014.

[2] Aaron Zelin et al., "Up to 11,00 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans," *ICSR Insight*, December 17, 2013.

ISIS's gains are reflected in more than 7,800 civilians dying in violent attacks in Iraq in2013 (making it the deadliest year the country has seen since the height of the civil war in 2006-07), and the dramatic offensive the jihadist group launched on January 1 of this year, in which it captured major parts of Fallujah and Ramadi.

A year or two agoit appeared that Assad's regime might collapse quickly, but the situation in Syria can now be described as a stalemate, and the U.S. intelligence community believes the war could ravage the country for another decade or more.[3]Though the possibility of an unexpectedly fast regime collapse should not be ruled out entirely, it is fair to say that a large part of the Assad regime's unexpected longevity can be attributed to two factors: outside support from Iran and Russia, and Assad's extraordinarily Machiavellian strategy.Assad has overwhelmingly concentrated his military resources and efforts on relatively moderate insurgent factions, which has ensured that jihadists play an increasingly prominent role on the rebel side.Regardless of the reprehensibility of the regime's strategy, it has served its purpose: the major role jihadists now play in the opposition has deterred Western countries and others from throwing significant weight behind the rebels. As the Syria conflict continues to rage, the problems associated with it will mount.

The U.S. has yet to match its desired outcome in Syria to the means it is willing to employ in addressing the conflict.This testimony will conclude by contextualizing our consistent failure to match ends to the means we are willing to employ in Syria, and it will suggest both a paradigmatic course and also specific policy prescriptions. The bottom line is that there is little we can do to end or otherwise "solve" the Syria conflict. The best we can do, most likely, is to understand the tremendous ripples that this war is producing, and attempt to contain the spillover.

Syria's Ongoing Civil War

As the respected Middle East scholar Emile Hokayem has noted, "Syria as the world has known it for the last four decades no longer exists."[4] Yet although his country is fractured, Assad may be able to avoid the collapse of his regime indefinitely.

As I mentioned previously, we should not rule out the possibility that Assad's regime could fall unexpectedly fast. It suffers from the combination of a moribund economy and a hollowed-out military that increasingly relies on conscripts, and the regime could be seriously threatened if rebel infighting declines and is combined with other major trends, such as battlefield reversals or growing defections on the government's side.Nonetheless, it is now clear that Assad's fall is not the inevitability that many analysts believed it to be a year ago, and the likeliest scenario is that which is now envisioned by the U.S. intelligence community:that is, the war continuing for another decade or more. And rather than the conflict ending with a clear winner that

[3] Adam Entous & Siobhan Gorman, "Behind Assad's Comeback, A Mismatch in Commitments," *Wall Street Journal*, December 31, 2013 (noting that "the civil war could last another decade or more, based on a Central Intelligence Agency analysis of the history of insurgencies that recently departed Deputy Director Michael Morell privately shared with lawmakers").

[4] Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* Kindle ed. (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2013), loc. 161 of 3617.

controls a unified state, it is entirely possible that it will terminate in "fragmented sovereignty," where a variety of state and non-state actors are dominant in different areas.[5] Such a possibility is consistent with director of national intelligence James Clapper's pronouncement in February 2014 testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives that Syria appears destined for "a perpetual state of a stalemate" in which "neither the regime nor the opposition can prevail."

For context on the present shape of the Syria war, Assad's overreactions had much to do with the early escalation of the struggle against him. As revolutionary fervor caught hold in the Arab world, Syria experienced a seemingly limited set of demonstrations beginning on March 15, 2011. The Deraa demonstrations were the most destructive. After a crowd burned down the city's Ba'ath Party headquarters, the regime "responded decisively,driving straight to the heart of the protest movement,the Omari Mosque."[6]There, the 4th Armored Division fired on unarmed protesters, killing up to fifteen. Images and video of the slaughter rapidly circulated through opposition media. This early incident is representative of the beginning of the conflict, where the regime's overreactions prompted escalation on the other side.

The regime faced internal and external problems. Soldiers began to defect rather than following orders to shoot protestors. On July 29, 2011, a video posted to YouTube by former Syrian army officers announced their defection and the formation of the Free Syrian Army. The Syrian government's excessesand its geopolitical position (Syria was allied with Iran, putting it at odds with the region's Sunni states) caused it to become increasingly isolated, and helped the opposition find sponsors. Following a series of meetings during the summer in Turkey and Qatar with those countries' approval, opposition forces made a further play for legitimacy and recognition by establishing the Syrian National Council (SNC) in October 2011. The SNC "quickly secured Turkish, Qatari and, to a lesser extent, Saudi political and material support."[7]

The Assad regime's increasing isolation was reflected in the Arab League's decision to suspend Syria in November 2011. Other regional leaders, including Jordan's King Abdullah and Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, called on Assad to resign.[8]

The opposition was nowhere near as organized as surface appearances may have made it seem. It was, in fact, beset by personality clashes, and failed to reflect Syria's diversity. Nonetheless, the combination of defections, Assad's isolation, and an increasingly potent opposition caused the regime to experience battlefield setbacks. As pressure mounted, the Syrian military both lost territory and also made tactical retreats. Analysts began to see it as inevitably doomed.

