



ISIS and the sectarian conflict in the Middle East

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“It’s an upside-down world and no one knows who are really allies...”

Quote from a Syrian opposition activist

Ben Smith

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Summary

Since the shock takeover of Mosul, the progress of ISIS and its allies through Iraq has been slowed and, in a few places reversed. This has happened partly because further, Shia-dominated territory in Iraq is more difficult for ISIS to conquer and partly because demoralised official Iraqi forces are increasingly supported by Shia militias, often with Iranian organisational help, by Kurdish Peshmerga forces who are receiving assistance from the West, and by US air strikes. In Syria, ISIS is up against a range of opponents: Jabhat al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian Kurds and, to a certain extent, the Syrian armed forces.

The process taking place in the Levant, the lands to the east of the Mediterranean, has arguably been going on since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. That time has seen a gradual undermining of the states set up after the First World War, as the different sects that they contained have increasingly cared more about their sectarian and ethnic identity than their national identity, and peaceful cohabitation has become rarer.

ISIS has its roots in the Sunni rebellion against the US-led occupation after the 2003 invasion and has recently broken away from al-Qaeda, setting itself up as a rival *jihadi* 'franchise'. Some say, however, that the reason for its military success in both Iraq and Syria is that ISIS is a useful cover for former high-ranking elements of Saddam Hussein's dismantled Sunni-dominated security forces, determined to regain their former position, at least in Sunni-majority areas of Iraq. There is limited support for official Iraqi forces among Iraqi Sunnis after what they see as relentless persecution by the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad.

Chaos in Syria gave ISIS an opportunity to take territory in that country and in 2014 it established the Syrian town of al-Raqqah as their 'capital.'

The formation of a new government in Baghdad raised hopes that a political solution to the violence could emerge, but even a broadly acceptable Iraqi government will have to deal with intractable problems including the failures of the armed forces, rampant corruption, the sharing of oil revenues and decentralisation demands and territorial disputes. More broadly, it must make progress in healing the sectarian divisions that have been deepening for decades, at a time when they are worsening across the region. This will be no easy task.

The UK and other Western governments have pledged to assist the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi government, and this is widely thought to comply with international law, despite the lack of UN Security Council resolution, because the Iraqi government has requested assistance to deal with ISIS. However, outside military intervention in Syria (necessary if ISIS is going to be tackled effectively) is more difficult to justify. US officials have argued that intervention in Syria is legally justified as an extension of the collective defence of Iraq. Others argue that it could be legal as a humanitarian intervention, without a Security Council resolution; any such resolution would be likely to be vetoed by Russia.

The air strikes and other military assistance to forces fighting ISIS may have helped slow the group's advance, but little more. Since the international military intervention, ISIS is reported to have lost only a very small amount of the territory it held in Iraq. In Syria, European nations have been reluctant to intervene militarily and an overall strategy for the two different theatres of the conflict has been difficult to define.

Many commentators have argued that strong military intervention by the West in Iraq would be unlikely to be successful and might even be counter-productive; a solution involving regional powers such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia would be preferable. However, the fundamental hostility between Sunnis and Shias, which is likely to be exacerbated by both

the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, stands in the way of regional cooperation and is difficult to resolve.

1 Introduction

In June 2014, the fall of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul to the extremist group ISIS,¹ which now refers to itself as the Islamic State, shocked regional and Western governments. The fact that the Iraqi Army, on paper much more powerful than ISIS, simply fled stirred deep disquiet about the weakness of the Iraqi state and even brought fears for the future of its capital, Baghdad.²

Fears over the fate of thousands of Yazidis (a group of Kurdish ethnicity, adherents of a religion based on Zoroastrianism, the pre-Islamic religion of Persia) brought the crisis to a new level. Some extreme Sunnis regard Yazidis as devil-worshippers and observers feared a massacre of the Yazidis surrounded by ISIS forces on Mount Sinjar, in Iraq's Nineveh Governorate.

At the same time there is a risk that effective *jihadi* propaganda, designed as much as a recruiting tool among a Sunni Islamist audience as for ISIS's supposed adversaries in the Shia world and the West, is distorting perceptions in the West. While the fall of Mosul and the collapse of Iraq's armed forces were a great shock, the overall death toll in Iraq, at perhaps 200,000 since 2003, including combatants, is probably smaller than the number of people killed in Syria since just 2013. So although the Iraq theatre has seen terrible violence, the conflict in Syria is more murderous and it has also produced far more refugees and internally displaced persons.

What makes Syria important, apart from the scale of the violence, is that the strategic allegiance of a state is up for grabs in Syria and this is probably less the case in Iraq (although whether either Syria or Iraq will survive within the present borders of both states is questionable). The fall of the Assad family from power would be a major blow to Iranian influence in the Middle East. Syria is Iran's only allied Arab state. It is ruled by a family that belongs to what is arguably a religious offshoot of Shiism, and certainly not by followers of the religion of the large majority of its inhabitants: Sunnism.

So the Shi'i Iranians and the Sunni Gulf monarchies have all been trying to swing the Syrian conflict their way in the context of a growing regional conflict between the Sunnis and the Shia. The interventions of the Gulf States have been largely uncoordinated and have often pulled in different directions. (The Western powers and the Russians have also lined up according to perceived geostrategic interests, although their involvement has been far less influential.)

These interventions of regional actors have prolonged and intensified the fighting in Syria; it has also produced a myriad of conflicting actors that are often in conflict with more than one rival/adversary, meaning that any further intervention by outside powers is fraught with difficulty.

In Iraq there is at least a clearer idea of who and what to support. But even here, the scene is highly complicated.

¹ ISIS, ISIL and the Islamic State are different names for the same group

² For information on ISIS/Islamic State and the fall of Mosul, see [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIS\) and the takeover of Mosul](#) - Commons Library Standard Note, 20 June 2014

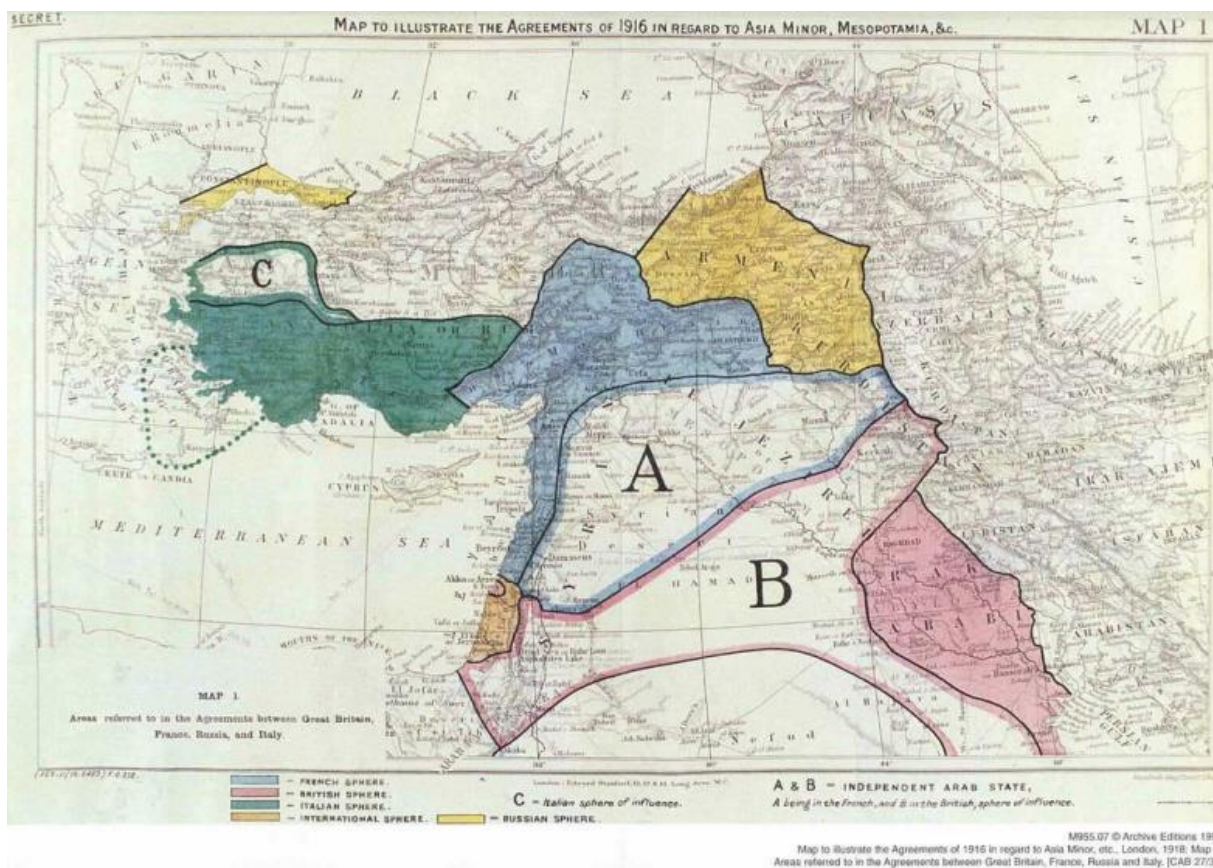
2 Background

2.1 Brief history of the Levant

How had the conflict in Syria become so intractable and spread to Iraq, threatening other regional states such as Jordan and Lebanon? Much of the explanation is in the history of the region, both early and recent.

The Levant, or the lands at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, had for centuries been controlled by the Ottoman Empire, where peaceful co-existence between different Islamic sects and other religions such as Christianity is generally said to have been better than in contemporary Christian societies.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, its lands in the Levant were divided into British and French spheres of influence, largely following the boundaries set out in the famous Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. The entities of Iraq and Syria were not complete inventions of the French and the British; they did have a certain amount of historical identity through the Ottoman years and before, but the post-1918 borders were drawn by the European powers.



The controlling powers were free to establish frontiers within their respective spheres of influence. In the French sector, the states of Syria and Lebanon were established while in the British sector emerged Palestine (under British Mandatory control granted by the League of Nations), Iraq, Transjordan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

These countries took some account of the administrative divisions bequeathed by the Ottoman Empire (the Vilayets) and of the ethnic and religious makeup of the region. Many argue that Lebanon, for example, was created to give the Christians their own country, although the demographic balance of the country has changed since creation. In any case,

the patchwork of different confessions in the region made drawing boundaries very difficult. In Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, particularly, there has always been significant diversity in populations and sometimes difficult relations between the different groups.

Relations between different sects and ethnicities are widely thought to have deteriorated in the later 20th century. The ideology of Arab nationalism had provided a basis for secular government and, indeed, aimed to end the divisions between the states created by outside powers, perceived, as they were, as artificial, and religious divisions in Arab society. Arab nationalist governments such as that of Colonel Nasser in Egypt and the Ba'athist regimes of Iraq and Syria were socialist-inspired and suppressed Islamist political movements.

Arab nationalism reached a peak with the creation of the short-lived United Arab Republic, a political union of Egypt and Syria, but Syria seceded after three years. After the oil crises of the 1970s, a new force grew: the conservative oil-rich monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula and Iran. These countries were allied with the West, not the Soviet Union, and the Arab monarchies, at least, derived much of their legitimacy not from socialism but from their purported adherence to and defence of Islam.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 changed everything. Populous and oil-rich Iran abandoned its alignment with the West, blaming particularly the US and the UK for undermining Iranian sovereignty and supporting the autocratic rule of the deposed Shah. But the Iranians were also not Arabs, and they were in their majority Shias rather than Sunnis. Iranian leadership gave Shias everywhere a perspective that their oppression at the hands of the dominant Sunnis in countries such as Iraq might not last forever. The scene was set for the re-emergence of conflict between the Sunnis and the Shias.

The Sunnis of the Gulf, and particularly Saudi Arabia, proponents of an austere form of Islam (Salafism or Wahhabism) which they hoped would bolster their legitimacy, spent some of their oil money setting up Islamic schools (*madrassas*) across South Asia (particularly in Pakistan) and elsewhere to spread that conservative form of Islam, and fight against the perceived influence of the Shiite Iranians, who were seen as a threat to the survival of the Gulf monarchies, particularly in Saudi Arabia with its significant Shia population concentrated in the oil-producing Eastern Province. Sunni Saudis sometimes refer to Shia Saudis simply as 'Iranians'.

Saddam Hussein had been a bitter foe of the Iranians and was worried that the Iranian Revolution might incite the oppressed Iraqi Shias to revolt against his rule, so he launched an assault on Iran, with some Western complicity, which ended up costing perhaps a million lives.

Shias, the majority in Iraq, had been brutally oppressed by the Saddam Hussein regime. The overthrow of Saddam was the next big boost for the Shias and the Iranians. His Ba'ath Party was nominally the same as the party of the Assads in Syria but the two governments were in fact bitter enemies. With a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, Iran lost an implacable enemy and gained significant influence over the country, together with easier land access to Syria, the older ally.

So the previously dominant Sunnis were increasingly being challenged by resurgent Shias and were also increasingly adhering to a very conservative and intolerant form of religion, with a predilection for denouncing what it saw as deviant or even heretical forms of Islam. Shias have taken to labelling Sunni Salafis as '*Takfiris*' – people who take it upon themselves to decide that a Muslim is *kafir*, or infidel, because of their unapproved version of Islam.

As the Arab uprisings shook Middle Eastern regimes, the conflict between Sunnis and Shias gained in intensity and its centre moved to Syria. The Alawite-led government in Syria, allied

with Iran and hostile to any form of Sunni political Islam, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, was challenged by what at first was a relatively peaceful and non-sectarian protest. Partly as a result of deliberate Syrian government actions, that protest became increasingly violent and sectarian. As the intercommunal violence grew, Syrians increasingly took refuge in their own communities and the rebellion looked ever more Sunni-dominated; with support from Gulf money for some Sunni Islamist rebel groups and a disorganised secular opposition, under the umbrella of the Syrian National Coalition, which received no decisive support from the West, the Syrian conflict became polarised between Salafi groups and the Assad government supported largely by Iran but also by Iran's Shiite proxy militia in Lebanon, Hizballah.

Dispossessed Sunnis in Iraq, angry about their lost dominance of Iraq and increasingly terrorised by the sectarian policies of the Shia-dominated Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki, were fertile ground for the radical Sunni forces that offered some protection. Sunnis in Syria, terrorised by the Alawite-dominated Syrian government in its violent campaign to suppress the rebellion, were equally fertile ground for radical *jihadi* groups and these received some support from Sunnis in the region.

2.2 The Kurds

Map showing estimated areas of major Kurdish settlement.



Source: [Congressional Research Service](#)

There are about 14 million Kurds in Turkey, 6 million in Iran, about 5 million in Iraq, and under 2 million in Syria.

The role of the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria is central to the conflict. Kurdish forces are local, Muslim forces with some proven effectiveness and a broadly pro-Western and anti-fundamentalist orientation, at least as they are perceived in the West.

There is, however, a danger of over-reliance on Kurdish forces; the fact that there is no Kurdish state means that Kurdish military strength will always be limited. Nor are the Kurds a unified group: Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria have lived under different regimes, have differing interests and even speak significantly different versions of the Kurdish language.

Iraqi Kurdistan has also been sharply divided between the followers of President Massoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), these two men being leaders of important Kurdish clans. The civil war between the two sides resulted in a division of the territory into rival fiefs for a time.

Despite the divisions, Iraqi Kurds show some confidence. Their region has been relatively stable, certainly in comparison with the rest of Iraq, and their territory is oil-rich. Independently of Baghdad, the KRG has been producing and selling oil, mainly to Turkey. A dispute between Baghdad and the KRG over Kurdish oil exports was settled in December 2014, and Kurdish officials expect that Kurdish oil exports to Turkey along a new pipeline could reach 800,000 barrels a day during 2015,³ which would make KRG exports comparable to those of Azerbaijan.

The Kurdish leaderships in the four countries concerned have to deal with different circumstances and have differing objectives: each must deal with the government of the land in which it operates, only the Iraqi Kurds have realistic autonomous powers, and each must also deal with the other major powers operating in the region: the US, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The interests of these powers do not match up neatly with those of any of the Kurdish factions: the US, for example, wants the Iraqi KRG to fight ISIS in Iraq but it does not want Iraq to disintegrate; the KRG fights ISIS in Iraq but it wants eventual Kurdish statehood.

The Syrian Kurdistan Democratic party, which is associated with the Turkish PKK, is accused in some quarters of cooperating with the Assad regime in return for *de facto* control of the Kurdish region in northern Syria. Turkey has been pursuing negotiations with Turkish Kurdish representatives, but their outcome, and even the Turkish government's commitment to them, is unclear. These factors mean that Kurdish fighters are always likely to be hampered by limited resources, a lack of coordination and no single, protecting power.

2.3 Origins of ISIS

Iraq

ISIS has grown from what used to be Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a Sunni insurgent group that fought against US and Iraqi government forces and carried out attacks against Shiite targets after the downfall of Saddam Hussein. Its leader at the time was Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who had originally set up a group called Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTJ) to try to bring down the Jordanian monarchy, without success. He moved to Iraq after the US invasion and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2004, when his group came to be known as AQI. AQI is designated as an entity associated with al-Qaeda by the UN.⁴ Al-Zarqawi was killed in 2006 by a US air strike.

AQI's centre of gravity was in the Sunni-majority areas of Iraq, particularly the Anbar province. It became known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in 2006. During the peak of the previous Sunni insurgency, from 2006 to 2010, the ISI's policy was to overthrow the Iraqi government and establish an Islamic state, but it was apparently undone when Iraqi and US military attacks led to the killing or capture of some 80% of ISI's leaders.⁵ The killings removed an older generation of leaders and opened the way for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also known as Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri, an Iraqi, to take control of the group (in what could be a warning about the pitfalls of 'decapitation' strategies). Al-Baghdadi was

³ 'Increased Kurdish oil exports will add to price pressure', *Financial Times*, 17 December 2014

⁴ The List established and maintained by the Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee with respect to individuals, groups, undertakings and other entities associated with Al-Qaida, updated 2 June 2014

⁵ Ahmed S Hashim, 'The Islamic State: from Al-Qaeda affiliate to caliphate', *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Winter 2014, Volume XXI, Number 4

designated a terrorist by the US government in 2011 and a reward of \$10 million was offered for information leading to his location.⁶

From 2010 to 2013 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi spent a lot of effort on reforming ISI's organisational structure and strengthening its military capabilities. He ended the dominance of foreigners in the upper echelons of the organisation, allowing more Iraqis to take control and helping to stress the Iraqi nature of the organisation. This would later help in securing the allegiance of Iraqi Sunnis. As Ahmed Hashim, of the Middle East Policy Council points out, along with the re-organisation there were three other factors that set the scene for ISI's breakout: the increasing dysfunction of the Iraqi state, the apparent fading away of core al-Qaeda under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.⁷

From 2010 to 2013, ISI became increasingly effective at mounting attacks, laying the ground for its sweep across swathes of Iraq and Syria, while the end of the US combat mission in December 2011 removed another obstacle to the Sunni militants' ambitions.

Divergence from Al-Qaeda

In 2013, ISI announced a merger with Jabhat al-Nusra, forming the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS or ISIL. Al-Sham is the Levant, the land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, hence ISIL. Some anti-ISIS Arabic-speakers reject the name ISIS or ISIL, because they do not accept that the group represents Islam. They prefer to call the group Daesh, derived from the equivalent acronym to ISIS but from the Arabic. In Arabic 'daesh' has pejorative connotations; the French government and some other Western leaders, including the House of Commons Defence Committee, have adopted the term).

Al-Nusra appears never to have accepted the merger and, after a struggle and a period of confusion, al-Qaeda's central leadership cut ties with ISIS and al-Baghdadi in February 2014, calling for ISIS to withdraw from Syria. Some have talked about ISIS being the 'extreme' version of al-Qaeda while Jabhat al-Nusra is linked to the core leadership of al-Qaeda and is more concerned about local sensibilities.⁸ ISIS is also reported to have weaker support in Syria than in Iraq, even though its 'capital' is in Syria. Al-Baghdadi's campaign to increase ISIS's Iraqi leadership left the organisation looking too Iraqi for some Syrians, who may prefer Jabhat al-Nusra.⁹

Al-Baghdadi decided that ISIS should join the fight in Syria. This would be consistent with pursuing chaos in Muslim lands with illegitimate governments (something which most Sunnis would consider the Assad regime in Damascus), in order to replace them with the caliphate.

However, the insurgency in Syria was a crowded scene with myriad secularist and Islamist groups of varying shades and shifting allegiances, partly fostered by the confusion of support coming from different countries, such as in the West and Gulf, with different objectives.

Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS have fought in recent months, leading to thousands of deaths. Press reports suggest that the central al-Qaeda leadership, in the person of Ayman al-Zawahiri, called for a reconciliation between the groups in May 2014.¹⁰ It is not clear how much control al-Zawahiri has over either group. Jabhat al-Nusra said that it would only

⁶ 'Terrorist Designation of Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri', US State Department press release, 4 October 2011

⁷ Ahmed S Hashim, 'The Islamic State: from Al-Qaeda affiliate to caliphate', *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Winter 2014, Volume XXI, Number 4

⁸ 'Iraq crisis Q & A: Who or what is ISIS? Is it part of al-Qaeda?', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 June 2014

⁹ Ahmed S Hashim, 'The Islamic State: from Al-Qaeda affiliate to caliphate', *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Winter 2014, Volume XXI, Number 4, p6

¹⁰ 'Syria: Al-Nusra Front agrees to end fighting with ISIS', *Asharq al-Awsat*, 5 May 2014

desist from initiating any attacks; as most attacks came from ISIS and al-Nusra pledged to respond if attacked, violence might continue. Al-Nusra had been one of the biggest groups fighting the Syrian government but reports suggest that it lost most of its foreign fighters to ISIS after the two groups started fighting. The extremism of ISIS is thought to appeal to foreign *jihadis*.

