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How to stabilise the Middle East and North Africa in the post- IS / Daesh era?

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Introduction

As you are reading this paper, several international coalitions, countries and non-state actors are engaging the so-called 'Islamic State' or 'Daesh' on many fronts, night and day. There are currently open battle grounds in Libya, Syria and Iraq, a situation not seen since the end of the Second World War. An international coalition under the leadership of the United States has made significant ground in Libya, but the situation is not yet consolidated. The military theatre in Syria is extremely complex. A geopolitical race for competing spheres of influence is manifesting itself, to some degree similar to the race to Berlin in the final days of World War II in the European theatre. Russia and the US find themselves on a collision course, and have criticized each other openly in the UN Security Council. The last couple of weeks, Aleppo has become a symbol of the military pressure by Syrian president Assad and Russian forces to attack civilian targets so as to force Sunni opposition fighters to surrender.

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However, both great powers still agree with one another that IS constitutes a common enemy. Meanwhile Turkey has started to literally carve out its own geopolitical sphere in the north of Syria. A similar situation might very well soon be reproduced in Iraq. On 17 October 2016, a coalition of mostly Shi'ite Iraqi forces and Kurdish Peshmerga, supported by Western airpower, started their campaign to retake Mosul, the last remaining stronghold of IS in Iraq. At the beginning of October 2016, Turkey's president Erdogan said he would also invade to protect the Turkmen and Sunni population of Mosul. This is clearly against the wishes of the Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi. The question is whether this will not provoke a further Iranian and Saudi Arabian intervention later on.



The vacuum left by IS's expected implosion creates severe geopolitical pressures. Iraq's delicate internal political balances will also need to be mended soon, the window of opportunity to do this will be very brief. A new Sunni revolt, perhaps again allied with a new manifestation of Sunni radicalism, might be the final blow to the territorial integrity of Iraq itself. Furthermore, as IS / Daesh will gradually degrade to what it originally was, a terrorist group, new and perhaps even spectacular terrorist attacks may be expected in the region, but also in neighbouring Europe. This is a dangerous time. On top of all of this, the MENA-region² finds itself in a dire humanitarian situation (see infra). Based upon previous UN Security Council resolutions, such as UNSC 2249 (2015), there exists a minimal consensus within the international community that IS / Daesh should be exterminated. Based upon this, international diplomats resume their work.

² MENA stands for 'Middle East and North Africa'.

A special session of the UN Security Council is organised to deal with the various questions that will very soon come at the top of the agenda of the international community. The central question is *how to stabilise the Middle East and North Africa in the post-IS / Daesh period*. You will need to address military issues, political problems, economic questions, whether the current territorial divisions will remain or change, the humanitarian question, a possible resurgence of terrorism *and* the question of a possible referral of former IS / Daesh – members to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The agenda is overburdened, the time is limited, the stakes could not have been higher. Will the international community be able to come together in an era in which geopolitical tensions are mounting? The answer to this question might even affect the future of the UN system itself. Hereafter a short briefing on the issues that are to be discussed.

The rise of Islamic State (aka: IS, ISIL, ISIS, Daesh)

IS can trace its roots back to the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian who set up Tawhid wa al-Jihad in 2002.³ A year after the US-led invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden and formed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which became a major force in the insurgency. After Zarqawi's death in 2006, AQI created an umbrella organisation, Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). ISI was steadily weakened by the US troop surge and the creation of Sahwa (Awakening) councils by Sunni Arab tribesmen who rejected its brutality.

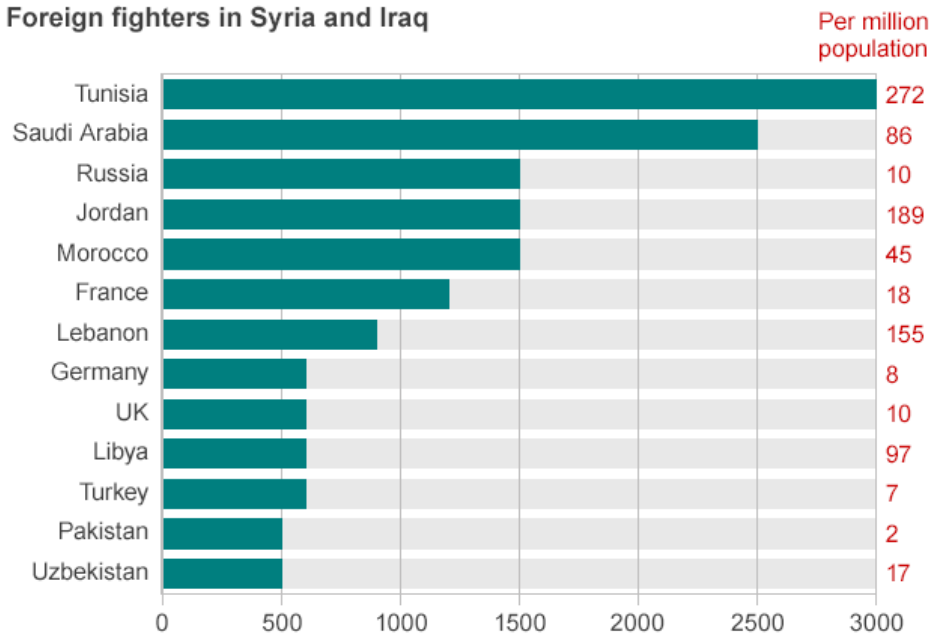
Baghdadi, a former US detainee, became leader in 2010 and began rebuilding ISI's capabilities. By 2013, it was once again carrying out dozens of attacks a month in Iraq. It had also joined the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, setting up the al-Nusra Front. In April 2013, Baghdadi announced the merger of his forces in Iraq and Syria and the creation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). The leaders of al-Nusra and al-Qaeda rejected the move, but fighters loyal to Baghdadi split from al-Nusra and helped ISIS remain in Syria. At the end of December 2013, ISIS shifted its focus back to Iraq and exploited a political stand-off between the Shia-led government and the minority Sunni Arab community. Aided by tribesmen and former Saddam Hussein loyalists, ISIS took control of the central city of Falluja.

³ This analysis is partly based upon a BBC source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144>

In June 2014, ISIS overran the northern city of Mosul, and then advanced southwards towards Baghdad, massacring its adversaries and threatening to eradicate the country's many ethnic and religious minorities. At the end of the month, after consolidating its hold over dozens of cities and towns, ISIS declared the creation of a caliphate and changed its name to Islamic State (IS).⁴ In February 2015, US Director for National Intelligence James Clapper said IS could muster "somewhere in the range between 20,000 and 32,000 fighters" in Iraq and Syria. But he noted that there had been "substantial attrition" in its ranks since US-led coalition air strikes began in August 2014. In June 2015, US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken said more than 10,000 IS fighters had been killed. To help mitigate the manpower losses, IS has turned to conscription in some areas. Iraqi expert Hisham al-Hashimi believes only 30% of the group's fighters are "ideologues", with the remainder joining out of fear or coercion. A significant number of IS fighters are neither Iraqi nor Syrian. In May 2015, a state department official estimated that the group had attracted more than 22,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries. Studies by the London-based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) and the New York-based Soufan Group suggest that while about a quarter of the foreign fighters are from the West, the majority are from nearby Arab countries; Tunisia, Saudi Arabia and Jordan and Morocco.

⁴ Among those who oppose 'IS', the term 'Daesh' has also gained widespread currency, both in the Middle East and further afield. 'Daesh' has been used as a way of challenging the legitimacy of the group due to the negative connotations of the word. Daesh is essentially an Arabic acronym formed from the initial letters of the group's previous name in Arabic – "*al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham*". Although it does not mean anything as a word in Arabic, it sounds unpleasant and the group's supporters object to its use. Daesh also sounds similar to an Arabic verb that means to tread underfoot, trample down, or crush something. Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27994277>.

Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq



Note: Upper estimates used. Countries with fewer than 500 fighters not included

Source: ICSR, CIA World Factbook

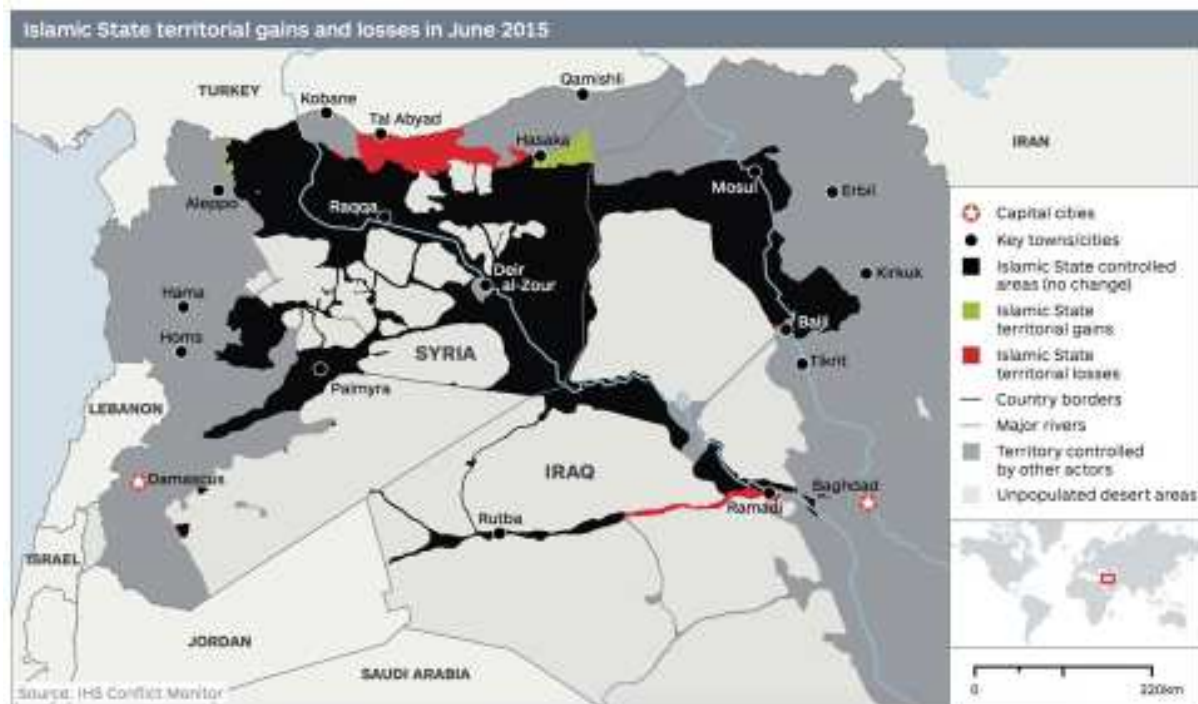
IS fighters have access to, and are capable of using, a wide variety of small arms and heavy weapons, including truck-mounted machine-guns, rocket launchers, anti-aircraft guns and portable surface-to-air missile systems. They have also captured tanks and armored vehicles from the Syrian and Iraqi armies. Their haul of vehicles from the Iraqi army includes armored Humvees and bomb-proof trucks originally manufactured for the US military. Some have been packed with explosives and used to devastating effect in suicide bomb attacks. The group is believed to have a flexible supply chain that ensures a constant supply of ammunition and small arms for its fighters. Their considerable firepower helped them overrun Kurdish Peshmerga positions in northern Iraq in August 2014 and the Iraqi army in Ramadi in May 2015.

The militant group is believed to be the world's wealthiest. It initially relied on wealthy private donors and Islamic charities in the Middle East keen to oust Syria's President Assad. Although such funding is still being used to finance the travel of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, the group is now largely self-funding. The US Treasury estimates that in 2014 IS may have earned as much as several million dollars per week, or \$100m in total, from the sale of crude oil and refined products to local middlemen, who in turn smuggled them in Turkey and

Iran, or sold them to the Syrian government. But air strikes on oil-related infrastructure are now believed to have diminished such revenue.

Kidnapping also generated at least 20 million US dollars in ransom payments in 2014, while IS raised several million dollars per month through extorting the millions of people living in areas under its full or partial control, according to the US Treasury. IS is believed to raise at least several million dollars per month by robbing, looting, and extortion. Payments are extracted from those who pass through, conduct business in, or simply live in IS territory under the auspices or providing services or "protection". Religious minorities are forced to pay a special tax. IS profits from raiding banks, selling antiquities, and stealing or controlling sales of livestock and crops. Abducted girls and women have meanwhile been sold as sex slaves. However, as military pressures upon IS started to mount, so their "business model" was degraded.

In 2015, IS stood at the peak of its development. The self-proclaimed caliphate had been established with Raq'qa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq as its main political and economic centres. The organization was recruiting foreign fighters from Europe, the Middle East, Northern Africa and even Russia. Rebel groups beyond their territorial reach such as Boko Haram in Nigeria were even pledging allegiance to IS. Libya fell victim to the scourge of Daesh. From 2015 onwards, following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris of 7 January 2015, the West started pouring in massive weapons deliveries to Kurdish Peshmerga forces in Iraq and Kurdish forces in Syria. Especially France played a key role in this. IS suffered its first territorial defeat in northern Syria (see map below, the red area indicated).



It is thus not a coincidence that France stood in the main firing line of an IS revenge. The 13 November 2015 attacks were a series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris, France and the city's northern suburb, Saint-Denis. In the evening, three suicide bombers struck outside the *Stade de France* in Saint-Denis, during a football match. This was followed by several mass shootings, and a suicide bombing, at cafés and restaurants. Gunmen carried out another mass shooting and took hostages at a concert in the Bataclan theatre, leading to a stand-off with police. The attackers were shot or blew themselves up when police raided the theatre. The attackers killed 130 people that day. Another 368 people were injured seriously. Seven of the attackers also died, while the authorities continued to search for accomplices. The attacks were the deadliest on France since World War II. Hollande's response before the joint chambers of the French Parliament, meeting in a special session at Versailles was clear: "*Nous sommes en guerre.*". Not only did the French airforce conduct strikes on ISIS positions in Syria, its diplomatic apparatus was activated in emergency mode. France became one of the main drivers of an initiative within the UN Security Council.

The international community starts responding

After the ISIS attacks on Paris on 13 November 2015, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted UNSC 2249 (2015) a few days later. In this Security Council resolution text, the UNSC condemned the recent terrorist attacks perpetrated by Da'esh — on 26 June in Sousse, on 10 October in Ankara, on 31 October over the Sinai Peninsula, on 12 November in Beirut and on 13 November in Paris. It expressed its deepest condolences to the victims and their families, as well as to the people and Governments of Tunisia, Turkey, Russian Federation, Lebanon and France.⁵

The Security Council condemned in the strongest terms ISIS's systematic and widespread abuses of human rights, as well as its destruction and looting of cultural heritage. Those who committed, or were otherwise responsible for, terrorist acts or human rights violations must be held accountable. By other terms, the Council urged Member States to intensify their efforts to stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters into Iraq and Syria, and to prevent and suppress the financing of terrorism.

The resolution text which was adopted states that those responsible for committing or otherwise responsible for terrorist acts, violations of international humanitarian law or violations or abuses of human rights must be held accountable. UNSC 2249 (2015) calls upon member states that have the capacity to do so to take all necessary measures, in compliance with international law, in particular with the United Nations Charter, as well as international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law, on the territory under the control of ISIL also known as Daesh, in Syria and Iraq. UNSC 2249 asked to redouble and coordinate countries' efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIL also known as Daesh, and all other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with Al-Qaida, and other terrorist groups. It aimed to eradicate the safe haven ISIS had established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria. UNSC 2249 (2015) did not necessarily give a mandate to the countries of the world to invade Syria and Iraq to exterminate ISIS. It remained vague with regard to the operationalization of an anti-ISIS strategy. That had to do with delicate balances within the Security Council, for instance the fact that the Russians and the

⁵ Source: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12132.doc.htm>

Americans did not see eye to eye with regard to how the international community should deal with the Assad regime in Syria. Washington still believed Assad had to go, Moscow stated Assad was a barrier of civilization against ISIS barbarism.