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[5]See discussion of fragmented sovereignty in Klejda Mulaj, "Violent Non-State Actors: Exploring Their State Relations, Legitimation, and Operationality," in Klejda Mulaj ed., *Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 7-10.

[6]Joseph Holliday, *The Struggle for Syria in 2011: An Operational and Regional Analysis* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2011), p. 13.

[7] Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*, loc. 1219 of 3617.

[8] Tony Badran, "How Assad Stayed in Power—And How He'll Try to Keep It," *Foreign Affairs*, December 1, 2011.

By now, however, Assad's regime is embattled and weakened, but has grown likelier to survive—even despite having crossed a U.S. "red line" by using chemical weapons against the opposition in August 2013. It is worth noting three major challenges the regime now confronts. First, Syria is about as isolated internationally as it could be (with the noteworthy exception of the support it receives from Iran and Russia, which will be discussed momentarily). Second, Syria's economy has been severely damaged by the civil war, and multiple reports have portrayed the regime as teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Third, the military's effectiveness has severely declined due to both attrition produced by the conflict and also significant numbers of defections. As a result, the regime has had trouble taking advantage of recent rebel infighting as an opportunity to regain territory. When it redeployed forces into Aleppo in January, for example, the regime was forced, due to hard limitations on its reliable manpower, "to give up control of the southern city of Jassem and the long-contested Ghouta neighborhood east of the capital, Damascus."[9]

Despite these weaknesses, Assad's position, and ability to survive, has been bolstered bytwo primary factors. First, his regime has been heavily supported by both Iran and Russia, both of which see this course as advancing their strategic interests. Iran doesn't want to lose its close ally, while Russia wants to maintain access to its naval base at Tartus, which it views as important to its ability to project power in the Mediterranean.[10]The role both Russia and Iran are playing feeds into the global jihadist narrative in discernible ways: Russian support for Assad conjures the image of external powers imposing tyrants upon the Muslim world, while Iran's rolemagnifiessectarian animosities. This sectarianism is further increased by the fact that Hizballah has deployed combatants to support Assad's regime, while Iran has helped to facilitate the entry of Shia irregular fighters from countries like Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Yemen.

A second factor bolstering Assad's chances of survival is his willingness to allow jihadists, and other factions viewed as malign by outside states, to flourish relative to other rebel factions. As previously alluded to, the regime has concentrated its military resources on fighting themore moderate opposition,while allowing extremist groups and other factions widely viewed as undesirables to become relatively strong. While the Syrian military has fiercely fought to recover territory controlled by the Free Syrian Army, it has not made similar efforts to prevent the jihadist groups Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS from holding territory. Further, the regime's pattern of releasing jihadist prisoners—but not those who might join more moderate rebel factions—during the course of the conflict suggests that it views making jihadists a prominent part of the rebellion as more important at this stage than defeating them or thinning their ranks.[11]

Assad appears to have followed a similar pattern with respect to Kurdish groups, undertaking a tactical retreat from northern Kurdish regions near the Turkish border.

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[9] "Assad Fails to Break Syrian Stalemate Despite Rebel Infighting,"*Financial Times*,Jan. 16, 2014.
[10] For information on Russia's naval base, see Christopher Harmer, "Backgrounder: Naval Base Tartus," Institute for the Study of War, July 31, 2012.
[11]Phil Sands, Justin Vela & Suha Maayeh, "Assad Regime Set Free Extremists from Prison to Fire Up Trouble During Peaceful Uprising,"*The National* (U.A.E.),Jan. 21, 2014; Ruth Sherlock, "Syria's Assad Accused of Boosting al-Qaeda with Secret Oil Deals," *Telegraph* (U.K.), Jan. 20, 2014.