Jabhat al-Nusra's focus has been on bringing down the Assad government in Syria, while ISIS has concentrated on conquering territory, avoiding fighting the Syrian army where possible.

Baathist and tribal forces behind ISIS

The popular image of ISIS is one of a modern *jihadi* group, a metamorphosis of al-Qaeda, fighting against the state. However, there are other powerful insurgent forces in play and these are considered by some to be more important than the radical Islamic ISIS 'branding'. Former Ba'athist commanders of the Iraqi army, disbanded after Saddam's fall and resentful about that loss of power, have long been involved in the rebellion in Sunni areas of Iraq against the Shia-led government. They are also strongly linked to Sunni tribal forces opposing the present government, based around Fallujah and Ramadi, in Anbar Governorate, and in parts of Nineveh and Salaheddin governorates.

Some sources suggest that the *majority* of top ISIS decision-makers are former members of Saddam's army or security services. The presence of high-ranking former Baathist army officers in the top echelons of ISIS helps to explain why the group was so successful in comparison with the Iraqi army, whose top brass had been weakened by the political appointments of Maliki loyalists and by corruption. On the other hand, there may still be Sunni sympathisers in the army; there were reports that Iraqi soldiers were ordered to give up by high-ranking commanders.¹¹

Former members of Saddam's military and intelligence services reportedly helped to set up and run the ISIS Security and Intelligence Council, which provides personal protection to al-Baghdadi, oversees communication between the central ISIS authorities and the regions, executes judicial decisions including punishments and runs a kidnapping and assassination squad. It is said to be headed by known former members of Saddam's security services.¹²

The strong influence of the 'secular' Baathists inside ISIS appears to be in total contradiction to the objectives of ISIS: to bring down illegitimate, secular Arab regimes and to replace them with a caliphate. However, it should not be too much of a surprise; the common thread is that they are Sunnis who want to gain control. Despite its avowed secularism, the Baath party served to maintain Sunni minority power and oppress the Shiite majority in Iraq, with underlying assumptions of the superiority of Sunnism. In this it differed from the Syrian Baath Party, which could not rely on the religion of its leaders as a source of legitimacy because the Alawites were a much smaller minority.

As Arab nationalism waned as a political force in the Middle East, Saddam Hussein himself was not above 're-branding' his regime with some Islamist touches, launching his Islamic Faith Campaign in 1993 to try to shore up his support among Iraqi Sunni authorities. Izzat al-Douri, former vice chair of the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council, led the Islamisation campaign. After the 2003 invasion, he was the highest ranking member of Saddam's government to escape capture. The re-emergence of senior Baathists in the leadership of ISIS could be viewed as taking that strategy to the next level.

¹¹ 'Iraq Militants, Pushing South, Aim at Capital', *New York Times*, 11 June 2014

¹² Ahmed S Hashim, 'The Islamic State: from Al-Qaeda affiliate to caliphate', *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Winter 2014, Volume XXI, Number 4

Adopting an Islamist 'brand' for convenience would not be unique to the Arab world. Many commentators have argued that Afghans' allegiance to the Taliban was in some cases an illusion: a convenient cover for older, more basic power struggles over influence and resources, frequently tribal-based.

Nadim Shehadi, writing for Chatham House, argues that the well-publicised *jihadi* organisation is really a front for more deeply-rooted and possibly more secularist Sunni interests in Iraq and that these interests should be engaged:

Engagement should be with the real forces which operate under the cover of Islamic State; these include some unpalatable elements but evidence suggests that they have gained ground for a reason, and if that reason is not addressed they will gain even more.¹³

Some have suggested that the former Baathists may be playing a double game similar to that ascribed to the Syrian government: the Baathists may have helped create ISIS to frighten the West and other regional powers and to subsequently offer themselves as the 'moderate' and effective solution.¹⁴

General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries

These former Iraqi soldiers have long experience of ruling Iraq, having been an important part of the Saddam government and in armed conflict, some being veterans of the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. The General Military Council for Iraqi Revolutionaries, the main grouping for Baathist former army officers, has reportedly received support from the Syrian regime.¹⁵

Former General in the Iraqi army, Muzhir al-Qaisi, spokesman for the GMCIR, said in June 2014 that the organisation of former Baathist military men was 'stronger than ISIS' and that ISIS could not have taken Mosul on its own. He described ISIS as 'barbarians'.¹⁶

The GMCIR has issued statements supporting a democratic solution for Iraq and saying that it follows the Geneva Conventions.

Naqshbandis

Also important is the Naqshbandi order, a little-known Sufi grouping with powerful connections in the region,¹⁷ including with influential figures in the ruling Turkish AKP of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.¹⁸ The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order was formed in 2007 and Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, former Vice-President of Saddam's Revolutionary Command Council, in effect the cabinet, is said to be the 'hidden sheikh' of the Naqshbandis, as well as a leading figure among the Sunni tribes.¹⁹ The group is important for former Ba'athists and fighters favourable to the Muslim Brotherhood and has much deeper roots in Iraqi Sunni communities than does ISIS.

Sunni tribes

Iraqi tribes generally have a stronger structure in rural areas than in the towns, and rural tribesmen are often armed as a matter of course; Sunni tribal structures were important in collaborating with US forces and driving out al-Qaeda in 2007-8. Provided with salaries by

¹³ Nadim Shehadi, 'What is hiding behind Islamic State?', *World Today*, December 2014 January 2015

¹⁴ Ribal al-Assad, 'The Islamic State and Saddam's Phantom Army', *Huffington Post*, 17 November 2014

¹⁵ Nadim Shehadi, 'What is hiding behind Islamic State?', *World Today*, December 2014 January 2015

¹⁶ 'Iraq conflict: We are stronger than ISIS', *BBC News Online*, 14 June 2014

¹⁷ Sufis are Islamic mystics who may be Sunni or Shia. Naqshbandis are exclusively Sunnis, however

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Hassan Hassan, 'More Than ISIS, Iraq's Sunni Insurgency', *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 17 June 2014

the US government, the Awakening Councils channelled Sunni tribesmen towards fighting against the *jihadis* and were crucial, along with the surge in US troops, in turning Iraq's increasingly violent civil war around.

In 2009, the US government handed the responsibility for funding the Awakening Councils over to the Iraqi government. This already set alarm bells ringing among the Sunni tribes. When ISIS started its surge through Iraq, some tribal fighters reported to Iraqi army centres asking to be armed so that they could resist the group but the army was reluctant to collaborate with them. With increasingly provocative actions and talk from the government of Nouri al-Maliki, many Sunni tribal leaders turned against the Baghdad government.

However, not all Sunni tribes have joined forces with ISIS. The Albu Nimr tribe, based in the Anbar, Salahuddin, Mosul and Baghdad Governorates, was an important part of the Sunni Awakening Councils that fought al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2005 and 2006 and has been opposed to ISIS since the beginning of 2014. In October, ISIS massacred 581 members of the tribe. Albu Issa is another Sunni tribe, based in Fallujah, which is fighting against ISIS.²⁰

Ansar al-Islam

Ansar al-Islam is a *jihadi* group originating in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2001. It imposed sharia law on the small amount of territory it controlled in the early years of this century. It was associated with al-Qaeda early on (although it did not fully join them) and was accused of collaborating with Saddam Hussein's government by the US, a small part of the administration's rationale for the 2003 invasion, although this assertion has since been largely discredited.

As Sunni resistance to the Baghdad government regained momentum after the US withdrawal in 2011, Ansar al-Islam participated in attacks on Iraqi forces, particularly in the north and east of the country around Mosul and Kirkuk.

Objectives

The name 'Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham' advertises the group's ambition to establish an Islamic caliphate across the Eastern Mediterranean. The objective of Muslim unity has a long history and significant support in the Muslim world: in 2007 a poll was conducted in Egypt, Morocco, Indonesia and Pakistan that suggested that 65% supported the idea of uniting all Muslim countries in a single state.²¹

ISIS has imposed extreme rules in the areas it controls, with summary executions and hundreds killed, according to the United Nations.²² The conditions imposed on civilians have been likened to the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan. The group has also threatened to kill Shiites and to destroy the Shiite shrines in cities such as Najaf and Karbala.

Although ISIS claims that it wants a caliphate across the whole region of the Levant, this partly serves propaganda purposes; the group is focussed on holding territory where this is feasible. Although Palestinian lands might be considered a prime target, it has not diverted its energies towards supporting the Palestinians or attacking Israeli interests; there have also been comments from ISIS ideologues criticising Hamas's alleged closeness to Iran and its participation in democracy, which ISIS considers illegitimate.²³

In practice, ISIS is concentrating its efforts on Arab, Sunni-majority areas of Iraq and Syria. The difficulty of taking areas with a significant Shia population has been illustrated by the

²⁰ 'IS kills 500 members of Albu Nimr tribe', *Al-Monitor*, 5 November 2014

²¹ Owen Bennett-Jones, 'When Jihadis Win Power', *London Review of Books*, 4 December 2014

²² 'Iraq conflict: ISIS militants seize new towns', *BBC News Online*, 13 June 2014

²³ 'Why Islamic State has no sympathy for Hamas', *Al-Monitor*, 29 June 2014

slowing of the ISIS advance outside Baghdad. ISIS has attacked Kurdish and Shia areas, but usually ones that are geographically vulnerable and offer resources or propaganda advantages, such as the largely Kurdish town of Kobane, near the Turkish border.

Not only is conquering and controlling Shia areas difficult, ISIS also has a priority of firming up its control of Sunni areas by marginalising other Sunni groups which have, in the past, proved effective opponents. In Iraq that means subduing or co-opting Sunni tribal structures and forces and other jihadi groups. In Syria, ISIS aims to replace the secular groups of the Syrian National Coalition and competing radical groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra.²⁴

The process of establishing a monopoly on protecting Sunnis from their respective governments is further advanced in Iraq than in Syria. In Iraq there are few Sunni organisations resisting ISIS, whereas in Syria there have been clashes between ISIS and both secular militias and other radical Islamist fighters.

In areas where ISIS exercises control, it has moved to control the education system, separating girls and boys and only allowing teachers of the same sex as their classes. It has imposed changes on the curriculum, banning art for example and replacing it with Arabic calligraphy. According to one report, the use of coloured pens was banned.²⁵ ISIS has made extreme oppression a hallmark of its control of territory, with public executions a regular occurrence in Raqqa, the group's self-proclaimed capital.

Controlling territory

The strategy of controlling territory is different from that of the al-Qaeda network, which is a transnational organisation and has focussed on attacks on Western interests. ISIS is concentrating on controlling territory, holding the allegiance of the Sunni Muslims in that territory and ending the rule over them of governments which it sees as non-Muslim, such as those in Baghdad and Damascus.

It is not clear the extent to which ISIS poses a threat to Western interests. Some have argued that the 'maximalist' objectives for ISIS to establish a caliphate including the whole of the Levant area are not the whole story. One senior former Baathist leader gave a different picture as ISIS was sweeping south through Iraq: "These groups were unified by the same goal, which is getting rid of this sectarian government, ending this corrupt army and negotiating to form the Sunni Region."²⁶

2.4 ISIS in Syria

Damascus fomenting jihad?

When the uprising against the government in Syria began in 2011, the Assad regime labelled its opponents as terrorists, hoping to discredit them in the eyes of moderate Syrians and Western governments. This was largely propaganda at the beginning: the demonstrations against the Assads started off relatively peaceful and non-sectarian. In contrast, the government presented itself as secular and as the protector of Syria's ethnic and religious diversity, which had a certain amount of truth to it (although those affected by the 1982 massacre of between 10,000 and 40,000 in the town of Hama during Bashar al-Assad's father's rule, to put down a Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising, would doubtless have a different impression).

The uprising in early 2011 was largely secularist, even if its roots were in the Syrian Sunni majority. Many commentators, including rebels in Syria, have argued that this did not suit the

²⁴ Noah Bonsey, 'What Obama Doesn't Understand About Syria', *Foreign Policy*, 26 November 2014

²⁵ 'Mosul diaries: Shortages bite', *BBC News Online*, 5 December 2014

²⁶ 'Iraq Militants, Pushing South, Aim at Capital', *New York Times*, 11 June 2014

Assad regime, so it developed a policy of fomenting the *jihadi* elements in the rebellion to fit its own narrative.

The killings in early 2012 of 108 Sunni civilians, many of whom were children, in the town of Houla, was attributed to Alawite Shabiha militiamen by several witnesses. Allowing such attacks may have been part of this policy. Also, crucially, many Islamist extremists were released from Sednaya prison near Damascus in March 2011. Sednaya prison is notorious for the torture and killing of inmates; radicals who had been imprisoned there would have a strong motivation to fight against the regime.

This was not the first time that the Syrian government had released militants for them to fight. During the violence in Iraq after the invasion, it is reported that *jihadis* were released and sent to Iraq, to help al-Qaeda in Iraq's fight against the US occupying forces.²⁷

Around the same time as the 2011 release of Islamist radicals, tens of thousands of liberal and secularist protesters were being arrested. Not surprisingly, the tone of the rebellion quickly became less secularist, more sectarian and more violent.

At the same time as suiting the Assads' narrative that its opponents were terrorists, the rise of ISIS also had the advantage, from the point of view of Damascus, of distracting more secular rebels from their fight against the government. The ISIS ideology is firmly opposed to secularists and ISIS has shown that it is prepared to fight other *jihadi* groups such as the Nusra Front for the allegiance of Syrian Sunnis. These trends meant that the various anti-government forces in Syria were distracted fighting each other, while the West, and particularly the US, became increasingly interested in fighting ISIS, perhaps downgrading the removal of Bashar al-Assad.

It is not possible to state categorically that the objective in Damascus was to foment *jihad*, and violence and sectarian hatred were perhaps likely to increase anyway. However, if that was the policy, it was a success.

Fomenting *jihad* is a risky strategy. As ISIS took more territory in Syria in the second half of 2014, some voices close to the Syrian government called for a stronger line against them. Despite any tacit understanding, one of the top objectives of the radical *takfiris* leading ISIS would be to bring down the Alawite-led and avowedly sectarian Syrian government. Reports of the killings of Alawite civilians by ISIS appeared, making the threat to the Syrian government from ISIS ever clearer.

Rise of extremist forces

As the conflict drew on, the 'moderate' rebel forces failed to coalesce into a well-organised and effective force, partly because of conflicting personalities and objectives, partly because of the lack of decisive support from outside. Free Syrian Army fighters have often been accused of corruption, looting and unjustly confiscating property, unlike *jihadi* forces, which are more strictly disciplined. The ineffectiveness of the 'moderates' made Western support for them even more difficult to organise.

At the same time, more radical groups were growing in influence. As many Syrians became disillusioned with the Free Syrian Army, more radical *jihadi* and conservative *Salafi* groups were attracting supporters, partly because many groups were better supplied with weaponry and other resources.²⁸ Jabhat al-Nusra announced its formation in early 2012 and committed its first attack, a suicide bombing that killed 40 people. Other groups emerging at around that

²⁷ 'From Jail to Jihad: Former Prisoners Fight in Syrian Insurgency', *Der Spiegel*, 10 October 2013

²⁸ For more on this see the House of Commons Library Standard Note *Military forces in Syria and the rise of the jihadis*, 29 April 2013

time included Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Islam and Suqor al-Sham, all of which were set up by inmates who had been released from Sednaya prison in the preceding year.²⁹

Enmity and violence between the different groups in the rebellion (and there are more than two strands on the rebel side), combined with Iranian and Russian help, allowed the Syrian government to improve its military situation in 2013.

As the involvement of Iran and its proxy Hizballah in supporting the Assad government became clearer, regional powers were increasingly accused of waging a proxy war. The Syrian struggle was seen as decisive in the growing regional conflict between Sunni and Shia and between their respective champions, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudis and other citizens of the Gulf States were increasingly accused of channelling money to radical groups in the war. While officials denied it, there were suspicions that the governments of the Gulf were tacitly supporting groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra, or at least not doing enough to prevent support reaching them.

The involvement of Iran and some of the Gulf States helped to foment the violence in Syria and to harden the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict, as well as fuelling the sectarian stand-off across the region.³⁰

ISIS enters the scene

Jabhat al-Nusra was long the most important *jihadi* group in Syria. The group is part of the al-Qaeda network but retains operational autonomy, and in 2013 it rejected a tie-up with al-Qaeda in Iraq. But from 2012, ISI began to make inroads into Syria, sending fighters across the border from its strongholds in northern and western Iraq, seeing an opportunity in the chaos and infighting in Syria, even between those who should in theory have been allies.

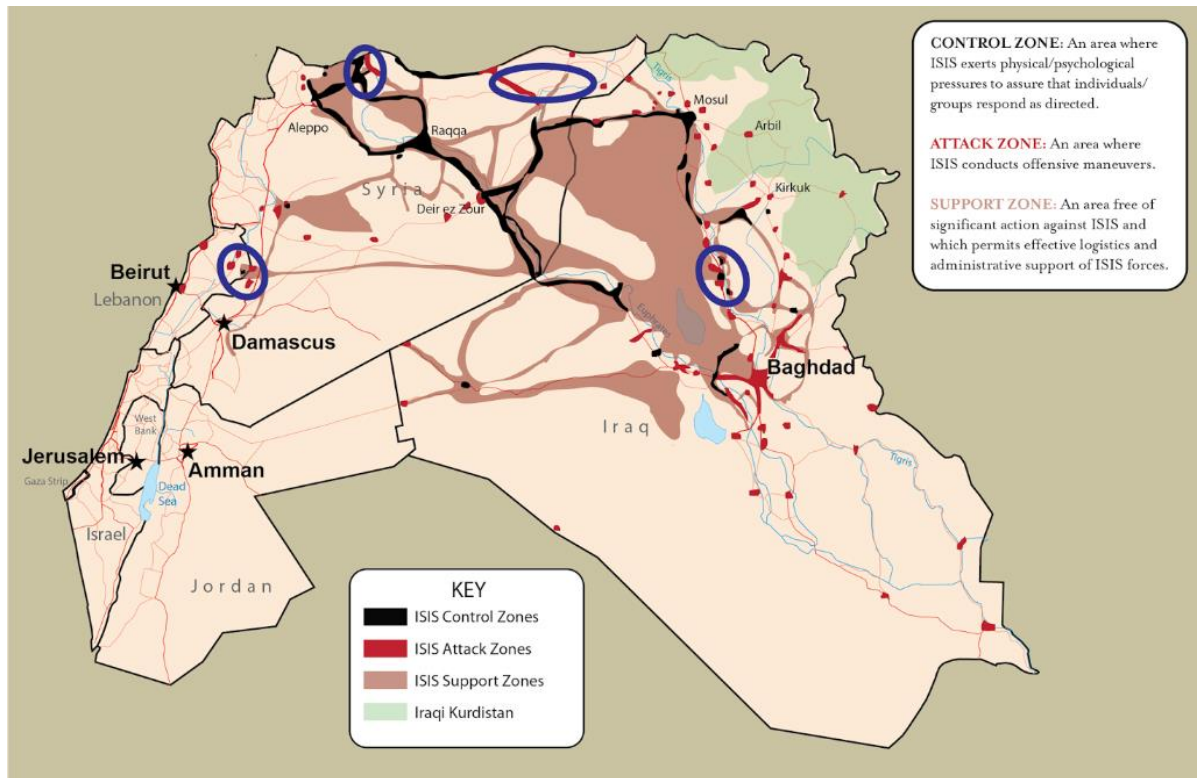
ISI used the now well-known aggressive tactics in Syria, killing other rebel fighters that opposed it and many civilians who refused to abide by its interpretation of Islam. In doing so, it managed to take control of large areas of Syrian territory. It was also disowned by the central al-Qaeda leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri, who said that Jabhat al-Nusra was the primary representative of al-Qaeda in Syria.³¹

By this time, ISIS had become one of the most powerful *jihadi* groups in Syria, controlling territory that included oil fields, providing it with essential financial resources. The Institute for the Study of War produced the following map in March 2015, showing areas controlled by ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

²⁹ Michael Lister, 'Assessing Syria's Jihad', in *Middle Eastern Security, the US pivot and the rise of ISIS*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014

³⁰ For more on this theme, see Emile Hokayem, 'Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian civil war', in *Middle Eastern Security the US pivot and the rise of ISIS*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014

³¹ 'Al-Qaeda disowns ISIL rebels in Syria', *al-Jazeera*, 3 February 2014



Institute for the Study of War

ISIS did not have it all its own way in Syria; the secularist rebels mounted a counter-offensive in early 2014 and drove ISIS out of Latakia and Idlib governorates. The group has been in full control of the Raqqah governorate since August 2014.

There are indications that the Syrian government was still treating ISIS gently in 2014. *Jane's* calculated that in that year, only 6% of 982 Syrian counter-terrorism operations targeted ISIS and only 13% of ISIS attacks were against Syrian government targets.³² ISIS aims to monopolise the Sunnis' rebellion against Damascus, and this appears to be a more urgent priority than bringing the government down. If the government were to fall to a myriad of opposition groups, generally more 'moderate' than ISIS, ISIS would not control the setting up of a new state. If ISIS can absorb other rebel groups and end up as the sole opposition to Assad, the group would be in complete control of the new Syria if the Assads' fell.

As *Jane's* points out, if the Syrian civil war became a fight between just ISIS and the Syrian government, that would be a 'lose-lose' situation for the West.³³ As it is, the US administration and its Arab supporters now have three adversaries in the Syrian conflict: the Syrian government, Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS.

