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## Syria Spillover:

### The Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the Middle East

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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about such a critical and timely issue.

The war in Syria is a humanitarian catastrophe. It threatens to tear the region apart along sectarian lines. It has injected new oxygen into groups and movements driven by violent Islamist ideologies, including but by no means limited to groups formally associated with al-Qaeda. Indeed, we are now faced with a sharp rise in violent extremism from within both the radical Sunni and Shiite camps.

Over the past few weeks, much of the discussion related to the war in Syria has focused on either diplomatic talks in Switzerland (which appear to be going nowhere fast) or the potential threats to the West in general and the U.S. homeland in particular posed by the Syrian jihad. These are critical issues, to be sure, but I am very pleased that this committee is holding today's hearing on the regional implications of the war in Syria.

As Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently noted, we can expect an increase in political uncertainty and violence across the region in 2014.<sup>2</sup> There are many reasons this will be the case, not all of which are directly tied to the war in Syria. For today's purposes, however, I would like to address three types of fallout from the war in Syria that are certain to cause significant spillover of one kind or another: First, the flow of foreign fighters to Syria from across the Middle East and the impact this is certain to have on regional stability; second, the especially pernicious sectarian nature of the conflict at hand, and the impact that will have on Lebanon in particular; and third, the sharp increase—as a result of the war—in dangerous macro trends, from refugees and population displacement to poverty, hunger, and lack of adequate health care, that create conditions conducive to violence and instability.

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Jonathan Prohov and Kelsey Segawa for their research assistance in support of this testimony.

<sup>2</sup> *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community: Hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, 113th Cong., 2nd. Sess. (January 29, 2014)* (statement of James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence), <http://www.intelligence.senate.gov/140129/clapper.pdf>.

## “When the Boys Come Home”

Fifteen years from now, when classified documents produced today begin to be declassified, we will surely look back with some discomfort at just how far off some of our judgments were when written in 2014. Such is the nature of intelligence assessments. I worry, however, that we may look back fifteen years hence and find ourselves dealing with a laundry list of difficult problems that are in large part the result of actions taken, or not taken, today.

This reflection is underscored by rereading a declassified August 1993 report, “The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous,” written by the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR).<sup>3</sup> Its subject was the possible spillover effect of Afghan mujahedin fighters and support networks moving on to fight in other jihad conflicts, alongside other militant Islamic groups worldwide. Much of the report could be applied as equally to the themes we find ourselves facing today as it did when it was written twenty-one years ago.

Consider how fighters are traveling from around the world to go fight on either side of the increasingly sectarian war in Syria. Much of the discussion about foreign fighters traveling to Syria has focused on radicalized Muslim youth coming from Western countries—Europe, North America, Australia—which presents an especially disconcerting threat to homeland security given that these Western passport holders are likely to return home far more radicalized than when they left. These individuals are also more often than not fighting with groups like Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), at least some of which, DNI Clapper recently testified, aspire to attack the United States.<sup>4</sup> But the greatest numbers of foreign fighters, on both the Sunni and Shiite sides of the equation, have come from the Middle East. Indeed, it must be noted that while most people focus on the Sunni foreign fighter phenomenon, there are at least as many Shiite foreign fighters in Syria today. Most are from Iraq, but others have come from as far afield as Yemen, Afghanistan, and even Australia.

Earlier this month DNI Clapper estimated that more than 7,000 fighters have traveled to Syria from more than fifty countries.<sup>5</sup> In an independent study in December, my colleague Aaron Zelin estimated the numbers to be some 8,500 foreign fighters from seventy-four different countries. His estimates of the range of foreign fighters from across the region who have come to fight on the Sunni side of the war in Syria are equally telling:<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), “The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous,” *Weekend Edition*, August 21–22, 1993, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/globalized-jihad-then-1993-and-now>.