UNSC 2249 (2015) focused on those aspects where UN members could agree. It urged member states to intensify their efforts to stem the flow of foreign terrorist fighters to Iraq and Syria and to prevent and suppress the financing of terrorism, and urged all Members States to continue to fully implement the above-mentioned resolutions.

Following the vote, France's representative in the Security Council said the fight against terrorism could only be effective if combined with a political transition that would eliminate Da'esh. The Russian Federation's representative stated the unanimous vote was a step towards the creation of a broad anti-terrorism front aimed at eradicating root causes. It seemed for a brief moment that the international community had come together. It seemed as though an international coalition would only be a matter of time. French president Hollande travelled to Moscow to bring the Americans and the Russians together on this issue. In fact, there existed more than one international coalition against ISIS.

On the one hand, on 10 September 2014, the American President Obama announced the formation of a broad international coalition to defeat The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): *"Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy."* On 3 December 2014, the US gathered 59 countries in Brussels to create a coalition with a mission to defeat the ISIS ideology, its funding and recruitment. This group henceforth called itself the **'Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)'**. The following goals were set; financing and funding and supporting military operation, providing military support to our partners, impeding the flow of foreign fighters, stopping ISIL's financing and funding, addressing humanitarian crises in the region, and exposing ISIL's true nature. The American Department of State refers on its website on the "Global Coalition to Counter IS" to Security Council Resolution 2170, which states *"terrorism can only be defeated by a sustained and*

*comprehensive approach involving the active participation and collaboration of all States... which is why our first priority is to encourage others to join in this important endeavor.”.*⁶

On the other hand, at the end of September 2015, Russia, together with Iraq, Iran and Syria set up a 'joint information center' in Baghdad to “gather, process and analyze current information about the situation in the Middle East – primarily for fighting IS.” On 30 September 2015, Russia began its air campaign on the side and in support of the Syrian government. Gradually a **Russian-Shia-alliance** was created out of this cooperation.

It was the intention of the French president Hollande after the attacks of 13 November 2015 to fuse these two coalitions together into one solid universal alliance. That goal failed, and still has not been reached until today due to the Syrian war and the question of how to deal with Syrian president Assad. However, Putin and Hollande stressed on 26 November 2015 the need to step up air strikes against vehicles transporting oil across territory controlled by Islamic State and thereby deliver a blow to a key source of financing for the militant group. Hollande has tried since then to be a diplomatic bridge between the international coalition under American leadership and the de facto Russian-Shia-coalition. This did not produce tangible results. France itself also stepped up its own military campaign against ISIS / Daesh.

In the last months, the situation has even become more complex. Since 24 August 2016, **Turkey's president Erdogan is conducting his own intervention against ISIS** (but also against a further advancement of the Kurds in Syria). The Turkish military intervention in Syria, code-named by Turkey as “Operation Euphrates Shield”, is an ongoing cross-border operation by the Turkish military and allied groups in the Syrian Civil War. Turkey said the operation was an act of self-defence, in response to ISIS shelling of Turkish border towns and suicide bombings and attacks targeting Turkish nationals and also that “*Our border must be completely cleansed of Daesh (ISIS)*”.⁷ Operations are ongoing in the region between the Euphrates river to the east and the rebel-held area around Azaz to the west. The Turkish

⁶ Source: <https://www.state.gov/s/seci/> . Negotiators are also invited to read the text of UNSC 2195 (2014) anew on the international battle against terrorism. It can be found on the website of the UN Security Council.

⁷ Source: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-idUSKCN10Z07J>

military and Turkey-backed Syrian rebel groups, some of which use the Free Syrian Army label, have been fighting against forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). However, to the east the Syrian Kurds have crossed the west bank of the Euphrates river. If they would retake ISIS held territory, then they would be able to consolidate the entire northern part of Syria. Erdogan fears this would be the beginning of a Kurdish state, certainly with the imminent attack against ISIS in Mosul. President Tayyip Erdogan and senior government officials have made clear the aim of *Operation Euphrates Shield* is as much about stopping the Kurdish YPG militia seizing territory and filling the void left by Islamic State as it is about eliminating the ultra-hardline Islamist group itself.⁸



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish_military_intervention_in_Syria#/media/File:Turkish_Offensive_in_Northern_Syria.png

The battle against IS / Daesh has thus become a complicated one, fought on many fronts. It has morphed into a very complex campaign with a multitude of regional and great powers being heavily involved, for all kinds of reasons. Several of these actors have quite opposing geopolitical goals for the post-IS-Daesh period. *Let us briefly have a look at the situation in each of these theaters to get a better understanding of what is going on.* What is the situation from a military, political and economic point of view? Hereafter, we will focus on Libya, Syria, Iraq and the international front. In conclusion, we will also try to investigate the current humanitarian catastrophe in the region.

⁸ Ibid.

The Libyan front: the battle for Sirte and its aftermath

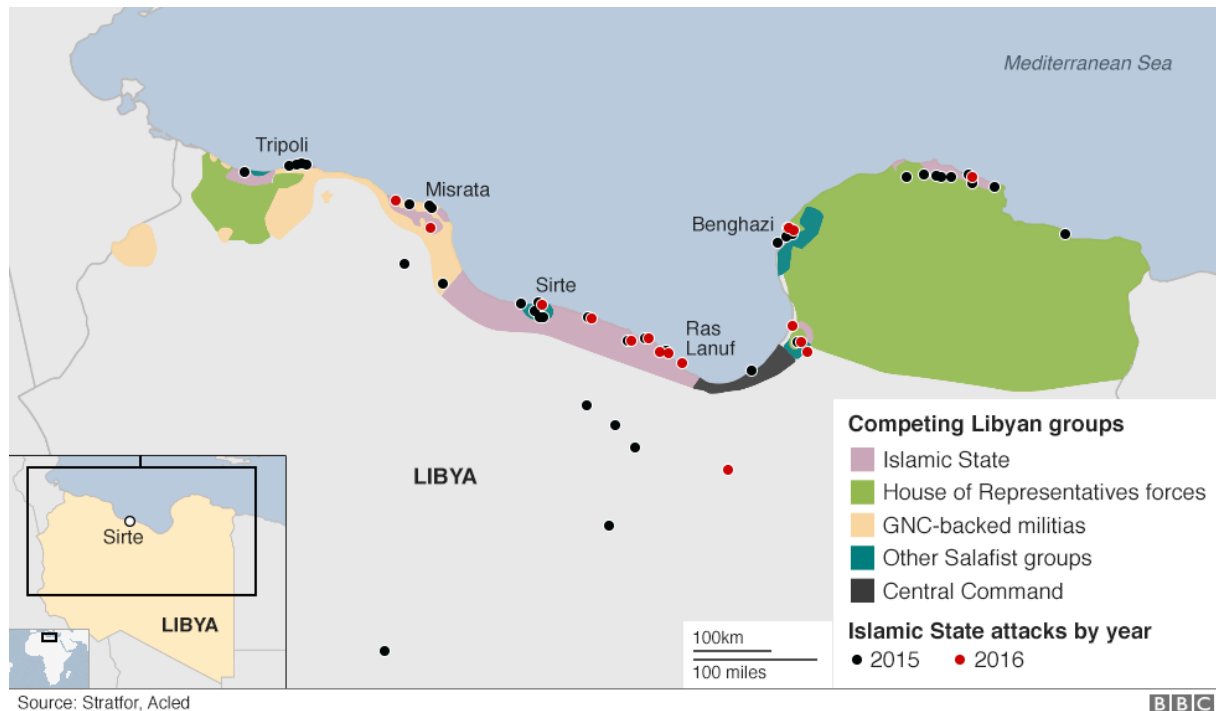
In 2011, the Arab Spring in Tunisia started to affect neighboring Libya. In the eastern city of Benghazi, protest movements grew rapidly. The government of strong leader al-Qadhafi started bombing these people. In the UN Security Council, the principle of “*Responsibility to Protect*” was for the first time invoked in resolution UNSC 1973 (2011). The text demanded the immediate establishment of a cease-fire and a complete end to violence and all attacks against, and abuses of, civilians. UN members were allowed to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory. Brazil, China, Germany, India and Russia abstained. Thanks to this mandate, France and the United Kingdom took the initiative to attack the Libyan armed forces of Qadhafi. However, Paris and London did more than that. Military intelligence was put in place to advise the Syrian rebels. They gave tactical and operational advice, and soon started to also develop the strategy against the Qadhafi-regime. In the end, Qadhafi was murdered under suspicious circumstances in which French intelligence seemed to be involved, acting on the direct orders of France’s ex-President Nicholas Sarkozy.⁹ For the Russian federation, this was a breach of the political deal behind the scenes in the corridors next to the UN Security Council in New York. These events showed, Moscow believed, that the West was not to be trusted; Paris and London used the opportunity to redraw their geopolitical spheres of influence, and soon signed new oil deals with the Libyan provisional government.