Consolidation of the Syrian government's position

With the rise of ISIS, the West's continuing reluctance to get involved in Syria, and Iran and Hizballah's sustained support for the government, recent months have seen the Assad regime consolidating its position. Both Russia and Iran continued to supply the government with weapons, while the supplies for rebels were sporadic. By the end of 2014, rebel forces of the Syrian National Coalition did not completely control any major Syrian city, although it

³² 'Syrian military and ISIS have been 'ignoring' each other on the battlefield', *IHS Jane's Intelligence Review*, 10 December 2014

³³ 'Syrian military and ISIS have been 'ignoring' each other on the battlefield', *IHS Jane's Intelligence Review*, 10 December 2014

remained a presence in rural areas and the Syrian government had regained control of the crucial corridor between the two major cities of Aleppo and Damascus, connecting also to the Mediterranean coast.³⁴

3 The ISIS surge

From 2012, protests against the Shia-led government in the Sunni areas of Iraq grew in strength. Protest camps were formed in Sunni strongholds such as Fallujah and Ramadi, in Anbar governorate. Some of the protests were put down violently by government forces causing hundreds of deaths. Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki denounced the protesters as supporters of al-Qaeda, while the complexity of the crisis was underlined as the radical Shia cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, sided with the protesters against the government.

The various elements behind Iraqi ISIS were already present in the anti-government protests, including former Baathists.

By 2014, ISIS had become the leading organisation representing the Sunni protests in Anbar and had taken control of territory in the Sunni areas of both Syria and Iraq, establishing the Syrian town of al-Raqqah as its 'capital'.

In June 2014, Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, fell to the group and its supporters, which left ISIS in control of a huge swath of territory across the Iraqi-Syrian border.³⁵ The takeover of so much territory underlined the difference in ISIS strategy from that of rival al-Qaeda. It also gave the group access to considerable resources, including oil and other minerals, and antiquities, and it allowed ISIS to make money from controlling smuggling routes. At the same time it gave ISIS leaders the responsibility for governing millions of people (which can be a liability as well as an asset).

3.1 Finance

According to *Jane's*, a security consultancy, AQI's main source of funding at the beginning of its existence was likely to have been wealthy Gulf individuals.³⁶ Nouri al-Maliki has said that Saudi Arabia and Qatar 'announced war on Iraq',³⁷ and Iranian officials have criticised the West for allowing funds to flow from its allies in the Gulf to extremists. There are some suggestions of direct support from Gulf government officials to ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (see the sections below on national reactions to ISIS).

Most sources suggest, however, that the Gulf governments have increasingly been assisting groups they perceive as more moderate than ISIS, but some argue that they have not done enough to prevent private individuals from sending funds to extreme groups. Kuwait is singled out as a staging post for the funds, a situation that has arisen not only because of Kuwait's location but also because of a relatively permissive political and financial environment.³⁸ The amount of money reaching militants in Syria and Iraq from Gulf individuals is probably in the hundreds of millions of dollars.³⁹

However, since ISIS has controlled more territory both in Syria and Iraq, it has increasingly been able to fund itself from the proceeds of organised crime, including protection rackets

³⁴ *The Military balance 2015*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015, p304

³⁵ For more on ISIS victories in 2014, see the House of Commons Library Standard Note [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant \(ISIS\) and the takeover of Mosul](#), 20 June 2014

³⁶ Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)

³⁷ 'Maliki: Saudi and Qatar at war against Iraq', *al-Jazeera*, 9 March 2014

³⁸ 'Kuwaiti minister accused by U.S. over terrorism funding quits', *Reuters*, 12 May 2014

³⁹ Elizabeth Dickinson, *Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home*, Brookings Institution, 6 December 2013

and bank robberies, and by selling natural resources. One UAE official has raised the prospect of ISIS forming an alliance with the Somali group al-Shabab and getting into the piracy business. A US official downplayed this, saying that controls on piracy were becoming more effective and as yet there was no sign of collaboration between al-Shabab and ISIS.⁴⁰

The looting of millions of dollars from Mosul banks was a major boost to ISIS finances, but similar activities had already been going on with the Syrian territory held by the group: a cache of intelligence captured by the Iraqi authorities showed that in late 2012 the group had taken control of oilfields in eastern Syria, giving it a healthy cash flow.

Antiquities

Raw materials other than oil are also traded by the group and there has been much concern about the looting of antiquities. The destruction of historic sites in Iraq and Syria was debated in the House of Commons on 12 February 2015.⁴¹ The probable scale of the problem was underlined, along with the fact that the government of Syria was also likely to be benefiting from the wholesale looting. Combatting the trade is difficult, however, as the antiquities market is notoriously opaque.⁴²

Income from the control of territory in Syria had already given ISIS cash and assets of some £515 million, before the takeover of Mosul. After Mosul, an Iraqi intelligence official estimated that 'they could add another \$1.5 billion to that' although this claim was not substantiated.⁴³

As well as giving ISIS control of valuable resources, controlling territory and population also implies commitments: providing food, welfare and security at the same time as continuing the military struggle in places such as Kobane. One analyst argues that, as the one-off gains associated with expansion dry up, these liabilities could bring ISIS down.⁴⁴

3.2 Tactics

Many commentators have pointed up the influence on both al-Qaeda and, particularly, ISIS of a book written by an author thought to be a high-ranking member of al-Qaeda in 2004: *The management of savagery: the most critical stage through which the Ummah will pass*. It was published on the internet and advocated constant attacks on the governments of Muslim-majority countries (which it considered illegitimate), weakening their legitimacy further and their grip on territory, and allowing territory to be taken by *jihadis*, that would form the nucleus of an Islamic state.

ISIS strategy aims to pursue this in Iraq and Syria, further delegitimising the existing authorities, allowing ISIS to attract supporters, spread fear among other people and take over territory, offering protection and social services in an Islamic state to which all Muslims should pledge allegiance.

ISIS tactics have impressed observers. The fluidity and speed of their and their allies' attacks left the Iraq government's security forces completely unprepared. They displayed skills that come from years of experience in irregular warfare in Iraq from 2003 to 2008 and from senior officers from Saddam's disbanded army and security services.

The group tries to look after the populations in the areas in controls and to maintain good supplies of bread, fruit and vegetables. There are also reports of energy and water shortages

⁴⁰ 'Is Islamic State Group Getting Into the Piracy Business?' *Defense News*, 2 November 2014

⁴¹ [HC Deb 12 February 2015, c1002-22](#)

⁴² Sam Hardy and Sasan Aghlani, 'tomb raiders and the profits of doom', *World Today*, February/March 2015

⁴³ 'Iraq arrest that exposed wealth and power of Isis jihadists', *Guardian*, 15 June 2014

⁴⁴ 'Defeating ISIS: How Financial Liabilities will Undo the Jihadists', IISS Commentary, 27 October 2014

and other economic problems, including the failure of mobile networks. The efforts of ISIS to offer some services to civilian populations has been contrasted with the Free Syrian Army, whose 'moderate' fighters and leaders are often accused of higher levels of corruption and brutality.⁴⁵

ISIS wages a hybrid campaign against its enemies in Iraq and Syria. ISIS does confront its enemies directly and tries to hold on to territory, much as in a conventional state-on-state conflict. It pays its fighters a minimum of \$400 per month, more for those who have military experience. Partly through fear of local resistance, it has decreed that from every family with more than one adult male one must enlist or the family must pay a fine equivalent to \$1,250.⁴⁶ It also has a well-organised and effective secret service.

ISIS also uses unconventional guerrilla tactics:

- Expansion of territory and successful operations are essential to its propaganda effort
- It attracts adherents from Western and other countries it considers enemies, knowing that they are likely to present problems for the governments of those countries when they return home
- The kidnap and execution of Western hostages and others is a terrorist tactic, sowing fear amongst its enemies
- ISIS uses car bombs and suicide bombs (improvised explosive devices or IEDs) against Iraqi army and in Baghdad, both in the Shia areas and, recently, near public buildings in the centre of the city⁴⁷
- It uses highly mobile forces, often riding on pick-up trucks mounted with artillery pieces
- ISIS fighters often leave booby trapped items when they leave an area: useful items such as torches or cars that explode when they are turned on.
- There have been reports that both ISIS and Syrian government forces have been using chlorine gas against each other.⁴⁸

Online jihad

ISIS conducts a sophisticated online propaganda campaign using footage of its fighters' achievements and promoting several Twitter accounts that give live updates on operations and illustrate their advances (although some of the material may not be genuine).

It has designed an app which delivers ISIS messages to subscribers. While it uses other social media apps, Twitter is the most important and Europe-based ISIS organisational accounts associated with the banned UK group al-Muhajiroun have an important influence on the content used by European-origin *jihadis*, according to recent research.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ahmed S Hashim, 'The Islamic State: from Al-Qaeda affiliate to caliphate', *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Winter 2014, Volume XXI, Number 4, p6

⁴⁶ Patrick Cockburn, 'If only they would leave', *London Review of Books*, 18 December 2014

⁴⁷ 'Car bombs in east Baghdad kill 15 after Green Zone blast', *Reuters*, 4 December 2014

⁴⁸ 'Report: ISIS using chlorine bombs', *Haaretz*, 25 October 2014

⁴⁹ Jytte Clausen, 'Tweeting the Jihad: social media networks of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 38 no 1, January 2015

The internet is central to the ISIS propaganda effort, and this battle is largely fought from countries outside the Middle East. Supporters in the US, the UK, India, Russia and Saudi Arabia have been the main source of pro-ISIS Twitter propaganda. ISIS organises hashtag campaigns, sometimes hijacking hashtags that have nothing to do with ISIS, in order to raise its profile.⁵⁰

On 13 January 2015, the group scored a propaganda victory when it hacked into the US Army's Central Command Twitter account and posted messages in support of ISIS. The extremists have evaded detection and censorship of their online activities by regularly changing the computers that are the source of its messages.

Response to increased military pressure

Faced with increased air strikes, ISIS modifies its tactics quickly, abandoning large convoys of vehicles (a large majority of air strike targets have been vehicles) and using motorbikes. They have planted their flags on domestic premises instead of command posts, burying themselves in residential areas, and have stopped using road blocks so frequently.⁵¹ They have increasingly used tunnels and camouflage.

ISIS has decentralised its government structures to protect itself from air strikes and other attacks. There are some 20 military headquarters in Iraq, up from two at the beginning. It has set up ministries for a range of functions including taxation and bomb-making.⁵²

The US Department of Defense has claimed that there are signs that the campaign against ISIS has reduced the group's income from oil (air strikes have targeted oil facilities), and argued that the fact that the group had to be more defensive would place limits on its influence on the ground. The Pentagon also argued, however, that the fight was not so much over territory as over ideology and that this would take time to win.⁵³

3.3 Treatment of Christians and other atrocities

Concern has been raised in Parliament and elsewhere about the treatment of Christians by ISIS. Lord Alton of Liverpool drew attention to the plight of Christians in Syria, some of whom have been killed while others have been forced to pay *jizyah*, a traditional tax on non-Muslims in Muslim areas that used to be levied by the Ottoman Empire and other Islamic regimes:

When they are not being murdered, they are being forced to pay extortionate jizya tax—protection money—to leave or to die, like the two men who were recently crucified by ISIS in Syria. I was given an account only today from Syrian refugees who are in Jordan, unable to pay a ransom. The head of the family was kidnapped and executed.

Last night, [...] Mosul fell to ISIS. Not surprisingly, overnight, 120,000 Christians were reported to have fled from Mosul to the plains of Nineveh.⁵⁴

There are concerns for other minorities too, such as Turkmen and Kurds. The mainly Turkmen town of Tal Afar, to the west of Mosul, was captured by ISIS on Sunday 15 June 2014 after heavy fighting.

⁵⁰ 'March of the armchair jihadis', *Financial Times*, 14 January 2015

⁵¹ 'Wary of air strikes, ISIS militants change tactics', *Al-Arabiyya*, 27 September 2014

⁵² Owen Bennett-Jones, 'When jihadis take power', *London Review of Books*, 4 December 2014

⁵³ 'Fewer Air Targets as ISIL Terrorists Hide, Change Tactics', US Department of Defense press notice, 23 January 2015

⁵⁴ HL Deb 11 June 2014, c418

It is not just religious and ethnic minorities who are the victims in ISIS-held areas. Hundreds of Sunni Arab tribesmen have been massacred for opposing ISIS. Two women in Mosul who had stood for election to the Iraqi parliament in Baghdad were shot dead by ISIS in Mosul, even though they had publicly repudiated their actions.⁵⁵

3.4 Foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria

Estimates for the total number of foreign fighters with Sunni extremist groups in Iraq and Syria are around 15,000 from 80 countries – 3,000 to 5,000 with Jabhat al-Nusra and 7,000 to 10,000 with ISIS.⁵⁶ It is reported that ISIS continues to be the most popular group for foreign fighters.⁵⁷ About 8,000 of the foreign fighters in the two insurgent organizations originated in neighbouring Arab countries like Jordan, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya and Morocco, while perhaps 3,000 come from Western countries, including France, the UK, the US, Canada and Australia.⁵⁸

The EU has estimated that the number could 'up to' 2,000 for EU citizens.⁵⁹ It is widely estimated that there are about 500 UK nationals fighting with extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, while the French Interior ministry says that around 900 French nationals are fighting in the region.⁶⁰ There are also about 600 to 700 fighters from the Western Balkans in Iraq and Syria, largely from Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Considering the small Kosovar population, Kosovo has provided a particularly high number of combatants and concern has been expressed that some of those who joined the fight from the Balkans have conducted suicide bombing missions, a tactic that was never used during the Balkan wars in the 1990s.⁶¹

Radio Free Liberty/Radio Europe recently produced a graphic from official sources, showing that the number of fighters per head of population is far higher in countries such as Jordan and Tunisia than in Europe:

⁵⁵ Patrick Cockburn, 'If only they would leave', *London Review of Books*, 18 December 2014

⁵⁶ 'At high-level debate, UN, Security Council renew pledge to counter foreign terrorist fighters', UN press release, 19 November 2014

⁵⁷ 'Nations Trying to Stop Their Citizens From Going to Middle East to Fight for ISIS', *New York Times*, 12 September 2014

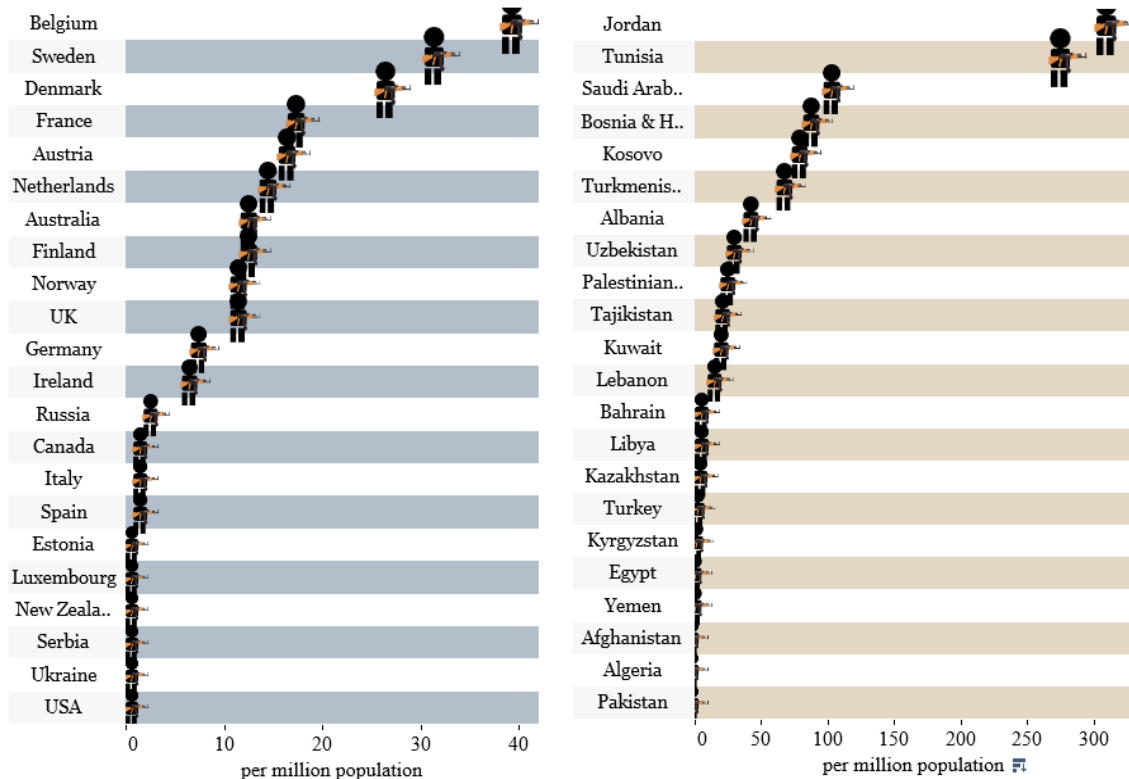
⁵⁸ 'Assessing The Threat Of Westerners Who Become Fighters On Behalf Of Al Qaeda Insurgents In Syria', *Journal of Counterterrorism and Homeland Security International*, Fall 2014

⁵⁹ 'European Ministers Adopt a New Action Plan to Conquer Syria-bound EU National Fighters', *International Enforcement Law Reporter*, October 2014

⁶⁰ 'Europe Struggles to Control a Rising Tide of Homegrown Jihadists', *Bloomberg*, 2 September 2014

⁶¹ Adrian Shtuni 'The Western Balkans: A Jihadist Pipeline to Syria and Iraq', *Fikra Forum*, 29 January 2015

Number of fighters per million population, Western countries and the rest



Sources: French Interior Ministry, British Government, Belgian Government, Austrian Interior Ministry, US government, Australian government, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, Reuters, France24, Deutsche Welle, The Local Sweden, Sveriges Radio



Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 29 January 2015

Turkey is said to be a common route for European *ihadis* heading for Syria. Cheap tourist flights are available from European airports and allegedly inadequate checks on the part of the Turkish authorities along Turkey's long border with Syria allow European *ihadis* to get into Syria easily.

The UN Security Council recently adopted a text which called on member states to tackle the problem. It said that member states should:

...prevent and suppress the recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a State other than their State of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, and the financing of their travel and of their activities...

It went on to stress:

the particular and urgent need to implement this resolution with respect to those foreign terrorist fighters who are associated with ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the

Levant], ANF [Al-Nusrah Front] and other cells, affiliates, splinter groups or derivatives of Al-Qaida...⁶²

Further information is available in the Presidential Statement of 19 November.⁶³

Fighters returning to the UK

Controversy continues in the UK over how to handle British fighters. On 1 September 2013, the Prime Minister said that the normal criminal law should be used where possible, but mentioned plans to allow the seizure of passports of British nationals who had been fighting in Syria or Iraq, or to prevent their return to the UK:

We already have important powers to block return: we can deprive dual nationals of their citizenship to stop them returning; we can bar foreign nationals on the basis of the threat they pose; and we legislated, in the Immigration Act 2014, to allow stronger powers to strip citizenship from naturalised Britons. But, of course, these powers do not apply to those who are solely British nationals, who could be rendered stateless if deprived of citizenship.

Some have said that we should deal with this gap by criminalising travel to certain individual countries or fundamentally changing our criminal burden of proof. The Government are clear that it would be wrong to deal with the gap by fundamentally changing core principles of our criminal justice system. But it is abhorrent that people who declare their allegiance elsewhere can return to the United Kingdom and pose a threat to our national security. We are clear in principle that what we need is a targeted, discretionary power to allow us to exclude British nationals from the UK. We will work up proposals on this basis with our agencies, in line with our international obligations, and discuss the details on a cross-party basis.⁶⁴

Mayor of London Boris Johnson has supported the calls for *jihadis* to be stripped of their citizenship and has also suggested that legislation should be introduced to overturn the presumption of innocence without proof of guilt.⁶⁵

On the other hand, Richard Barrett, former head of the external intelligence service MI6, said on 6 September that British *jihadis* disillusioned with the fighting should be allowed to return to the UK. He argued that disillusioned radicals, many of whom have found that they are engaged with fighting rival radical Islamic groups rather than the Assad government, could make themselves useful to the fight against radicalisation at home:

These are the people who can expose the true nature of the Islamic State and its leadership. Their stories of brutality and the motives behind it will be far more credible and persuasive than the rhetoric of men in suits.

These repentant fighters need a way out, and although the law must take its course, they need to know there is a place for them back at home if they are committed to a non-violent future.⁶⁶

Sir Menzies Campbell, former leader of the Liberal Democrats, offered some support for this view: "I don't think we could give them a total amnesty, but we could treat them leniently in return for completing a de-radicalisation programme."⁶⁷

⁶² [‘Security Council high-level summit tackles growing threat of foreign terrorist fighters’](#), UN press release, 24 September 2014

⁶³ [Statement by the President of the Security Council S/PRST/2014/23](#), 19 November 2014

⁶⁴ [HC Deb 1 September 2014, c26](#)

⁶⁵ [‘Boris Johnson calls for ‘guilty until proven innocent’ for suspected terrorists’](#), *Guardian*, 25 August 2015

⁶⁶ [‘Isis fighters must be allowed back into UK, says ex-MI6 chief’](#), *Observer*, 7 September 2014

Saudi rehabilitation programme

Saudi Arabia instituted a rehabilitation programme for *jihadis* in 2006, on the initiative of Mohamed Bin Naif, a Saudi prince who is now Minister of the Interior and since January 2015, Deputy Crown Prince.

