

# SYRIA 90-DAY STRATEGIC FORECAST: ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND AL-SHAM (ISIS)

## ISIS OBJECTIVES IN SYRIA

### Grand Strategic Objectives:

- Rule all Muslims under an Islamic Caliphate
- Provoke and win an apocalyptic war with the West

### Strategic Objectives in Syria:

- Preserve and expand territorial control in Syria
- Implement governance guided by Shari'a law and subjugate minorities within the caliphate
- Seize a historic caliphate capital and eliminate the Alawite regime
- Neutralize or absorb the Syrian armed opposition
- Neutralize or absorb Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN or JAN)
- Stoke regional disorder through sectarian or religious conflict in Syria

## ISIS IN SYRIA: CURRENT CONDITIONS

ISIS currently faces a new threat from the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in the form of an "ISIS-Free Zone" in northern Syria. But ISIS retains operational flexibility to adapt to new conditions on the ground. Anticipated or ongoing developments in Syria that will shape ISIS's options and requirements include:

Condition		Impact
Impending implementation of "ISIS-free" zone in northern Aleppo Province	→	Threat to last ISIS-controlled border crossings; incentive to seek additional cross-border access via Idlib Province, Lebanon, or Jordan
Potential U.S.-led coalition operation by FSA and YPG against ar-Raqqqa City	→	Threat to key ISIS-held urban center; impetus for expansion of control into western Syria and consolidation of control in Deir ez-Zour
Series of military victories and governance measures by JN and allied rebel forces in Idlib Province	→	Challenge to ISIS's religious legitimacy, governance efforts, and leadership of the jihad; opportunity to maximize degradation of the Syrian regime
Growing discontent against the regime from loyalist populations, e.g., Druze	→	Opportunity to achieve maximum psychological effect against Syrian regime through operations against Homs, Damascus, or Deir ez-Zour.
Prospect of additional military support for Syrian regime from Iran or Russia	→	Potential increased resistance from pro-regime forces against ISIS's expansion into western Syria; opportunity to capitalize on sectarianism or regional proxy warfare in Syria

### THREE MONTH FORECAST: SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2015

#### Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)

ISIS's most likely course of action during the 90 day timeframe will prioritize maintaining cross-border access through Aleppo, Idlib, Lebanon, or Dera'a. ISIS will pursue this objective in concert with other operational objectives. It must balance the requirements of its defensive operations in northern Syria against its desire to conduct further advances

ISIS's likely primary operational objectives and most likely courses of action (MLCOAs) over the next twelve weeks.

ISIS will most likely pursue its objectives in ways that prevent creating a new advantage for another actor, in particular the Syrian regime. In order to make gains against the opposition without inducing this effect, ISIS will likely balance its attacks against the opposition and the Syrian regime. ISIS is pairing attacks on rebels north of Aleppo with a siege on the regime-held Kuweiris airbase east of Aleppo simultaneously in September 2015, likely in order to ensure that the regime is

ISIS in Syria Operational Objectives & MLCOAs for 90 Days	
September 9, 2015	
Operational Objective	MLCOA
Disrupt Anti-ISIS Forces in Northern Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage in 'active defense' to fix Syrian Kurdish YPG and moderate rebel forces in northern Syria (ongoing)</li> <li>Attack rebels in Azaz north of Aleppo City to disrupt "ISIS-free" zone and Idlib defenses (ongoing)</li> <li>Seize the regime-held Kuweires Airbase east of Aleppo City to maintain momentum for anti-regime operations (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Challenge Jabhat al-Nusra Position in Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Escalate assassination campaign and spectacular attacks against Jabhat al-Nusra and allied rebel forces in Idlib and Dera'a Provinces (ongoing)</li> <li>Continue messaging campaign against legitimacy of Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel methods of governance (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Position for Future Operations Against Syrian Regime in the Central Corridor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seize major oil and natural gas fields between Homs City and Palmyra from regime forces (ongoing)</li> <li>Seize the strategic T4 (Tiyas) and Shayrat Airbases from regime forces (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Secure Access to Cross-Border Supply Routes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seize the rebel supply line through Azaz in northern Aleppo Province to preempt "ISIS-free" zone (ongoing)</li> <li>Reinforce and fortify Jarabulus and other key ISIS-held border crossings in Aleppo Province (ongoing)</li> <li>Set conditions for operations to secure additional border access in Idlib Province, Lebanon, or Jordan</li> </ul>
Consolidate Full Control over Euphrates River	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Seize remaining regime positions in Deir ez-Zour City and the Deir ez-Zour Military Airbase (ongoing)</li> <li>Suppress tribal unrest to consolidate popular control (ongoing)</li> </ul>