But Libya itself soon seemed to fall of the West’s radar. The Western powers forgot to manage the post-conflict phase. Western weapon deliveries went missing and former rebel groups who had united against Qadhafi now started to attack one another in an effort to gain more local power. Libya has never really existed as a country; it is a complex web of local tribes and nomads. The country soon sank in a deep and disruptive civil war from 2012 onwards. As the years passed by, the situation degraded from bad to worse. Libya became

⁹ Source: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/french-secret-service-killed-gaddafi-sarkozy-s-orders-reports-1614795688> . The situation becomes even more puzzling taking into account the fact that Sarkozy allegedly accepted money from Qadhafi to run his first election campaign. Read: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/nicolas-sarkozy-did-take-50-million-of-muammar-gaddafis-cash-french-judge-is-told-8435872.html> .

an ideal nursing ground for the Islamic State. On 13 November 2014, the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - Libya Province” was formed as a branch of the militant Islamist group ISIS, active in Libya. Pledges of allegiance were made to ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi by these militants in Libya. Al-Baghdadi announced the creation of three branches in Libya: Cyrenaica in the east, Fezzan in the desert south, and Tripolitania (or Tarabulus) in the west, around the capital.¹⁰ ISIS had the opportunity to gain territory in many places in Libya. But from 2015 onwards, they were the strongest in the centre of the country – around the city of Sirte, where they controlled up to 150 miles of coastline and 20 percent of the total territory. The oil installations in Ras Lanuf were their main target. Because of the migration crisis in Greece, European countries became increasingly worried that Libya would soon constitute a new migration front. American, British and French military intelligence covertly assessed the situation on the ground in search for military options. It was decided to wait for political efforts at the UN to broker a peace deal between the two governments in the country who claimed full sovereignty; the remains of the former transitional government, now residing in al-Bayda, and an opposing islamist government in Tripoli. A new unity government, the so-called “*Government of National Accord*” came into force as the result of the signing on 17 December 2015 of the terms of the Libyan Political Agreement. It was unanimously endorsed by the United Nations Security Council, which has welcomed the formation of a Presidency Council for Libya and recognized that the Government of National Accord is the sole legitimate government of Libya. Starting on 2 August 2016, a major new military campaign against ISIS was initiated when U.S. planes bombed targets in Libya, responding to requests from the U.N.-backed Libyan government. The strikes took place in the coastal town of Sirte, which ISIS took in June of last year. The strikes represented a significant escalation in the U.S. war against ISIS, spreading the conflict thousands of miles from the then already existing warzones against ISIS in Syria and Iraq (see infra).

¹⁰ Source: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/world/middleeast/islamic-state-sprouting-limbs-beyond-mideast.html?_r=2



The strategy of Washington seems to be twofold. On the one hand the US strikes IS positions with the goal to avoid that the Libyan oil reserves would fall in its hands. On the other hand, the US tries to erode the IS' grip on central Libya, in a bid to allow the new Libyan Government of National Accord to consolidate the national territory. This will however not seem so easy taking into account the neo-medieval composition of its constituent tribes and nomads. From a territorial point of view, the current Libya is a construction of the era of Benito Mussolini. In the past, only a strong central authority was able to contain the internal geopolitical forces within the country. The question is whether the weak Libyan GNA will be capable to foster a 'national unity'. The military attacks on IS positions might thus just battle the symptoms and not the causes of the instability. There is a genuine need for a political process to give each of the constituent parts within the country a political representation within the central authority. If this process fails, then one can expect new forms of internal stability and chaos. That in itself will offer new opportunities for IS or its successor(s) to exploit. As the recent years have clearly shown, radical jihadism thrives in situations of instability and internal strife.

One of the strongest opponents of a Libyan national unity government is the eastern, anti-islamist general Khalifa Hifter. He fights both militarily and politically the GNA-government of Prime Minister al-Sarraj.¹¹ Hifter has in the past sworn to liberate the country from IS.¹² However, he recently seems to strategically wait and stall so that the militias that have pledged allegiance to Sarraj would bear the heaviest burden. Hifter seems to hope that these forces become weakened as a result of this. From his side, GNA-Prime Minister Sarraj recently stated that ‘great numbers of dead’ fell among IS-fighters as a result of the American bombing campaign. Sarraj is under pressure, also his own militias consider him to be a rather weak figure. The real political-strategical map in Libya is thus even more complex than one would detect at first glance. The ‘battle against IS’ almost seems to be a side-show for some of the main actors in the country, an attempt to temporarily invite foreign forces to gain the upper advantage in an internal power struggle. Perhaps this was the intention of Hifter after all? First he allowed IS to grow in Sirte in order to then be accepted by the West as a figure with whom Western forces should cooperate. In the last couple of months, it became clear that at least France secretly was working together with Hifter. It is exactly this internal battle for power that has severely weakened Libya, which further makes it into an easy prey for radical jihadist groups. In essence, the country is trapped in a vicious circle. The question that lies before the UN Security Council is how to get out of this trap. How can the temporary gains against IS be used in a way so as to stabilize the country – militarily, politically and economically? What with the enduring problem of foreign jihadist fights that are attracted to Libya’s power vacuum? Is the current GNA enough representative of all the political forces in the country? Or should we not kid ourselves, and rather recognize that it is our obstinacy to retain the current territorial integrity of Libya itself which makes it difficult or even impossible to achieve real stability on the ground?

¹¹ Sarraj comes from a prominent Tripoli family. His father was a government minister during the Libyan Monarchy and was one of the founders of modern Libya.

¹² Hifter aka Khalifa Belqasim Haftar is a Libyan marshal and the principal commander of one side in the ongoing Libyan Civil War of 2014. On March 2, 2015, he was appointed commander of the armed forces loyal to the elected, internationally backed government, the Council of Deputies. Transliterations of his name include Hefar, Haftar, Hifter, Hefter, etc. Hiftar was born in eastern Libya. He served in the Libyan army under Muammar Gaddafi, and took part in the coup that brought Gaddafi to power in 1969. He commanded the Libyan contingent against Israel in the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Hifter has been described as “*Libya’s most potent warlord*,” having fought “*with and against nearly every significant faction*” in Libya’s conflicts, and as having a “*reputation for unrivalled military experience*”. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khalifa_Haftar

The Syria front: the race between the great and regional powers to annex the vacuum left by ISIS / Daesh

