

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## IRAQ: BASRA PROTESTS

*Brian Perkins*

Protests that first began in July and intensified in early September have wreaked havoc on Iraq's port city of Basra. The unrest—motivated by protesting government corruption, and shortages of electricity, jobs and clean water—began shortly after the country's inconclusive parliamentary elections produced a political stalemate. The situation in Basra has only complicated the formation of a new government, which will help shape future relations between Iraq, Iran, and the United States.

While the protesters' grievances and demands are pointed toward the Iraqi government, they have also directed their anger toward Tehran and pro-Iran political figures and militias that have long been entrenched in Basra and elsewhere in Iraq. The clear disdain for Iran's influence became glaringly evident when protesters torched the Iranian consulate and numerous other buildings associated with pro-Iran entities ([Baghdad Today](#), September 7). Iran's destabilizing influence in Iraq is undoubtedly worthy of attention, but media reports relating to the protests in Basra have, perhaps, placed too much emphasis on Iran. Meanwhile, not enough atten-

tion has been placed on the harsh realities the people of Basra face. A level of stability being reached in the near term is a high priority for the people of Basra. This can only be done by pushing the government forward.

The immediate effect of the protests is that Haider al-Abadi's role as prime minister is certainly coming to an end, partly at the behest of Muqtada al-Sadr ([Rudaw](#), September 13). The former Mahdi Army leader and his Sairoon Alliance won a plurality of seats in the parliamentary election and he appears to be steering the political process recently. As the political uncertainty and protests escalated, Sadr called for Abadi to resign his post while looking for an alternative alliance to help put forward a candidate for prime minister. The protests and backlash against Abadi also hastened the outcome of the second parliamentary meeting since the election. Unlike the first meeting, the second meeting on September 15 resulted in Sunni politician Mohammed al-Habousi being elected as Speaker of Parliament ([Baghdad Post](#), September 15).

Abadi's decline and Sadr's reemergence as a key political player will likely be detrimental to the United States' relations with Iraq. Abadi's stance toward Iran and U.S. sanctions made him the United States' preferred candi-

date while Sadr has long made his disdain for the United States clear. Similarly, the new Speaker of Parliament was the candidate put forth by Hadi al-Ameri's pro-Iran Fatah coalition and has already denounced U.S. sanctions on Iran ([al-Monitor](#), September 17).

Concern over the implications the protests and the composition of the new government will have on both U.S.-Iraq and U.S.-Iran relations are entirely valid. What is positive at this moment, however, is that the protests have seemingly hastened the formation of the next government. It would be beneficial to both Iraq and the United States if the political deadlock ends and the new government fulsomely addresses the very real grievances that prompted the protests. If Abadi had secured another term as prime minister before grievances against his administration boiled over it would have been even more likely that Iraq would have fallen into a dangerous backslide so soon after its victory against the Islamic State. The next Iraqi government is almost certain to have closer ties to Iran, which will likely necessitate a reconsideration of U.S. sanctions and diplomacy between Iran and the United States to ensure future stability in Iraq.

## **PAKISTAN: JALALUDDIN HAQQANI'S DEATH AND U.S.-PAKISTAN RELATIONS**

*Brian Perkins*

The Taliban reported the death of the fearsome and elusive founder of Afghanistan's Haqqani Network, Jalaluddin Haqqani, on September 3 ([Jihadology](#), September 3). His death marks the end of one of the longest tenured jihadists in Afghanistan. Having fought the Russians with the Afghan mujahideen and being a key figure alongside his Taliban counterparts, Jalaluddin was part of a generation of jihadists that are either dying or ageing out of active leadership roles. Like the death of other notable leaders within the Taliban milieu, such as Mullah Omar, Jalaluddin's death will have little, if any, effect on the Haqqani Network's operations. His death, however, could potentially have broader geopolitical implications and is a reminder of increasingly strained relations between the United States and Pakistan.