into the Syrian central corridor. ISIS retains the flexibility to reorder its operational priorities in response to changes in the conditions listed above, as they constrain or open opportunities for ISIS in Syria. ISIS can also pursue courses of action that serve multiple operational objectives. ISIS will attempt to position itself to maintain its options to pursue one or more courses of action in response to any phase change in these conditions. The chart below details

unable to exploit opposition losses. Attacking regime bases further buffers ISIS against assaults by other anti-ISIS actors, including the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, because other anti-ISIS actors will not stop ISIS from prosecuting anti-regime activities. Nevertheless, attacking Kuweires allow ISIS to replenish its military stockpiles and free up manpower for other operations, directly strengthening its northern campaign to the detriment of anti-ISIS operations. In this

way, ISIS is poised to exploit the dynamic equilibrium that other actors in Syria have managed to maintain over the last four years.

The operational objectives and MDCOAs pursued by ISIS in Syria will both shape and be shaped by the courses of action of other actors on the ground. The threat of expansion by ISIS into the Syrian central corridor may generate pressure on mainstream Syrian rebel factions to either align with ISIS as an effective anti-regime actor or alternately cohere with Jabhat al-Nusra as protection against ISIS, perceiving ISIS as a greater threat. Similar concerns regarding potential advances by ISIS could also push restive minority populations closer to the Syrian regime, or alternately fuel increased dissent from regime supporters dismayed by continued setbacks at the hands of anti-regime forces. This dynamic may either weaken or harden fighting groups against ISIS, but in the latter case, anti-ISIS formations will become increasingly sectarian, a condition that ISIS may

exploit to ignite greater regional conflict. Meanwhile, ISIS will also tailor its courses of action in response to pressure from other actors. Successful anti-ISIS coalition operations targeting ISIS in northern Syria may increase the likelihood of direct escalations by ISIS against Idlib Province, Homs City, or Deir ez-Zour. At the same time, evolving conditions in Iraq – particularly continued pressure from the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and allied militias in Anbar and Salah ad-Din Provinces – will likely spur ISIS to maneuver more vigorously in Syria to demonstrate the enduring capacity to achieve new territorial gains. This dynamic does not preclude reinforcements of its Iraq campaign from Syria.