What started more than four years ago as a peaceful uprising in Syria in the wake of the then Arab Spring which swept the region, has become a nightmare. First a civil war, now a war with regional and international dimensions, Syria has become the symbol of an international crisis that seems unsolvable. On one side stands the Syrian Government under the leadership of president al-Assad, a Shia Alawite, helped by the Russian federation initially via arms. Since 30 September 2015, the Russian federation has started its own military campaign – officially against Islamic State / Daesh¹³, but in practice against all who the Assad-government calls “terrorists”. This also entails Al Nusra, which is Al Qaeda in Syria. The question is whether this also involves the Sunni opposition groups, who have been fighting against Assad the last four years. It seems that Russia has created an alliance since September 2015 with all Shia forces in the region; Iran, Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon and the Shia dominated government in Iraq. A ground offensive supported by Russian airpower may be in the cards. On the other side stands a conglomerate of opposition groups, supported by the West, and Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. The biggest is the Syrian National Council, which is comprised of Sunnis and Kurds. But there are many other opposition groups that all too often seem to disagree with one another. The Syrian National Council wants Assad to leave power indefinitely, and clearly does not want to compromise on this. Over the last year, the threat of IS/Daesh has grown substantially. The US was somewhat frustrated with the Syrian National Council and became more interested with combatting IS rather than Assad. Therefore the US created and trained a new group, the so-called New Syrian Forces, also known as ‘Division 30’. The New Syrian Forces are a Syrian paramilitary group trained and equipped by a United States-led coalition and active in the Syrian Civil War. Most of the members were drawn from the 30th Division of the Free Syrian Army. After training, the fighters returned to Syrian rebel groups and are not under international coalition command and control. This initiative has not proven successful. In August 2015, after the first group of fighters re-entered Syria after their training in Turkey, the militia was attacked and routed by Jabhat al-Nusra, which stormed its

¹³ IS/Daesh wants to create a sharia based state covering the current Iraq and Syria in phase one, and possibly extended through the entire region of North Africa and the south of Europe in the longer term. These fighters have been in the recent past highly active and successful on the battle field.

headquarters and kidnapped a number of its members. In September 2015, 30 NSF-fighters betrayed the US and turned their weapons over to Al Nusra.¹⁴ The US strategy clearly was failing in 2015.

In the past, al-Assad “allowed” IS to develop itself on his territory in the hope that he would later in the conflict be seen as a beacon of defence against ‘barbarism’. This strategy seems to have been working. From 2015 onwards, the Americans were mostly only interested in the battle against IS, although they rhetorically still said “Assad must go”. On 11 October 2015, the establishment of the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) was announced. The alliance built on longstanding previous cooperation between the founding partners. While the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ) had been operating throughout the cantons of Rojava, the other founding partners were more geographically focused. The following groups signed the founding document:¹⁵

- People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG)
- Women's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, YPJ)
- Al-Sanadid Forces
- Syriac Military Council (Mawtbo Fulhoyo Suryoyo, MFS)
- Liwa Thuwwar al-Raqqa
- Euphrates Volcano
- Army of Revolutionaries (Jaysh al-Thuwar, JAT)
- Brigade Groups of Al-Jazira
- Lîwai 99 Muşat

On 10 December 2015, after a two-day conference, the SDF established its political wing, called the Syrian Democratic Council. On 12 October 2015, the Pentagon confirmed U.S. C-17 transport aircraft having dropped 100 pallets with 45 tons of arms and ammunition over SDF-controlled territory in Rojava. During the SDF's February 2016 al-Shaddadi offensive,

¹⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11882195/US-trained-Division-30-rebels-betrayed-US-and-hand-weapons-over-to-al-Qaeda-affiliate-in-Syria.html>

¹⁵ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syrian_Democratic_Forces

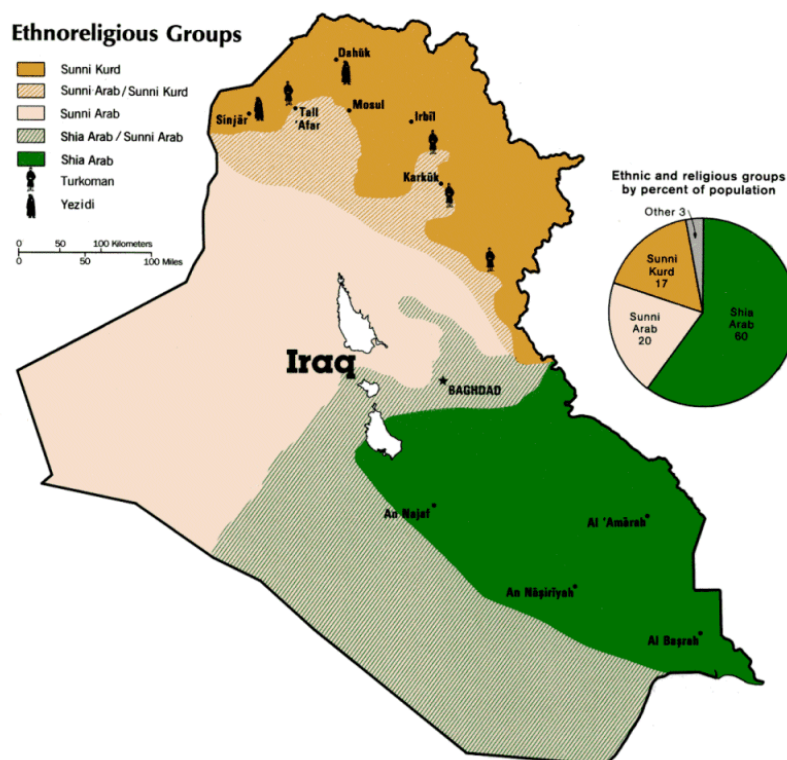
there were US special forces embedded with the SDF forces who coordinated airstrikes against ISIL with the SDF. Clearly, the Americans had a new strategy. They helped the SDF take more and more territory from IS positions, both in the north east and north west of Syria. Among them, the Kurdish YPG (see yellow on the map below) gained the most spectacular advances.

Meanwhile, the Russians started flying less and less sorties against IS positions. In 2016, they more and more focused on aiding al-Assad's army against the Sunni rebels. Serious territorial consolidation has been made in Hama and Homs. In the last months of 2016, Aleppo is now on the agenda. Assad and Russia are bombing civilian targets such as hospitals in Aleppo to drive the Sunni rebels out. Among them are also 900 former al-Nusra fighters. Russia uses this as an excuse to bomb them. UN Special Representative for Syria Steffan de Mistura has warned that if the current situation continues, Aleppo will be completely destroyed by

Christmas 2016. The US has accused Russia of “barbarism” in an open session of the UN Security Council. It warns that Aleppo’s destruction may actually in the end aid a rise of IS...

The Iraqi front: the battle for Mosul and its aftermath

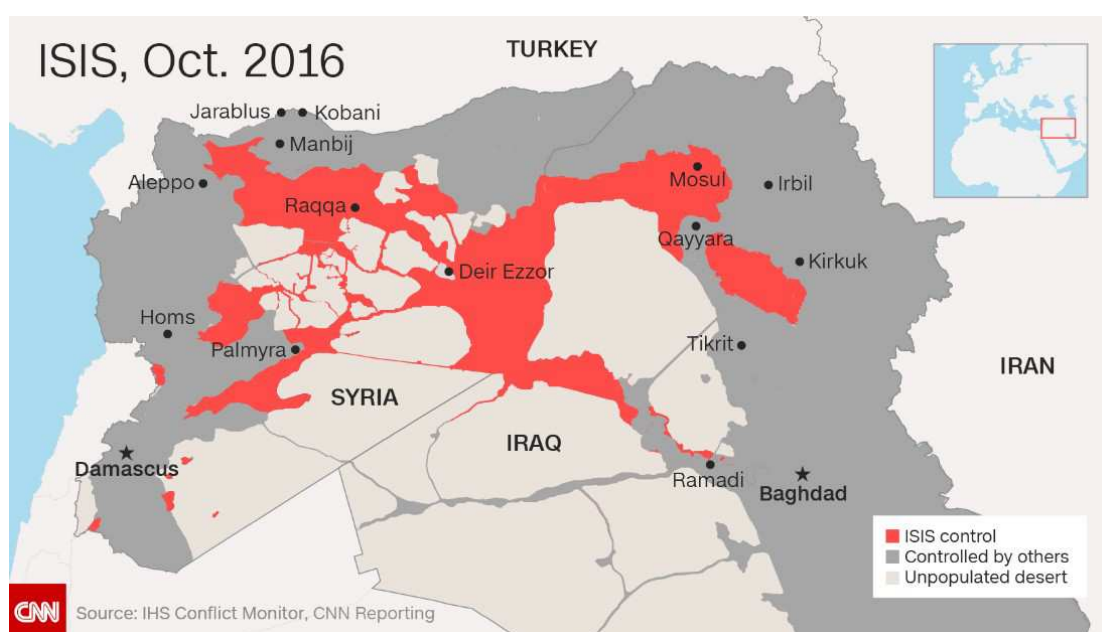
In March 2003, the United States of America invaded Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein. American president George W. Bush took this decision in order to “save the world from grave danger”. Bush believed Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. They were never found afterwards. The Bush administration then started changing their discourse saying they “wanted to bring democracy to Iraq”. The Americans send out word that whoever who had worked for Saddam’s regime in the past could not get a job in the new order. This meant that the elites of the Sunni Arab population of Iraq, a minority in the country, were left out. The new Constitution of 2005 produced democracy, but without “checks and balances”. In fact, it became the dictatorship of the majority, the Shiites of the south. They were in the majority, and now also in power. Only lower ranking positions in the government and administration were given to the Sunnis.