The scheme has been used to process former Saudi Guantánamo Bay detainees and other domestic radicals. At least in its early years, the scheme was said to be a success, with the government saying in 2009 that it had had a 98% success rate with 3,000 'graduates'.⁶⁸

This success may have been in part due to the fact that, according to some reports, many of the early inmates were not really hardened *jihadis* at all, rather; Arab nationalists who were drawn into the fight against the Western occupation of Iraq, and al-Qaeda foot soldiers, who were easily weaned off violent *jihadism* with grants and encouragement to get married.⁶⁹ The optimism was further questioned after two former *jihadis*, Said Ali al-Shihri and Abu Hareth Muhammad al-Awfi, appeared in an al-Qaeda video after going through the rehabilitation. The programme has produced other embarrassments: One centre incarcerates men who have been arrested for trying to travel to Syria. In 2013, the nephew its director was killed while fighting there. His family said on Twitter that they were proud of him.⁷⁰

Concerned about the possibility of returning fighters from Syria destabilising the country, the Saudi government passed a counter-terrorism law in 2014 making it a crime for Saudi citizens to go to fight in Syria. The new legislation also put the rehabilitation programme on a new legal basis and gave the courts the power to send terrorism suspects to the centres instead of prosecution. The law was criticised for failing to respect the human rights of detainees and for failing to uphold the presumption of innocence.⁷¹

Commentators have noted that the Saudi programme relies on particular Saudi factors, such as the influence of the traditional Ulema (Islamic scholars) and on family and social connections. It would therefore be difficult to replicate the programme in the West.⁷²

3.5 Political developments in Iraq

The failure of the Iraqi state against ISIS highlighted two sides of the same problem: the effectiveness of ISIS and the weakness of the Iraqi state. ISIS could not have made such gains without broad based political support and access to significant military resources and know-how, and effective organisation. Official Iraqi forces failed because they received little support from the population in areas taken over by ISIS, and because their effectiveness was undermined by disastrous organisational weaknesses.

The Iraqi state failed on the most fundamental levels:

- to control violence, particularly in Sunni areas, and establish its authority
- to provide services to help the lives of ordinary Iraqis (the government still fails to provide a constant electricity supply despite Iraq being one of the most energy-rich countries in the world)
- and to develop a sense of national identity and loyalty – indeed the policies of Nouri al-Maliki eroded such loyalty to the state as existed in Sunni areas.⁷³

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ [The De-radicalisation of Jihadists](#), Chatham House meeting summary, 10 December 2009

⁶⁹ 'Saudi CARE for Jihadis', Wall Street Journal Europe, 11 January 2010

⁷⁰ 'Saudis Back Syrian Rebels Despite Risks', *New York Times*, 7 January 2014

⁷¹ 'Saudi Arabia: Terrorism Law Tramples on Rights', Human Rights Watch press release, 6 February 2014

⁷² [The De-radicalisation of Jihadists](#), Chatham House meeting summary, 10 December 2009

The history of political failures and the violence associated with the ISIS advance are increasing the already strong centrifugal forces in Iraq, as Sunnis and Kurds see a chance to break free from Baghdad. These developments could pose a serious threat to the continued existence of Iraq as a state in its present borders.

Maliki's government

After pressure from the US and Iran, Nouri al-Maliki announced on 14 August 2014 that he was stepping down as Prime Minister. His sectarian policies had been blamed by many commentators for the unrest in Sunni areas of Iraq, which surged in the last couple of years, as the Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi was charged with murder in 2011, fled to Iraqi Kurdistan and was sentenced in his absence to death.

Protests and occupations spread and the Baghdad government's response was harsh, particularly in the central Iraqi town of Fallujah. By January 2014, it was reported that ISI had taken control of the town, in a foretaste of the successes it was about to have in wide swathes of Iraq and Syria.

In May 2014, with more than 3,500 people dead from the violence during the course of the year, a general election was held. Al-Maliki's coalition, the State of Law, won the largest number of seats: 92 of the 328 in the Iraqi Council of Representatives.⁷⁴

The US and Iran were keen to see al-Maliki leave office because the difficulties in responding to al-Qaeda in Iraq in the same areas in the mid-2000s had already illustrated the central political problem in Iraq and shown that the Maliki government was not dealing with it. Then, the surge in violence, which was only brought under control when local tribal leaders abandoned al-Qaeda in Iraq and joined the fight against them. This was despite the full-scale occupation by US ground forces.

Western leaders and others did not believe that it was possible to control ISIS without removing their grassroots support in the same way, and this would only be possible if Sunni Arabs in central and northern areas had confidence that the Baghdad was looking after their interests. For the US, achieving this turnaround would not be possible under the leadership of Nouri al-Maliki, as these comments from an adviser to the US Congress suggest:

Maliki's government and its Iranian allies suppressed the Iraqi Sunnis so much that ISIS was able to sweep through Sunni areas without much resistance at first because of resentment toward the premier. ISIS is taking advantage and seizing more land, power, and eliminating Arab Sunni moderates in Iraq.

The adviser went on:

ISIS knows that the only possible threat against them, short of an all-out international ground campaign, is an uprising by [Sunni] tribes.⁷⁵

The new Iraqi government

A British-educated Shiite from al-Maliki's Dawa party, Haidar al-Abadi, was designated Prime Minister and endorsed as party leader by Dawa on 11 August 2014. Al-Abadi is seen, at least in the West, as more moderate than al-Maliki and more able to begin a reconciliation process with Sunnis. Many Sunnis see him as just another anti-Sunni politician. Getting Sunnis to support the federal government and fight ISIS is a tall order, particularly in the context of

⁷³ For more on this theme, see Toby Dodge and Becca Wasser, 'The crisis of the Iraqi state', in Middle eastern security, the US pivot and the rise of ISIS, International institute for Strategic Studies, 2014, pp 14-17

⁷⁴ 'Iraq elections: Maliki's State of Law 'wins most seats'', *BBC News Online*, 19 May 2014

⁷⁵ 'Iraqi Sunnis who fought al-Qaeda not keen to quell ISIS', *Al-Arabiya*, 29 August 2014

regular violence between Sunni ISIS and its Sunni allies and government forces supported by Shia militias and advised by Iran.

The possibility of the situation spiralling into further sectarian violence, rather than improving, was starkly illustrated when, on 22 August 2014, Shiite militiamen opened fire inside a Sunni mosque in north east Iraq, killing 65.⁷⁶ Following the attack, Sunni MPs withdrew from the talks to form a new government. ISIS vowed to avenge the attack.

The infighting continued in September as a vote on the new government, scheduled for 6 September was put off until 8 September. Disagreements persisted about the sharing out of government ministries, particularly the Ministry of Defence.

On 9 September, it was announced that a new government had finally been formed. Posts had successfully been shared out between the three different groups – Shia, Sunni and Kurdish – although the defence and interior, the two crucial security posts, had still to be agreed. The Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said that these would be allocated in the next few days.⁷⁷

Armed forces

The Maliki government had concentrated most of its efforts on securing its own power, and this meant sacking experienced military officers whose loyalty was questioned, installing less experienced allies in key positions in the security forces and interfering with the chain of command by issuing orders directly from the prime minister's office. Combined with rampant corruption, these policies fatally undermined the effectiveness of the security forces.

The new Prime Minister has admitted that about 50,000 of the 350,000-strong army were in fact ghost soldiers, whose salaries were syphoned off by army officers. The new government has also set about purging commanders who were not up to the job.

Haider al-Abadi proposed a plan of action in the Iraqi parliament in September 2014, which included forming a new National Guard which would be mobilised locally and would help the regular armed forces in the fight against ISIS. It would incorporate both Sunni and Shia militias under one national organisation. A Sunni tribal leader from Anbar province said:

The idea was discussed earlier as a solution for the practices of the governmental forces against the [region's] inhabitants. It focuses on forming a local force, like the Kurdish peshmerga, in each province to protect it locally and avoid the intervention of foreign forces.⁷⁸

Critics foresaw problems with this initiative, however, as it could entrench the sectarian nature of the conflict and could lead to friction between differing branches of the security forces.⁷⁹ The plan was related to demands for decentralisation from the Sunni areas of Iraq. It is not clear how these will be addressed.

Even an acceptable, broadly-based government will still have to face intractable underlying problems such as the sharing of oil revenues, disputed territory and arguments over decentralisation as well as much-needed reform of the armed forces; the US had already spent \$24 billion on the Iraqi armed forces and the results were clearly a failure. Whether the Iraqi government can be more effective now is open to question. As one commentator

⁷⁶ 'Iraq mosque massacre: 65 dead', *CNN*, 24 August 2014

⁷⁷ 'US: New government is 'milestone' for Iraq', *BBC News Online*, 9 September 2014

⁷⁸ 'Iraq's unified 'National Guard' may be impossible', *Al-Monitor*, 16 September 2014

⁷⁹ 'A New Sectarian Force for Iraq', *Carnegie Endowment for World Peace*, 13 November 2014

argues, those who hope that a new government in Baghdad will transform the Iraqi state's ability to take on ISIS should not hold their breath:

No one envies the policy makers and officials grappling with Isis's rise at a time of public antipathy over military adventures in the Arab world, tightened budgets and multiple interlocking global crises. But they may need to develop an alternative plan that does not rely too much on Mr Abadi's new government for dramatic political change in Iraq.⁸⁰

3.6 ISIS spreading?

There have been several statements from both governments and from *jihadi* groups that suggest that ISIS is growing in influence and that attacks in several countries can be attributed to sympathisers. However, there may be reasons for both governments and *jihadi* groups to raise the spectre of ISIS for publicity purposes. Many countries have a problem with Islamist extremism, but few share the conditions in Syria and Iraq that have allowed ISIS to take over territory.

A recent opinion poll suggested that ISIS has almost no popular support in Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Lebanon, even among Sunnis. In Egypt, only 3% support ISIS, while in Saudi Arabia it was slightly higher at 5%. Only 1% of Lebanese Sunnis supported the group. However, approval for US policy is also low, particularly in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.⁸¹

While only a small proportion of the population may support ISIS in these important Muslim countries, it does not take many supporters for a radical group to be able to destabilise a fragile political situation. The situation in many of these countries is markedly fragile. However, some declarations of allegiance to ISIS may be opportunistic. It benefits ISIS propaganda to show its reach, and it benefits radicals outside Syria and Iraq to adopt the most feared *jihadi* label of the moment. But ISIS commanders may have little operational control over such militants and what control they do have could be temporary.

On 24 September 2014 the French government confirmed that that a tourist abducted in Algeria had been murdered by a group claiming allegiance to ISIS.⁸² This is probably an example of opportunism rather than genuine ISIS organisational capacity in Algeria. In other more fragile countries, developments are more alarming.

Libya

Libya has been in chaos since the fall of Muammar Qaddafi and presents ideal opportunities for groups such as ISIS to operate.

Radical militants in Libya have taken to the ISIS brand with some enthusiasm, to the extent that ISIS leaders have declared three parts of Libya to be governorates of the Islamic State. Adherents of Ansar al-Sharia in Derna, formerly affiliated with al-Qaeda, pledged allegiance to ISIS in November 2014. In December the head of US Africa Command said that a couple of hundred ISIS fighters were setting up training camps in eastern Libya, near the border with Egypt.

In January 2015, there was an attack ascribed to ISIS against a top hotel in Tripoli, in which nine people died. In February, militants in Derna claimed the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians for ISIS and posted a gruesome video on the internet.

⁸⁰ 'Surface change in Iraq's politics allows deep wounds to fester', *Financial Times*, 8 September 2014

⁸¹ [Arab public opinion and the fight against ISIS](#), Fikra Forum/Washington institute for near East Policy, October 2014

⁸² 'French hostage Herve Gourdel beheaded in Algeria', *BBC News Online*, 24 September 2014

South Asia

In India and Pakistan, particularly in the Kashmiri areas, there is also militancy that has been attributed to ISIS.⁸³ In September 2014, it was reported that militants had crossed the border from Afghanistan into Pakistan carrying leaflets and flags, urging locals to join ISIS. Militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan who went to fight in Syria have returned to their home countries to recruit for ISIS.⁸⁴ Reports suggested that several hard-line Sunni groups had already pledged allegiance to ISIS:

A number of hardline groups operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan have already announced support for the group headed by Afghan Taliban. Among them, Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost and Maulvi Abdul Qahar, stalwarts of Saudi Arabia-backed Salafi Taliban groups operating in Nuristan and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan, have already announced support for the self-styled caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁸⁵

Gulf

There are reports that ISIS cells are operating in Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia. Official Saudi news media are supporting the Kingdom's decision to participate in military action against ISIS, but there is an undercurrent of support there for the Sunni extremists. One person tweeted anonymously: "Why aren't you attacking the Shia – you are enemies of Islam and friends of crusaders".⁸⁶ Another showed a map indicating Tel Aviv and suggested that the Saudi pilots should bomb there.

In November 2014 an attack that killed seven Shia worshippers in Saudi Arabia was linked to supporters of ISIS and Saudi security sources said that they had uncovered a network of 77 people supporting the group.⁸⁷ In December a group of ISIS supporters in Saudi Arabia released a video of what they claimed were its members shooting a Danish contractor in November.⁸⁸ Bahrain has also arrested alleged ISIS sympathisers.

Sinai

One of Egypt's most important radical Islamist groups, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), announced its allegiance to ISIS in November 2014. ABM mainly operates in the north of Egypt's troubled Sinai Peninsula, attacking Israel, Egyptian security forces, oil and gas infrastructure and personnel and, on one occasion, tourists. The overthrow of Hosni Mubarak and subsequently of his successor Mohammed Morsi left the Egyptian state's security presence in the Sinai much weakened, which allowed ABM the opportunity to expand its operations.

Although it released a statement that it would obey ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, analysts have questioned whether ABM can or would want to become a part of ISIS. It does not hold any territory and, despite its claim of responsibility for the death of a US employee of an oil exploration company, has not concentrated on Western targets. A situation similar to that in Syria and Iraq is unlikely in Egypt. Most Egyptians share allegiance to the Egyptian state and oppose violent *jihadism*. The security institutions of Egypt, particularly the army, are relatively effective and well-supported. Nevertheless, the fragility of the situation in Sinai was underlined in January 2015 when Ansar Beit al-Maqdis attacked police and military targets in the capital of the North Sinai provincial capital, Al-Arish. The attack left 26 soldiers

⁸³ 'Protesters again display ISIS flags in Kashmir valley', *Times of India*, 17 October 2014

⁸⁴ 'Islamic State is spreading into Pakistan', *New Republic*, 23 September 2014

⁸⁵ 'Spillover effect: ISIS making inroads into Pakistan, Afghanistan', *Tribune*, 3 September 2014

⁸⁶ 'Air strikes on Isis launch battle for Gulf hearts and minds', *Financial Times*, 24 September 2014

⁸⁷ 'Gulf states launch joint command to counter Isis and Iran', *Financial Times*, 30 November 2014

⁸⁸ 'Islamic State followers say they were behind shooting of Dane in Saudi Arabia', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 December 2014

dead at an army checkpoint while three more died in shooting incidents in the town. The attack was surprisingly well-coordinated.

Russia

The Russian media has suggested that a recent attack in Grozny was instigated by ISIS, adding that hundreds of Chechens are fighting in Iraq and Syria. There is also concern at the possibility of blowback to Russia from the Syrian conflict. A group of fighters there composed of people from Dagestan and Chechnya as well as from the Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan declared allegiance to ISIS in May 2014.⁸⁹ There were reports that at least one faction of the Dagestan insurgents in the Russian Caucasus had declared support for ISIS in December 2014. Competition appeared to remain between the supporters of ISIS and the supporters of al-Qaeda, however.⁹⁰

Nigeria

Nigeria shares with Iraq and Syria the failure of central government to establish full control over its territory and a religious gulf that helps to undermine the legitimacy of the government and there is fear of collaboration between ISIS and Boko Haram, the Nigerian group. Abu Bakar Shekau, Boko Haram's leader, voiced support for ISIS and al-Qaeda in a video in July 2014 and the group has increasingly been developing video and social media strategies similar to ISIS.⁹¹

In a joint letter to a newspaper from senior British politicians and military figures: "Boko Haram and ISIS form a key part of a growing, well organised international terror network that poses a direct threat to UK national security. They must be stopped."⁹²

However, it must be questionable whether a group such as Boko Haram, which already controls significant territory in Nigeria, would be prepared to give up control to ISIS.⁹³

Yemen

Another country with comparable conditions to those in Iraq and Syria is Yemen. There, too, the government does not control all of the national territory effectively and there is a sectarian divide. However, Yemen's is already a competitive market for insurgency against central government. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is headquartered in Yemen and is considered one of the most important of the Al-Qaeda 'franchises'. It appeared that the leadership there was pushing back against ISIS when in November 2014 the AQAP leadership denounced ISIS for seeking declarations of loyalty from within other *jihadi* groups and expanding their caliphate into countries 'in which they have no mandate.'⁹⁴

With the fall of the president in January 2015 and what some see as the development in Yemen of a new theatre for Iran/Saudi Arabia and Sunni/Shia rivalries,⁹⁵ securing Sunni support in Yemen will be high on the agenda for both Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

⁸⁹ 'Central Asian jihadist group joins ISIS', *Long War Journal*, 7 May 2014

⁹⁰ 'Split in the Caucasus Emirate, or an FSB Provocation?' *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 11 Issue: 216, December 2014

⁹¹ 'Boko Haram Expands, Launches ISIS-Style Social Media Presence', *HStoday*, 18 February 2015

⁹² 'Boko Haram: An open letter to the UN and the global community', Letter from General Sir David Richards and Rt Hon Lord Ashdown and others, *Independent*, 13 October 2014

⁹³ For more on Nigeria and Boko Haram, see the House of Commons Library Research Paper *Nigeria 2015: analysis of election issues and future prospects*, 19 January 2015

⁹⁴ 'Al-Qaeda in Yemen denounces 'expansionist' ISIS', *Al-Arabiya*, 22 November 2014

⁹⁵ For more on Yemen, see Peter Salisbury, *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*, Chatham House, February 2015

4 International reaction to ISIS

4.1 National policies towards ISIS

Interventions by other countries have had a significant effect on the crisis in the Levant as outside powers have seen the power vacuum, particularly in Syria, as opportunities to pursue their own objectives. The fighting has shown up the divergence between those objectives, particularly between Shia and Sunni countries, but also among the different Gulf countries, and Turkey, which have been following sharply different foreign policies. This has added to the complexity of the conflict, making any resolution more difficult to achieve.

In evidence to the House of Commons Defence Committee, Joost Hiltermann of the International Crisis Group suggested establishing a regional security conference, where foreign and defence ministers from the region could meet to help defuse regional tensions. He said that this was something which Western countries could help with.⁹⁶

Saudi Arabia

On 26 September 2014, the Saudi Ambassador to the UK, Mohammed bin Nawaf Al Saud, made a statement condemning ISIS and pledging that Saudi Arabia would take action against it:

A self-proclaimed "Islamic State" – which is neither Islamic nor a State - plagues our region, at the centre of which sits my country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam. This serpent threatens Saudi Arabia as much as it threatens the rest of the world – if not more.

As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, stressed most recently: "The evils of terrorism must be fought with force, reason and speed." We have taken action in our country, and on Tuesday the Royal Saudi Air Force joined the international military operation against this latest terrorist group.

Our foreign minister, Prince Saud Al Faisal, told the Global Terrorism Forum this week: "Faced with such serious realities, we are required today to initiate policies and take fateful and resolute decisions to confront this vicious attack with full force and determination, and to act seriously and swiftly, taking into account the element of time and the consequences of inaction."

Our decision to participate in airstrikes against "IS" over Syria demonstrates our continued determination to destroy any form of terror and further demonstrates our commitment to stand, as we have stood before, during Saddam's attack on Kuwait, shoulder-to-shoulder with our long-standing friends, allies and partners in the region and in the West. We count the UK amongst those partners as we know they desire the destruction of this evil, which threatens us all, as much as we do.⁹⁷

Saudi Arabia has denounced ISIS and contributed to military action in Iraq, while the government has issued an order to the clerical establishment to condemn ISIS. In August 2014, the Saudi Grand Mufti said that al-Qaeda and ISIS 'have nothing to do with Islam and are the enemy number one of Islam'.⁹⁸ The government has banned individuals from going to Syria or Iraq to join the fighting.

⁹⁶ *The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham (DAESH)*, House of Commons Defence Committee 7th report of 2014-15, HC 690, 5 February 2015, Para 115

⁹⁷ 'This plague upon our region threatens Saudi Arabia', Statement by the Saudi Ambassador to the UK, 26 September 2014

⁹⁸ 'Death threats for Saudi pilots after ISIS raids', *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 25 September 2014

At the beginning of September 2014, it was reported that the authorities had arrested 88 extremists in the country, after jailing a preacher for glorifying al-Qaeda and the leader of ISIS.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, there is reportedly considerable support for ISIS from Saudi individuals and possibly some from government officials too. The number of Saudis fighting in Iraq and Syria suggests that the ban is not being enforced effectively, and it has been reported that many of the Twitter messages supporting ISIS originate from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.¹⁰⁰

But the Saudi monarchy is often described as being ambivalent about extremist Sunni ideology. Although ISIS is hostile to the regime in Riyadh (and to the other Gulf monarchies), it shares much of the Wahhabi fundamentalist ideology that the Saudis use to bolster their own political legitimacy.

The Saudi government has been accused of giving too much power to an extreme traditional (*Salafi*) clerical establishment, in return for its support. Critics also say that not enough effort goes into preventing rich Saudi (and other Gulf) citizens from funding groups such as ISIS (see the section on ISIS funding). It has long been reported that the Saudi state and Saudi Islamic charities fund the network of Islamic seminaries (madrassas) across South Asia that helped spawn the Taliban and al-Qaeda.¹⁰¹

One of the most important elements of the type of Islam preached at these seminaries is the superiority of Sunnism over Shia Islam. This idea is useful to the Saudi royals because they argue that they are guardians of true Islam; in 1986, the then King Fahd took the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.