Given Turkish support for the Syrian rebels, this retreat served a strategic purpose: Turkey has had significant troubles with Kurdish separatism, and Kurdish control of territory in Syria's north raises the possibility that a rebel victory could threaten Turkish territory. Turkey viewed Assad's retreat from Kurdish areas through this lens, as government sources told the media that Syria "deliberately left the three districts on the Turkish border in northern Syria to the control of the Democratic Union of Kurdistan (PYD), known as an affiliate of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)," and voiced concerns about a new PKK front opening up inside Syria.[12]

This is extraordinarily Machiavellian strategy has served its purpose. The major role jihadists now play in the Syrian opposition has deterred Western countries and others from throwing significant weight behind the opposition. Syrian democratic activist Haitham al-Maleh has described ISIS, with some justification, as "a mine planted by the Assad regime in the revolution's body to warn the international community of approaching or interfering in Syrian issues."[13]

Foreign FighterNetworks in Syria

One extraordinarily important aspect of the Syria conflict is the fact that the rebel side is highly popular throughout the Muslim world, and the jihad enjoys deep mainstream clerical support. Regional *ulema* widely believe that Syria represents a legitimate jihad in support of fellow Muslims, and the fight has been endorsed by such figures as Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Al-Azhar's Sheikh Hassan al-Shafai, and such organizations as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. At a Friday sermon in Mecca's Grand Mosque, senior cleric Shaikh Saoud al-Shuraym encouraged congregants to support anti-Assad rebels by "all means." To the extent that the jihad is dominated by salafi jihadists, includingal-Qaeda and its fellow travelers, the conflicthelps to legitimate them, boost their manpower, and attract financial support to their cause.

The emotional resonance of the conflict and success of the call for jihad can be seen in theenormous number of foreign fighters who have answered the call. As I noted earlier, the number of fighters who traveledto Syria from abroad to fight Assad's regime is estimated to be as high as 11,000, and even that number may be conservative. They have come from a large number of countries—around fifty, according to U.S. intelligence assessments.

Earlier, I drew a comparison between the Syria conflict and the Afghan-Soviet war. Similar to the Syria conflict, the rebel side in that conflict was extremely popular throughout the Muslim world, and the anti-Soviet fight was widely endorsed by clerics as a legitimate defensive jihad. Around ten thousand Arabs flocked to South Asia to help the Afghan cause.[14] The ripple effects of that conflict were tremendous, touching numerous countries. Al-Qaeda itself was a product of the Afghan-Soviet war, founded in

[12] Serkan Demirtas, "Ankara: Assad Leaves Turkish Border to Kurds,"*Hürriyet Daily News*, July 25, 2012.
[13]Nicholas Blanford, "What Syrian Rebel Infighting Means for Assad,"*Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 13, 2014.
[14]Mohammed M. Hafez, "Jihad after Iraq: Lessons from the Arab AfghansPhenomenon," *CTC Sentinel* (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point),Mar. 2008.

August 1988, in the waning days of the conflict.[15]At that time, Osama bin Laden and his mentor Abdullah Azzamagreed that the organization they had built during the course of the Afghan-Soviet war to support the fight against Russian occupiers shouldn'tsimply dissolve when the war ended, but rather its structure should be preserved to serve as "the base" (*al qaeda*) for future mujahedin efforts.[16]Veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad went on to play a critical role in the Algeriancivil war that claimed over 150,000 lives; and the Afghan-Soviet war left behind a wrecked country that would serve as a safe haven for a large agglomeration of jihadist groups. Thus, the ripples of the Afghan-Soviet war could be felt in a large number of far-flung places: while the fact that the conflict would have second-order consequences could have been predicted at the time, the exact reach of the Afghan-Soviet war's ripples was unpredictable.

Similarly, it can be said with certainty that the foreign fighters who have been drawn to Syria will prove to be profoundly important, and their impact on jihadism will likely reach places that analysts don't anticipate at present. One issue worth highlighting is European Muslims who have traveled to Syria to fight Assad's regime: the most comprehensive open-source estimate holds that up to 1,900 of the foreign fighters in Syria hail from Western Europe.[17] The possibility that these individuals could return and either carry out attacks or otherwise foster a militant milieu has made this issue a top national-security concern in several Western European countries.

The percentage of Western foreign fighters who might be expected to carry out attacks against the West is relatively low. In a recent comprehensive study examining foreign fighters in several conflicts, Norwegian researcher Thomas Hegghammer found that "no more than one in nine foreign fighters returned to perpetrate attacks in the West."[18] As Hegghammer details, there are two sides to this finding. First, it is far from true that "all foreign fighters are domestic fighters-in-the-making." But conversely, though this is a low percentage of the whole, it is nonetheless high enough to "make foreign fighter experience one of the strongest predictors of individual involvement in domestic operations that we know." Given the large numbers who have gone to the Syrian battlefield, there is clearly cause to view this as a concern.