It is thus not a surprise that the main insurgency against the American “occupation” started in 2004 and 2005 in the Sunni al-Anbar province, in cities such as Falluja and Ramadi. Former Saddam loyalists started organizing the people. At the same time, terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) started to form themselves (see supra), out of the remnants of the former al-Zarqawi-network. It is now clear that former Saddam loyalists also infiltrated their ranks and ‘professionalized’ what later would become IS or Daesh. Saddam had his revenge against the Americans after all... Sectarian violence started to grow in 2006 and 2007. George W. Bush first tried to look the other way, but then decided to go for ‘the surge’; a temporary American military build up to get rid of the Sunni insurgency once and for all. This seemed to work after a while. Bush ordered the deployment of more than 20,000 soldiers into Iraq (five additional brigades), and sent the majority of them into Baghdad. He also extended the tour of most of the Army troops in country and some of the Marines already in the Anbar Province area. The President described the overall objective as establishing a “...unified, democratic federal Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself, and is an ally in the War on Terror.”¹⁶ The number of U.S. military forces in Iraq peaked at 170,300 in November 2007. The withdrawal began immediately in December 2007. The new code word was ‘Iraqisation’ (see parallel with ‘Vietnamisation’ in the 1960s and 70s, which incidentally also failed dramatically); the Iraqi army itself should now take care of the remaining job and stabilize al-Anbar. But the Iraqi army was, and still is, mostly composed of Shiite forces. The very fact that they entered al-Anbar province, and suppressed the uprising there, made the situation even worse. Nevertheless, in 2008 George W. Bush signed the *U.S.–Iraq Status of Forces Agreement*. It included a deadline of 31 December 2011, before which “all the United States Forces shall withdraw from all Iraqi territory”. When Obama took office in 2009, he was committed to this agreement. Barack Obama desperately wanted to “end the Bush wars”. Even when it was clear that the Iraqis might not completely be up to the task, Obama pushed through. Did he deliberately misperceive the situation on the ground? Did he underestimate the threat emanating from Sunni radicalism? That seems to have been the case. The last U.S. troops left Iraq on 18 December 2011, in accordance with this agreement.

¹⁶ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraq_War_troop_surge_of_2007

The government of the Iraqi Shiite Prime Minister al-Maliki was corrupt. Moreover, relations with the Sunnis further were degraded. Although the Iraqis still received billions worth of American military equipment, they were not up to the task. The fragile political situation in the country had a lot to do with it. In 2014, Sunni radical fighters gained a lot of ground against the Iraqi army. The situation went from bad to worse. In January 2014, ISIL took control of Fallujah and Ramadi, inciting conflict with the Iraqi army. On 4 June 2014, the insurgents began their efforts to capture Mosul. The Iraqi army had 30,000 soldiers stationed in the city, facing a 1,500-member attacking force. However, after six days of fighting, the city, as well as Mosul International Airport and helicopters located there were under ISIL's control. An estimated 500,000 civilians were displaced from the city due to the conflict.¹⁷ While capturing the city, the group freed nearly 1,000 prisoners, some of whom were greeted by the fighters. Black flags were also flown over government buildings. They have been fighting there ever since, until recently. On 17 October 2016, a coalition of Iraqi Shiite forces, together with Kurdish Peshmerga and supported by American airpower started operations to free Mosul from the scourge of IS. The military operation will be costly and complex. The coalition has no option other than victory. If they would be defeated, IS would be able to reclaim that their ideology will in the end be victorious. IS believes we are witnessing 'the end of days' for the old order. Current estimates are that between 4,000 to 6,000 fighters are present in Mosul. They are using the local population as human shields. If they attempt to flee, they will most definitely be killed, along with their families.



¹⁷ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Mosul

Recently scholars such as Renad Mansour (Chatham House, United Kingdom) have placed another additional problem on the international agenda:¹⁸

"You have many different forces moving in. They might all have the same short term objectives, which is to remove the so called "Islamic State" (IS) from Mosul. But the medium to long term objectives are where we see conflict. These groups include forces associated with the Iraqi government, which include counter terrorists units under the prime minister's office as well as units under the ministry of defense and interior. They also include different paramilitaries or militias, predominantly Shia paramilitary militias. On top of that you also have, particularly from the northeast, the Kurdish Peshmerga, which include Kurdistan's Democratic Party Peshmerga and some Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Peshmerga. And then you also have from the local areas different Sunni Arab tribes and also Sunni Arab forces associated with certain politicians, for instance the former governor, Atheel al-Nujaifi. So the point is that there are many different groups, all looking at this battle as a way to remove the Islamic State from Iraq's second-largest city, but also anticipating a power vacuum in a very important strategic city. And it's that anticipation I think where we find most trouble looking forward."

The problem is thus that the expected demise of IS will lead to a power vacuum that different forces in and around Iraq may want to fill. It constitutes a unique opportunity to redraw the geopolitical forces in the region, even Turkey wants to 'move in' (and avoid a further Kurdish advancement in what it considers a "Sunni sphere of influence"). Chances are that, once IS is defeated, a number of these groups will soon start to fight against one another. A central question will be *"how to win the Sunnis back"*.¹⁹ The window of opportunity for a lasting peace after the defeat of IS will thus be very short. At the same time, IS will become again what it was in the past; a terrorist group. The more IS has to retreat, the more chances for terrorist attacks around the world. The Iraqi and Syrian battlefield could thus turn into a more global one...

¹⁸ Source: <http://www.dw.com/en/interview-battle-for-mosul-likely-to-lead-to-power-struggle/a-36049145>

¹⁹ Ibid. Mansour also states: *"Mosul, unlike the other cities that have been liberated, is not a homogenous city. It has many different ethnicities and religions. And reconciliation after what has happened to the Yazidis or the Christians - if they come back and when they come back - is another big question as well. And that's what complicates the future outlook of Mosul at the same time."*

The international front: Daesh / IS attacks in Belgium, again in France, Tunisia, Egypt and many other countries in the world

Daesh has already tried to “internationalize” its struggle in the last year. First, it conducted a number of terrorist attacks in North African countries, aimed at undermining the tourism industry and thus the ‘business model’ of many of these countries. A low cost terrorist attack can cause major multiple billion of dollars worth of costs, and thus can destabilize countries.



