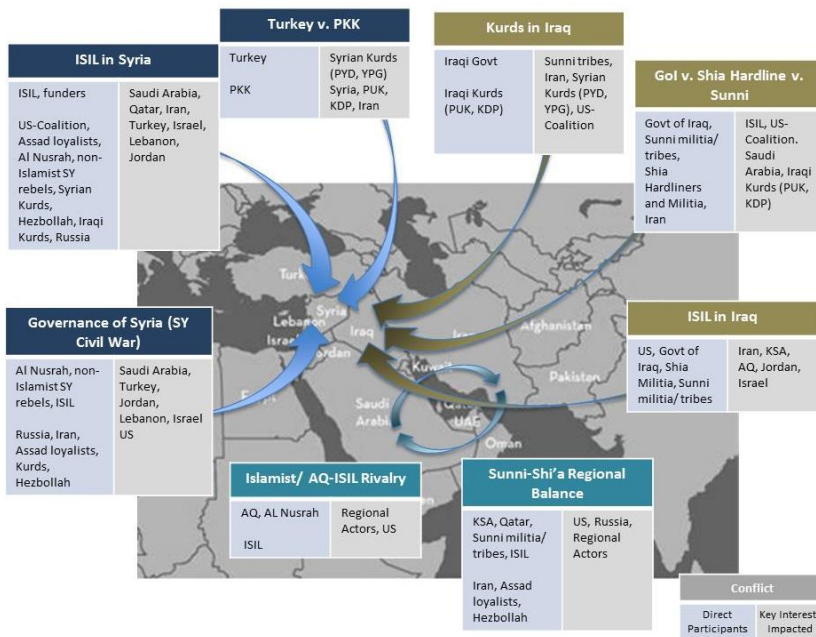March | 2016

Unpacking the Regional Conflict System surrounding Iraq and Syria

Part I: Characterizing the System

Deeper Analyses.
Clarifying Insights.
Better Decisions.

Unpacking the Regional Conflict System Surrounding Iraq and Syria

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NB: *This is Part I of a larger study exploring the dynamics of the central Middle East conflict system. It describes the system and why it is critical to assess U.S. security interests and activities in the context of the entire system rather than just the conflicts (e.g., defeat of ISIL) in which the U.S. is most interested. Part II describes the analytic approach used to assess regional dynamics and regional futures based on the alignments and conflicts among three critical drivers: actor interests, resources and resolves. Part III illustrates the analytic process applied to 20-plus actor over five of the eight conflicts. The final results are presented in a Power Point briefing.*
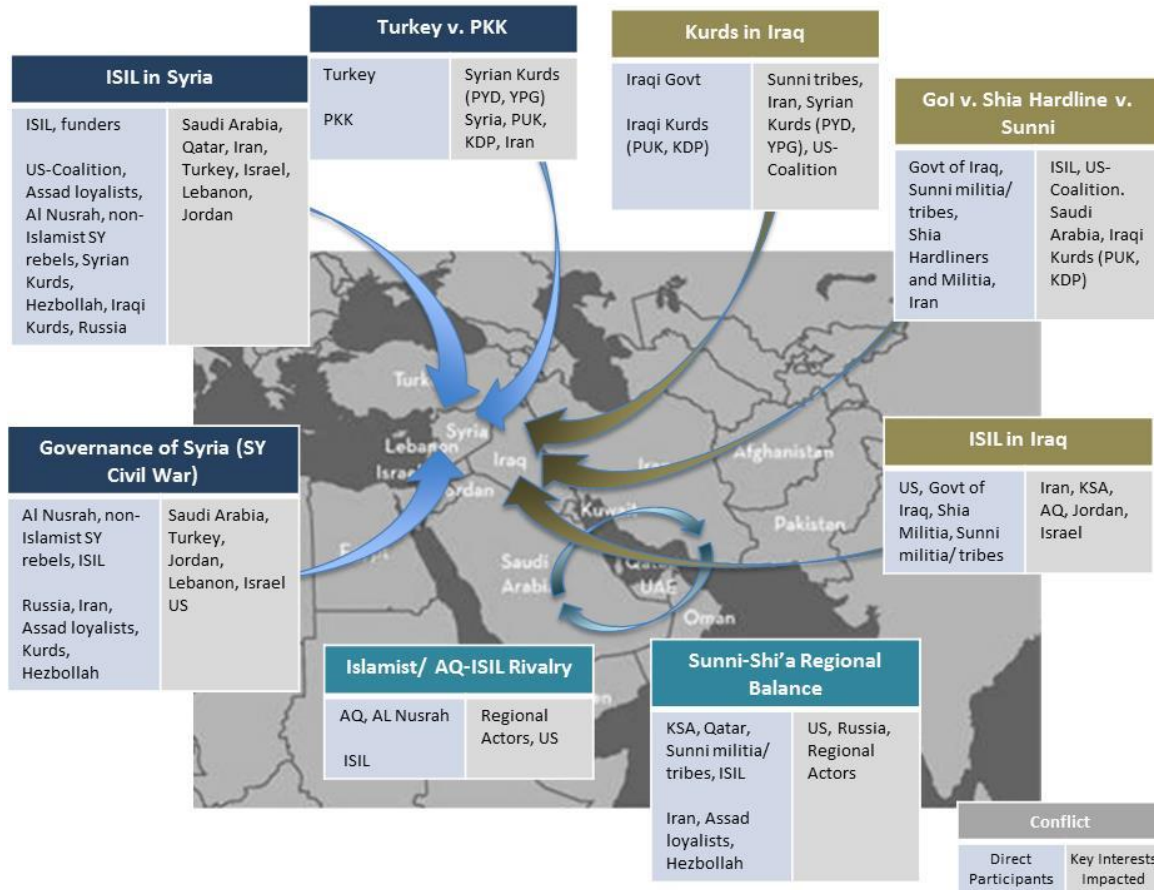
Part I: Characterizing the System