Jalaluddin was reportedly in very poor health for years and had already passed the leadership of the Haqqani Network to his son, Sirajuddin Haqqani, in 2001 ([Tolo News](#), September 4). Sirajuddin has more than proven his leadership ability through his network's persistence and ability to repeatedly conduct complex attacks on both soft and hard targets. Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense and the U.S. spokesperson for the NATO Resolute Support mission have attributed countless attacks in Afghanistan to Haqqani Network members in the past two years. A notable example includes the ambulance bombing in Kabul that killed 103 people on January 28 and the bombing near the German Embassy that killed 105 people in Kabul in May 2017 ([Pajhwok](#) January 14; [Express Tribune](#), January 30).

The Haqqani Network has not captured as many headlines as the Taliban in recent years, but that is only because they generally operate congruently, as they have for years. Countless attacks attributed to the Taliban were actually carried out by members of the Haqqani Network. The Haqqani Network under Sirajuddin has maintained the same level of loyalty to the Taliban and al-Qaeda as the groups always had under his father. This sentiment was echoed by the Taliban and al-Qaeda in eulogies published via their respective media outlets ([Jihadology](#), September 3). [1]

Although Jalaluddin's death was reported on September 3, it is unclear when he actually died. Rumors of his death had occasionally circulated in previous years. It is possible he could have in fact died years before this confirmation, as was the case when the Taliban finally confirmed Mullah Omar's death. What is also unclear and could prove to be highly contentious is the location of his death—whether in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

The announcement comes amid escalating violence in Afghanistan and at a time when the United States has increasingly pressured Pakistan to address militancy in the country's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province—including the former Federally Administered Tribal Area—and other known militant safe havens in its border regions. The Trump administration has publicly expressed frustration toward Pakistan on countless occasions and has proposed two different reductions in security assistance to Pakistan since January. The combined total of the reductions is approximately \$550 million. The administration has specifically cited Pakistan's acquiescence toward the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network in briefings related to the proposed reductions ([Express Tribune](#), August 3). [2] U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in Pakistan just days after the announcement of Haqqani's death for "reset" talks with newly elected Prime Minister Imran Khan, prompting many to speculate the Taliban timed the announcement. The meeting did not result in any concrete progress, nor did it fix the relationship.

If a discovery is made that Jalaluddin died or was treated for his illness inside Pakistan, it will likely draw the ire of President Trump and will undoubtedly add further strain to U.S.-Pakistan relations. Such a discovery would also be a litmus test for how Imran Khan will address the issue of militancy and approach relations with the Trump administration. However amenable Khan's response is to tackling terrorism, it will likely be hampered by Pakistan's spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence. The agency has historically operated outside the state's control to support and harbor the groups it deems "good terrorists."

## Notes

[1] Collection of eulogies released by numerous terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda ([ICTC](#), September 12)

[2] Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 first introduced April 2018 and since amended shows proposed reduction from \$900 million to \$350 million ([Congress](#), April 4).

# Clashes Between Islamic State and AQAP Emblematic of Broader Competition

Brian Perkins

The Islamic State's (IS) global network is far from defeated, but the core group's loss of significant territory in Iraq and Syria is emblematic of a longer trend and stands in stark contrast to al-Qaeda's lack of major change in the same period. This trend is particularly evident in Yemen, where the Islamic State formally entered the country's jihadist scene in November 2015. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released an audio tape accepting oaths of allegiance from Yemeni fighters ([Terrorism Monitor](#), August 7, 2015). Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was, and still is, the preeminent terrorist organization in Yemen. IS, however, did come on strong by launching numerous attacks across the country and establishing several different subgroups—Aden-Abyan, al-Bayda, Hadramawt, Ibb-Taiz (Green Brigade), Lahij, Sana'a, Shabwa ([Terrorism Monitor](#), August 7, 2015).