The Islamic revolution in 1979 was perceived as a very great threat by the Saudis and by other Sunni Gulf royal families, not least because most countries on the Peninsula are home to substantial Shia minorities or, in the case of Bahrain, a majority. The Shia minorities are widely seen by Gulf Sunnis simply as 'Persians' who, as such, owe their allegiance not to their home country but to Iran. On top of this, Saudi Arabia's Shi'is tend to live on the east coast, where the major oil fields are located.

The Saudis are accused by some of spreading Wahhabism to counter this perceived threat from Iran. Pakistan was a particularly important battleground in the Iranian/Saudi fight for leadership and allies because it has one of the biggest Shia populations in the world, even though it is majority-Sunni.¹⁰²

If the Saudi government has been fomenting a fundamentalist vision of Sunni Islam, that could in the end pose more of a threat to the Saudi regime than Iran does. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, like the other Sunni Gulf monarchies (with the partial exception of Oman) shares a goal with ISIS: preventing the spread of Shia and Iranian influence in the Arab world.

Press freedom has become more restricted in Saudi Arabia since the Arab uprisings in 2011. Any more thorough debate about Saudi Arabia possibly being partly responsible for the rise in extreme Sunni ideology is not encouraged, and clerics, who espouse and depend on the ideology as much as the monarchy does, are perhaps not in a position to condemn ISIS with complete conviction. As one liberal Saudi commentator wrote:

⁹⁹ 'Saudi Arabia intensifies crackdown on extremist groups', *Guardian*, 2 September 2014

¹⁰⁰ 'How Isis is spreading its message online', *BBC News Online*, 19 June 2014

¹⁰¹ Interview with Vali Nasr, PBS, 25 October 2001

¹⁰² For more on this theme, see Vali Nasr, *The Shia revival, How conflicts within Islam will shape the future*, 2006

How can [our scholars] respond [to] Isis...and all the other parasites which have sprung up on the margin of Islam, when its germs grew among us and within our homes and it was us who nurtured its thought and rhetoric until it grew?¹⁰³

Another Saudi writer said in June 2014: "Unfortunately, we are still in denial. It is time we asked 'what went wrong' and let's search within ourselves."¹⁰⁴

Iraq

Like many other Sunnis in the region, the Saudi government blamed divisive anti-Sunni policies pursued by former Iraqi Prime Minister for the ISIS crisis, which "would not have happened if it wasn't for the sectarian and exclusionary policies that were practised in Iraq in past years and which threatened its security, stability and sovereignty,"¹⁰⁵ according to one Saudi minister.

Syria

In Syria, the objectives of the Saudi and other Sunni governments in the region tend to be clearer: an end to the Assad regime would empower Sunnis and weaken Iran. However, the conservative governments in the Arabian Peninsula recognise the threat to their existence from the radicals of ISIS. Saudi Arabia has called for more support to the 'moderate' Syrian rebels and has agreed to host training camps for them, in collaboration with the US.¹⁰⁶

Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are alleged to have helped Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS in Syria, with one Qatari official going so far as to say "ISIS has been a Saudi project".¹⁰⁷ There is reported to have been official help early in 2014 and, unofficially, funds may still be arriving. The removal of the Syria policy from Prince Bandar bin Sultan's control early in 2014 could have been the result of increasing unease in Riyadh about the dangers to Saudi Arabia of sponsoring such groups.¹⁰⁸ Commentators think that the Kingdom has concentrated its help on more mainstream groups in Syria since mid-2014.

The Saudi armed forces' participation in strikes against ISIS in Syria has not been entirely popular in the Kingdom. Some unnamed internet commentators posted maps of Israel, suggesting that Saudi bombs should be falling there. Others posted death threats against the Saudi pilots carrying out the operations.¹⁰⁹

In November 2014, the Gulf States announced that they would be launching a joint military command based in Saudi Arabia to counter the threats posed by ISIS and other militants and from Iran, they said. A Gulf Cooperation Council naval command already exists in Bahrain and an air command is in Saudi Arabia. The new military command would coordinate with these two centres.¹¹⁰

Qatar

Like other Gulf monarchies, Qatar has been accused of being soft on Qataris who allegedly help fund extremist groups. The Qatari foreign minister denies that any Qatari money has gone to ISIS;¹¹¹ Qatar may be closer to Jabhat al-Nusra. One US commentator wrote: 'a

¹⁰³ 'Saudi Arabia 'in denial' over Isis ideology', *Financial Times*, 30 September 2014

¹⁰⁴ 'Saudi Arabia 'in denial' over Isis ideology', *Financial Times*, 30 September 2014

¹⁰⁵ 'Saudi rejects foreign interference in Iraq, blames 'sectarian' Maliki', *Reuters*, 16 June 2014

¹⁰⁶ 'Saudi Arabia Will Host Training Camps For Syrian Rebels', *Reuters*, 10 September 2014

¹⁰⁷ '"Thank God for the Saudis': ISIS, Iraq, and the Lessons of Blowback', *The Atlantic*, 23 June 2014

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ 'Death threats for Saudi pilots after ISIS raids', *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 25 September 2014

¹¹⁰ 'Gulf states launch joint command to counter Isis and Iran', *Financial Times*, 30 November 2014

¹¹¹ 'Qatar urges west to back Syrian moderates against Assad', *Financial Times*, 14 September 2014

senior Qatari official told me he can identify al-Nusra commanders by the blocks they control in various Syrian cities'.¹¹²

A distinct foreign policy

Qatari foreign policy is markedly different to that of Bahrain, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, in that Qatar is much more favourable to the mainstream Islamist Muslim Brotherhood than are the other monarchies, which view the Brotherhood as anathema. Significant strains have emerged between Qatar and some other Sunni states, too. In Egypt, journalists from the Qatari-owned Al-Jazeera network were sentenced to prison terms for 'aiding the Muslim Brotherhood'.¹¹³

In October 2014 it appeared that the rift between Qatar and the other Gulf monarchies might be narrowing. After an agreement was signed in the Saudi capital Riyadh, the three governments said they would return their ambassadors to Doha, the Qatari capital. Qatar agreed to match funding from the three to the Egyptian government, the front line of the battle between the Muslim Brotherhood and more traditional authoritarian rule.¹¹⁴

However, Qatar's hostile reaction to the Egyptian air strikes in Libya in February 2015 indicated that Qatar has not entirely aligned with Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Qatari military action

Qatar has announced its support for the coalition to take action against ISIS, although how much the country has done so far is not clear. Meanwhile, the Qataris are urging Western leaders to lend more support to the moderate Syrian opposition.¹¹⁵ Qatar is one of the countries that has been at the forefront of providing that support.

UAE

The UAE has taken part in strikes against ISIS in Syria. On 3 September, the UAE Ambassador to the US made a statement condemning the group as the biggest threat since fascism:

Now is the time to act. The UAE is ready to join the international community in an urgent, coordinated and sustained effort to confront a threat that will, if unchecked, have global ramifications for decades to come.

Any action must begin with a clear plan for direct intervention against ISIS but must address the other dangerous extremist groups in the region. It is also critical to tackle the support networks, the entire militant ideological and financial complex that is the lifeblood of extremism.¹¹⁶

Even within the UAE, however, there are differing attitudes to Shias and to Iran, and the UAE has closer relations with Iran than does Saudi Arabia, particularly since trade with Iran is important to the UAE economy.¹¹⁷

¹¹² [Thank God for the Saudis: ISIS, Iraq, and the Lessons of Blowback](#), *The Atlantic*, 23 June 2014

¹¹³ [Egypt sentences Al Jazeera journalists to years in prison](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 23 June 2014

¹¹⁴ [Gulf states launch joint command to counter Isis and Iran](#), *Financial Times*, 30 November 2014

¹¹⁵ [Qatar urges west to back Syrian moderates against Assad](#), *Financial Times*, 14 September 2014

¹¹⁶ [Statement of Ambassador Yousef Al Otaiba On Challenging Extremism](#), Statement of the UAE Ambassador to the US, 3 September 2013

¹¹⁷ [Easing of Iran-UAE relations](#), *MEED*, 13 January 2014

Bahrain

Bahrain is the Gulf State with a majority Shia population. The government is close to Saudi Arabia, particularly since the latter sent troops to Bahrain in 2011 to help shore up the Bahraini authorities in the face of mounting Shia protests.

The sectarian nature of the conflict in Iraq and Syria finds strong resonance in Bahrain, reflecting as it does the fundamental problem in Bahrain: a Shia majority ruled by a Sunni elite. A prominent Bahraini human rights activist, Nabeel Rajab, was arrested recently over tweets suggesting that Bahraini ISIS supporters were connected with the Bahraini security forces.¹¹⁸

Jordan

Jordan is often seen as a fragile state, without many resources and with a divided population, many of them Palestinian refugees. Like other countries in the region it works to contain any radical Islamist tendencies within the country. For these reasons it has been wary of the Syrian conflict. It has a long and porous border with Syria and Iraq, which fighters could easily cross to carry out attacks in the Hashemite Kingdom.

ISIS may well have ambitions on Jordanian territory, as this might be the easiest target for further territorial expansion; the Jordanian government has increased security along its border with Iraq.

Most Jordanian domestic *jihadis*, however, are aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Syrian group that is a rival to ISIS in Syria.¹¹⁹ This, combined with the relative stability of the Jordanian regime and the lack of a sectarian divide such as those that exist in both Iraq and Syria, should make it more difficult for ISIS to move into Jordan. Jordan's security forces are also reckoned to be relatively effective, partly because of close long-term relations with Western powers.

At first, it seemed to be Jordan's policy to keep a low profile in relation to Syria, while hosting hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees; at present there are over 600,000 refugees in Jordan and the biggest camp represents the fourth largest city in Jordan.¹²⁰

The Jordanian monarchy is perhaps the closest ally of Saudi Arabia in the region, although the two countries are very different on the ground. In 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council offered \$5 billion of aid to Jordan to support it through the political instability of the Arab Uprisings and Jordan has even been considered for membership of the Gulf regional body. More recently, Saudi Arabia has given a lot of money to Jordan to help with Jordan's huge Syrian refugee burden.¹²¹ Other support from Saudi Arabia remains undisclosed, but is likely to include security cooperation.¹²²

Jordanian military action

With the rise of ISIS, Jordan responded to the US push to assemble a coalition and in September 2014 pledged military support to fight the radical group. Jordanian planes have been contributing to air strikes against ISIS positions in Syria.

¹¹⁸ 'Bahraini activist arrested over tweets about Isis', *Guardian*, 2 October 2014

¹¹⁹ 'Jordan Could Be the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levants Next Target', *Stratfor*, June 2014

¹²⁰ European University Institute Migration Policy Centre, [Syrian refugees - Jordan](#)

¹²¹ 'Saudi clinics provide health services Syrian refugees', Washington Saudi Embassy press release, 25 August 2014

¹²² Ben Fishman, 'Jordan: caught in the middle again', in *Middle Eastern Security, the US pivot and the rise of ISIS*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014, p128

Jordan's participation in the coalition was not particularly popular in the country and, when a Jordanian pilot, Lieutenant Moaz al-Kaseasbeh crashed and fell into ISIS's hands, Jordan's participation attracted more hostility. Jordan tried to organise the release of its pilot, offering the release of a female suicide bomber in exchange, but in the end ISIS killed the pilot in a horrifying manner and posted a video on the internet. The pilot was from an important clan with close connections to the monarchy and there was a risk for the government that the death would turn Jordanians against participation in the coalition conducting airstrikes against ISIS.

Jordan executed two prisoners in response to the death. One of them, Sajida al-Rishawi, had been demanded at one point in exchange for the Jordanian pilot. She was an Iraqi militant with connections to senior figures in Al-Qaeda in Iraq and had been sentenced to death after conviction for involvement in terrorist attacks in the Jordanian capital, Amman, in 2005.

Jordan also launched extra air strikes against ISIS targets in Syria, with several Jordanian air force planes flying over the pilot's home town on their return, in a show of defiance.

Iran

Many have argued that the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq was a major strategic gift to Iran. While the Sunni Hussein was vehemently pro-Sunni and suppressed Shi'is in Iraq, he also led Iraq, with some support from the West, during the disastrous Iran-Iraq war, which cost the lives of around a million people. With Saddam out of power and a government dominated by the Shi'i majority in Iraq, Iran had lost a major threat and gained a compliant state dominated by co-religionists who looked to Iran for leadership.

The Assad regime in Syria, too, is extremely valuable to Iran. Until the establishment of elections in Iraq, Syria was Iran's only allied Arab state and it provided an important bridge to Iran's other major allied Arab force: Hizballah in Lebanon. Iran has been perhaps the major supporter of the Syrian government in the conflict there, supported increasingly overtly by the Lebanese Hizballah.

Iran's and Hizballah's consistent support for the Assads in Syria was crucial in helping the government in Damascus to bounce back from the difficult situation it found itself in in 2012.

Tehran has contributed to the fight against ISIS by helping to organise Shiite militias that have been an important part of Baghdad's fight-back following the failures of the Iraqi army.. Iranian involvement in Iraq was underlined when an Iranian general, Hamid Taqavi, was shot dead by a sniper in Samarra, near Baghdad, in December 2014. Iran is dedicating resources to protecting Shia holy sites, of which Samarra is one.

The election of Hassan Rouhani changed the outlook for relations with the West and injected new life into the nuclear negotiations, which had been moribund under the previous government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But another factor has affected relations: the spread of ISIS into Iraq. While the group, along with other Islamist radicals, were largely confined to the Syrian conflict, Iran was supporting the Assad government in Syria and criticised the US for allowing its allies in the Gulf to fund radical Sunni groups in Syria.

Iran and the US were already involved in some cautious cooperation in Iraq, where the two traditional enemies were committed to protecting the Iraqi government. After the spread of ISIS control into Iraq, coming close to the outskirts of the capital Baghdad, shared interests were underlined and Iran and the US were instrumental in persuading Iraq's previous Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, to step down.

The US waited until the change of government in Baghdad before committing military support to it, hoping to assuage the political problems first. Although this was understandable, it may

also have enhanced Iran's already strong position in Iraq, because the Iraqi government was forced to turn to Iran for immediate help when the US delayed. Iran sent weapons, ammunition, crucial intelligence and senior advisers to help the Baghdad government within 48 hours of the fall of Mosul. Major General Qassem Soleimani, leader of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, has taken a high-profile role advising Baghdad on all aspects of the military operation and even re-designing the Iraqi security apparatus that the US spent so many years and dollars creating. This quick involvement increased the intertwining of Iranian and Iraqi security forces, which, in itself, would undo some of the good done by the change of government, antagonising Sunnis further.

Tehran has reportedly considered allowing ISIS to keep hold of Sunni majority areas such as western Anbar province, to consolidate the defences of the Shia areas and wait for an opportunity to fight back. However, this has raised worries that Iran is only interested in the Shia areas of Iraq, consolidating its influence over Iraq's Shias, and would not object to the partition of Iraq. An adviser to the Iranian parliament said that ISIS would not disappear quickly: "Isis is going to have a long life and will not finish in one or two years because Sunni culture likes the group's behaviour."¹²³

Iran's help for Baghdad may complicate a political solution to Iraq's sectarian problems, but it also comes at a time when Iran has its problems as much as any other country. Iranian officials are aware that they were taken by surprise by the fall of Mosul and that this amounted to a failure of Iran's enormous intelligence operation. It is now asking a lot for Iran to support the Iraqi and Syrian governments when they are both in mortal danger, at a time when its economy is being severely affected by Western sanctions and the oil price, to cap it all, has fallen significantly.

Wider collaboration?

US and other Western sources have been relatively coy about any coordination between Iranians and the Western advisers that are also supporting the Iraqi state. The idea of Western collaboration with Iran after decades of antagonism is particularly delicate because of the ongoing negotiations about the Iranian nuclear programme. Iranian President Rouhani appeared to tie cooperation with Iran over ISIS to the progress of the nuclear negotiations during his visit to the United Nations in September 2014:

We are determined to continue our confidence-building approach and our transparency [in the negotiations]. If our interlocutors are equally motivated and flexible, [We can start cooperating on] very important regional issues, such as combating violence and extremism.¹²⁴

Recent reports suggest that the nuclear negotiations are making progress.¹²⁵

The US and Iran have already found themselves performing similar functions advising the Baghdad government on its military campaign against ISIS. This collaboration could pave the way for an acceleration of the rapprochement between Iran and the West and underpin the nuclear negotiations by increasing trust. However, such trust is unlikely to be built up quickly and the dire situation in Iraq could just as easily bring conflict as cooperation.

In any case, the sheer complexity of the situation in Iraq and Syria means that there is not likely to be a wholesale re-alignment. Iran continues to support the Assad government in Syria. Moderate Syrian rebels also accuse Iran of helping to create ISIS, to go along with the Assads' alleged policy of turning the rebellion into a *jihadi* one; the US State Department's

¹²³ 'The Iranian connection', *Financial Times*, 11 November 2014

¹²⁴ 'Iran Says It's Willing to Fight ISIS, for a Price', *Newsweek*, 29 September 2014

¹²⁵ 'Iran and west narrow gap in nuclear talks', *Financial Times*, 20 February 2015

terrorist designation in 2012 of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, for supporting Al-Qaida in Iraq, supported that idea.¹²⁶

Western/Iranian cooperation poses questions for both sides: can the West cooperate with Iran in Iraq while being opposed to Iranian actions in Syria? Can Iran support the Iraqi government while also supporting the Syrian government, when these see ISIS very differently?

In June 2014, US Secretary of State John Kerry said that the US was open to talks with the Iranians over Iraq:

We're open to discussions if there is something constructive that can be contributed by Iran, if Iran is prepared to do something that is going to respect the integrity and sovereignty of Iraq.¹²⁷

But some commentators have warned against cooperating too much:

We have grown accustomed to Pakistan playing both arsonist and fireman at the same time — sheltering Osama bin Laden and supporting jihadist groups while winning aid from Washington by portraying itself as a partner in the war against terrorism. Iran is adept at playing a similar game, only instead of aid it is likely hoping for a further relaxation of Western sanctions and a sweeter deal on its nuclear program.¹²⁸

Turkey

Turkey's relationship with ISIS is ambivalent, too. While Turkey's ruling party the AKP is not usually accused of sharing the extremist Islamic ideology which has been linked to ISIS and Saudi Arabia, it is an Islamist party that is moving Turkey away from its traditional secularism. Like other governments in the region, it tries to tread a line between trying to contain the threat of ISIS across the border in Syria and provoking violent reaction from extremist forces at home. But the Turkish government also aims for regime change in Damascus, because it considers the Assad regime a greater threat than ISIS.

Turkey has been accused for some time of allowing extremist fighters to cross into Syria,¹²⁹ and of allowing oil from ISIS-controlled wells to be sold in Turkey.¹³⁰ Originally, Turkey is reported to have been relatively close to Jabhat al-Nusra and to have allowed militants to join the fighting in Syria from Turkish territory and injured fighters to retreat to Turkish medical facilities. The Turkish government denies these allegations, but refused to allow the US Air Force to launch attacks on ISIS from the US base at Incirlik in Turkey.

Some of the fighters who originally joined Jabhat al-Nusra via Turkey subsequently joined ISIS, particularly after the latter's takeover of Mosul. Turkey's allegedly permissive policies may have contributed to the marginalisation of the Free Syrian Army and to the rise of ISIS in Syria.¹³¹ An opposition MP criticised the Turkish government for what he said was 'cooperation' with ISIS:

ISIS is a terrorist organization that poses a global threat, a group that kills recklessly and believes that killing people is a ticket to heaven. One would expect such a group to

¹²⁶ 'Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism', US Treasury, 16 February 2014

¹²⁷ 'Kerry says air strikes in Iraq an option, U.S. open to Iran talks', Yahoo News, 16 June 2014

¹²⁸ 'The United States should not cooperate with Iran on Iraq', Washington Post, 16 June 2014

¹²⁹ 'Islamic State: Turkey MPs to vote on Iraq/Syria deployment', BBC News Online, 2 October 2014

¹³⁰ 'Opposition MP says ISIS is selling oil in Turkey', Al-Monitor, 13 June 2014

¹³¹ Henri J Barkey, 'Turkey's Syria predicament', Middle Eastern Security, the US pivot and the rise of ISIS, International Institute for Strategic Studies Adelphi Paper, 2015

engage in certain attacks in Turkey any time. Turkey's cooperation with thousands of men of such a mentality is extremely dangerous. You can never know what demands they could make to Turkey, a country whose regime they consider to be un-Islamic. No one can guarantee they will not repeat the massacres they commit in Iraq today or carry out similar attacks in Turkey tomorrow.¹³²

Another factor in Turkey's relations with ISIS is the ISIS battle with the Syrian Kurds. After the beginning of the conflict in 2011, Syrian Kurds managed to take control of many of the predominantly Kurdish areas in north eastern Syria. However, as radical groups grew in power in the Syrian conflict, fighting erupted between Kurdish groups and radical Islamist groups. Turkey has an interest in this fight because of the historic conflict between Kurdish separatists and the Turkish state. The situation of Turkish Kurds is fluid at the moment, with some halting progress towards a settlement. Meanwhile, Turkey has a flourishing trade relationship with autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, much of whose oil output goes north to Turkey.¹³³ But the scale of the violence in both Syria and Iraq has perhaps unsettled this rapprochement.