Next, also Western countries came (again) on the radar of IS. France experienced this many times, and initiated a ‘state of emergency’ – temporarily halting some of democratic rights people have. With fear IS tries to change societies from the inside out, and to create a conflict between Muslim inhabitants and the local population. On 22 March 2016, Belgium experienced a severe terrorist attack. Three coordinated suicide bombings occurred in Belgium: two at Brussels Airport in Zaventem, and one at Maalbeek metro station in central

Brussels. Thirty-two civilians and three perpetrators were killed, and more than 300 people were injured. Another bomb was found during a search of the airport. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for the attacks. The perpetrators belonged to a terrorist cell which had been involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks. The Brussels bombings happened shortly after a series of police raids targeting the group. The bombings were the deadliest act of terrorism in Belgium's history. The Belgian government declared three days of national mourning.²⁰



Just like France did after the 13 November 2015 attacks, Belgium also declared that it would step up its own military bombardments of IS position in the framework of the American led coalition. In May 2016, the Belgian government decided to extend the range of their sorties against IS in Iraq also into Syria itself. There are unconfirmed reports that IS threatens to attack Brussels again if Mosul would fall. On 14 July 2016, the French national day, France experienced a new unexpected attack in Nice. A 19 ton cargo truck was deliberately driven into crowds celebrating Bastille Day on the *Promenade des Anglais* in Nice, France, resulting

²⁰ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Brussels_bombings

in the death of 86 people and injuring 434. The driver was Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, a Tunisian resident of France. The attack ended following an exchange of gunfire, during which Lahouaiej-Bouhlel was shot and killed by police. Since then, several new attacks in France and recently also Germany have been foiled.

The struggle against Daesh is becoming a psychological and ideological battle. IS may already know its days as a 'state' are over. They are planning to 'go deep' and 'underground'. Quite possibly one may expect new 'spectacular' attacks, primarily in the Middle East and North Africa, but also possible in Europe, the US or Russia. The question remains how the international community can protect itself against such cruel terrorist attacks. What can the security council do to create an atmosphere of cooperation between the nations of the world, while at the same time the international political environment has never been so tense since the end of the Cold War. The Syrian and Ukrainian questions have opened a deep rift between the West and Russia, that today almost seems insurmountable. IS will try to make advantage of this. It thrives in chaos and geopolitical tension, and would like nothing better than nations being in conflict with one another.

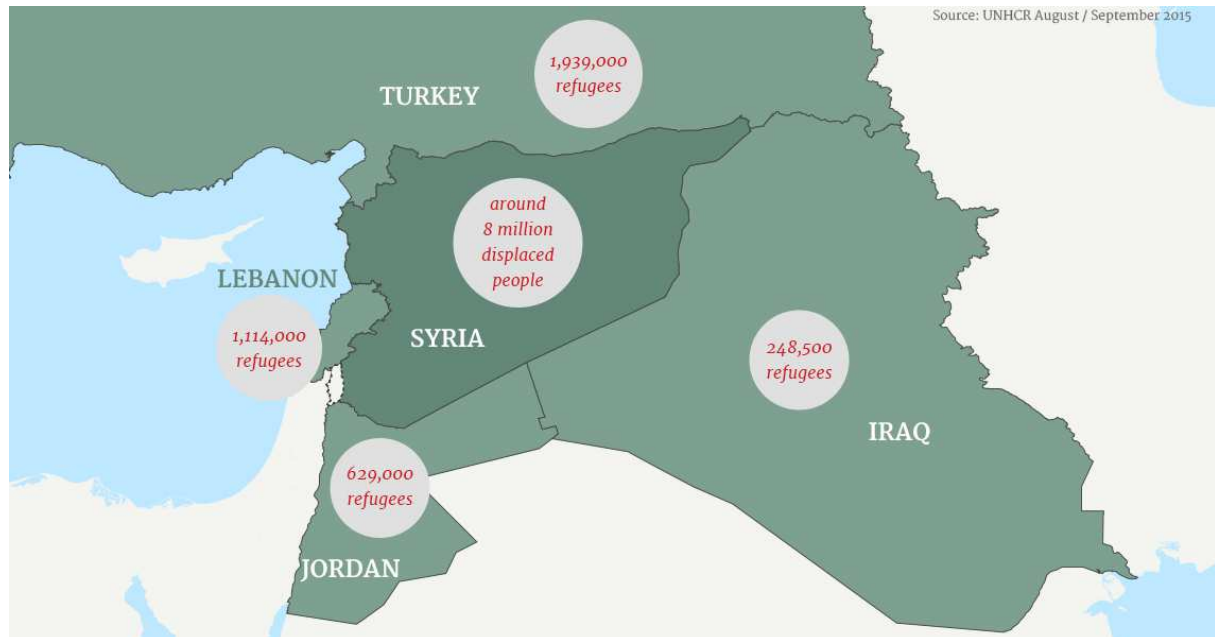
The humanitarian situation

Within Syria the humanitarian situation deteriorates on a daily basis as millions of Syrians are driven deeper into poverty. In addition, the ability of the Government to provide basic services is eroded.²¹ This complicates the protection of citizens, widespread fighting affects Syrians countrywide, in a State lacking law and order.²² Concerning the humanitarian situation two elements are to be flagged. First, the problem of the access of humanitarian aid. Second, the situation of displaced persons and refugees and the pressure they bring on neighboring countries.

²¹ Ibid.

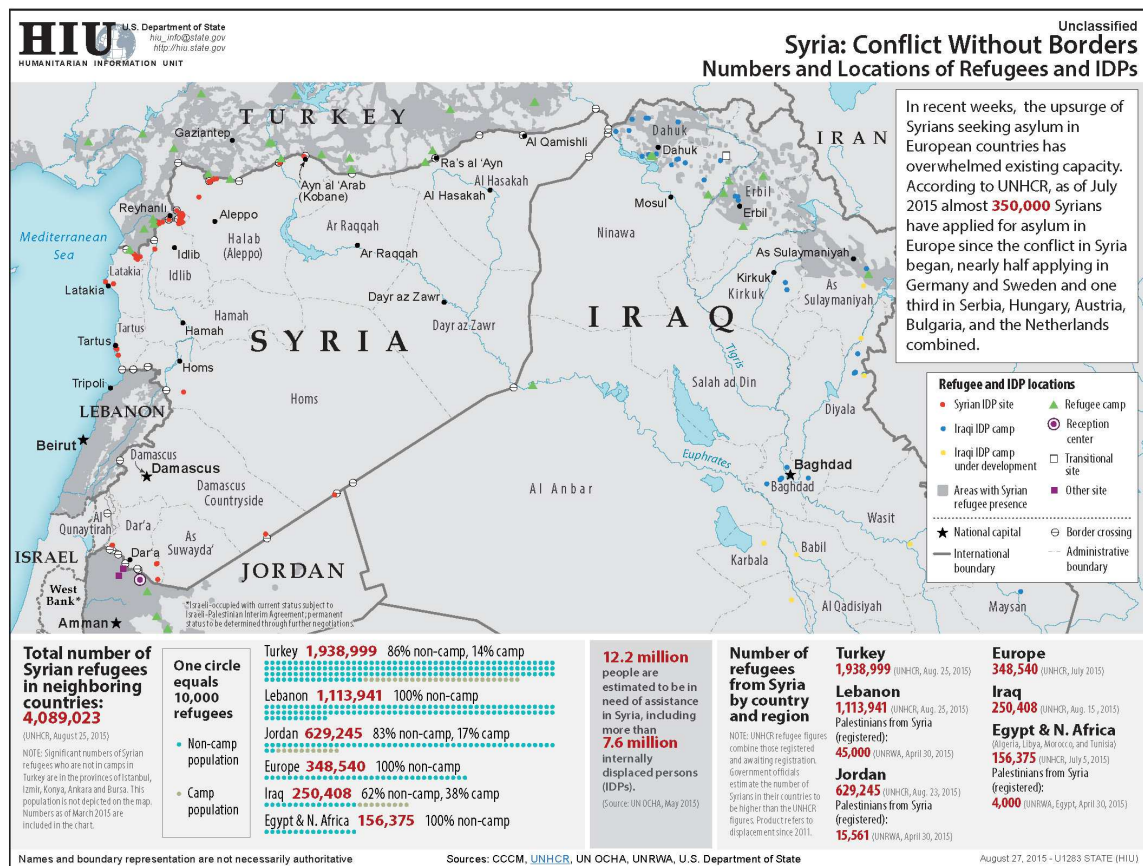
²² Ibid.