By early 2016, IS was operating in countless areas that overlapped AQAP's operations, but still managed to find success due to the chaotic security environment across the country. The group's ranks and operations have dwindled considerably over the past year, and the most active subgroup, IS-al-Bayda, has become locked into a physical and ideological fight with AQAP that is illustrative of the broader contest between core al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

## Islamic State's Decline in Yemen

IS got off to a relatively strong start in Yemen, claiming numerous high profile attacks, including twin suicide bombings on two pro-Houthi mosques in Sana'a that killed 137 people and injured hundreds more on March 20, 2016 ([Aljazeera](#), March 23, 2015). Each of the subgroups claimed responsibility for dozens of attacks in their respective territories, with varying degrees of brutality. IS's propensity for attacking mosques and killing civilians quickly drew condemnation from AQAP. In addition to successful operations, IS also started off with very active propaganda wings. Many of the IS subgroups produced high-quality videos and were regularly releas-

ing recruitment materials and statements about their operations. [1]

Despite their strong start, IS in Yemen has largely been on the decline since mid-to-late 2016 as the group failed to control the territory where it operated. The group was also hampered by its brutal tactics and inability to embed with local tribes. Unlike AQAP, IS in Yemen did not rebrand nor did it engage in social projects that would ingratiate IS members with locals. Little is known about the actual composition of the group but locals have indicated that many of its members are disenfranchised AQAP fighters and tribesmen lured to the group by the promise of salaries. The group's failure to control territory and sustain their own finances, however, has led to high rates of attrition.

The number of successful attacks the groups have claimed has decreased significantly, and the majority of its operations have targeted Houthi forces or Yemeni security forces rather than heavily populated areas or civilian targets such as mosques. [2] Likewise, the frequency of propaganda and statements made by the different subgroups, with the exception of IS-al-Bayda, has also declined significantly. IS's operations have also been severely hindered by improved security in Southern Yemen and active counterinsurgency operations by Emirati troops and UAE-back forces ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 14). Meanwhile, the crowded battle space and constant airstrikes against the Houthis in Sanaa, Taiz and other key battlegrounds are not conducive to the group's recruitment, growth, or survival. These factors are key reasons why the other subgroups have largely become inactive. The group's profile has risen recently, however, due to open clashes with AQAP.

## Conflict with AQAP

Conflict between IS and AQAP in Yemen was inevitable as their operations overlapped and both were vying for the same resources, which has largely been the case between the broader al-Qaeda and Islamic State core. IS Yemen's recent decline as well as the uptick in clashes and propaganda competition between IS in Yemen and AQAP have similarly reflected the broader competition between core IS and al-Qaeda.

Despite an apparent agreement to avoid confrontation, competition with AQAP heated up in July 2018 as IS became mostly restricted to the Qayfa area of al-Bayda,

where AQAP is particularly active. A clash broke out between IS and AQAP on July 10, reportedly resulting in the deaths of 14 AQAP fighters and 22 IS members ([Yemenat](#), July 16). The Islamic State purportedly also managed to take 12 AQAP fighters hostage, which were later shown in a video released by the group ([Jihadology](#), August 1).

Aside from the video of the alleged AQAP hostages, both groups' official media wings were relatively quiet about the clashes until early August, when IS released a video titled "And the Initiator is the Aggressor" that took aim at AQAP for initiating the clashes ([Jihadology](#), August 1). The tempo of official video releases and statements, however, increased significantly after both IS leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, and al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, made public statements on August 22 and August 23, respectively ([Jihadology](#), August 23; [Jihadology](#), August 23). Baghdadi specifically referenced Yemen alongside Iraq and Syria, stating "Don't you see what has happened to the people in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen? Haven't you seen what has happened to the people of Islam of misery? Wake up! They have decided to secularize you with a campaign that will lead to your disbelief, and to ruin the approach of the Sunnah." Baghdadi's message was a clear call for further support in Yemen. Zawahiri's message did not specifically reference Yemen, but made similar calls for support.

Just five days after Zawahiri's message, AQAP released an official statement condemning IS for switching the focus from fighting infidels to infighting between Muslims ([Jihadology](#), August 28, 2018). The two groups have since traded public barbs against one another and have released statements at a higher frequency than in the past. IS released further details regarding the clashes in al-Bayda in Naba 147 on September 14, placing the blame squarely on AQAP and accusing them of putting innocent lives at risk by using civilians as shields. IS went on the message to frame themselves as the protectors of the people of Qayfa and al-Humaydah ([Jihadology](#), September 14). The subgroup in Yemen has since released its first video in the past six months, likely an attempt to make IS appear stronger than it is in reality.