The nature of "the" conflict, or: Why there are no sides

At the beginning of U.S. involvement in the war against ISIL, many U.S. analysts and planners tended to treat the defeat of ISIL as two issues: defeating ISIL in Syria and defeating ISIL in Iraq. There are good reasons for the initial focus on Iraq, including the more significant U.S. interests, relations and sunk costs. As ISIL's territorial gains progressed, however, the situation became more commonly viewed as a single, cross-border conflict. The reason the conflict engulfing Syria and Iraq is so difficult to grasp is that what many view as one or two conflicts is in reality a complex web of at least eight distinct militarized disputes happening simultaneously in pretty much the same space.[1] While some of the conflicts have overlapping participants, possible outcomes, and similar interests, none of the eight are the same on all counts.[2]

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[1] The colors of the conflict headings in the graphic indicate the general location of the current conflicts. Blue indicates fighting and violence that occurs primarily in Syria; khaki indicates conflict mainly in Iraq and teal represents regional rivalries.

[2] The actors included in the larger study are: Hezbollah, Iran, ISIL, the Abadi Government of Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Iraqi Kurds (PUK, KDP), Syrian Kurds (PYD, YPG), Iranian Kurds (PDKI, PAKJ), Lebanon, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Shi'a Militia (Iraqi), Sunni Tribal Elites, Free Syrian Army, Revolutionary Command Council, AQ/ Al Nusrah Front, Syrian Government (Assad and Loyalists), Turkey and the US.

8 Co-located Near East Conflicts – different actors, different stakes, multiple sides

ISIL in Syria	
ISIL, funders	Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan
US-Coalition, Assad loyalists, Al Nusrah, non-Islamist SY rebels, Syrian Kurds, Hezbollah, Iraqi Kurds, Russia	

Turkey v. PKK	
Turkey	Syrian Kurds (PYD, YPG) Syria, PUK, KDP, Iran
PKK	

Kurds in Iraq	
Iraqi Govt	Sunni tribes, Iran, Syrian Kurds (PYD, YPG), US-Coalition
Iraqi Kurds (PUK, KDP)	

GoI v. Shia Hardline v. Sunni	
Govt of Iraq, Sunni militia/ tribes, Shia Hardliners and Militia, Iran	ISIL, US-Coalition. Saudi Arabia, Iraqi Kurds (PUK, KDP)

Governance of Syria (SY Civil War)	
Al Nusrah, non-Islamist SY rebels, ISIL	Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel US
Russia, Iran, Assad loyalists, Kurds, Hezbollah	

ISIL in Iraq	
US, Govt of Iraq, Shia Militia, Sunni militia/ tribes	Iran, KSA, AQ, Jordan, Israel

Islamist/ AQ-ISIL Rivalry	
AQ, AL Nusrah	Regional Actors, US
ISIL	

Sunni-Shi'a Regional Balance	
KSA, Qatar, Sunni militia/ tribes, ISIL	US, Russia, Regional Actors
Iran, Assad loyalists, Hezbollah	