Here are the latest figures coming from the International Committee of the Red Cross:



Source: International Committee of the Red Cross

The US Government recently published these data and map:



Concerning the first point, gravely concerned by the deepening ‘humanitarian tragedy’ in Syria, the United Nations Security Council has been urging all sides of the conflict to immediately provide access for humanitarian aid.²³ Indeed, the magnitude of the humanitarian tragedy caused by the conflict in Syria requires immediate action to facilitate safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance across the entire country.²⁴ Access of humanitarian aid has been a big problem in the Syrian conflict from the very beginning. It is important to recall that according to customary law rule 55 (applicable in both international and non-international armed conflicts): *“The parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction, subject to their right of control”*.²⁵

In the midst of this grave humanitarian tragedy, more than 4 million Syrians have fled their homes, taking refuge in neighboring countries or within Syria itself.²⁶ The large-scale exodus of refugees continues at a pace outwitting humanitarian response planning in neighboring countries. Absorbing the massive influx of refugees has been an enormous challenge for Syria’s neighbors, with strong implications for the stability of the entire region. At the same time an exodus has started from August 2015 onwards in the direction of the territory of the European Union, in particular such countries as Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands and others. Remarkable is that countries such as the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia do not harbor any refugees within their own territories.

Recently, the migratory stress on the European Union has lessened, but with the attack on Mosul ongoing it is expected that even an extra million people could soon start fleeing the city. With the war in Syria heightening instead of lessening and taken into account the Libyan instability, the humanitarian question is only expected to grow.

* * * * *

²³ UN Security Council urges all sides in Syrian crisis to immediately provide access for humanitarian aid, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=46174&Cr=&Cr1=#.Uk0lb2zCTcs> (3/10/2013)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ http://www.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule55 (6/10/2013).

²⁶ Syrian Refugees: A snapshot of the crisis – in the middle east and Europe, <http://syrianrefugees.eu/> (3/10/2013)

The Role of the Security Council in this Case, and Your Role

In light of all these developments, **it is decided that the UN Security Council (UNSC) will again convene to assess the current situation, and possibly to vote a resolution on this topic.** It is important for all delegations to distinguish the different security dimensions embedded within this case.

An Emergency Session of the UNSC will be held. **The following negotiation questions are on the agenda;**

1. *What military decisions need to be made on the multiple battle grounds in which IS / Daesh is being engaged; Libya, Syria, Iraq and the international front (a possible resurgence of terrorism)? How can the influx of jihadi fighters further be frustrated?*
2. *What about the political dimension on the Libyan, Syrian and Iraqi fronts? Whereas the diverse anti-Daesh coalitions now appear to be working together, they might actually have opposing goals. Analysts warn that even a victory against IS in countries such as Libya and Iraq may produce a very brief 'window of opportunity' for a new internal balance of power. Can the Security Council establish certain principles that should be adhered to immediately following the post-Daesh period?*
3. *The economic questions. If the region is not rebuilt, if there are not enough resources committed, then the region may quite easily revert back to conflict. Should the international community agree upon a 'Marshall Plan' for the region now, so as to give the people in the region some perspective for the future?*
4. *Analysts warn that the filling up of the power void left by IS, may in fact energize a geopolitical struggle for power among the great powers (US, Russia) and the regional powers (Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia). How can this be avoided? Or should we not kid ourselves and acknowledge that the current territorial divisions in the Middle East are*

obsolete, that the subsequent wars have created a new de facto situation on the ground – which in the end will lead to a ‘redrawing of the geopolitical map’?

5. *What solution can be found to manage the current humanitarian situation, both internal and external? What urgent measures should be taken to further avoid a worsening of the situation? Not only limit yourself to words, but also to concrete actions, commitments, money, support of humanitarian organizations, etc. Could ‘safe havens’ be a solution, or not? What about overflight rights, logistics, personnel, etc.? What is the time table? Winter is approaching very fast and the situation on the ground is more dire every day.*
6. *Finally in conclusion, should the international community send a message and allow that remaining IS members that are captured would be sent to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to go on trial?*



Beware that the abovementioned negotiation questions are interconnected. The United Nations Security Council will convene in an **Emergency Meeting** in an attempt to develop a common answer from the international community to this volatile crisis. A Plenary Session will give each of

the member-countries of the UN Security Council an opportunity to influence the course of current international politics. Some other countries will also be invited by the 15 to have a say, although they will themselves not be deciding parties. You will act as the Ambassador of one of the 15, or of an invited delegation. Be aware, however, that negotiations constitute a *dynamic process*; it will be up to you to defend the interests of your country/delegation! You and only you will also be answerable for your actions to your own Government upon returning to your capital.

Thus, much is at stake... It will therefore prove crucial that you reflect in advance about the strategy you will follow during the deliberations. For this purpose, you will be asked to write a *position paper* in preparation of the Emergency Meeting. The position papers will be officially distributed in advance. The strategy papers however should be considered top secret material which can only circulate *within* and *not between* delegations.

It is very probable that the UNSC will move from a formal setting to an informal setting during its deliberations. This is called '*caucusing*', a setting which can be suggested by one or more of the delegations. There are two forms of '*caucusing*'; moderated and unmoderated. Both are informal ways of negotiating. The difference can be stated quite simply; (1) a '*moderated caucus*' is led by the presidency around the negotiating table, (2) an '*unmoderated caucus*' can be seen as an interaction between delegations away from the negotiating table (the presidency thus has no role to play in an '*unmoderated caucus*').

When you return to a formal setting, be aware that a resolution is adopted if 9 out of 15 votes are in favour and if there is no veto. Any amendments will be voted upon before the resolution has become final. In procedural matters, a veto cannot be used. The presidency calls the meeting to order and as it proposed this emergency session of the Council, he/she will speak up first. After this opening address the permanent members will take the floor, followed-up by the non-permanent members.

The final goal of the negotiations should be the drafting of a UNSC resolution. If this would ultimately prove politically and/or technically unattainable, the negotiating parties can draw up statements, on their own or as a group. If a resolution is attainable, the negotiating parties can also issue explanatory statements. *Last but not least*, if certain countries were to agree upon separate '*secret*' deals during the Emergency Session in Brussels, the parties involved will be asked to disclose the content of their arrangements during the evaluation *after* the negotiations, so that a full *group-evaluation* of the political process can be made, all the cards on the table.

A final piece of advice; be aware that the negotiations can also be affected by '*new developments on the ground*'. You must therefore '*be prepared for anything*'.

* * * * *

Beware of the Dynamics in the Decision-making Arena!

The Emergency Session of the UNSC (VVN MUN) on the topic '*How to stabilise the Middle East and North Africa in the post- IS / Daesh era?*' will convene in the city of Brussels.

The UN Security Council consists of five permanent members (the so-called “P-5”, with veto powers); **the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States.**

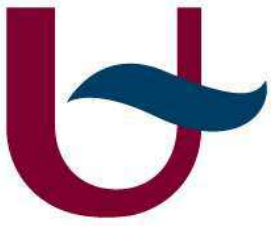



Furthermore, the UNSC consists of an additional ten non-permanent members; currently **Angola, Egypt, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal, Spain, Ukraine, Uruguay, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).**

In addition, a number of delegations will also be invited to the work of the Security Council during the negotiations, a representative of the following countries: **Libyan UN-brokered unity government, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UNHCR, ICRC, Arab League, Syria, Iraq.**

Be aware that these invited delegations can be a source of advice and/or exert informal pressures on the negotiations. However, they do *not* have any voting powers in the UNSC...

At the end of the day, it will thus be upon the 15 to (try to) decide upon an international course of action to safeguard peace and stability. The presidency of the Security Council will be observed by a number of professors, together with 2 vice-presidents (assistants).

The distribution of the delegations among the different Flemish universities is as follows:

 <p>Universiteit Antwerpen</p>	 <p>Vrije Universiteit Brussel</p>	 <p>UNIVERSITEIT GENT</p>	 <p>KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN</p>
United Kingdom	France	United States of America	Russian federation
People's Republic of China			
Egypt	Ukraine	Japan	New Zealand
Angola	Venezuela	Senegal	Spain
	Malaysia	Uruguay	
Libya – Government of National Accord (GNA)	Turkey	Saudi Arabia	Iran
Syria	UNHCR	Iraq	Arab League
			ICRC

Good luck!