



Syria & Iraq Conflict Futures Report sample

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Introduction & Scope

On 6 February 2015 IHS held a one-day Iraq-Syria Conflict Futures Workshop, bringing together a combination of subject matter experts to develop and discuss a range of scenarios for the future trajectory of the linked Iraq and Syria conflicts over the next two to five years.

Participating subject matter experts drawn from across IHS included analysts focused on the study of regional geopolitics, politics and security, as well as extremist movements and sub-state armed groups operating in Iraq and Syria.

Over the course of the event IHS analysts used input from intelligence and security communities to discuss **drivers**, develop specific scenario **pathways** and investigate **branches** of these pathways in three distinct categories of scenarios.

Each of the categories was designed to isolate and explore a specific dynamic:

- The increasingly complex nature of the extremist landscape and threat in Syria and Iraq
- The role that increasing Western and extra-regional actors' involvement in the region can play in either containing or escalating these conflicts
- The intersection of the Iraq-Syria wars (and IS in particular) with overlapping, complex regional geopolitical rivalries—and the implications for Western intelligence, security and policy communities

In addition to developing specific scenario pathways, analysts also developed insights into the uncertainties, tensions and unresolved issues shaping each scenario category and implications of each scenario.

They also addressed a series of questions about the implications of these alternative future worlds on regional political geography and state stability; Islamist extremism; regional geopolitics; pathways for contagion; and threats to and challenges for Western states, their homeland security and regional interests among other scenario specific questions.

In order to ensure the broadest range of creative thinking about these scenarios and mitigate the pitfalls associated with group think and cognitive bias, workshop participants were divided into two teams, each of which was asked to develop distinct scenario pathways within each category of scenario. Teams would brief their scenario pathways and discuss their analysis of scenario dynamics and implications in a plenary session including all Workshop participants.

The scenarios included in this report are amalgamations of the insights and pathways briefed in the plenary discussions.

The resulting report incorporates scenario pathways and analysis generated by IHS analysts during these events, and seeks to capture both the prevailing narratives and the analysis, as well as interesting or provocative minority viewpoints and counter-narratives developed during the two workshops.

Introduction & Scope

The report is divided into five separate sections:

- Executive Summary
- Preface: Scenario Planning, Why? What?
- Scenario 1: Arc of Extremism
- Scenario 2: Western Overreach and Disengagement
- Scenario 3: Turkish Intervention.

This **sample** provides excerpted content from Scenario 1 of the report.

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Scenario 1: Arc of Extremism

This scenario explores the potential future trajectory of Islamist extremist influence in the Iraq-Syria conflict across the next two to five years. Whilst it considers in detail some of the factors that might shape the development of Islamic State, it also attempts to situate the group among a broader range of Islamist and extremist actors seeking greater influence and territorial control in Syria, and thus to examine the impact of Islamist extremism as a whole on the conflict.

Scenario

Islamic State (IS) endures as a territorially-contiguous entity, sustaining a proto-state largely in the ar-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zour provinces of Syria that outlasts a sustained counter-offensive by the International Coalition. Unable to precipitate complete collapse of IS, and potentially distracted by other regional or international security concerns, support for a seemingly open-ended low intensity conflict with IS begins to decline among new political administrations in Western member states, except for punitive strikes. As these states slowly scale back their support and increasingly leave the fight to regional partners, remaining member states then pursue varying policies of targeted counterterrorism, containment or confrontation through non-state proxy forces.

However, IS survives as only one of a number of Islamist militant / extremist actors that will cumulatively control territory stretching from most of northern

Idlib province and neighbouring Aleppo province across north-central and north-Eastern Syria. These extremist proto-states represent an 'arc of extremism' in Syria, and engage in a competition for influence over the Sunni populations under their control.

The most significant entity to threaten the survival of IS becomes Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and a coalition of Islamist militant and extremist allies. With external support from Turkey and Qatar, this coalition gains control over most of Idlib province, Aleppo province and crucially Aleppo city, which becomes the de facto capital of a rival JN-led Islamic Emirate of ash-Sham.

Our scenario assumes that JN will continue to prove successful in fostering collaboration with other Syrian insurgent groups, and in the pursuit of its model of co-governance under Sharia. It further assumes that this coalition does not fracture after the battle for Aleppo and that the US and regional partners are unsuccessful in peeling away insurgent groups from JN's influence through funding, training, and weapons/equipment.