Conflict	
Direct Participants	Key Interests Impacted

We misdirect ourselves if we insist on looking for a consistent alignment of actors - "sides" - across this complex, overlapping and multi-tiered system. Because the same actor can have different widely interests at stake in different conflicts we cannot assume a priori that co-participants like Hezbollah and the U.S. who share preferences over certain outcomes (e.g., the defeat of ISIL in Syria) in one or more of the conflicts will share objectives in the others. Analysis of the actors interests that shape events in the region shows actors can sometimes agree on which is the worst outcome in a given dispute, while being in serious disagreement over which is the best outcome in that same dispute. For example, in the Syrian Civil War Jaish al Fatah and the Assad regime agree that ISIL should not be allowed to expand the self-proclaimed Caliphate over large areas of Syrian territory; however they disagree intensely over who *should* govern Syria. The reverse can also be true: Turkey, the U.S. and the non-Islamist Syrian opposition might agree that the best outcome in the Syrian Civil War would be replacing the regime with leaders from the non-Islamist Syrian opposition; because they have different arrays of core interests there is less agreement over whether the worse outcome would be the fall of the regime accompanied by ISIL expansion, or, Assad's regaining control in Syria.

Why is this important?   First, coming to grips with these differences – what we might think of as the limits or tipping points of cooperation between actors – is critical for estimating what other actors may do in response to changing conditions in the region. Second, failure to appreciate and manage the broader context within which our counter-ISIL efforts occur leaves us vulnerable to missteps and strategic surprise simply because we have not considered the impact of our actions beyond the battle against ISIL. In fact, looking more broadly highlights a number of scenarios in which the defeat of ISIL, for example accomplished by further alienating the Sunni minority from any political system in Iraq, or by tipping the balance in Iran-Saudi power politics, would actually do more damage to our counter-terror efforts than not having done so.

The remainder of Part I outlines the core issues for eight militarized disputes in the conflict system. To demonstrate what we may fail to recognize about the broader threats to US interests we consider the impact of the total defeat of ISIL in Syria and Iraq on the regional conflict system.

U.S. Interests

First a word on U.S. interests. Very few if any of the proposed solutions to the problem of ISIL, or critiques of the Administration's strategy that emerged in the light of the attacks in Lebanon and France make reference to what U.S. national interest really are. Practitioners and the public are rightly confused: it is not always simple to glean from leaders' speeches or even policy guidance what U.S. interests are in a particular circumstance. The distinction drawn here is between interests (e.g., avoiding attack on allies, protecting the US homeland) and the means (e.g., containment, counter-terror) that have been used over the years to promote and protect them. "Defeat of ISIL" is neither a national interest nor a strategy; it is an objective relative to the national security interest of protecting the U.S., its citizens and assets. Despite this lack of clarity, it is nevertheless the case that core U.S. national interests have remained relatively consistent over time. Relative to the Middle East U.S. national interests can be articulated as: defending the homeland and U.S. assets abroad from attack, and maintaining sufficient stability around the world to allow for trade and economic expansion. From these interests follow three of our persistent objectives in the Middle East: retaining access to important resources; countering the threat of terrorist attack against the U.S. and allies; and avoiding broader regional warfare involving U.S. allies that may draw in the U.S. and/or incentivize arms build-ups in a region counting at least three nuclear capable states.[3]

Describing the Disputes in the Conflict System

While there are certainly additional rivalries and long-standing animosities across the region that remain potential flash points around which larger-scale fighting might erupt (e.g., Iran-Israel; U.S.-Russia contest for regional influence; internal Kurdish clashes; the final status of Kurds in Syria) for the sake of scope the conflict system discussed here was limited by two conditions: 1) the specific conflict directly impact events in and around Iraq and Syria; and 2) it involve at least two sides currently engaged in militarized (as opposed to criminal) violence. The eight conflicts meeting these conditions are:

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[3] The U.S. certainly has domestic political (e.g., support of Israel) and international influence interests in the region as well.

Conflict	Core Issue
Syrian Civil War	*Political and territorial control over all or part of a Syrian state*
ISIL in Syria	*ISIL's ability to operate within and control Syrian territory*
Turkey versus the PKK	*Survival of the PKK*
Kurds in Iraq	*Degree of Kurdish autonomy*
Iraq govt. v. Shi'a hardline v. Sunni	*Inclusiveness of governance and minority rights*
ISIL in Iraq	*ISIL's ability to operate within and control Iraqi territory*
Sunni-Shi'a regional balance	*Relative strength and influence of Iran and Saudi/Sunni in regional affairs*
Radical Islamist/Al Qaeda versus ISIL	*Ideological leadership, relative strength and influence of Al Qaeda and other Islamists versus ISIL and ultra-extreme*

The Syrian Civil War

Governance of Syria (SY Civil War)	
Al Nusrah, non-Islamist SY rebels, ISIL	Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel US
Russia, Iran, Assad loyalists, Kurds, Hezbollah	

The civil war in Syria was and remains a contest over legitimacy of the Assad regime to govern Syria. It began with protests in the spring of 2011 and quickly turned violent as the Assad regime sought to put down the unrest. By August 2014 a quarter of a million people had been killed and over 10 million refugees had fled the fighting. This has pitted the regime and its core Alawi and elite support base, now bolstered by Iran, Hezbollah and Russia (each with its own set of interests), against a diverse field of extremists and more moderate challengers.