<sup>4</sup> *Current and Future Worldwide Threats to the National Security of the United States: Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, United States Senate*, 113th Cong., 2nd. Sess. (February 11, 2014) (statement of James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence).

<sup>5</sup> David Rohde, “Analysis: Is Syria Now a Direct Threat to the U.S.?” Reuters, February 7, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/07/us-syria-us-analysis-idUSBREA161NG20140207>.

<sup>6</sup> Aaron Zelin, “Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise among Western Europeans,” *ICSR Insight*, December 17, 2013, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/up-to-11000-foreign-fighters-in-syria-steep-rise-among-western-europeans>.

Country	Low	High
<b>Arab World</b>		
Kuwait	54	71
Lebanon	65	890
Tunisia	379	970
Jordan	175	2,089
Libya	330	556
Iraq	59	97
Algeria	68	123
Egypt	118	358
Palestine	73	114
Saudi Arabia	380	1,010
Sudan	2	96
Yemen	13	110
Morocco	76	91
United Arab Emirates	13	13
Mauritania	2	2
Qatar	14	14
Bahrain	12	12
Oman	1	1

On the Shiite side of the equation, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militants from groups like Asaib Ahl al-Haqq and Kataib Hezbollah make up a majority of the Shiites fighting in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Some estimate that as many as five thousand Lebanese Hezbollah have been active in Syria, on a rotational basis.<sup>7</sup> Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria are also estimated to be as high as five thousand.<sup>8</sup> And Iranians are present in smaller support and advising roles. In April 2011, the entire Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was designated by President Obama's Executive Order 13572 for human rights violations in Syria.<sup>9</sup> Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) forces as well as its Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) have also been active in Syria, and have likewise been designated by the U.S. Treasury Department for human rights abuses.<sup>10</sup> Shiites from Saudi Arabia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Afghanistan have also flown to Syria to fight on behalf of the regime, and Yemeni Houthi fighters are reported to be going to Syria through Hezbollah camps in Lebanon to fight with the regime and Hezbollah.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> David Horowitz, "5,000 Hezbollah Troops in Syria, with 5,000 More Set to Join Them," *Times of Israel*, May 26, 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/5000-hezbollah-troops-in-syria-with-5000-more-set-to-join-them/>.

<sup>8</sup> Jamie Dettmer, "Number of Shia Fighters in Syria Could Rise Following Fatwa," Voice of America, December 16, 2013, <http://www.voanews.com/content/number-of-shia-fighters-in-syria-could-rise-following-fatwa/1811638.html>.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Executive Order 13572, "Blocking Property of Certain Persons with respect to Human Rights Abuses in Syria," April 29, 2011, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/13572.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism," press release, February 16, 2012, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>; U.S. Department of Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Syrian, Iranian Security Forces for Involvement in Syrian Crackdown," press release, June 29, 2011, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1224.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> *Terrorist Groups in Syria: Hearing before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, United States House of Representatives*, 113th. Cong. (November 20, 2013) (statement of Mr. Phillip

In Syria, these foreign fighters are learning new and more dangerous tools of the trade in a very hands-on way, and those who do not die on the battlefield will ultimately disperse to all corners of the world better trained and still more radicalized than they were before. DNI Clapper stressed that it is not only foreign fighters who are drawn to Syria today but also “technologies and techniques that pose particular problems to our defenses.”<sup>12</sup>

“We are concerned,” CIA director John Brennan testified, “about the use of Syrian territory by the al Qaeda organization to recruit individuals...to use Syria as a launching pad” for attacks on the West.<sup>13</sup> But the threat is not limited to actual al-Qaeda groups or operatives, nor is it limited to attacks targeting the West. The majority of radicalized fighters are likely to return home and attack their own homelands even before they seek to strike ours, in large part because the events that have followed the Arab Spring have created conditions favorable for militant Islamist revival—social and militant both—across the region.