## Outlook

Although IS Aden-Abyan released its first video in several months, it is unlikely that that subgroup will find

significant success. Similarly, the larger group is unlikely to regain ground in other southern governorates due to ongoing operations by the UAE and its allied groups. IS-al-Bayda will remain the most active group in the near term and is likely to persist until there is a significant shift in the security environment. This group, however, will continue to face strong competition from AQAP and further clashes will likely continue. The propaganda wings for both AQAP and IS-al-Bayda will continue taking cues from their parent organizations. They will frame clashes in terms of a broader ideological competition, with each group painting themselves as more righteous while discrediting the other. Unlike IS, AQAP is likely to dig in deeper than it already is and will remain Yemen's preeminent terrorist organization for the foreseeable future.

## Notes

[1] For instance see video's and statements released by the subgroup in Hadramawt ([Jihadology](#), 2015-2016)

[2] Data recorded by ACLED ([ACLED](#), July 5)

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# Growing Network of IS-K in Pakistan's Baluchistan-Province

*Farhan Zahid*

With the fall of Mosul in July 2014, the Islamic State (IS) started to spread its tentacles, luring in Islamist terrorist groups all over the world. This includes many groups previously aligned with al-Qaeda. The IS spokesperson, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, called upon all Islamist groups to align with the so-called Islamic Caliphate and pledge allegiance to its caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In quick succession, more than 40 Islamist terrorist and insurgent groups across the globe pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. [1]

Among those to answer IS's calls were several Pakistani Islamist terrorist groups, which joined hands with IS and allowed the terrorist organization to spread its ideology and violence in an already terrorism-ridden country. Tehreek-e-Khilafat Pakistan, Jundullah and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan's Shahidullah Shahid faction were the first to answer the call in late 2014. [2] Some terrorist groups issued conciliatory statements whereas others established working relationships with IS. The group termed the Pakistan and Afghanistan region Wilayat-e-Khurasan, commonly referred to as Islamic State-Khurasan (IS-K).

The so-called Khurasan region has become crucial to the core of IS. After the fall of Raqqa in November 2017 it, along with Africa, became a primary region for hundreds of relocating IS militants. The Khurasan region is also fertile ground with long-established Islamist terrorist groups and large swathes of unsecure territory. These factors improve the group's ability to recruit and operate.

## IS-K in Pakistan

IS-K was quick to capitalize on Pakistan's rich jihadist landscape. The group spread its network with the help of local and regional militants in all four of Pakistan's provinces, as well as in the eastern and northern provinces of Afghanistan. Pakistan is particularly attractive to IS due to the sheer number of different terrorist organizations. Recent fractures within a variety of Pakistani ter-

rorist groups also makes the country an alluring target for IS. IS-K launched a massive media campaign coupled with strong propaganda on social media in order to drive recruitment in Pakistan. Concerted efforts by law enforcement and security forces quickly began to root out IS influence in Pakistan and halt its recruitment drive. [2] The group's recruitment efforts, however, succeeded despite stiff resistance from both security forces and rival al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist groups operating in Pakistan.

IS-K has perpetrated scores of attacks in both urban centers and far-flung rural areas across the country, though it has been more successful in some provinces than others. The group conducted a wave of at least 60 targeted killings in western Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province before law enforcement forces managed to dismantle the IS-K cells operating in that province.

IS-K in Sindh province has proven to be more resilient and effective in launching terrorist strikes and establishing decentralized cell-based units of highly educated young militants. In one major attack in May 2015, an IS-K cell killed 43 Ismaili-Shias when they attacked their bus and murdered them in cold-blood ([Dawn, May 13, 2015](#)). The IS-K cell in Karachi has also targeted social workers, and members of secular parties, especially the anti-Islamist, anti-Taliban, overtly secular Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) during 2014. The groups created havoc in Karachi and Hyderabad before law enforcement forces were able to make a significant number of arrests and disrupt their operations. Arrested members were predominantly highly educated individuals espousing the Salafist-jihadist ideology. While IS-K has found some success in Sindh, the group's growth has been most notable in Baluchistan, where rule of law is particularly lacking.