ISIL in Syria

ISIL in Syria	
ISIL, funders	Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan
US-Coalition, Assad loyalists, Al Nusrah, non-Islamist SY rebels, Syrian Kurds, Hezbollah, Iraqi Kurds, Russia	

The central issue of this conflict is ISIL's ability to operate in and control Syrian territory. In 2013 ISIL moved in to Syria to take advantage of state weakness and the chaos caused by the civil conflict. The group succeeded in gaining control of large areas in north and east Syria and has moved west, infamously through the ancient city of Palmyra, to the outskirts of Damascus. The U.S. and Coalition partners began launching airstrikes against ISIL in Syria in September 2014 and have pursued ISIL into Syria largely by training and arming proxy fighters and assisting their operations from the air. A year later, ISIL has few overt state or organizational supporters while the Coalition along with additional regional and extra-regional actors (i.e., Russia) share interests that are best served by the weakening and/or defeat of ISIL in Syria. The point of differentiation among ISIL's adversaries in Syria is roughly the degree to which each actor a) opposes the very existence of ISIL the organization; b) opposes ISIL's self-proclaimed leadership of the "true Islam"; or c) accepts, or prefers, ISIL retaining some territory in Syria.

Turkey versus the PKK

Turkey v. PKK	
Turkey	Syrian Kurds (PYD, YPG)
PKK	Syria, PUK, KDP, Iran

While this enduring conflict is founded in the political and cultural autonomy of Turkish Kurds, by no means is there a unified Kurdish position, even among the Kurdish population in Turkey. Preferences range from Turkish government guarantees of cultural and civil rights to secession from Turkey and the establishment of an independent Kurdistan. Unlike some other Kurdish nationalist groups, since its founding in 1978 the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – a State Department designated foreign terrorist group -- has pursued its cause through armed rebellion. It has carried out violent protests, clashes and terror attacks in Turkey from its bases in the southeast as well as from the Kurdish autonomous area in Iraq (protected by the no-fly zone instituted after the first Gulf War) and eastern Syria.[4] These have generally been met by aggressive counter-insurgency operations by Turkish security forces, although toward the end of 2012 Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan launched a major peace initiative with the PKK. Erdogan called a halt to talks in July 2015 following the alleged PKK bombing of a peaceful political rally in the city of Suruc, and announced that politicians with links to "terrorist groups" should be stripped of their immunity from prosecution.

Status of Kurds in Iraq

Kurds in Iraq	
Iraqi Govt	Sunni tribes, Iran, Syrian Kurds (PYD, YPG), US-Coalition
Iraqi Kurds (PUK, KDP)	

The conflict between the Kurds and the current or future Baghdad government is at its base one of social and political rights and control of territory. The central question is the status of the Kurdish population and traditional areas in Northern Iraq, relative to the Iraqi state. Kurds in Iraq have been involved in conflicts, rebellions and wars against the central government since the end of the Ottoman Empire a hundred years ago. At various times throughout this history they have fought for rights within the state, autonomous rule and full-out secession from Iraq to form an independent Kurdistan.

Today Iraqi Kurds are largely split into two parties: the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The two parties have had a bloody history since 1975, which deteriorated again in the 1990s and entrenched rivalry among the leadership persists to this day. During the Iran-Iraq War Kurds sided with Iran against Saddam Hussein, who retaliated with the genocide of tens of thousands of Kurds when that conflict ended. The no-fly zone in Northern Iraq maintained by the international coalition at the end of the First Gulf War gave Iraqi Kurds a degree of autonomy and a shield from the brutal regime.

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[4] In fact, Bashir al Assad's apparent ceding of several Turkish areas to the PKK's Syrian affiliate in 2012 fused the Civil War with this dispute. In 2012 the Assad regime pulled Syrian forces from a number of Kurdish areas along the Turkish border effectively ceding these to local Kurdish governance. In 2014, the Syrian Kurdish leadership in the guise of the Kurdish Supreme Committee declared Cizîrê, Kobanê and Efrîn as cantons of autonomous Syrian Kurdistan. Although the political contest over these and other areas will not end until the resolution of the Syrian Civil War, overturning the current arrangement will not be easy.