But the largest impact of foreign fighters returning to their home countries is likely to be felt outside the West.The ICSR study names Jordan as the largest contributor of foreign fighters to Syria, with about 2,100 having joined the jihad.[19] Several Jordanians serve in prominent leadership roles within Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. Nusra's head *sharia* official is a Jordanian who holds a doctorate in Islamic law from the University of Jordan, and young Jordanians also serve as officials in Nusra's

[15]Indictment, *United States v. Arnaout*, 02 CR 892 (N.D. Ill., 2002), p. 2; *9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission onTerrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton,2004), p. 56.
[16]Tareekh Osama memorandum, 1988, introduced by prosecution atBenevolence International Foundation trial, Northern District of Illinois, 2002–2003.
[17] Zelin et al., "Up to 11,00 Foreign Fighters in Syria."
[18] Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?: Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review*,Feb. 2013, p. 10.
[19] Zelin et al., "Up to 11,00 Foreign Fighters in Syria."

military wing.[20] Combined with the significant Syrian refugee presence in Jordan and consequent strains on the country's economy, returning foreign fighters could have a drastic impact on Jordan.

ICSR names Saudi Arabia as the second largest contributor of foreign fighters in Syria, with over a thousand. Other estimates are even higher, ranging up to three thousand.[21] Saudi Arabia implemented a set of policies toward Syria early in the civil war that can only be described as short-sighted and potentially suicidal: it offered to commute the sentences of its prisoners on the condition that they go to Syria to fight Assad's regime.[22]More recently, Saudi Arabia has indicated that it will clamp down on its citizens traveling to Syria to join the jihad.However, the monarchy has a pattern of taking one step forward and two steps back in fighting jihadist militancy, and also is heavily invested in defeating Assad's regime. Thus, it is worth watching whether Saudi Arabia ends up deviating from its announced policies designed to stem the flow of citizens to Syria. Unfortunately for Saudi Arabia, its foreign fighters will be returning at a time when the country is experiencing increasing challenges based on natural demographic trends: Put simply, as its population grows, the country's oil wealth provides them fewer and fewer benefits. As Saudi Arabia experiences increasing financial problems, its ability to simply throw money at problems erodes, and thus it becomes more difficult to absorb such challenges as large amounts of returning foreign fighters.

ICSR's study names Tunisia as the third biggest contributor of foreign fighters, with about 970 Tunisians traveling to Syria; there are also higher estimates. The jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia has frequently posted notices of the martyrdom of Tunisians killed in Syria, and videos posted to YouTube are testament to the Tunisian presence in that conflict. Tunisia is a small country, and though the current challenge it faces from jihadist groups has been low in intensity, it may be vulnerable if it proves unable to absorb returnees.

As the Afghan-Soviet war demonstrates, the ripples of jihadists being drawn to major conflicts can also occur in unanticipated places. A recent report by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) notes that, in Syria, Indonesians are for the first time "going overseas to fight, not just to train, as in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and 1990s, or to give moral and financial support, as in the case of Palestine."[23] Currently the number of Indonesians in Syria is relatively small, estimated at around 50 by Indonesia's foreign ministry.Nonetheless,the Indonesian presence in Syria has raised fears that the conflict may breathe new life into Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which analysts previously considered moribund due to Indonesian security forces' crackdown against it. IPAC's report notes that the Syria war has already bolstered JI's prestige: when jihadists groups are at the forefront of a popular conflict, they will reap the benefit. Moreover,

[20] Rana al-Sabbagh, "Jordan Faces Growing Salafi-Jihadist Threat," *Al-Monitor*,Feb. 4, 2014.
[21] Taimur Khan, "Prince Mohammed Appointment Highlights Saudi Arabia's Terrorism Concerns Over Syria,"*The National* (U.A.E.), Feb. 25, 2014.
[22] Michael Winter, "Report: Saudis Sent Death-Row Inmates to Fight Syria," *USA Today*,Jan. 21, 2013.
[23]*Indonesians and the Syria Conflict*, Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict Report No. 6, Jan. 30, 2014, p. 1.

IPAC suggests that the Syria conflict could magnify sectarian tensions in Indonesia by increasing anti-Shia sentiment, and also that returning mujahedin may "bring new life, leadership and ideas to the radical movement at home."[24]

Growing Sectarian Strife in Lebanon

The Syria conflict has allowed Sunni jihadists to experience significant gains in Lebanon, and has produced a tremendous resurgence of sectarian conflict. The major jihadist group that has gained since the conflict began is the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB), named after bin Laden's mentor.