## IS-K's Growth and Operations in Baluchistan

IS-K has been able to make inroads in sparsely populated Baluchistan, which is Pakistan's largest province. Baluchistan makes up 43 percent of Pakistan and is almost the size of Germany. The province is also the poorest and most underdeveloped part of Pakistan. It time and again experiences Baluch nationalist-separatist insurgencies. The group has capitalized on the weak writ of state, presence of ungoverned territories and relationships with other terrorist organizations.

The IS-K does have its own recruitment, financial, and logistics networks in the province, but it also seeks support from its operational hubs in neighboring Afghanistan. The southeastern provinces of Afghanistan, close to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, have traditionally weak rule of law, allowing IS-K and the Afghan Taliban to infiltrate and find safe havens in those areas. The proximity of these areas and the presence of ungoverned territories in Baluchistan makes the province particularly conducive to IS-K's growth and survival. Apart from Islamist terrorist groups, a plethora of Baluch nationalist-separatist groups also operate in southern Baluchistan—some with bases in neighboring Afghanistan—and at times collude with Islamist groups as far as logistical issues are concerned.

The IS-K campaign in Baluchistan could be categorized as the group's most successful to date because it has managed to forge important alliances with local terrorist groups. For instance, IS-K has developed a working relationship with Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami (LeJA). The LeJA is led by Yousaf Mansour Khurasani, a native of Punjab province that now operates in Baluchistan. He espouses a conciliatory approach towards IS-K and seemingly collaborates with IS-K on a regular basis ([Terrorism Monitor, January 27, 2017](#)).

The cooperation between the LeJA and IS-K is purely a marriage of convenience. The LeJA does not adhere to IS-K's Salafist ideology but espouses a violent anti-Shia Deobandi version of Islam. Their shared hatred for Shia and Sufi communities, however, appears to be the driving force behind their relationship. Despite their relationship, the LeJA has remained associated with al-Qaeda. Many of its commanders and militants had received training at al-Qaeda-run camps in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (1996-2001). The LeJA, unlike other al-Qaeda-linked groups, has not shown any hostility towards IS-K. The LeJA and IS-K have jointly claimed attacks conducted in Baluchistan, and at times, in neighboring Sindh province.

Baluchistan's Mastung District remains the hub of IS-K activities. A three-day-long security forces operation in June 2017 revealed that various hideouts were used by both organizations. A total of 12 IS-K militants and two suicide bombers were killed by security forces during the operation ([Dawn, June 8, 2017](#)). The security forces also claimed to have destroyed the headquarters of IS-K and LeJA ([News International June 8, 2017](#)). The group,

however, still remains intact and has demonstrated its operational capabilities through several attacks on security personnel and election meetings.

IS-K continues to exploit vulnerabilities of the security mechanisms in Baluchistan. In August 2017, an IS suicide bomber hit a military convoy passing near Pishin District, killing 15 people, including eight soldiers ([Nation, Aug 13](#)). Among the group's most notable, recent attacks were two consecutive bombings during election campaigning for the 2018 general elections. IS-K claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing at a Baluchistan Awami Party rally in Mastung District on July 13 that killed 131 people and another at a polling station in Quetta on July 25—election day—that killed 31 people ([Dunya News, July 15](#); [Dawn, July 25](#)). These two bombings underscored IS-K's operational capabilities and ability to inflict mass casualties, even during events that are typically accompanied by a significant security presence.

## Conclusion

Despite Pakistani law enforcement and security forces' consistent and concerted efforts to eradicate IS-K, the terrorist group has demonstrated its resilience and continues to be able to perpetrate acts of terrorism, particularly in Baluchistan. The province provides the group a largely ungoverned area, relationships with well-established Pakistani terrorist groups, and proximity to IS-K networks based in Afghanistan. IS-K's growth in Baluchistan and its activities in Afghanistan—where the local IS-K network has perpetrated waves of terrorist attacks—highlights the need for Pakistani authorities to collaborate with their Afghan counterparts to share intelligence. The sharing of information is essential to eliminate IS-K, as alone neither of the two neighbors have been able to resolve the issues while the group moves freely between the two countries. Pakistani and Afghan policymakers need to align their policy measures vis-à-vis IS-K before its network becomes too strong to be dismantled.