Although Kurdish political and cultural autonomy was recognized in the 2005 post-Saddam Iraqi Constitution, tensions between the government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) over the details of the power-sharing arrangement have persisted. At particular issue has been the status of the oil-rich Kirkuk region, which is claimed by both Kurds and Arabs. Although there has been deadly conflict between the Peshmerga and Iraqi forces as recently as 2012, the fight against ISIL, in particular ISIL's targeting of Kurdish areas, has significantly changed the dynamic between the much weaker central government and a strengthened Kurdish north with its battle tested defense force. When the Iraqi Army fled ISIL advances in northern areas, it was the Kurdish Peshmerga that moved in to take control of Kirkuk and other Kurdish areas beyond the boundaries of the Regional Government. Although their stated focus is dealing with the ISIL threat, it is clear that despite internal power struggles, Iraq's Kurds have not given up their territorial claims. Even as the Peshmerga recaptured the northern town of Sinjar, KRG President Barzani made a point to remind the Government of Iraq and the international community that Sinjar had been "liberated by the blood of the Peshmerga", making the conclusion that Sinjar was therefore now "part of Kurdistan", obvious.[5]

Abadi Government versus Iraqi Shi'a hardline versus Sunni in Iraq

GoI v. Shia Hardline v. Sunni	
Govt of Iraq, Sunni militia/ tribes, Shia Hardliners and Militia, Iran	ISIL, US-Coalition. Saudi Arabia, Iraqi Kurds (PUK, KDP)

The foundational issues in this conflict are governing legitimacy and minority rights coupled with sectarianism. It arises from competing claims to legitimacy and governing authority among the Sunni minority that had long ruled Iraq, the Shi'a hardline, and the government of Prime Minister al-Abadi, which seeks governing legitimacy over a unified Iraq.

The striking rise of ISIL and empowerment of other Sunni groups in Iraq have made it patently evident that stable, unified governance in Iraq will require reconciliation between the Arab Sunni minority calling for fair treatment and political inclusion (Zebari, 2014)[6] and the harder line component of the Government's core support that many of whom are happy to continue to exclude the Sunni minority, in addition to the resolution of the status of Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region.

Efforts to gain the trust of Iraq's Sunni population have been undermined by the battlefield failures of the Iraqi Army and the Government's dependence on Shia militias for security, especially in majority Sunni provinces. Sunni Iraqi's, already concerned by the influence of Iran over the government and security forces, are doubly leery of the semi-official sanctioning of some of the same Shi'a militia groups

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[5] See The Guardian, November 16, 2015. While the assumed, yet not officially stated, outcome is the establishment of an autonomous, united Kurdistan observers tend to see this as a unfeasible near-term outcome for several reasons: 1) lack of economic independence (Cook, Berkey, & Natali, 2015); 2) internal fissures which would threaten social and political stability (Behruz, 2015); and 3) the country would be landlocked, requiring detailed negotiations with their former "landlords" to ensure border stability and access to trade routes (Cook, Berkey, & Natali, 2015; Vali, 2015).

[6] As recently as 29 October 2015 Reuters reports that members of the Badr Organization and Abadi's own Dawa Party have threatened to withdraw support from the government in protest of reforms that he has instituted without consultation or having gone through proper channels. (Rasheed, Ahmad. "Members of Iraq's ruling coalition threaten to withdraw support for Abadi's reforms", Thu Oct 29, 2015; Reutershttp://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/29/us-iraq-abadi-reforms-idU.S.KCN0SN14120151029#BTjZWVrJhpzK2tjI.99

responsible for the wide-scale violence and killings that the former Maliki Government failed to prevent (Mathews, Hiltermann, & Parker, 2014; see also Dodge, 2014).

Reuter's reports that the power balance has shifted to the Shi'a militia since Abadi took office in October 2014, promising to reduce Shi'a-Sunni tensions and govern a unified Iraq.[7]   The Shi'a militias are reportedly operating with little oversight from the government. In addition, Dawa Party hardliners like Nouri al-Malaki, the former Prime Minister widely accused of condoning atrocities against Sunni Iraqis, and one of the current government's three vice presidents have been challenging Abadi's authority and attempts at reform.

ISIL in Iraq

ISIL in Iraq	
US, Govt of Iraq, Shia Militia, Sunni militia/ tribes	Iran, KSA, AQ, Jordan, Israel

The legitimacy of the Caliphate declared by ISIL is the underlying issue in this conflict. In practice this involves ISIL's ability to control people, resources and territory in Iraq. Like the battle in Syria, ISIL faces a variety of adversaries. ISIL's rapid gains in the Sunni areas of Iraq in 2014 have been attributed in part to the previous years of discrimination and repression of Sunni Iraqis at the hands of the Shi'a-led government. Over time however, news reports suggest that the group's horrifically violent practices have diminished its cache among Sunni groups in Iraq who increasingly see it as an enemy. [8] Having declared a Caliphate, ISIL requires territory in which it can fully apply its version of Islamic law. Implementation of the penal code must be accompanied by the social service side of Sharia[9] (i.e., provision of social and economic justice) in order for the Caliph to have fulfilled his duty and remain a legitimate ruling authority.