As the U.S. Department of State has explained, AAB's formation was announced in a July 2009 video that claimed credit for a rocket attack against Israel.[25] There are two different branches of AAB. The Lebanese branch is called the Ziad al-Jarrah Battalions, named after a Lebanese citizen who was one of the 9/11 hijackers, and it has primarily been known for occasional rocket strikes on Israel. Like ISIS, AAB was focused on benefiting from the Syria conflict, and late AAB emir Majid bin Muhammad al-Majid issued guidance regarding what kind of attacks to avoid in Syria in order to win over the population.[26]

AAB had low manpower prior to the onset of the Syrian conflict, with perhaps 150 men in the group's ranks. Its growing capabilities can be seen in recent attacks that it carried out inside Lebanon. The most prominent attack AAB carried out was the November 19, 2013 bombing of the Iranian embassy in Beirut. This attack is indicative of both AAB's growing capabilities—Iran's embassy is not an easy target—and also growing sectarianism in Lebanon. AAB also launched a twin suicide attack in Beirut last month that struck an Iranian cultural center.

AAB's attacks come within the context of escalating violence in general, and sectarian violence in particular, inside Lebanon. Some of the early attacks following the onset of anti-Assad protests in Syria struck at U.N. forces, including a May 2011 roadside bomb that struck a U.N. convoy near Sidon, and a July 2011 bomb attack that injured five French U.N. peacekeepers, also near Sidon. U.N. peacekeepers were struck by a roadside bomb for a third time in December 2011, prompting Lebanese prime minister Najib Mikati to describe these attacks on peacekeepers as targeting "Lebanon's stability and security."[27]

In addition to these anti-U.N. attacks, occasional violence broke out between anti-Assad protesters and Tripoli's Alawite communities, but clashes became more frequent andmore sectarian over time. A variety of incidents demonstrate the progressive growth in sectarian strife:

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[24]Ibid., p. 10.
[25]U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations,"May 30, 2013.
[26] Bill Roggio, "Abdullah Azzam Brigades Names Leader, Advises Against Attacks in Syria's Cities," *Long War Journal*,June 27, 2012.
[27] Anthony Shadid, "U.N. Peacekeepers Wounded in Southern Lebanon Attack," *New York Times*,Dec. 12, 2011.

- The arrest and killing of prominent Lebanese Sunni figures in May 2012 produced instability: after authorities arrested Islamist figure Shadi al-Mawlawi, resulting street protests descended into violence that killed 10, and the shooting death of Sheikh Ahmad Abdel-Wahad later that month similarly produced rage and unrest.
- In June 2012, after a Lebanese Shia was arrested for firebombing and shooting up the offices of New TV, which was critical of Assad's regime, Shia gunmen erected roadblocks in Beirut, burning tires and firing automatic weapons into the air.[28]
- In July 2012, after a Damascus bombing killed several regime figures close to Assad, celebrations in the Tripoli's Sunni neighborhood Bab al-Tabbeneh descended into clashes with Alawite residents of the Jabal Mohsen neighborhood, leaving one person dead. Clashes between residents of these two neighborhoods have proved to be an enduring feature of how the Syria conflict is being felt in Tripoli.
- In October 2012, a bomb blast in Beirut killed Lebanese intelligence chief Wissam al-Hassan was assassinated, with Syria strongly suspected. This raised immediate concerns about inflaming sectarian tensions, as "black smoke from burning tires ignited by angry men choked the streets of a few neighborhoods in the city" before night fell.[29] Al-Hassan's assassination and the subsequent backlash of violence has had huge repercussions in Lebanon, greatly destabilizing politics and leading to a marked escalation in violence in 2013.

Bombings would further escalate sectarian tensions. On July 9, 2013, a car bomb exploded in Hizballah-dominated territory in southern Beirut, injuring over 50 people. This attack "increased fears that the spillover from the war in neighboring Syria was entering a dangerous new phase."[30] About a week later, gunmen assassinated Mohammad Darra Jamo, a pro-Assad media commentator, in his Sarafand home.[31] On August 15, 2013, a car bomb struck a Hizballah stronghold in southern Beirut again, killing 20 and wounding over 100 people. A Sunni Islamist group claimed credit, and promised to continue striking at Hizballah. On November 19, 2013, AAB carried out its already described bombing of the Iranian embassy in Beirut. The attack killed at least 22 people, including Iran's cultural attaché, and wounded over 100. On December 4, 2013, high-ranking Hizballah leader Hassane Laqees was assassinated, shot at close range as he parked his car near a south Beirut apartment that he used.[32]On January 2, 2014, another bomb struck a Hizballah-dominated area in south Beirut, killing at least five and injuring more than 50.