Sample Assumption: NATO's Crowded Threat Environment

One of the core assumptions of the *Arc of Extremism* scenario is that Western governments scale back military involvement in Iraq and Syria, relying on 'policies of targeted counterterrorism, containment or confrontation through proxy groups.'

Scenario 1: Arc of Extremism

While political or fiscal realities could certainly drive this disengagement, especially if current efforts are viewed as having minimal effect on the situation on the ground, so too may other security or geopolitical exigencies that lead to a deprioritization of the IS threat, even if low-level terrorist operations linked to IS in Western states persist.

Indeed, a central feature of ongoing IHS NATO Futures initiative involves analysis of the exceptionally complex and crowded threat landscape facing NATO and, critically, its member and partner states and the varying perceptions among these states of how to prioritize these threats. A significant Russia contingency, an escalation of fighting in North Africa, and a Western Pacific security crisis or several crises simultaneously could stretch already thin resources in a way so as to diminish the interest and capacity to support continued presence and Coalition operations in Iraq and Syria.

Sample Insight: The Importance of Mosul

Exercise discussions frequently centred on the tactical, operational and strategic importance of driving IS from Mosul, and how the loss of Mosul might shape the future of Islamic State and extremism in the region as both a trigger for the *Arc of Extremism* scenario and as a wildcard, the result of which could drive the future of IS along a vastly different trajectory than that posed by the scenario.

The recapture of Mosul by the Iraqi military and, importantly, allied Shia

militias—a strategic victory for the military and the al-Abadi government that precipitates further recapture of territory in Nineveh and Anbar provinces—is the first major event in our base scenario. The ability of the Iraqi military to achieve victory in Mosul in 2015 remains uncertain; whilst the United States is reportedly accelerating transfers of small arms and other ordnance to the Iraqi army, some military capabilities assessments have suggested that the army in particular remains insufficiently prepared for the prospect of difficult urban operations against an entrenched, highly-motivated and experienced adversary. Indeed, IHS analysts noted on multiple occasions that IS must be considered more skilled in the operational art of urban combat, having had the benefit of significant institutional knowledge gained from combat since 2003.

The failure to evict IS from Mosul, via military action or brokered withdrawal, would inflict a political shock on the government of Haider al-Abadi and further damage the already low morale of the formally constituted 'national' Iraqi security forces. The ability of IS to fend off an assault on the city would also be trumpeted by the group as a major strategic victory buoying its confidence, driving new recruits and indicating enhanced prospects for longer-term survival and, plausibly, expansion and growth.

But the outcome of the battle for Mosul is only one of the many drivers shaping the operational environment on the ground.

Scenario 1: Arc of Extremism

Of equal importance in this scenario is the nature of the retaking of Mosul, should it occur. Whilst the Iraqi military may initially seek to minimize civilian casualties and collateral damage, fearing a public backlash, a persistent failure to recapture the city might see them resort to more indiscriminate tactics. IS may seek to leverage rising civilian casualties to position itself as defender of Sunni residents from an intended massacre by the Shia-led government, strengthening local public support for the group.

The possible involvement of Shia militias is also likely to be a contentious issue among Sunni communities in and around Mosul. As one IHS team member asserted, use of these militias to help take Mosul will “guarantee another round of atrocities, making enduring solutions impossible.”

This would also place Western powers, which have been backing the Iraqi military with air strikes, in a much more difficult position and may lead to a downturn in the tempo of strikes so as not to be seen as offering air cover for Iraqi army and militia atrocities.

Sample Insight: Major IS Narratives Relating to Coalition Air Strikes

Religious narratives

- ‘Assembly of a Coalition proves the righteousness of our cause’
- ‘Righteous always targeted by the unjust’
- ‘Faith defeats arrogance and aggression’

Strategic narratives

- ‘We will wear down the enemy, then recover and attack’
- ‘We will wear down the economy of the West and their willingness to support Apostate Arab governments’
- ‘*Dawlat ul-Islam baqiyah*’—‘we will remain and then expand’

Impact

- ‘Bombing hurts the population, not our capabilities’
- ‘The Coalition destroys—we help rebuild’
- ‘Air strikes alone will not defeat us—the enemy has to face us on the ground’

Consistency and themes

- Messaging is consistent between official media units, fighters and activists and reflects a shared view of Sunni victimization.
- ‘Coalition strategy doomed to fail’
- ‘Civilians are the targets—but the State endures’
- Coordination among IS enemies (Iran - US; Syria - US, for example)
- ‘Faith defeats aggression’



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