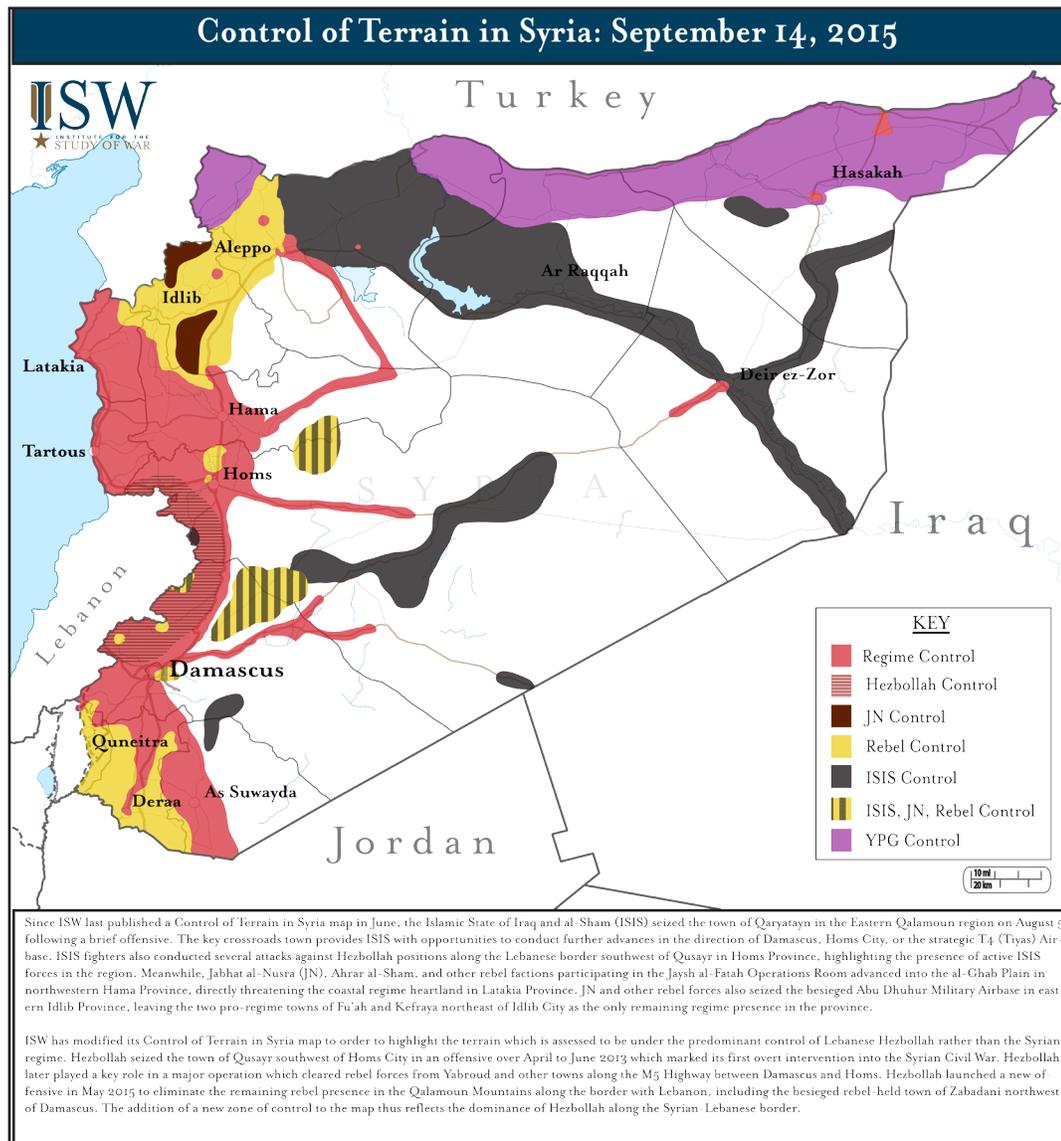
#### *Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)*

ISIS retains the ability to conduct major operations inside of Syria that generate nonlinear effects on the Syrian Civil War despite increasing pressure on its core terrain over

<b>ISIS in Syria Operational Objectives &amp; MDCOAs for 90 Days</b> September 9, 2015	
MDCOA #1: Offensive against Syrian regime in Homs City or Qusayr	
MDCOA #2: Offensive against Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces in Idlib Province	
Operational Objective	MDCOAs
Challenge Jabhat al-Nusra's Position in Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MDCOA #2: Conduct major assault against rebel-held terrain in Idlib Province over medium-term</li> <li>Continue messaging campaign against legitimacy of Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel methods of governance (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Deter Anti-ISIS Forces in Northern Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage in 'active defense' to fix Syrian Kurdish YPG and moderate rebel forces in northern Syria (ongoing)</li> <li>Reinforce and fortify Jarabulus and other key ISIS-held border crossings in Aleppo Province (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Position for Future Operations Against Syrian Central Corridor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MDCOA #1: Conduct shock offensive against Homs City or Qusayr in order to force regime contraction</li> <li>Seize the strategic T4 (Tiyas) and Shayrat Airbases from regime forces (ongoing)</li> </ul>
Secure Access to Cross-Border Supply Routes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MDCOA #1: Conduct rapid offensive against Qusayr in order to secure access to the Lebanese border</li> <li>MDCOA #2: Conduct major assault against rebel-held terrain in Idlib Province over medium-term</li> </ul>
Consolidate Full Control over Euphrates River	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contain remaining regime positions in Deir ez-Zour City and the Deir ez-Zour Military Airbase</li> </ul>