Sunnis were also targeted by bombings. On August 23, 2013, powerful bomb

[28] Rob Nordland, "Assad Supporters Suspected in New Beirut Incidents," *New York Times*,June 26, 2012.
[29]Anne Barnard, "Blast in Beirut is Seen as an Extension of Syria's War," *New York Times*,Oct. 19, 2012.
[30]Anne Barnard, "Car Bombing Injures Dozens in Hezbollah Section of Beirut,"*New York Times*, July 9, 2013.
[31]Oliver Holmes, "Gunmen Kill Pro-Assad Figure in Lebanon as Syria War Spreads,"Reuters, July 17, 2013.
[32]Anne Barnard, "Major Hezbollah Figure, Tied to Syrian War, is Assassinated Near Beirut," *New York Times*,Dec. 4, 2013.

blasts struck two Sunni mosques in Tripoli whose imams had ties to Syrian rebels (the Al-Taqwa and Al-Salam mosques), killing at least 42 and wounding about 600. The level of carnage in these attacks hadn't been seen in Lebanon since the 1980s. On December 27, 2013, former Lebanese finance minister and U.S. ambassador Mohamad Chatah (a member of the Sunni community) was killed by a car bomb. Chatah's vocal opposition to Hizballah and the Assad regime made the list of possible perpetrators rather clear.

Lebanon-based Alawites have also been the victims of sectarian violence. On February 20, 2014, an official in the pro-Assad Arab Democratic Party (ADP), Abdel-Rahman Diab was shot and killed by masked gunmen on a motorcycle while driving on the coastal Mina highway. As news of his killing spread, ADP fighters in the hotspot Jabal Mohsen neighborhood "began sniping at their rival neighborhoods of Mallouleh and Mankoubin."[33]

The sectarian strife in Lebanon is particularly intense, but the Syria war has also magnified sectarianism throughout the region, and beyond. As researchers Aaron Y. Zelin and Phillip Smyth demonstrate, the way this conflict has lined up—with Sunni salafists battling Alawites and Iranian-backed Shias—has caused dehumanizing sectarian language to become a more common part of discourse.[34] Zelin and Smyth note that "many players are pursuing a long-term dehumanization strategy because they view this as an existential cosmic religious battle between salafi Sunnism and Khomeinist Shiism." In turn, there have been sectarian incidents not only in the region, but in countries further from the main battlefield, such as Australia, Azerbaijan, Britain, and Egypt.

As for Lebanon, the spillover of the Syrian conflict can be seen on three levels. The first is the increase in sectarianism that has blossomed into violence within Lebanon, as I have detailed at some length. Second, there is the increase in conflict between Syria and Lebanon: Syria has carried out cross-border attacks against rebel targets in Lebanon. Third, the growing presence of refugees from Syria is putting an increasing strain on the Lebanese economy and society.

Resurgent Jihadism in Iraq

At the time of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, ISIS, which is the successor to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), "was still able to conduct attacks, but theorganization was isolated, disrupted, and did not posean existential threat to the state," as demonstrated by the fact that, "from September 2010to December 2011, monthly fatalities in Iraq stabilizedin the 300-400 range."[35] The group has experienced a dramatic renewal since then: in 2013, more than 7,800 civilians lost their lives in violent attacks, while ISIS was able to launch a stunning offensive that captured large portions of Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014.

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[33]Misbah al-Ali, "Pro-Assad Party Issues Ultimatum Over Official's Killing," *Daily Star* (Lebanon), Feb. 20, 2014.
[34]Aaron Y. Zelin & Phillip Smyth, "The Vocabulary of Sectarianism," *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 29, 2014.
[35] Jessica D. Lewis, *Al-Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, Sept. 2013), p. 9.

Factors other than Syria also played a role in ISIS's rebound, but the Syria war has also helped bring new life to the jihadist group due to the already explained popularity and legitimacy that the Syria jihad enjoys. When the Syria conflict escalated, ISIS already had an existing infrastructure that gave itone of the best ground games among rebel factions, and which helped the group gain territory and prestige. In turn, it also attracted additional resources and more recruits. The symbiotic relationship between the Syria conflict and ISIS's resurgence in Iraq is further illustrated by administration officials' belief that "most" suicide bombers striking inside Iraq during a recent surge in the tactic's use "are coming in from Syria."[36]

The Syria conflict has strengthened ISIS in four major ways. First, ISIS experienced a surge in popularity by being at the forefront of a popular jihad, though its brutal tactics could undercut this gain. Second, the abundance of people willing to fight the Assad regime provided the group with an easy source of recruits.Today, ISIS is estimated to have around 7,000 fighters in its ranks.[37]Third, the conflict made funding easier to obtain, both from external financiers and also through extorting "tax" revenues from citizens and militarily capturing industries in Syria.(As will be discussed subsequently, ISIS's recent expulsion from al-Qaeda likely diminishes its external sources of funding.) And a fourth factor contributing to ISIS's gains has been its ability tocontrol territory in Syria and otherwise operate from the Syrian side of the border. Iraqi deputy interior minister Adnan al-Asadi has explained that ISIS "is deployed in vast desert areas on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian borders that are difficult for any army to control," which makes Iraq's fight against ISIS"require a lot of time and resources.[38]