## Notes

[1] List with dates of when various groups pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([Intel Center, 2015](#)).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Discussions with a senior police officer of Baluchistan police who requested for anonymity on August 12, 2018

[4] Discussions with a senior officer of KPK police department, August 24, 2018

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## How Assad's Strategies Facilitated the Suweida Massacre

*Nidal Betare and Koji Flynn-Do*

At daybreak on July 25, Islamic State (IS) fighters launched a brutal attack against the predominantly Druze city of Suweida. The attackers went door to door, massacring helpless victims. They quickly and silently entered homes and slaughtered countless people before a single shot was fired. By the end of the assault, IS fighters murdered more than 250 people. The Assad regime publicly claims to be committed to defeating IS, but its tactics undoubtedly facilitated the IS movements that led to this tragedy and will likely facilitate more in the future.

The Assad regime had granted safe passage out of Yarmouk to the same IS fighters who later attacked Suweida. [1] A deal was struck to evacuate IS following the month-long bombardment of Yarmouk by Syrian and Russian airstrikes. Notably, regime forces declined to even enter the camp until they reached an arrangement to move IS militants out of the area. The regime commonly refuses to enter areas where IS operates until a settlement is made or local militias eradicate IS fighters in the area.

Unlike other negotiated settlements, IS fighters were not forced to disarm and were transported out of Yarmouk in comfortable buses. These buses even reportedly had air conditioning—a luxury not afforded to the tens of thousands of forced evacuees subjected to the reconciliation agreements ([Haaretz](#), Aug. 28, 2017).

For civilians, these reconciliation agreements constitute forced displacement, such as can be seen in Zabadani and Madaya since 2015. They come after years of indiscriminate bombardment, starvation and siege ([Syrian Observer](#), November 7, 2016). The scores of civilian evacuees packed into the regime's notorious green buses are often given short notice of their fate and are permitted to bring only the few belongings they can carry. Meanwhile, because of the Assad regime's acquiescence of IS, these agreements provide fighters a safe retreat. This allows IS to regroup and fight again another day.

The IS fighters evacuated from Yarmouk were taken east to the Syrian Badia desert. The area is one of the few

remaining parts of the country where the group still operates. It is also an area from which the regime had just removed security forces and checkpoints. It was from this same location that IS fighters launched their attack on the city. [2]

The evacuation of IS fighters from Yarmouk is the most recent instance of acquiescence toward IS in a larger pattern of conspiracy between the Assad regime and IS in Damascus. A mutualistic relationship between IS and the Syrian regime became apparent to residents in 2016. A deal was reportedly struck by which IS would fight Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate, and in exchange, would be allowed to move in and out of Yarmouk ([PDC](#), August 2, 2018). Residents of the camp were confined, starved and bombarded daily while IS women were free to shop in the city's commercial stores. The Assad regime helped move IS fighters through checkpoints that it set up, such as in al-Qadam. The regime even allowed IS to evacuate wounded fighters to be treated in al-Mahayni Hospital in regime-controlled central Damascus. [3]

### **Assad and the Druze**

Facilitating the most recent IS attack on Suweida is part of a reoccurring pattern of regime assistance to IS. In 2014, IS in the eastern al-Lajat Badia area was comprised of a collection of defected fighters from both the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat al-Nusra. It was during this time that IS sought to extend its zone of control toward Suweida. Reports indicate that when IS swept through much of Iraq and Syria during its 2014 expansion, the Assad regime supplied the group with intelligence of the area in order to dislodge local Druze resistance ([emaratalyoum](#), August 6, 2018). Assad even went so far as to attempt to disarm the Druze armed forces, the Sheikhs of Dignity, as IS advanced on the city.