the medium-term. ISIS could pursue at least two most dangerous courses of action (MDCOAs) under current conditions in order to achieve nonlinear effects against its adversaries. The most dangerous course of action that ISIS can pursue in the 90 day timeframe is attempting to cause the precipitous collapse of the Syrian regime. Alternately or in concert, ISIS could decide to launch a major offensive against the opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra stronghold in Idlib. Both potential MDCOAs involve a decision to conduct limited defensive actions across most fronts in Syria while massing resources to conduct a major offensive against vulnerable terrain in western Syria – either regime positions in the vicinity of Homs City in the first MDCOA or regions governed by Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces in Idlib Province in the second. In either scenario, ISIS will also pursue objectives that also appear in the MLCOA, particularly to secure sustainable cross-border access, counteract expected advances by the anti-ISIS coalition in northern Syria, and generate exploitable opportunities for further expansion.

A major offensive against regime positions in Homs City or nearby Qusayr constitutes one MDCOA available to ISIS. ISW previously assessed this course of action as ISIS’s primary MDCOA in Syria during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan; however, this scenario now appears less likely over the 90-day timeframe given ISIS’s emergent requirement to conduct defensive operations in northern Syria. Nonetheless, ISIS could calculate that sufficient pressure against the regime in the Syrian central corridor would prompt uncontrolled regime contraction which ISIS could then exploit. ISIS may calculate that it is better positioned to take advantage of such a collapse than JN or the Syrian opposition due to its broad geographical disposition and ability to conduct cross-front operations. ISIS may also calculate that aggressive anti-regime actions that could lead to regime collapse will disrupt the U.S.-led anti-ISIS campaign. U.S.-led coalition operations that successfully challenge ISIS in ar-Raqqah City or northern Aleppo Province will increase the likelihood of this MDCOA by increasing ISIS’s incentive to secure additional border access to Lebanon and generate opportunities for expansion. If effective, the pursuit



of this MDCOA sets conditions for a rapid collapse of the institutions of the Syrian regime which would ultimately empower ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, Iran, and other malign actors in Syria at the expense of the U.S.-led coalition and its allies.

A ground offensive by ISIS targeting Jabhat al-Nusra and allied rebel forces in Idlib Province represents the second potential MDCOA available to ISIS over the next three months. U.S.-led coalition operations which successfully challenge ISIS's access to the Turkish border northern Aleppo Province will increase the likelihood of this MDCOA by requiring ISIS to transplant its physical control and governance structures into new cities. ISIS could also view current conditions as a key opportunity to force a military confrontation with Jabhat al-Nusra while the Jabhat al-Nusra-led Jaysh al-Fatah Operations Room is engaged in heavy fighting with regime forces near Latakia Province. In this way, ISIS could provoke opposition actors and foreign fighter brigades to choose ISIS over Jabhat al-Nusra on the bases of performance in a direct contest. This direct contest may translate to other fronts besides Idlib. The conflict would also present ramifications for the overall competition for leadership in the global jihad between al-Qaeda and ISIS. A defeat of Jabhat al-Nusra in Idlib by ISIS would constitute a significant blow to al-Qaeda's overall prestige. An expanded confrontation between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra would also limit the combat power and cross-border access of opposition formations willing to work with the U.S., directly increasing the threat environment for them. It may nonetheless increase the appeal of partnering with the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS. But this MDCOA would also generate destabilizing effects in neighboring U.S. regional allies that serve as transit points and reservoirs for both groups, especially Turkey and Lebanon.

Early gaming of the second MDCOA also surfaced the dangers that an attack on Idlib poses to any future attempts to disaggregate Jabhat al-Nusra from less extreme rebel groups. Almost all rebel groups that are not fighting on the side of ISIS routinely unite strongly when facing military pressure from ISIS. The further intertwinement of Jabhat al-Nusra and other opposition forces in Idlib will likely result if ISIS pursues this second MDCOA.

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