One of ISIS's striking achievements last year was the July 2013 prison break from the notorious high-security Abu Ghraib prison outside of Baghdad. The tactics it employed included suicide and car bombs, an attack against another prison in Taji as a diversion, and inside assistance from some of the personnel charged with guarding the prison.[39] An Iraqi security official told Reuters that the attack was "obviously a terrorist attack" designed to "free convicted terrorists with al-Qaeda."[40] The most commonly cited figure for the number of prisoners who managed to escape is 500, and there was a particularly high concentration of important ISIS leaders and operatives in this group. Given the manner in which prison breaks and prisoner releases have bolstered the jihadist movement in the past, the Abu Ghraib incident is likely to magnify the challenges that Iraq faces.

One issue of immediate relevance regarding the future of ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Syria jihad is ISIS's expulsion from the al-Qaeda network on February 2, 2014, when al-Qaeda's senior leadership announced it was no longer affiliated with ISIS.This

[36] Senior administration official, U.S. Department of State, "Background Briefing on U.S.-Iraq Political and Diplomatic JCC Meeting and the U.S.-Iraq Bilateral Relationship Under the Strategic Framework Agreement," Aug. 15, 2013.
[37] "What ISIS, an Al-Qaeda Affiliate in Syria, Really Wants," *The Economist* Jan. 20, 2014.
[38] Harith Hasan, "ISIS Exploits Weak Iraqi, Syrian States," *Al-Monitor*, Nov. 29, 2013.
[39] Adam Schreck & Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Abu Ghraib Prison Break: Hundreds Of Detainees, Including Senior Al-Qaeda Members, Escape Facility," Associated Press, July 22, 2013.
[40] Kareem Raheem & Ziad Al-Sinjary, "Al-Qaeda Militants Flee Iraq Jail in Violent Mass Break-Out," Reuters, July 22, 2013.

separation was a long time coming. ISIS had been fighting with other Syrian rebel factions, and al-Qaeda's senior leadership ordered it to submit to mediation to resolve these tensions. ISIS paid lip service to these demandsbutin practice flouted the mediation orders. Though there was a great deal of behind-the-scenes maneuvering between the two, ultimately al-Qaeda issued a statement announcing that ISIS was no longer part of the organization.

There was an immediate escalation in tensions in Syria following ISIS's expulsion from AQ.After other rebel factions increasingly targeted ISIS, it has largely retreated to its northern Syria stronghold of Raqqa, which it believes to be the most defensible position during a difficult and uncertain time. There will also be implications for the shape of jihadism beyond the region. ISIS had been in open defiance of al-Qaeda's senior leadership (AQSL)until it was finally expelled from the organization. If it prospers despite defying al-Qaeda's leadership, does that weaken AQSL's ability to have influence over other affiliates? Might AQ financiers and potential recruits throw their weight behind competing jihadist sources of power? There are some signs of the strains being placed on the al-Qaeda network by this separation. Jihadist forumsnow feature users openly siding with ISIS, and condemning al-Qaeda's recognized branches in Syria. Further, jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda are deeply divided over how to address the split between ISIS and al-Qaeda.

The stakes involved in this question were raised significantly at the end of February when Abu Khalid al-Suri, a longtime leader within al-Qaeda and one of the founding members of the Syrian rebel group Ahrar al-Sham, was killed by a suicide bomber, with ISIS being blamed by many jihadists, including by Ahrar al-Sham.[41]

Though the fragmentation of al-Qaeda is one possible outcome of the ISIS-AQ split, some public sphere analysis has gotten ahead of the facts in this regard. ISIS itself risks weakness and fragmentation. Major clerics like Abdallah Muhammad al-Muhaysini have called for ISIS fighters to defect to other jihadist factions.[42] ISIS's retreat to Raqqa—abandoning such sources of income as Deir al-Zour's grain mills and factories in the process—is indicative of its feelings of vulnerability in Syria. And ISIS has seen new competitors emerge even inside Iraq. In late February, a new jihadist group called Al-Murabitin Front in Iraq announced its formation, something that many online jihadists believe to be a new al-Qaeda branch designed to counter ISIS's influence.[43] Al-Murabitin has already claimed its first attacks in Iraq, posting statements to the Hanin jihadist web forum claiming bomb attacks against Iraqi military vehicles.[44]

The ISIS-AQ split is an important inflection point that may have an enormous impact on jihadism within Syria and beyond. The ramifications warrant close attention.