Sunni-Shi'a regional balance

Sunni-Shi'a Regional Balance	
KSA, Qatar, Sunni militia/ tribes, ISIL	US, Russia, Regional Actors
Iran, Assad loyalists, Hezbollah	

The break between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims over religious leadership and belief emerged in the aftermath of the death of the Prophet Mohammad. Representing only about 15% of the world's Muslims, the Shi'a have long identified as victims and have been politically marginalized in the Islamic world. [10] The Sunni majority more often identifies as followers of the true

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[7] Parker, Ned. 2015. "Iraq's Power Struggle, Power failure in Iraq as militias outgun state," Reuters, October 21, 2015; http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-abadi/

[8] Holding this view in common with the Abadi government however has not translated to support for that government. Nor does it mean that preferences over the outcome of the conflict are also held in common. See, Al Jazeera, 5 September 2015. "More Sunni groups are backing Shia-led government despite widespread allegations of discrimination"; http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/sunni-tribes-join-fight-isil-iraq-150905134251217.html

[9] Wood, Graeme. "What ISIS really wants" The Atlantic, March 2015; http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/

[10] Council on Foreign Relations, "The Sunni-Shi'a Divide." http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/?cid=otr-marketing_url-sunni_shia_infoguide

Islam, an idea that facilitates Sunni extremist representation of Shi'a as apostates and infidels of which the faith should be cleansed.[11]

What has made this ancient sectarian rivalry so potent in the current context is the proxy warfare and quest for regional influence between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran (Schmitz, 2015), spurred in large part by the Iranian Revolution. This rivalry has led to Iran's support of the Assad regime competing with Saudi Arabian and the Gulf State support for Sunni opposition groups in Syria. It also underlies Iran's push for influence in Iraq, and has led both states into a low-intensity proxy war in Yemen. The resources brought to the fight by both sides (military support, funding, etc.) have emboldened and empowered Islamist groups and Shi'a militias involved in other conflicts. Sectarian identities however should not be oversimplified, as there are also many examples of both Sunni and Shi'a co-religionists fighting each other, most notably in the Gulf War and Iran-Iraq War respectively.

Radical Islamist/AQ versus ISIL

Islamist/ AQ-ISIL Rivalry	
Al Qaeda, al Nusrah	Regional Actors, US
ISIL	

The conflict between ISIL and Al Qaeda and its affiliates (e.g., the Nusrah Front in Syria) is about ideological dominance and stature in the world of Sunni extremism. ISIL grew out of a group established by Abu Musab al-Zarkawi in 1999. In 2004 what came to be known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) gave Al Qaeda a visible presence in the fighting in Iraq at a time when much of its senior leaders had been driven underground. A rift emerged between Zarkawi and Al Qaeda central leadership however, over what the latter saw as AQI's misplaced emphasis on targeting Shi'a Muslims in Iraq, rather than U.S. and coalition forces.

In early 2006 AQI joined with other Sunni Islamist groups to form the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi emerged as the group's leader in 2010 after the death of Zarkawi. In fact, it was fighters sent by Baghdadi to Syria who became the core of the Al Nusrah Front. In April 2013, Baghdadi took the liberty of announcing the merger of ISI and Al Nusrah to form the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) -- a move rejected by the leaders of Al Nusrah and Al Qaeda. The struggle culminated in Al Qaeda cutting ties with ISIL in February 2014. The following June ISIL declared itself a global Caliphate led by al Baghdadi.

The ideological conflict between ISIL and Al Qaeda revolves around the proper approach to jihad. Both under the leadership of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's approach has been incremental; to gain victories (e.g., removal of non-Muslims and the state of Israel from the region) against the "far enemy" as initial steps toward the future re-establishment of the Caliphate. By contrast, ISIL leadership appears to see the end times as just over the horizon, and its approach is consequently more fully apocalyptic. Overall, ISIL has focused its violence more locally than Al Qaeda as

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[11] A particular point of frustration may be the dissonance between this aspect of Sunni identity and the perspective of Sunni Arabs particularly in Iraq who see themselves as victims in the current context *(Natali, 2015).*

local conditions provide critical aspects of the proximate conditions of the apocalypse.[12] Striking out against the U.S./West directly is a secondary priority to "cleansing the faith" in the central Middle East.[13]