The Druze in Suweida have a long and complicated history with the Assads. A minority group itself, the Alawite Assad regime has cast itself as a purported protector of religious minorities in Syria, like the Christians, the Ismailis and the Druze, among others. When the revolution first broke out, the Druze community primarily attempted to maintain neutrality and defend its own territories.

Internal divisions within the Druze, however, made this difficult. Some believed that the regime would help pro-

tect them, while others aimed to side with opposition groups. Another level of division has arisen between Suweida families. The majority throw their weight behind the influential Lebanese Walid Jumblatt, who comes from a centuries-long lineage of Lebanese Druze royalty, but others support the upstart Wiam Wahhab. [4] The former has sided with the Syrian opposition while the latter has encouraged Syrian Druze to form militias and fight on behalf of Assad. Historically, though, outside threats to the community have been sufficient to unite the Druze together in defense of their shared way of life.

The regime's use of sacred Druze imagery in 2014's corrupt, war-time presidential election sparked outrage from the minority group. Efforts to conscript young Druze men from Suweida shortly after only inflamed these tensions ([Daily Star](#), April 9, 2014). As a small minority, conscription is seen as a threat to the very existence of Druze society. [5] Being deployed with the regime's forces to fight in the war would mean that the Druze would not be able to defend their own society from the hostile forces that threaten it. Sheikh Abu Fahad Wahid Balous declared that Druze should resist forced military service in June of 2015, broadcasting online that Druze authorities "have ended mandatory conscription" ([zamanalwasl](#), June 17, 2015). In 2015 and 2016, student-led protests against corruption and economic destitution broke out among young activists in Suweida ([Syria Deeply](#), September 1, 2016). The unrest was met with waves of arrests, detentions and assassinations—including the 2015 assassination of Sheikh Balous.

### **Assad's Strategy**

The regime's most recent maneuver, which facilitated the attack on the people of Suweida, is not merely a punitive exercise against the Druze. Rather, allowing IS to continue operating and attacking local Syrian populations serves several important functions for Assad.

The evacuation of IS from Yarmouk can be used to buttress public claims by both Moscow and Damascus that they are advancing against terrorist groups, while allowing Damascus to assist those same terrorists when it suits the regime's purposes. During the Ghouta offensive earlier this year, Assad vowed during a press conference to "continue fighting terrorism" until all terrorist groups

had been defeated, but was simultaneously peacefully evacuating IS fighters in other areas. [6]

The ploy appears to be working, as most media reports have noted IS's continued ability to conduct large-scale attacks despite significant battlefield "defeats" and the loss of most of its territory. This does not take into account the fact that many of the group's recent attacks have been facilitated by the Assad regime's tactics. This strategic misdirection allows the Assad regime to continuously prosecute destructive offensives under the pretext of its war on terrorists. Assad is creating the very conditions that he and his allies claim necessitate the continuous cycle of violence.

The tactic also follows a long pattern of the regime outsourcing its military campaigns to foreign patrons and local militias. Following years of bloody civil strife, attrition within the Syrian army has reached the point where it can no longer hold positions once they are retaken ([ayyamsyria](#), August 2, 2017). This is particularly true in the expansive Eastern Badia, where rugged geography facilitates the movement of locals accustomed to the terrain. Instead, the regime seemingly uses IS to punish once-restive or otherwise uncooperative segments of the Syrian population. Doing so means that the regime and its allies do not have to expend their remaining military and economic resources in a likely Sisyphean attempt to control sparsely populated, desert territory. Assad seemingly hopes that locals will be forced to defend their homes against IS incursions, slowly whittling down both IS forces and uncooperative civilian populations.

## Notes

[1] Interview on July 27, 2018, with a former resident of the Yarmouk refugee camp in southern Damascus who was displaced to northern Aleppo province in May.

[2] Interview on August 3, 2018, with a former resident of Suweida.

[3] Interview on July 27, 2018, with a former resident of the Yarmouk refugee camp in southern Damascus who was displaced to northern Aleppo province in May.

[4] Interview on August 3, 2018, with a former resident of Suweida.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Assad's comments were made during a press conference on March 4, 2018 ([YouTube](#), March 4).

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