Conclusion

[41]Maria Abi-Habib, "Al-Qaeda Emissary in Syria Killed by Rival Islamist Rebels,"*Wall Street Journal*,February 23, 2014.
[42] Thomas Joscelyn, "Pro-Al-Qaeda Saudi Cleric Calls for ISIS Members to Defect," *Long War Journal*, February 3, 2014.
[43]BBC Monitoring in English, Feb. 26, 2014.
[44]BBC Monitoring in English, Feb. 28, 2014.

The Syria war is already a major tragedy. It is likely to have a tragic ending, too, and the U.S. is probably unable to avert that even if it chooses to become far more deeply involved in the country's civil war.

At a policymaking level, the U.S.'s response to developments in Syria can best be described as confused. We haven't defined our desired end state: we seem to vaguely know what we *don't* want to happen, but have little or no idea how to get there. Nor have we defined the kind of means we are willing to devote in pursuit of whatever goals we think are in our strategic interest. What do we want? What are we prepared to do to achieve it?

It is also important to bear in mind that the more involved we choose to be, the greater the danger that the U.S. will be further drawn into the conflict in ways that we do not intend. I believe that the U.S. should choose a course of limited engagement for several reasons:

- The U.S.'s strategic interests in Syria *that it can realistically achieve* are relatively low.
- It is obvious that the U.S. doesn't understand the players on the ground well, and so will have great difficulty selecting a desirable set of players to back.
- Indeed, it is highly likely that U.S. aid to rebel factions will fall into jihadist hands.
- There are cognizable risks of the U.S. being drawn into the Syria quagmire beyond what it intends.

Let us not sugarcoat what a strategy of limited engagement means. I have noted that it's possible the Assad regime could collapse faster than anticipate; but if the U.S. chooses a strategy of limited engagement, we have to be prepared for the converse possibility, that Assad may crush the rebels. It comes down to a question of tradeoffs, and the fact that there are costs to any option the U.S. might choose.

A strategy of limited engagement is not the same as a strategy of non-engagement. A limited-engagement strategy would recognize that the U.S. is probably incapable of truly addressing Syria's problems—certainly not at an acceptable cost—and so our overarching priority is containing the spillover. One priority for this strategy should be ameliorating the humanitarian crisis that the Syrian war has created, focusing efforts on refugees from Syria. There are both strong moral and humanitarian reasons for doing so, but also strategic reasons: the potential for radicalization within the refugee problem is a real concern.

It is at the very least acceptable, and perhaps desirable, for the U.S. to provide small arms to rebel factions. The harm in doing so is relatively small if these arms fall into the wrong hands, given the large amount of light weaponry that is already in Syria; and the U.S. can derive specific benefits from providing light arms to rebels. Those benefits should not involve trying to lengthen or draw out the conflict; but, if the policy is implemented right, it can provide the U.S. with both a presence and platform. The U.S. might use this position to gather intelligence and better map the rebel factions; and it may be able to gain some degree of influence over the rebels, although the potential for gaining influence should not be overstated.

There have been suggestions that the U.S. should send anti-tank or anti-aircraft weapons to Syrian rebels. Such a course presents significant risks that the weaponry would end up in jihadist hands, or the hands of others who would wish harm to the United States or its allies. For this reason, under the approach I suggest the U.S. should refuse to escalate by providing this more advanced weaponry, unless a) a clear and specific strategic interest can be advanced by the provision of imagery, and b) the U.S. can ensure to its satisfaction that the weapons will not end up in jihadist hands. At present, neither of these conditions exist.

One of the fundamental dilemmas the U.S. must confront in the twenty-first century security environment is the reality of severely constrained resources. The U.S. no longer has the luxury of living in the unipolar world that existed a dozen years ago. Not only is the U.S. now incapable of responding with full vigor to every perceived threat—doing so would ensure that we lack the resources to advance our most pressing interests—but we will also be increasingly challenged, including by those we regard as our allies.

Just as we no longer have the luxury of living in a unipolar world, we also no longer have the luxury of being able to muddle through with poor foreign-policy strategy and expect that there will be no costs. This means that we will have to carefully consider what kind of resources and commitments we are willing to make in advance of any potential commitment. When the U.S. drew a red line over Syrian chemical weapons use that it was apparently unable to enforce, that resulted in real damage to other countries' perception of what U.S. security guarantees mean.

One sad reality of the twenty-first century is that lives will often be lost in other parts of the world, and we won'tbe able to do anything about it. This should give us no comfort, butwe must be realistic. The course to maintaining American power in the twenty-first centurybegins with *conserving* our resources, and in Syria achieving real strategic gains at an acceptable cost will be difficult.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.