Regional Impact of Defeating ISIL in Iraq and Syria

Why is it important to consider all conflicts when we are most interested in the outcome of only a few? As an illustration, consider the scenario in which the U.S. achieves its immediate security objectives with regard to ISIL. That is, the organization is delegitimized and fully defeated in Syria and Iraq. In other words, the U.S. and coalition partners achieve their main objectives in the "ISIL in Syria" and "ISIL in Iraq" conflicts. Viewed independent of the broader conflict system we might convince ourselves that this outcome would result in improved U.S. security. However, considering the outcomes of those two conflicts as catalysts to change in the rest of the system suggests that the defeat of ISIL would have at best only partially satisfied U.S. security interests. At worst we will have traded short-term gain for a much more threatening future. An analysis of the effect of removing ISIL from the other conflicts within the system highlights some of the potential implications for U.S. security:[14]

Defeat of ISIL: Impact on Syrian Civil War

The full defeat of ISIL will do little to address the popular grievances that originally incited the civil conflict in Syria. There is nothing in the defeat of ISIL that would necessarily change the Assad regime and its allies' interests in preserving the regime, or the opposition groups' (and regional actors who might fund them) interest in taking it down. In short, even with the defeat

Governance of Syria (SY Civil War)
• Conflict continues
• Area remains unstable; safe havens

of ISIL there is every indication that civil conflict would continue between regime supporters and the opposition - including Al Qaeda, Jabat al Nusrah, and other groups the U.S. and international community considers terrorists. Given their current capabilities, the possibility of these groups remaining bogged down in Syria may appear to not directly threaten U.S. security interests. However, if these groups grow stronger or ultimately succeed in defeating Assad in all or major parts of Syria, this calculus may change. Even with the defeat of ISIL and removal of the Assad regime, the Syrian civil war will continue as the remaining non-Islamist, "moderate" forces that the U.S. has supported, and Al Qaeda and Islamist splinter groups fight for control. Consequently, U.S. policy makers will likely still face the question of how or whether to respond to the stated national security risk of a terrorist safe havens in an ungoverned area.

Turkey v. PKK
• Little direct impact on dynamics of dispute
• Removes pretext for cross-border incursions

Defeat of ISIL Impact on Turkey versus the PKK

Although there is nothing in the defeat of ISIL that would obviously change the dynamics of the conflict between Turkey and the PKK, the years of

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[12] Wood, Graeme. "What ISIS really wants" The Atlantic, March 2015; http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/

[13] Ibid

[14] The effects described here are based in the actor interest summaries and analyses completed for Parts III-V of this effort.

external support funding and arms that would have contributed to the defeat of ISIL have already strengthened Kurdish parties, encouraged some cooperation among them and polished their image in international opinion. As long as the PKK remains at odds with other Kurdish groups the impact on U.S. security interests would be minor and could remain essentially an internal Turkish issue.

Defeat of ISIL Impact on Kurds in Iraq

Aside from Al Qaeda (see below) some of the biggest winners from the defeat of ISIL may be the Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria. In both instances the removal of ISIL could give Kurdish leaders opportunities to consolidate their defenses of territory that has come under their autonomous control. As with the PKK, the successes of the Peshmerga fighters have changed U.S./international perceptions of the Kurds. This could easily spur political pressure for agreements that accommodate Kurdish goals for guaranteed human rights and autonomous rule. However, removal of the immediate security threat presented by ISIL could also prompt a return to internecine fighting among Kurdish parties vying for power. In Iraq, defeat of ISIL could pressure both the Kurds – now in a much stronger position than a few years ago – and the Government of Iraq to resume talks to resolve the political status of Kurdish autonomous areas.

> **Kurds in Iraq**
> - Increased political pressure for resolution of status of Kurds/ Kurdish areas

Defeat of ISIL Impact on Abadi Government versus Iraqi Shi'a hardline versus Sunni in Iraq

Defeat of ISIL will not necessarily address the Sunni Arab sense of embattlement and lost dignity that ISIL initially exploited so well in Iraq, and the West for that matter. If Iraqi Sunnis feel that the defeat of ISIL was once again a Western attack on the Sunni in favor of the Shi'a, the actions taken by the Government of Iraq, Shi'a militia and international community to defeat ISIL could actually spur domestic conflict and undermine international efforts to build governing institutions and capacity in Iraq. Also, as Natali (2015) points out, Shi'a militia (and Iran) will likely have played a significant role in the defeat of ISIL in Iraq and should be expected to resist leaving the territories in which they have been operating, causing continued sectarian tensions and impeding reconstruction of Iraq's devastated infrastructure. Constructing a viable political solution – whether a unified state or autonomous areas – requires both time and some degree of cooperation among groups even if this is just tacit recognition of their differences. With the defeat of ISIL the serious political issues surrounding the make-up of Iraq will be brought to the fore.