ISIS seized 46 Turkish nationals from the Turkish consulate in Mosul in June 2014. They were released on 20 September after intensive negotiations but no further details were released, and there was no obvious deal in exchange for the release. Turkey denied paying a ransom or making any promises to ISIS. Some speculated that Turkey was preventing refugee Kurds in Turkey returning to Syria to fight with ISIS as part of a covert deal; this would allow ISIS to take back some territory from Syrian Kurdish control, undermining the efforts of Kurds to establish and protect their autonomous region in Syria. The Syrian conflict has reportedly energised Kurdish fighters from the Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) who have been hiding out in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan; they have crossed into Syria to help the Syrian Kurds defend territory there.¹³⁴

Turkey and military action

Turkey did not initially join the US-led coalition against ISIS, but on 24 September 2014, reportedly after US pressure, the government issued a statement saying that Turkey would support operations: "Turkey will provide the necessary support for the anti-Isis operation. The support could be military or political." However, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu went on to question the utility of military action: "...operations that do not envisage lasting peace and stability in the region in the region will only bring new problems".¹³⁵

A proposal was submitted to the Turkish Parliament on 30 September 2014 that would allow Turkish forces to operate in Syria and Iraq. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan said that Turkey would "fight effectively against both [IS] and all other terrorist organisations within the region".¹³⁶ However, he also questioned the effectiveness of air strikes, saying that they only postponed the threat from the extremist group. The parliament voted on the proposal on 2 October, passing it with an overwhelming majority. The motion also provided for foreign military forces to operate from Turkish bases.¹³⁷

The urgency of Turkey's preparations was increased by the news that the tomb of Suleiman Shah, the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, just inside Syrian territory, had

¹³² 'Opposition MP says ISIS is selling oil in Turkey', *Al-Monitor*, 13 June 2014

¹³³ For more on this, see the Commons Library Standard Note *The Kurds: new perspectives?*, 14 August 2013

¹³⁴ 'Turkey accused of colluding with Isis to oppose Syrian Kurds and Assad following surprise release of 49 hostages', *Independent*, 21 September 2014

¹³⁵ 'Turkey To Broaden Possible Army Operations Against Militants in Iraq, Syria', *Defense News*, 24 September 2014

¹³⁶ 'Islamic State crisis: Abadi opposes Arab strikes in Iraq', *BBC News Online*, 1 October 2014

¹³⁷ 'Turkish parliament authorizes potential military action in Syria and Iraq', *Washington Post*, 2 October 2014

been surrounded by ISIS fighters. The tomb is considered a Turkish enclave because the treaty ending the Franco-Turkish war in 1921 specified that Turkey would keep the tomb, fly a Turkish flag on it and post Turkish guards around it.

In February 2015, Turkey made its largest single intervention in the Syrian conflict to date; Turkey sent over 500 troops supported by 49 tanks and 51 armoured vehicles to evacuate the shrine. The 38 Turkish troops defending the tomb were removed along with the relics themselves from their promontory in the River Euphrates to village just on the Syrian side of the Turkish border. The Turkish move was timed to capitalise on the progress made by Kurdish forces in and around Kobane, the Syrian Kurdish town on the border with Turkey that is very close to the Suleyman Shah shrine's old location. It was rejected by the Syrian government as "flagrant aggression".¹³⁸

Turkey hosts a huge number of Syrian refugees, over 1 million including those awaiting registration, according to the UN High Commission for Refugees.¹³⁹

Egypt

In Sunni-majority Egypt, the government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, supported by the anti-Islamist Gulf States of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, views the Muslim Brotherhood and associated Islamist groups as unacceptable. This has been demonstrated by its treatment of the Brotherhood in Egypt itself, but when the Egyptian military deposed Mohammed Mursi, it also ended the previous government's support for mainstream Syrian rebels and stopped inviting Syrian refugees into Egypt.

And although the Assad government is not popular with the new Egyptian regime, there are historic ties between the two countries' powerful militaries, from the time of the fractious and short-lived United Arab Republic and from the jointly-planned attack on Israel in 1973. The Egyptians have always warned very strongly about the danger of a collapse of the Syrian state or its delivery into the hands of violent *jihadi* groups. *Jihadi* militants in Libya, just across the border, have been a concern to Egypt since the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi and the Egyptian military has intervened several times recently.

In December 2014 Bashar al-Assad's nephew visited Cairo with a delegation of Syrian officials. This was ostensibly a technical visit but it was the first official Syrian visit to Cairo since the uprisings of 2011 and would be seen in the region as a small sign of possible thawing of relations between the two capitals. Nevertheless, Sisi's dependence on support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE would limit any such move.¹⁴⁰

Initially Egypt did not have a high profile with regard to ISIS and has not participated in airstrikes in either Syria or Iraq, despite Egypt's membership of the international coalition against ISIS. Relations with the Iraqi government have been improving as the threat from ISIS has grown, both regionally and at home in Egypt; an oil supply deal in January helped that process along.¹⁴¹

The beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya in February 2015 dramatically increased Egypt's focus. The Egyptian air force carried out air strikes against alleged ISIS targets in the Libyan town of Derna, including training camps and weapons stores. The area is reported to be outside the control of either of the competing Islamist and secularist power

¹³⁸ 'Turkish military enters Syria to evacuate soldiers, relocate tomb', *Reuters*, 22 February 2015

¹³⁹ UNHCR, [Syria Regional Refugee Response](#)

¹⁴⁰ Marc Sievers, 'Questions About Egypt's Syria Policy', *Fikra Forum*, 12 January 2015

¹⁴¹ 'Egypt forgives Iraqi debt in exchange for oil', *al-Monitor*, 23 January 2015

centres.¹⁴² Egypt called on the international coalition against ISIS in Syria and Iraq to take action “against the terrorism of ISIS and other groups in Libya.”¹⁴³ The action was said to be coordinated with the widely-recognised authorities in Tobruk, near the Egyptian border. The other government, based in Tripoli, said that Libya’s sovereignty had been violated.

Iraq

Iraq’s new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, said in a recent interview that he does not support Arab states participating in strikes against ISIS in Iraq, although he does support such action by Arab neighbours in Syria. Al-Abadi said that western air forces had filled a gap in Iraqi capabilities but that foreign ground troops would not be accepted.¹⁴⁴

The Iraqi government sent a delegation to Damascus to inform the Syrian government that it had requested the air strikes against ISIS on Syrian territory.

Accepting military intervention in Iraq from Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia would be politically difficult for the Shia-led Iraqi government. In any case Baghdad will want to preserve an image of as much sovereign control of its territory as possible.

Israel

Israeli policy was at first to keep a low profile on the Syrian conflict. Israel shares a border with Syria and had chilly but stable relations with its neighbour for many years. Despite hostile rhetoric, Damascus had kept a strict control on anti-Israel sentiment in the country, preventing border skirmishes and avoiding any overheating in the relationship, despite the fact that Israel remains in occupation of a significant chunk of Syrian territory in the Golan Heights, an occupation almost universally regarded as illegal.

So although Israeli politicians harbour few warm feelings for the Assad regime and would do little to save it, many fear that whatever replaced it could be worse for Israel.

The main fear for Israel is the involvement of the Lebanese Shia militia Hizballah and the potential for a spill-over of the conflict into Israel, particularly via Lebanon. But the situation has changed as the area of Syria next to the Golan Heights has been taken over by *jihadi* groups, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra.

There have been reports of cooperation between *jihadis* on the border and Israeli Defence Force personnel and the Syrian government has accused Israel of supporting *jihadi* rebels. Others have argued that Israel is talking to Nusra because it would prefer the border to be held by them than by ISIS. Israel is also quite close to the Kurds and may have a strategy of maximising Kurdish influence and territory in any settlement to the Iraq and Syria crises. This has possible consequences for continued hostility between Sunni Arabs and Kurds in both countries, however.

Israel has attacked convoys of vehicles that it said were taking military supplies to Hizballah, most recently in December 2014, when the Syrian government claimed that Israel had conducted air strikes near Damascus and near the Lebanese border. These appeared to be targeted at Damascus international airport and possibly at a small military airport in the area.¹⁴⁵ An arms convoy heading for Hizballah may have been the target of the second strike. On 18 January 2015 Israel carried out an air strike in the Golan Heights, killing the Iranian general Mohammad Ali Allah-Dadi, a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards who was

¹⁴² For information on the situation in Libya, see the House of Commons Library Standard Note [Libya: deepening conflict](#), 13 November 2014

¹⁴³ ‘Egypt bombs jihadi targets in Libya after beheadings’, *Financial Times*, 17 February 2015

¹⁴⁴ ‘Islamic State crisis: Abadi opposes Arab strikes in Iraq’, *BBC News Online*, 1 October 2014

¹⁴⁵ ‘Israel accused of carrying out airstrikes near Syrian capital’, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 December 2014

advising Hizballah forces on their support for the Assad government. The attack also killed six Hizballah militants.

Israel is still limiting its actions in Syria and Lebanon, and the Syrian government is cautious about responding to any strikes that Israel does carry out. Bashar al-Assad has no interest in antagonising Israel and the US when there is a chance that the West is shifting its focus away from toppling him to defeating ISIS.

However, the fragility of this situation was illustrated in January 2015, when Hizballah launched five missiles at a convoy of Israeli military vehicles, killing two Israeli military personnel and a Spanish UN peacekeeper. The attack appeared to be in retaliation for the 18 January Israeli attack on Syrian territory that killed an Iranian general.

Lebanon

Lebanon has been at the mercy of events in Syria ever since its creation as a state and it has received from the present conflict more refugees relative to its population than any other country.

Sectarian hostilities failed to heal after the 1975-90 civil war and have now been made much worse by the situation in Syria. Both the Lebanese army and Hizballah are protecting Shia religious events after ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra threatened to target Shia worshippers.

Lebanon's official armed forces are weak, and not as powerful as the Lebanese Shia militia Hizballah. So the Lebanese government does not pretend to influence developments in Syria with the threat of force. The main aim is to minimise the spill-over of the conflict into Lebanese territory. However, Lebanon is also home to most of the different sects of the eastern Mediterranean region and the suffering in Syria has provoked hostilities between these groups in Lebanon. There is a significant Alawite population centred on the northern city of Tripoli and Sunnis and Alawites have been clashing around the city since before the start of the Syrian conflict.

The increasing tension has totally paralysed Lebanon's already troubled political system, as the pro-Hizballah politicians boycott parliament and Sunnis are angry with Hizballah for joining the Syrian conflict on the orders of Iran, provoking Sunni *jihadi* terrorism within Lebanese borders.

Jabhat al-Nusra kidnapped 30 Lebanese soldiers and policemen in August. The Lebanese authorities arrested some Nusra commanders' wives and Nusra executed a policeman that it was holding in revenge.¹⁴⁶ *Jihadis* are reported to be moving into Lebanon in numbers, particularly around Tripoli in the north, the largely Shia Beka'a Valley to the east of Beirut and into Saida in the south of the country. North Lebanon remains the scene of most clashes between Sunni and Shia.

Lebanon is also one of the most important stages on which the Iran/Saudi Arabia tussle is being played out. The suicide bombing of the Iranian embassy in Beirut epitomised this aspect: it was carried out by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a terrorist group linked to al-Qaeda and with connections to Saudi Arabians and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The leadership of Hizballah claimed that Saudi intelligence was really behind the attack, an accusation that the Saudi government denied.

¹⁴⁶ 'Nusra threat to kill more Lebanese soldiers', *Al-Jazeera*, 7 December 2014

US

Determined to carry out its pledge to end US involvement in existing wars the Obama administration was reluctant to get involved in new ones. But that policy came under increasing strain as serious crises, particularly in Ukraine and in the Levant, led to calls for more decisive US intervention. In the Syrian theatre the US was wary of getting drawn in to a very intractable problem and the Obama Administration appeared ready to take considerable criticism for sticking to a non-interventionist policy, particularly when critics said that Obama's 'red line' on the use of chemical weapons did not amount to much.¹⁴⁷ Despite the reluctance, the US is now conducting air strikes against ISIS in Iraq and against ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

The ISIS surge to take Mosul, Iraq's second biggest city, shifted thinking in Washington. It is not clear that ISIS in Iraq presents more of a strategic threat than the civil war in Syria; the violence in Syria has certainly claimed far more lives and led to a lot more human suffering. But there are several reasons why the US was more ready to react to events in Iraq than Syria.

- There is substantial US political and material investment in Iraq to protect. While the Iraqi government may not have turned out to be the strategic ally that the US hoped for when it led the invasion in 2003, it still has relatively close ties to Washington and Washington has invested a huge amount in its success. For it to fall would be a massive blow to US prestige and end any claims for success of the invasion and occupation.
- The Iraqi government, too, is regarded as legitimate by most powers (if not by most Iraqi Sunnis). This means that military intervention, after a request from Baghdad, is easy to justify legally without a UN Security Council resolution. This differentiates Iraq from Syria, where Russia has vetoed attempts to pass Security Council resolutions that threaten the survival of the Syrian government.
- Intervention in Iraq has a relatively clear objective: to support the existing government. That may prove harder to do than it appeared at first, but it is still more straightforward than the situation in Syria, where the US is in danger of fighting on more than one side of a multi-faceted conflict, intervening in ways that may be mutually contradictory.
- The rise of ISIS brings echoes of the establishment of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and of terrorist attacks on US territory. The murder of US hostages such as the journalist Steven Sotloff, in September 2014, exacerbates those fears. These factors may make it easier to sell intervention to a war-weary US public, and there is some polling evidence that public opinion did become more favourable to intervention after the events of summer 2014.¹⁴⁸

Yet it was quickly plain that to tackle ISIS in Iraq but not in Syria was impractical and, as the US increasingly targeted ISIS in Syria as well, it became difficult to disentangle politically the campaign in each country.

¹⁴⁷ For more on the crisis over chemical weapons, see House of Commons Library Standard Note, [Intervention in Syria](#), 28 August 2013

¹⁴⁸ 'Air strikes against the Islamic State (ISIS): Public opinion and historical perspective', Journalist's Resource, 23 September 2014

In June 2014 the US Administration requested \$500 million from Congress for an overt training and equipment programme for selected Syrian opposition groups. According to the President's request, the proposed assistance had the following aims:

- Defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and the Syrian regime, facilitating the provision of essential services, and stabilizing territory controlled by the opposition;
- Protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from the threats posed by terrorists in Syria;
- Promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.¹⁴⁹

The proposal was approved on 17 September by the House of Representatives by 273 to 156 votes and by the Senate on 18 September by 78 to 22. While it was controversial, it was supported by senior members from both parties. Rand Paul, a Kentucky Senator, was one of the prominent opponents.¹⁵⁰

Russia

Russian officials have often blamed Western and particularly US intervention for the instability in the Middle East and warned the US not to play into the hands of ISIS propaganda. Moscow's attitude to the international efforts to tackle ISIS will be significant. Russia has traditionally supported the West's campaigns against Islamist extremist groups; it cooperated with the NATO campaign in Afghanistan by facilitating the Northern Supply Network, for example, and has designated ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra as terrorist organisations.

Cooperation does not extend to the situation in Syria, however. Russia supports the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and has opposed intervention to help any of the opposition forces in that conflict; the Russian-brokered deal with Syria to decommission its chemical weapons arsenal was greeted by some as a triumph for President Putin and was seen by critics as letting the Assads off the hook.

Russian leaders also criticise alleged breaches of the rule of international law (perhaps selectively) and the Russian government says that any air strikes in Syria should only have taken place with the approval of Damascus or the Security Council. But air strikes may weaken ISIS and therefore bolster the Assad government, in line with Russian interests.

Russian influence in the region should not, in any case, be overestimated. Russia's limited resources would make a decisive intervention in the Middle East difficult; nor does Moscow consider the region to be as important to Russian interests as does its declared 'privileged sphere of interest', in countries such as Ukraine. Also, Russia's support for the Damascus government is likely to reduce further its influence among the many Sunni-majority Arab states. Russia has consistently supported Damascus with arms supplies and is determined to help Bashar al-Assad remain in power.

Many point to keeping the Russian naval base at Tartus, the only Russian base outside the former Soviet Union, as a motive for helping the Syrian government. However, a bigger prize may be to frustrate US policy and show Russian independence. An analyst at the Moscow Carnegie Center said:

¹⁴⁹ [Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response](#), US Congressional Research Service, 17 September 2014

¹⁵⁰ [Senate approves Obama's plan to arm and train Syrian rebels](#), *Guardian*, 19 September 2014

Russia is now doing everything to ensure that Assad wins convincingly. If Russia can show it's capable of carrying out its own foreign policy, regardless of America's wishes, it will be a major achievement for Putin.¹⁵¹

4.2 Sanctions

On 14 August 2014, the UN passed [Security Council resolution 2170](#) on ISIS and Iraq. It warned that countries had a duty to prevent funds being sent by their nationals to the group and that individuals or entities that did so risked being put on the UN [al-Qaeda sanctions list](#). At the same time, it added six individuals to that list and underlined that member states should impose asset freezes and the other sanctions set out in [Security Council Resolution 2161 \(2014\)](#). Two Saudis, two Kuwaitis, one Iraqi, and one Algerian were added to the al-Qaeda sanctions list by the UN resolution.

Comparison of UK and US sanctions regimes

There has been a campaign to make the UK sanctions regime tougher, on the basis that the UK (or the EU or the UN, where the names originally come from) is not sanctioning all the people who are on the US sanctions list.

The UK Government said in response to a PQ along these lines that it designates as terrorists all persons listed by the UN, but that the US has a separate regime which the UK would not adopt automatically:

The UK implements all sanctions agreed at the UN. These sanctions are implemented via the EU. The UK is responsible for implementation for the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies. The US has its own domestic legislation by which it can introduce sanctions. This is an entirely separate process to the UN. The UK would not implement US domestic sanctions, although there may be individuals that the US designates which are also listed under UN sanctions.¹⁵²

Abd al-Rahman bin 'Umayr al-Nu'aymi, a Qatari financier, was added to the UK list in October 2014.¹⁵³ The UK designation appears to have come in response to a decision by the United Nations 1267/1989 Sanctions Committee to list him, on 23 September 2014.¹⁵⁴ Nu'aymi had been designated by the US authorities for supporting al-Qaeda in December 2013,¹⁵⁵ and questions have been raised in the British press as to why the US list and the UK list are not synchronised and, specifically, why names such as that of al-Nu'aymi took so long to get on the UK list. According to the *Daily Telegraph* of 18 October 2014, there were five more Qataris on the US list that were not on the UK list.¹⁵⁶

Steve Barclay MP recently asked the Government about the criteria for inclusion on the different lists. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office said that the criteria differ from regime to regime and from country to country:

Stephen Barclay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, if he will make a comparative assessment of the criteria used to draw up the (a) UK, (b) US and (c) UN sanctions lists.

¹⁵¹ 'Putin Defies Obama in Syria as Arms Fuel Assad Resurgence', *Bloomberg*, 3 April 2014

¹⁵² [Sanctions: Written question – 211104](#), 20 October 2014

¹⁵³ HM Treasury Financial Sanctions notice, [Al-Qaida](#), 17 October 2014

¹⁵⁴ UN Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, [QI.A.334.14](#). 'Abd al-Rahman bin 'Umayr al-Nu'aymi

¹⁵⁵ 'Treasury Designates Al-Qa'ida Supporters in Qatar and Yemen', US Treasury press notice, 18 December 2013

¹⁵⁶ 'Terrorist paymaster targeted by Britain', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October 2014

Hugo Swire: There are over 30 sanctions regimes at either EU or UN level. Sanctions regimes are designed to combat a range of issues including: proliferation, terrorism and human rights issues. Criteria for each regime are therefore very different and crafted to meet the specific ends of the sanctions regime. The EU implements all UN sanctions and in doing so will reflect the criteria agreed at UN level. However, where the EU implements its own sanctions regime or goes further than UN sanctions (e.g. on Iran or Syria), the criteria are set by the EU. US sanctions criteria for their own domestic measures vary from regime to regime and may be different from the UN or EU criteria. UK sanctions lists replicate UN / EU lists except in relation to counter-terrorism sanctions where, in addition to implementing UN / EU sanctions, the Treasury can freeze domestically the assets of those believed to have been involved in terrorist related activity, where this is necessary for public protection from terrorism, under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing Act 2010.¹⁵⁷

There may be people on the *UK Financial sanctions: consolidated list of targets* that are not on the US list.

Commercial Secretary to the Treasury

The Commercial Secretary to the Treasury, currently Lord Deighton, has the following roles:

- asset freezing and financial crime
- working with Lord Livingstone and UKTI to promote the UK as a destination for foreign direct investment.¹⁵⁸

Some have expressed concern that the roles of supervising asset-freezing and promoting the UK as a destination for foreign investment may not be compatible. Some of those being considered for asset freezes in connection with terrorist financing are wealthy individuals who are nationals of the Gulf States, while the government is also interested in attracting funds from Gulf States to the UK.¹⁵⁹

The aim to attract Gulf investment to the UK could clash with the duty to list those responsible for supporting terrorism, particularly in such a small country as Qatar, where many members of the elite (and those with access to enough funds to be of significant assistance to extremist groups) must be familiar with each other.

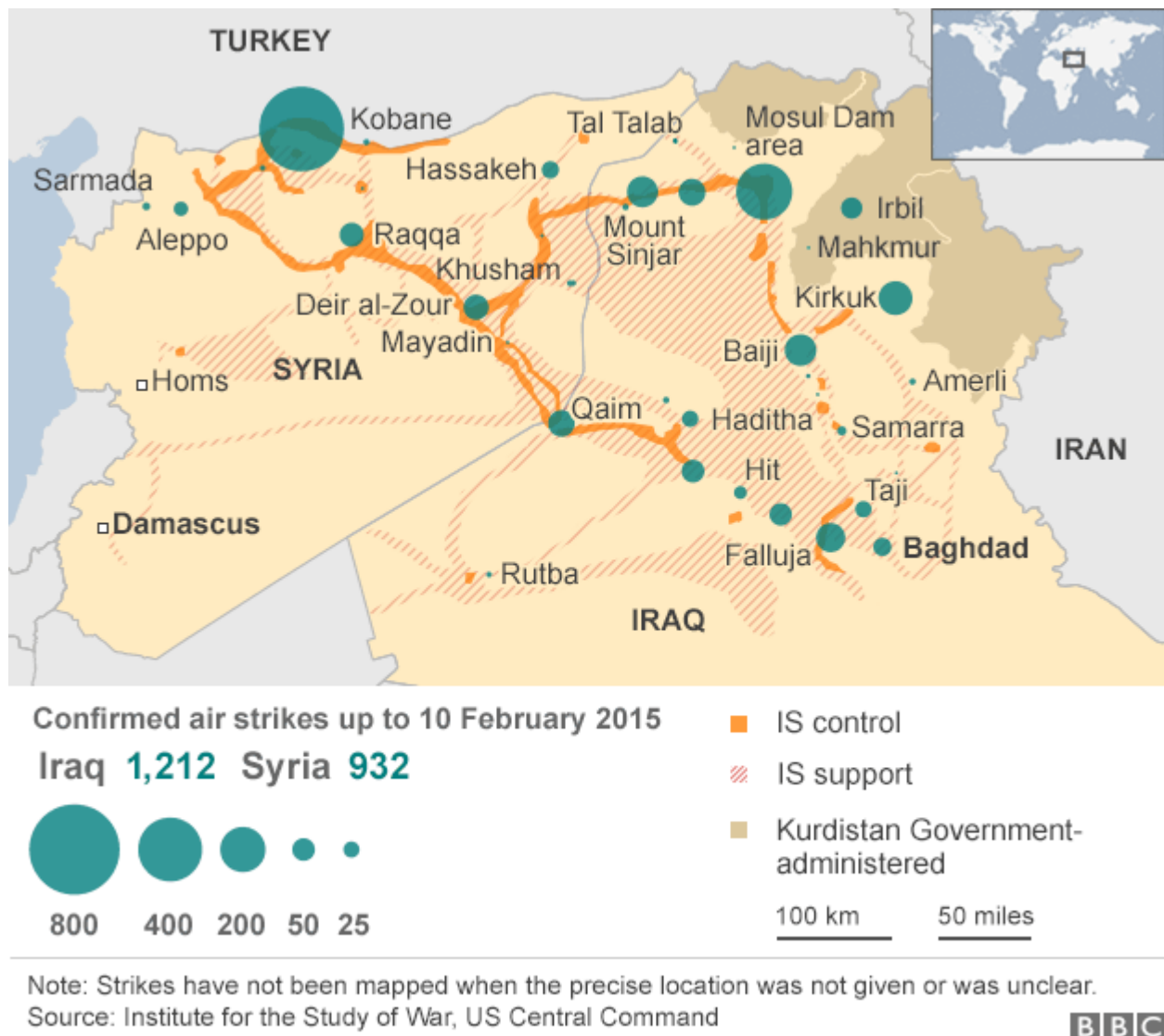
There is a broader problem than attracting investment or making arms sales. Western governments are unlikely to want to have a big public argument about alleged Gulf support for terrorism while they are trying so hard to secure their political, military and counter-terrorist cooperation. Relations between the Gulf States and the West are already strained by the West's support for the 2011 Arab uprisings.

¹⁵⁷ [Sanctions: Written question – 211493](#), 22 October 2014

¹⁵⁸ HM Treasury Ministerial role, [Commercial Secretary to the Treasury](#)

¹⁵⁹ [‘Lord Deighton: Minister trying to bring gulf billions to UK’](#), *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 October 2014

5 Military action against ISIS



Source: [BBC News Online](#)

The international coalition of countries conducting airstrikes in Iraq is composed of the US, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The request of the Iraqi government, seen as legitimate by Western governments, provided a firm legal basis for military intervention.

On the other hand, the Arab countries that are part of the Syria coalition - Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – are Sunni-led. The new Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, said in October 2014 that, while Western air power had “filled many gaps” in Iraq’s capacity to fight ISIS, he totally opposed any military action by Arab states in his country. His government being Shia-dominated and close to Iran, it is not surprising that neither Iraq nor the Sunni Arab states want to be fighting on the same side as each other. Al-Abadi also rejected any foreign troops on the ground.

Yet if they are not fighting on the same side within Iraq, they *are* on the same side in the wider fight against ISIS, adding to the strategic confusion that plagues the whole situation.

5.1 Military action in Iraq

Kurds and the Peshmerga

The Peshmerga (“those who face death”) militias of Iraqi Kurdistan are an important part of Kurdish society and there have been high expectations for their contribution to the fight against ISIS. However, this confidence may be exaggerated.

The main Iraqi Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK, have strong roots in the Peshmerga and there continue to be formations within the KRG’s armed forces with close links to each of these parties, undermining the unity of the force.¹⁶⁰

Strength

It is not clear exactly how strong the Peshmerga are. There are some 35,000 Peshmerga nominally incorporated in the Iraqi armed forces (although some of these may be fighting separately since the flight of the Iraqi Army in the face of ISIS advances). Most Peshmerga were already outside the command of the Iraqi government in Baghdad – a Kurdish official estimated the total number at 190,000 in 2012 – and they are relatively well-armed and experienced. However, the ISIS strategy and tactics against them are widely reported to be very effective.¹⁶¹

Although the Peshmerga are often reported to be more capable than the Iraqi army, many commentators think that their abilities have been over-estimated in the West. When ISIS launched its surprise attack on the Kurds in August 2014, the Peshmerga retreated even more quickly than the Iraqi army had when attacked in Mosul. The Kurdish fighters failed to protect the Yazidi communities around Mount Sinjar, even though they are mostly Kurdish-speaking.

The UK and other Western countries are supporting the Peshmerga with arms and training. This is widely considered a legal intervention because it is supported by the legitimate government of Iraq.¹⁶²

Kurds in Syria

Probably the most important Kurdish party in Syria, the Democratic Union party or PYD, is an affiliate of the Turkish Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which is banned in Turkey and in a number of Western countries as a terrorist organisation. The PYD is banned in Syria, whose constitution prohibits ethnicity-based (and religious) parties. It opposes the present Syrian government but conflict between the PYD and the government was low at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, with the government appearing to leave the Kurdish majority areas to look after themselves. As the conflict deepened, Syrian Kurds fought both against government forces and against *jihadi* groups in the north and east of the country. Kurdish fighters increasingly clashed with Jabhat al-Nusra forces from 2012 onwards.

Kobane

In 2014, a major battle broke out between the Kurds and ISIS fighters for control of the town of Kobane (or Ain al-Arab in Arabic). Kobane is a Kurdish outpost, separated from the main Kurdish majority area in Syria’s far north east, but is contiguous with Turkey’s majority Kurdish areas. Kobane is also close to the ISIS ‘capital’ of al-Raqqah in central north Syria. The Turkish government was reluctant to allow Kurds to cross the border to join the fight

¹⁶⁰ Massoud Barzani is the President of the Kurdish Regional Government and Jalal Talabani was the President of Iraq until 24 July 2014, when he was succeeded by another Iraqi Kurd, the PUK’s Fuad Masum (real power in Baghdad belongs with the Prime Minister).

¹⁶¹ ‘How effective is Isis compared with the Iraqi army and Kurdish peshmerga?’ *Guardian*, 12 June 2014

¹⁶² For more on the arming of the Kurds, see the Commons Library Standard Note [UK arms transfers to the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan](#), 18 August 2014

against ISIS, fearful of legitimising the Kurdish fight against the Turkish state. In October 2014, Turkey relaxed its policy and helped Iraqi Peshmerga forces to travel to Kobane through Turkey. However, Ankara still banned Turkish PKK fighters from entering Syria.

The US coordinated with the PYD (and reportedly had secret talks with the PKK for some time) and supplied the Kurdish fighters with weaponry in air drops. The US Air Force carried out significant air strikes on ISIS positions around Kobane in October and November 2014, preventing the *jihadis* from capturing the town in what would have been a major publicity triumph for them.

By February 2015, the combination of international air strikes and Kurdish fighters had succeeded in pushing ISIS out of Kobane and the Kurds were trying to drive them further westwards.

British intervention?

The recall of Parliament

During questions in the House on 8 September 2014 the Prime Minister confirmed that any decision to join military action in Iraq would be put to a Parliamentary vote.¹⁶³ However, he went on to say that the Government should preserve its freedom to act quickly:

I have always believed, in this role and as leader of a Government, that you should consult the House of Commons as regularly as you can and the House of Commons should have an opportunity to vote. The point I always make, though [...], is that it is important that a Prime Minister and a Government reserve the right to act swiftly without consulting the Commons in advance in some specific circumstances—for instance, if we had to prevent an immediate humanitarian catastrophe or, indeed, secure a really important, unique British interest. But other than that I believe it is right, as he said, to consult the House of Commons.¹⁶⁴

On 24 September Downing Street announced that the Speaker of the House of Commons had agreed to the Government's request for a recall of Parliament on the following Friday, 26 September.

Prime Minister David Cameron addressed the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September, making a veiled reference to the vote in the House of Commons in 2013 against punitive strikes against the Syrian government for the use of chemical weapons. He said that inaction would be the wrong lesson to learn from the past:

This is a problem that affects us all. And we must tackle it together.

Now there is not one person in this hall who will view this challenge without reference to the past. Whether in Iraq. Whether in Afghanistan.

Now of course it is absolutely right that we should learn the lessons of the past, especially of what happened in Iraq a decade ago.

But we have to learn the right lessons. Yes to careful preparation; no to rushing to join a conflict without a clear plan. But we must not be so frozen with fear that we don't do anything at all.

Isolation and withdrawing from a problem like ISIL will only make matters worse. We must not allow past mistakes to become an excuse for indifference or inaction.

¹⁶³ See also [Parliamentary Approval for Deploying the Armed Forces: An Update](#) - Commons Library Standard Note, 24 September 2014

¹⁶⁴ [HC Deb 8 September 2014, c663](#)

Declaring that he was recalling Parliament to secure approval for British air strikes against ISIS in Iraq, he said:

We are facing an evil against which the whole of the world should unite. And, as ever in the cause of freedom, democracy and justice, Britain will play its part.¹⁶⁵

On 26 September 2014, Parliament debated a substantive motion on participating in air strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq.

The House discussed a substantive motion on the Government's policy of participating in air strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq but not in Syria.¹⁶⁶ The House of Lords also met to debate a motion to take note of the developments in Iraq.

The House of Commons motion had been carefully negotiated with representatives of the main parties to place limitations on what was being approved. It recognised the request from the Government of Iraq for military support, noted the broad coalition contributing to military support including countries throughout the Middle East, noted the legal basis for action in Iraq and endorsed UK air strikes against ISIS in Iraq. The motion explicitly ruled out deploying UK troops in ground combat operations and did not endorse UK air strikes in Syria, which would be subject to a separate vote in Parliament:

That this House condemns the barbaric acts of ISIL against the peoples of Iraq including the Sunni, Shia, Kurds, Christians and Yazidi and the humanitarian crisis this is causing; recognises the clear threat ISIL poses to the territorial integrity of Iraq and the request from the Government of Iraq for military support from the international community and the specific request to the UK Government for such support; further recognises the threat ISIL poses to wider international security and the UK directly through its sponsorship of terrorist attacks and its murder of a British hostage; acknowledges the broad coalition contributing to military support of the Government of Iraq including countries throughout the Middle East; further acknowledges the request of the Government of Iraq for international support to defend itself against the threat ISIL poses to Iraq and its citizens and the clear legal basis that this provides for action in Iraq; notes that this motion does not endorse UK air strikes in Syria as part of this campaign and any proposal to do so would be subject to a separate vote in Parliament; accordingly supports Her Majesty's Government, working with allies, in supporting the Government of Iraq in protecting civilians and restoring its territorial integrity, including the use of UK air strikes to support Iraqi, including Kurdish, security forces' efforts against ISIL in Iraq; notes that Her Majesty's Government will not deploy UK troops in ground combat operations; and offers its wholehearted support to the men and women of Her Majesty's armed forces.¹⁶⁷

The Prime Minister told the House "we want to see ISIS degraded and then destroyed as a serious terrorist force." He spoke in favour of taking direct action as well as supporting Iraqi security forces:

We should be frank: a military conflict is already taking place. ISIL has taken territory. It is butchering people in Iraq. Iraqi, including Kurdish, security forces are already fighting ISIL. We have to decide if we are going to support them and I believe that we should. If we are to beat these terrorists, it is vital that the international community does more to build the capability of the legitimate authorities fighting extremism.

¹⁶⁵ 'PM speech at the UN General Assembly 2014', Prime Minister's Office, 25 December 2014

¹⁶⁶ 'Downing Street statement on recall of Parliament', Prime Minister's Office press release, 24 September 2014

¹⁶⁷ 'Commons recalled to debate Iraq: Coalition against ISIL', House of Commons news release, 26 September 2014

Along with our European partners, as has been discussed in the House, we are playing our role, supplying equipment directly to the Kurdish forces. We are strengthening the resilience of military forces in Lebanon and Jordan and our Tornado and surveillance aircraft have already been helping with intelligence gathering and logistics to support American attacks on ISIL in Iraq. To be frank, and it is vital for the House to understand this, the Iraqi Government want more direct assistance. Earlier this week, the Iraqi Foreign Minister wrote to the UN Security Council requesting military assistance to support its actions. When I met Prime Minister Abadi in New York on Wednesday, he reiterated that request to me. In Iraq, the real work of destroying ISIL will be for the Iraqi security forces, but they need our military help and it is in our interest, and theirs, to give it.¹⁶⁸

Defence Committee chair, Rory Stewart, argued that finding a long-term solution would be difficult:

Problem No. 1 is that we do not control the borders. That is most obvious in relation to Syria, but we also have a problem with Turkey. Problem No. 2 is that there is no trust currently among the Sunni population in the Government in Baghdad. They will find it very difficult—even more difficult than they did in 2007—to trust us again. The third problem is that there is very limited will among the Iraqi army to get into those areas. The Shi'a elements of the Iraqi army will be reluctant to go into Mosul. Kurds will be reluctant to go into Mosul, and even if they could be convinced to do so, they would find it difficult to hold those areas because they would be perceived as an alien occupying force. That means, therefore, that all the hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken about a political solution and a regional solution must be right, but we cannot underestimate the difficulty of that.¹⁶⁹

However, he supported the motion.

Diane Abbott said that she would not support the motion, partly, she argued, because Western military intervention is what ISIS wants:

When it comes to this military intervention in the middle east, we do not have to look in the crystal ball; we can read the book. I am all too familiar with the history of our last military intervention in the region, so I will not support the motion in the Lobby tonight. It is totally disingenuous of colleagues on either side to say that this is a choice between acting and not acting. It is a choice between what sort of action we take—whether we place the emphasis on these military interventions, which are in some ways for show, or on humanitarian and diplomatic work and, above all, on putting pressure on the great powers in the region to step up.

There is something that no one has mentioned: it is quite clear from what ISIL has done in filming the beheadings, putting them on YouTube and ensuring that they have English voice-overs that it is seeking to incite us to bomb. Why does that not give people pause? ISIL wants this to happen because it will make it the heroic Muslim defender against the crusader.¹⁷⁰

One of the reasons for widespread support for the motion was the acceptance by many speakers of the legality of action in Iraq. Nevertheless, Sir Richard Ottaway, Foreign Affairs Committee chair, said that the action would not succeed if Syria was excluded and called for more help for the Free Syrian Army and the Peshmerga:

¹⁶⁸ [HC Deb 26 September 2014, c1259](#)

¹⁶⁹ [HC Deb 26 September 2014, c1328](#)

¹⁷⁰ [HC Deb 26 September 2014, c1342](#)

Strategically, it makes sense to bolster moderate forces to take the fight to ISIL. This means supplying funds and equipment to the Free Syrian Army, which has shown itself to be a reliable partner over a sustained period. In the longer term, this will strengthen its anti-Assad capability and bring him to the negotiating table—something that we have been talking about for over three years. No one should be under any illusion that the attacks on innocent citizens in Syria remain 99% the work of the Syrian regime, which has now killed an estimated 170,000 of its own people, as against just a few hundred killed by ISIL.¹⁷¹

Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander set out the case for the Labour Party's support for the Government's motion:

As the Leader of the Opposition has already made clear, we will support the Government in the Lobby this afternoon. For many of us, the decision about the use of British military force in Iraq is a wrenching one. The Opposition support the motion not because we are eager for conflict, nor because we are unaware of recent history, nor simply because we wish to show support for our armed forces. We do so because we believe the action meets the criteria that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition has set down—that it is a just cause; that the proposed action is a last resort; that it is proportionate; that it has a reasonable prospect of success; that it has a clear legal base; and that it has broad regional support.¹⁷²

Angus Robertson, for the Scottish National Party, argued against the motion:

The motion is very clear, and I urge Members to read it. It supports bombing, but it contains not a single mention of a strategy or plan to win the peace. It asks for a green light for military action that could last for years, and it makes no commitment to post-conflict resolution. For that reason, my party will not be able to support the motion, and we will vote against the Government this evening.¹⁷³

The House of Commons voted 524 to 43 in favour of the Government's motion. There were Members from all three main parties among those who voted against the motion.

UK military participation

Military action has so far been restricted to air operations in support of local forces, providing reconnaissance, surveillance and attack capabilities. RAF Tornado GR4 aircraft, based in Cyprus, and the Reaper remotely piloted air system (RPAS) have conducted a number of airstrikes and reconnaissance missions in Iraq, with support aircraft including the new Voyager tanker/transport aircraft. UK Reaper and Rivet Joint aircraft have also conducted surveillance operations over Syria. Other countries have deployed F-16, F-18, Tornado and Rafale combat aircraft, plus support aircraft in the form of tankers, surveillance and transport aircraft.

The Ministry of Defence has confirmed it has sent what it describes as a “training team” to northern Iraq to instruct Peshmerga soldiers on the operation of 40 heavy machine guns donated by the UK. Other training teams will also be sent to provide soldiering skills, medical and counter-explosive device knowledge, the MOD said in a written statement on 13 October 2014. In a separate statement, the MOD said they were a “small specialist team of non-combat Army trainers.” The *Sunday Times* had reported that the soldiers were from the 2nd

¹⁷¹ [HC Deb 26 September 2014, c1277](#)

¹⁷² [HC Deb 26 September 2014, c1354](#)

¹⁷³ [HC Deb 26 September 2014, c1335](#)

Battalion the Yorkshire Regiment, which is currently based in Cyprus. More trainers were announced later in 2014.¹⁷⁴

The House of Commons Defence Committee published a report on ISIS in February 2015, arguing that the UK military effort was smaller than other comparable nations'. The committee suggested ways in which it could be expanded, which they recommended. They suggested enhancing the training mission to Iraqi forces, including training in mines and roadside bombs, and increasing the tempo of British airstrikes once Iraqi forces were in a position to go on the attack. The committee thought that the UK could contribute more to the re-structuring of the Peshmerga,¹⁷⁵ and that training on roadside bombs is something that UK forces could usefully give.

US action

The Obama administration has used the executive authority granted to it by the 2001 Authorisation for the Use of Military Force, which stated that:

...the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons...¹⁷⁶

While the extension of the 9/11 authority against al-Qaeda to include action against ISIS is controversial, similar use of the resolution was used by the George W Bush administration. In his State of the Union Address in January 2015, President Obama called on Congress to pass a resolution specifically authorising the ISIS military action.¹⁷⁷

Other members of the coalition action

The United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, Canada and Denmark have all conducted air strikes in Iraq. All are reluctant to intervene militarily in Syria. Iran is also reported to have conducted airstrikes in eastern Iraq, although not in coordination with the US-led coalition.

The Turkish Parliament has approved a motion allowing its military to join the campaign in both Syria and Iraq. Turkey borders both countries.

There is widespread resistance from publics in North America, Europe and Australia to deploying ground combat troops (excluding Special Forces). The reliance on air power has prompted a debate about the need for 'boots on the ground' among former defence chiefs and Parliamentarians, although the US, UK, Canada, Australia and France have all explicitly ruled out deploying ground combat forces in Iraq, as has the Iraqi government itself. The UK has deployed "non-combat Army trainers" to northern Iraq and announced at the beginning of November that a small number of advisers would deploy to Iraqi headquarters.

Key dates

- 8 August 2014: first US airstrikes on ISIS targets in Iraq
- 19 September: France carries out its first air strike in Iraq

¹⁷⁴ For more information on the UK and other countries' military action in Iraq, see the House of Commons Library Standard note *ISIS: the military response in Iraq and Syria*, 8 December 2014

¹⁷⁵ *The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham (DAESH)*, House of Commons Defence Committee 7th report of 2014-15, HC 690, 5 February 2015, para 103

¹⁷⁶ 'The President's Legal Authority to Order the Use of Military Force against ISIL', American Constitution Society blog, 26 September 2014, para 103

¹⁷⁷ *State of the Union 2015: Full transcript*, CNN 21 January 2015

- 23 September: first US airstrikes on ISIS targets in Syria supported by Arab states
- 26 September: UK Parliament approves military action in Iraq only, not in Syria
- 29 September: RAF Tornado GR4 conduct first armed reconnaissance missions over Iraq, but do not carry out any airstrikes
- 30 September: first UK airstrikes on ISIS targets in Iraq
- 16 October: RAF Reaper RPAS re-deployed from Afghanistan to the Middle East for use in ISIS operations
- 21 October: Reaper and Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft authorised to conduct surveillance flights over Syria
- 5 November: Additional UK military assistance to Iraqi forces is announced
- 7 November: US announces the deployment of up to 1,500 additional non-combat personnel to Iraq.
- 9 November: RAF Reaper conducts first offensive strike sortie in Iraq.
- 23 January 2015: US Department of Defense says that ISIS has only lost about 1% of the territory it held since the beginning of the air strikes.¹⁷⁸
- In March, Iraqi armed forces and allied fighters launched their most high-profile campaign so far: to retake the symbolically important town of Tikrit, birthplace of Saddam.