> **GoI v. Shia Hardline v. Sunni**
> - Lack of Sunni political voice; Internal political divisions brought to the forefront

Defeat of ISIL Impact on Sunni-Shi'a regional balance

There is little in the defeat of a former Saudi client that is likely to change Saudi regional security concerns, or stem the political, economic and security threat it has long believed Iran poses. The defeat of ISIL in Syria and Iraq could also have a negative impact on longer-term U.S. security interests if Iranian and Saudi efforts to enhance their own security are allowed to

> **Sunni-Shi'a Regional Balance**
> - Possibly increased instability in Sunni countries
> - Continuation of Iran-Saudi proxyism

escalate. The continued conflict in Syria and Iraq that we should expect to follow an ISIL defeat will hold these areas open to continuation of Sunni and Shi'a proxy warfare. Finally, depending on how ISIL was defeated, surviving jihadists could be return home and generate unrest in Sunni states and make laying blame on Iran an attractive diversionary device.

Defeat of ISIL: Impact on Radical Islamist/Al Qaeda versus ISIL

Lastly, possibly one of the most underexplored consequences on regional security dynamics brought on by major defeat of ISIL in Syria and Iraq is the boon this could represent for AL Qaeda. Effectively eliminating the ISIL organization could easily tip the scales in the conflict between Al Qaeda and ISIL by handing Al Qaeda a huge win. With proper handling of the narrative

> **Islamist/ AQ-ISIL Rivalry**
> • AQ gets the win
> • New groups emerge

space (admittedly not an Al Qaeda core competency) ISIL's precipitous approach to establishing the Caliphate could be branded as a failure. This could in turn push Al Qaeda's current rebranding campaign forward, rehabilitating their stature and legitimacy. ISIL's defeat also would give the Al Qaeda leadership and other groups the opportunity to adopt some of its (ISIL's) successful innovations, or recruit the people who could accomplish this for them. ISIL's failure may also leave significant numbers of fighters looking for an alternative extremist organization to join, if so their experience and approach may not only strengthen Al Qaeda and other groups, but make them more violent as well. Barring a radical change in ideology neither of these outcomes would enhance U.S. security.

So What?

The bottom line is this: we lead ourselves astray when we look at the Central Middle East conflict in terms of gains in only the conflicts in which we are presently engaged, and fail to consider the full range of alternative outcomes of U.S. and coalition actions. Viewing the region and our actions in it as a whole helps clarify what we are doing now, and what we should expect to do in the future to defend against threats to U.S. interests that emanate from the region. The defeat of ISIL is not the end of the story, and despite our current attentions, in context and as it is presently pursued, it may not be as important to U.S. national security as it is for domestic politics.

What can be done? Start by thinking differently. Rather than try to simplify the decision process by lumping all conflicts together, and assuming all actors as either allies or opponents, we need to be more cognizant of the overall security context and its implications for the interests of each actor. Understanding the connections and interdependencies between actors based on interests, rather than assuming we can assign each to a static "side" will help us understand their preferences over a full range of conflict outcomes. This approach may bring to light second and third order implications for U.S. security objectives, allowing us to identify threats earlier ("farther to the left") than has typically been the case, and suggest amendments to plans and engagements to ameliorate these threats.

Here are a few questions that emerge from the example considering what the region looks like after an ISIL defeat:

- *Should kinetic and non-kinetic efforts to counter Al Qaeda be stepped up as ISIL wanes to avoid the gain for Al Qaeda that ISIL's defeat could represent?*

- *Should the Coalition cease kinetic action against ISIL in the absence of progress in affirming the identities and political efficacy of Iraqi Sunnis to avoid a repeat of extremist groups exploiting their frustration and grievance?*

- *Is it appropriate to treat Sunni Arab grievances and efforts to address them as political concerns (i.e., State Department or USAID), or should they be treated in the manner that other trans-national security issues (e.g., counter-terror; non-proliferation) are treated?*

- *Which is the graver threat to U.S. security, the return of the Assad regime and the brutal repression that almost inevitably would follow, or the possibility of a second and third round of civil conflict if the regime is destroyed completely?*

Of course, these are just the regional effects to consider; there are also effects that would extend beyond the region to a global system with its own implications for the national security of the U.S. and its allies. Part II of this study describes an analytic approach for assessing regional dynamics and regional futures based on the alignments and conflicts among three critical drivers: actor interests, resources and resolves. It is intended to aid analysts and planners take a broad view of the security context even while focusing on their primary mission to degrade and defeat ISIL.

The following section of this report lays out the Interest-Resolve-Capability analytic process.