5.2 International military action in Syria

Coalition nations cooperating with the US air campaign in Syria are Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Other Western nations are not participating in Syria but are taking action in Iraq. In the case of the UK at least, this is because of concerns about the legality of military action in Syria, where the Syrian government has not asked for Western intervention. In the case of Iraq, the request of the Iraqi government, seen as fully legitimate by Western countries, provides a firm legal basis.

The international coalition against ISIS has been carrying out air strikes against ISIS positions in Al-Raqqah. It has also bombed ISIS in Hasakah, Abu Kamal, north of Aleppo and in Kobane, the Kurdish majority town on the border with Turkey.

Although Kurdish forces claimed in January 2015 to have captured Kobane, airstrikes are continuing on ISIS positions near the town.

US action

Operation Inherent resolve

The US military's operation in both Iraq and Syria is called *Inherent resolve*. The operation started on 8 August 2014 and, as at 9 January 2015 had cost a total of \$1.3 billion with the average daily cost being \$8.3 million.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Department of Defense Press Briefing by Rear Adm. Kirby, 23 January 2015

¹⁷⁹ US Department of Defense, *Operation Inherent Resolve, targeted operations against ISIL terrorists*, 28 January 2015

US Air Force and Navy aircraft, including F-15, F/A-18 aircraft and MQ-1 Predator drones have been conducting air strikes in Iraq since early August 2014.

Operations were expanded into Syria towards the end of September. US aircraft participating in those sorties have included F-15, F-16, F/A-18, F-22 fighter aircraft and B-1 bombers. Tomahawk missiles deployed aboard US naval vessels deployed in the Red Sea and North Arabian Gulf were also utilised in the initial stage of offensive operations in Syria. The USS George H W Bush Carrier Strike Group is currently deployed in the Gulf. The Secretary of the Navy has ruled out adding a second carrier.¹⁸⁰

About 2,100 US military personnel are in Iraq giving advice and assistance to Iraqi forces and providing protection to US personnel and missions. As many as 1,300 more were expected to arrive in Iraq in early January 2015.¹⁸¹

Training

The US began training Iraqi army recruits in December 2014. Training was taking place at two Iraqi army bases: at Taji north of Baghdad and at the Asad base in Anbar province. In total nine Iraqi brigades were expected to be trained – six from the regular Iraqi army and three from the Peshmerga.¹⁸²

5.3 International legal implications of military action

(By Rob Page, International Affairs and Defence Section)

The British Government has made it clear that it is only considering air strikes in Iraq at present, partly because the legal case for that is relatively strong, but many observers argue that it will be impossible to defeat ISIS in Iraq without also taking action against them in Syria. There has been much discussion about the international legal implications of the UK conducting air strikes against ISIS in either country without a UN Security Council resolution.

Article 51 of the [United Nations Charter](#) states:

Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security.

This implies that action against ISIS, either in Iraq or in Syria, could be legal in the following circumstances:

- Individual self-defence – that is, if there were deemed to be a genuine threat to the UK from IS.
- Collective self-defence – that is, if action (whether in Iraq or in Syria) were deemed to be an attempt to defend the UK's ally, namely the Government of Iraq. The US

¹⁸⁰ 'One carrier in the Gulf sufficient for now, USN's top civilian says', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 8 October 2014

¹⁸¹ 'U.S. Military Begins Training Iraqi Forces to Take on ISIL', US Department of Defense press release, 5 January 2015

¹⁸² For more information on the coalition's actions in Syria, see the House of Commons Library standard note [ISIS: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#), 8 December 2014

Ambassador to the United Nations has justified the ongoing US air strikes in Syria on precisely this basis:

States must be able to defend themselves ... when, as is the case here, the government of the state where the threat is located is unwilling or unable to prevent the use of its territory for such attacks.

Accordingly, the United States has initiated necessary and proportionate military actions in Syria in order to eliminate the ongoing (Islamic State) threat to Iraq.¹⁸³

A witness for the House of Commons Defence Committee inquiry into ISIS said that any collective defence justification for attacks in Syria would have to be against ISIS fighters who were directly threatening Iraq.¹⁸⁴

It is important to note that the Government of Iraq has specifically requested UK air strikes, whilst the Government of Syria – unsurprisingly given its adversarial relationship with the West – has not (although President Assad has said that he is willing to cooperate with the US in the fight against terrorism in Syria).¹⁸⁵

Speaking on 4 September, the Prime Minister was asked if he would consider it legal for the UK to take action in Syria without the permission of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad. In his response the Prime Minister drew a contrast between the “legitimate” Iraqi government on the one hand, and President Assad on the other hand, who has “committed war crimes on his own people and is therefore illegitimate.”¹⁸⁶

It is also important to note that any intervention would have to be conducted in accordance with the [Geneva Conventions](#). Article 51 of [Protocol 1 of the Geneva Conventions](#) includes the following:

4. Indiscriminate attacks are prohibited. Indiscriminate attacks are:

- (a) those which are not directed at a specific military objective;
- (b) those which employ a method or means of combat which cannot be directed at a specific military objective; or
- (c) those which employ a method or means of combat the effects of which cannot be limited as required by this Protocol; and consequently, in each such case, are of a nature to strike military objectives and civilians or civilian objects without distinction.

5. Among others, the following types of attacks are to be considered as indiscriminate:

- (a) an attack by bombardment by any methods or means which treats as a single military objective a number of clearly separated and distinct military objectives located in a city, town, village or other area containing a similar concentration of civilians or civilian objects; and
- (b) an attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.

¹⁸³ ["Exclusive: United States defends Syria airstrikes in letter to U.N. chief"](#), *Reuters*, 23 September 2014

¹⁸⁴ [The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham \(DAESH\)](#), House of Commons Defence Committee 7th report of 2014-15, HC 690, 5 February 2015, para. 23

¹⁸⁵ [‘Syria’s President Speaks: A Conversation With Bashar al-Assad’](#), *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2015

¹⁸⁶ ["UK could launch strikes against Isis in Syria without Assad's support, says PM"](#), *Guardian*, 4 September 2014

The following is an extract from a [blog](#) by Ryan Goodman, Professor of Law at New York University School of Law, written before the recent launch of US airstrikes in Syria (but after the launch of US airstrikes in Iraq). Goodman discusses the potential legal implications of US airstrikes in Syria:

There are potentially two additional complications for airstrikes in Syria.

First, a strong case could be made that the US prerogative to strike in Syria would be conditioned on Iraq's request for assistance including Iraq's determination with respect to Syria. That is, if the United States were to conduct operations against ISIS in Syria on the basis of collective self-defense of Iraq, the government of Iraq would presumably [need to request the US take the fight to Syria](#). Iraq may thus also need to accept the doctrine of unwilling or unable and determine that Syria fails the test.

Second, does Syria present a case of a state that is "willing and able"? Assad has demonstrated that he is utterly unwilling or unable to deal with the ISIS threat effectively. But, the Syria government has now essentially stated that it is willing and able to cooperate with the United States in carrying out strikes against ISIS. And the Syrian government has [said](#), "Any strike which is not coordinated with the government will be considered as aggression."

In a statement that is a bit stunning when viewed in light of international law, the State Department spokesperson [said](#) earlier this week, "We're not looking for the approval of the Syrian regime."

Therein lies the complication: What is the international law when a host state (Syria) is willing and able to deal with a non-state group (ISIS) through military cooperation with the threatened state (the United States) but the latter (the United States) doesn't want to associate itself with the host state for other potentially unrelated reasons?

The "unwilling or unable" test is already a (controversial) exception to international law's cardinal prohibition on the use of force in another state's territory. It would be hard, to say the least, to suggest there is an additional "exception to the exception." Given the importance of the use of force prohibition in international law and politics, it is also difficult to read the exception broadly.

I suppose the US government will have to argue that Assad is not truly willing or able even in these circumstances. First, the United States could argue that Assad is not acting in good faith. Indeed, many close observers believe Assad is playing a double game in which he has deliberately failed to quell ISIS in order to try rally parts of the international community to his side. Second, the United States might argue (like [here](#)) that the involvement of Syrian military and intelligence would compromise the effectiveness of the operations to the point that the operations would not be able to deal effectively with the ISIS threat. On that front, some close observers [think the opposite is true](#) (that the US needs Syrian support for more effective operations).

6 Conclusion

The situation in Iraq and Syria has been brewing for decades. Peter Harling of the International Crisis Group described Sunni rage at recent setbacks in relation to the Shia:

Simply put, the Sunni world has trouble coming to terms with its past and imagining its future. A fragmented 20th-century history, following a long period of Ottoman occupation which was seen as a period of decline, ended with a succession of failures: anti-imperialism, pan-Arabism, nationalist movements, socialism, various forms of Islamism, capitalism — all led only to bitter or ambiguous experiences. Thus far, with the exception of Tunisia, the hopes born of the 2011 uprisings have turned to ashes.

So where can Sunnis turn to find inspiration, self-confidence and pride? The reactionaries in the Gulf and Egypt? The Muslim Brothers, who are on the ropes? Palestinian Hamas, locked in a perpetual impasse in its resistance to Israel?

During the same period, the Shia world has scored notable, if qualified, successes: Iran has established itself as a country the West cannot avoid dealing with and has ambitions to play an ever greater role in the Arab world; Hizbullah is calling the shots in Lebanon and there is an ever-stronger Shia axis linking Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran. This has created a new and troubling phenomenon: a Sunni majority with a minority complex — a powerful though confused feeling of marginalisation, dispossession and humiliation. More and more Sunnis throughout the region experience and express the feeling that they have been deprived of their fundamental rights and are suffering persecution.¹⁸⁷

The West should in no way be complacent about developments in Iraq, according to Jane Kinninmont of Chatham House. The history of Western involvement in that country is not a happy one:

...pinning all the blame on Maliki conveniently absolves the US and UK of responsibility for helping to create a political system where violence and sectarianism are the usual mechanisms for staying in power. Over the past 30 years, the west first supported and armed a genocidal dictator, then crippled the country with sanctions that failed to remove him, then invaded the country and dismantled the state and army. After 2003, the US and UK helped design a system of sectarian "power-sharing" where "power-sharing" means carving up government ministries – made extremely lucrative by raging corruption – between a tiny elite drawn from each ethnicity and sect.¹⁸⁸

Many commentators argue convincingly that the effort to dislodge ISIS must be based on a political solution in Iraq and Syria, undercutting the widespread loathing of the perceived anti-Sunni policies pursued by the Iraqi and Syrian governments. But as the House of Commons Defence Committee pointed out, this idea suggests that Western governments are pursuing a similar strategy of state-building as they did in Afghanistan after 2001 and in Iraq from 2003. The success of those state-building operations is debatable at best.¹⁸⁹

Even in the best possible scenario, changing opinions in Sunni areas of Iraq would take time. The replacement of al-Maliki as Iraqi Prime Minister by Haider al-Abadi suggests some progress in this direction, but the process of installing a new government, let alone pursuing new and inclusive policies that heal the deep divisions in Iraqi society, is fraught with difficulty. The fact that Sunni politicians boycotted the formation of the new government at the end of August 2014 in protest at the killings of Sunnis by Shiites militias illustrates the difficulties.

The violence in Iraq tends to deepen the rift between Sunnis and Shias. And that brings up another problem: if the roots of the ISIS insurgency are fed by the Sunni/Shia split, a realignment bringing Shia Iran, the US and the majority Shia government with its supporting Shia militias together against ISIS could boost ISIS even further, especially given some of the reported atrocities that have taken place at the hands of the Iraqi Shia militias.¹⁹⁰ Add to that the possibility that the West could soon be perceived by Sunni *jihadis* to be on the same

¹⁸⁷ Peter Harling, 'IS Back in Business', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 1 September 2014

¹⁸⁸ Jane Kinninmont, 'Isis will not be beaten by a kneejerk reaction from the west', *Observer*, 7 September 2014

¹⁸⁹ *The situation in Iraq and Syria and the response to al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq al-Sham (DAESH)*, House of Commons Defence Select Committee 7th report 2014-15, HC 690, 5 February 2015, paras 30-1

¹⁹⁰ See for example, *Iraq: Evidence of war crimes by government-backed Shi'a militias*, Amnesty International, 14 October 2014

side as the Alawite-dominated government in Syria, and the narrative of a Sunni war against the West and Shia 'heretics' would be complete.

Given that even with the full-scale invasion and occupation for several years it was difficult to pacify Iraq, air strikes alone are not likely to succeed. ISIS controls large amounts of territory, population and natural resources and is consequently better funded than the Sunni resistance which so troubled US forces after the 2003 invasion. Indeed, the US military has said that ISIS has lost little territory since the air strikes began.

What is more, air strikes are likely to result in civilian casualties as ISIS forces hide among the civilian population. This is conceivably their aim – to provoke the West into military action which hurts Muslim civilians, thus supporting their narrative of the West's 'war on Islam'.

For these reasons, it is not only the fight against the advocates of violence against the West but also efforts to ease Sunni/Shia hostilities which are crucial. The West may not be in a good position to help with this. A stronger commitment to the fight against ISIS from regional Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as well as Shiite Iran, would perhaps be better. These countries also have far more to lose from the spread of ISIS than Western states do. Some argue that it is indeed better for the US and NATO to stand back, forcing regional powers to assume more responsibility for maintaining order in the region.¹⁹¹

Supporting the Kurdish Peshmerga seems like a good start to resolving this problem. Peshmerga forces cooperating with official Iraqi armed forces and Shiite militia, supported by US air strikes, have had some notable successes. But the Peshmerga alone would not be strong enough to defeat ISIS, even with outside help.

Holding territory is a liability as well as an asset, though; ISIS is surrounded by enemies who have an interest in defeating it. If ISIS is driven out of significant amounts of territory, that would have a serious effect on its propaganda effort. ISIS has advised its leaders on the ground to beware of over-reach, taking territory that they cannot hold. ISIS may also alienate ordinary Sunnis by its use of shocking levels of violence.

Complexities

Although sectarian hostilities are the source of much of the anger and frustration that fuels support for ISIS in Iraq and Syria, to see the conflict only in those terms would be a mistake. The insurgencies in the Levant are multi-faceted; there are disgruntled former Baathist military officers fighting against the Iraqi government, and some of those have talked of ISIS as a useful front for the real power struggle. There are Sunni Kurds and Sunni Arab tribes fighting against Sunni ISIS, there are *jihadi* Kurds fighting with ISIS, there are fights between rival Sunni *jihadi* groups, particularly in Syria. Alongside the Sunni-Shia conflict is the separate but connected rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, respectively Shia and Sunni champions but also Arab/Persian champions and rivals in their own right for leadership in the Middle East.

In Syria particularly, but also in Iraq, there is a bewildering mosaic of forces. Much of this complexity is the result of the manoeuvring of different Sunni forces, competing for the role of defending Sunnis against their repressive governments dominated by non-Sunnis. It also means that if any force is to control Iraq or Syria, it must make effective alliances with all sorts of groups, and may have to co-opt or absorb them. In their former formation, the *jihadis* in Iraq failed to maintain their alliances with Sunni forces, and their efforts came to nothing when alienated Sunni tribes turned against them. As ISIS attempts to hold on to territory,

¹⁹¹ See for example, George Friedman, 'The Virtue of Subtlety: A US Strategy Against the Islamic State', Stratfor, 9 September 2014

there will be ample opportunities for conflict to arise with allied groups over resources and tactics. As Ahmed Hashim puts it:

In Iraq, there are already strains between some of the former Baathist and nationalist elements, who see IS and its leaders as 'useful idiots' who can be used to extract revenge and overturn the Shia-dominated system in Baghdad. However, there is every indication that IS and its command see the local allies as useful idiots to be exploited. Only time will tell whether IS will succeed in fully incorporating the "allies."¹⁹²

The fight against ISIS and its allies is also tactically complex. The group's ways of working require a whole-government response that is intelligence-rich and focussed on the information war. However, the response to ISIS is being provided in two different theatres by a coalition involving several different countries and several non-state actors, some of which are not generally allies and have very different motivations. Creating a subtle but effective and coordinated response from so many actors is difficult; the information war is difficult to win when a multitude of actors is giving conflicting messages.

Syria

While much attention has been focussed by the West and by the UK on the situation in Iraq, the Syrian civil war is really the bigger battlefield. Many commentators argue that the West will not attain its objectives in regard to ISIS in Iraq without focussing more attention on Syria.¹⁹³ However, the multifaceted nature of the region's problems remains the obstacle; how to tackle ISIS in Syria without empowering the Assad government in Damascus?

The Assads' probable strategy of getting the rebellion to change into an extremist *jihadi* movement has paid off to a certain extent. The West has been alarmed by the successes of the ultra-radical group and US airstrikes in Syria have been blamed, at least by the more secular Syrian rebels, for giving the Syrian government more space to attack secularists. It will be difficult for the West to back down from their previous demands for Bashar al-Assad to relinquish power. But any action against ISIS in Iraq will be inadequate without action against them in Syria and the rhetoric against the Assads may be toned down.

Action against ISIS and other Islamist militant groups in Syria might help the Assad government to survive. However, some argue that for the West to re-align, even partially, with the Assad government could do terrible long-term damage to its image, particularly with the Sunnis, because of the scale of the suffering in Syria. 'My enemy's enemy is my friend' may have its uses, but that sort of thinking contributed a lot to the rise of Saddam Hussein and violent transnational jihad in the first place.

Action in Syria is in any case more difficult to justify legally. It is unlikely that the West could use any request from Syria for military intervention as a legal basis and there is no sign that the Assad government intends to make such a request. An alternative legal justification, and one used by the US administration, is that the collective self-defence of Iraq requires military action in Syria, but this argument is not universally accepted. The British government has said that any action in Syria will comply with international law, and another way to achieve this might be to claim that military action is for humanitarian purposes, using the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. This remains controversial, however, without a United Nations Security Council resolution to authorise it.

¹⁹² Ahmed S Hashim, '[The Islamic State: from Al-Qaeda affiliate to caliphate](#)', *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Winter 2014, Volume XXI, Number 4, p8

¹⁹³ See for example Noah Bonsey, '[What Obama Doesn't Understand About Syria](#)', International Crisis Group, 26 November 2014

The potential for ISIS to spread is worrying for Western countries but it presents a bigger challenge for the governments of other Muslim countries; the majority of foreigners who have joined ISIS to fight in Syria or Iraq come from neighbouring Arab countries rather than the West. Many countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, while they might contribute a lot to efforts to push ISIS out of Syria and Iraq, are also worried about blowback and the threat to stability in their own countries.

However, many of those countries have had their own Islamist and *jihadi* groups for some time and any declarations of allegiance may be a symptom of those groups jumping on the ISIS bandwagon. Like al-Qaeda after 9/11, the dramatic success of ISIS has made it attractive to *jihadis*. Ahmed Rashid pointed out that al-Qaeda spent many years setting up cells around the Middle East, Sudan and Afghanistan, something which ISIS has not done. Support for ISIS may be relatively shallow and vulnerable to ebb if the group's propaganda offensive falters. Meanwhile, the more deeply-rooted local groups are not going away:

The unprecedented atrocities carried out by Isis are an inspiration to others and this is a real concern. But the problem is that intelligence agencies are now looking for Isis under every bed.

The truth — mercifully — is that it has not yet arrived. But what remain present are extremist groups with deep roots in the local soil, and these are just as dangerous.¹⁹⁴

Patience

Many commentators (and Western leaders) have argued convincingly that ISIS and the insurgency in Iraq and Syria will not go away quickly, and that Western and regional governments should not over-react.

Martin Wolf wrote in January 2015 that ISIS militants are much like other fanatics and will probably respond to tactics that have worked with other movements:

First, accept that we are playing the long game of containment.

Second, recognise that the heart of the struggle is elsewhere. The west can help. But it cannot win those wars.

Third, offer the lived idea of equality as citizens as an alternative to violent jihad.

Fourth, appreciate and respond to the frustrations many now feel.

Fifth, accept the need for measures to provide security. But remember that absolute safety is never achievable.

Finally, remain true to our beliefs, since without them we have nothing to offer in this struggle. We must not abandon either the rule of law or the ban on torture. Once we do, we have already lost this war of ideals and ideas.¹⁹⁵

On the other hand, much of the driving force behind the insurgency in Iraq is the pragmatic plan of former Baathists and other 'secular' forces to reverse their fall from power and the humiliation they feel they have suffered at the hands of the government in Baghdad. The way in which Iraqi government forces and Shia militias treat civilians in their attempts to re-take Sunni towns such as Tikrit will be crucial. Witnesses told the House of Commons Defence Committee that a settlement would have to be reached between these forces and the

¹⁹⁴ Ahmed Rashid, 'ISIS extends its reach but the roots of other groups go deeper', *Financial Times*, 11 December 2014

¹⁹⁵ Martin Wolf, 'How to share the world with true believers', *Financial Times*, 14 January 2015

Baghdad government. This would probably mean at least autonomy for the Sunni areas to match that of Iraqi Kurdistan.

While it is clear that the conflicts are causing a terrible toll of suffering on local communities, it is not yet known exactly what threat the insurgencies in Iraq and Syria present to the West. They may be very successful at inspiring 'lone wolf' attacks in Western cities, but ISIS appears to be more concentrated on holding territory in the Levant than on organising large-scale attacks against Western interests. The ISIS strategy of taking territory from the 'near enemy' rather than al-Qaeda's strategy of attacking the 'far enemy' (the West, particularly the United States) ought surely to make ISIS *less* of a threat to the West than al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

Nevertheless, the string of successes as ISIS swept through Syria and Iraq was stunning and raised the alarm around the world. But the sheer complexity of the conflicts means that a coherent response from the coalition of forces arrayed against ISIS is very difficult to craft. If and when ISIS is 'degraded and ultimately defeated' as a force in the Levant, the boundaries established may not be exactly as set out in 1916 by Sykes and Picot.