Consider just a few regional reverberations of the Syrian jihad already being felt today:

- This week an Israeli court convicted an Israeli Arab citizen of joining Jabhat al-Nusra. The presiding judge expressed concern over the danger posed by Israeli citizens who join the war in Syria and return home, where “they could use the military training and ideological indoctrination acquired in Syria to commit terror attacks, indoctrinate others or gather intelligence for use in attacks by anti-Israel organizations.”<sup>14</sup>
- For many in the region and beyond, going to fight in Syria is a natural and unremarkable decision. For these people, the fight in Syria is a defensive jihad to protect fellow Sunni Muslims—women and children—from the Assad regime’s indiscriminate attacks on civilian population centers. And so it is that Ahmed Abdullah al-Shaya, the poster boy for Saudi Arabia’s deradicalization program—which boasts a tiny 1.5 percent recidivism rate from among its 2,400 graduates—has now turned up on the battlefield in Syria.<sup>15</sup>
- “Tunisia’s revolution and those in Syria, Egypt and Yemen, and Libya gave us a chance to set up an Islamic state and sharia law, and in the Maghreb first,” explained a young Tunisian Salafist in Tunis, Abu Salah. “We want nothing less than an Islamic state in Tunisia, and across the region. The first step must be Syria. I am proud of our brothers in Syria, and I will go there myself in a few weeks.”<sup>16</sup>

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Smyth), <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20131120/101513/HRG-113-FA18-Wstate-SmythP-20131120.pdf>; Ariel Ben Solomon, “Report: Yemen Houthis Fighting for Assad in Syria,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 31, 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-Yemen-Houthis-fighting-for-Assad-in-Syria-315005>.

<sup>12</sup> “Clapper Says Syrian al-Qaida Wants to Attack U.S.,” *Washington Post*, January 29, 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/clapper-says-syrian-al-qaida-wants-to-attack-us/2014/01/29/46f35732-8905-11e3-a760-a86415d0944d\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/clapper-says-syrian-al-qaida-wants-to-attack-us/2014/01/29/46f35732-8905-11e3-a760-a86415d0944d_story.html).

<sup>13</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Mark Mazzetti, “U.S. Spy Chief Says Assad Has Strengthened His Hold on Power,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/05/world/middleeast/us-representative-to-syrian-opposition-is-retiring.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Khoury, “Israeli Arab Gets 18 Months for Trying to Join Fight against Assad,” *Haaretz*, February 11, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/.premium-1.573552>.

<sup>15</sup> Glen Carey, “Saudis Fearing Syrian Blowback Expand Rehab for Jihadis,” *Bloomberg*, December 9, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-12-08/jihadis-offered-rehab-as-saudis-seek-to-avert-syria-war-blowback.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Markey and Tarek Amara, “Insight: Tunisia Islamists Seek Jihad in Syria with One Eye on Home,” *Reuters*, November 18, 2013, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/11/18/uk-tunisia-jihad-insight-idUKBRE9AH0GO20131118>.

- Another young Tunisian, Ayman Saadi, who was raised in a middle-class family with a secular tradition, was stopped from going to fight in Syria several times by his parents before he finally snuck out of the country to Benghazi. He trained there for a short time, but instead of going on to Syria, he was instructed to go back to Tunisia to carry out a suicide attack at a presidential mausoleum; Saadi was tackled by guards before he could trigger his explosives. Just before that, another bomber managed to kill only himself at a nearby beach resort popular with foreign tourists.<sup>17</sup>
- In Egypt, the government is already facing high levels of violence largely in reaction to the deposition of former president Muhammad Morsi. Incidents of militants returning from Syria, too, and carrying out violent acts against the government have occurred. The Sinai militant group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis attracts many returnees and has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks in recent months. In September, Walid Badr, a former Egyptian army officer, after returning from Syria conducted a suicide attack that narrowly missed Egyptian interior minister Muhammad Ibrahim, instead injuring nineteen others.<sup>18</sup> In November, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis published a propaganda video featuring a segment of a speech by the late Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the former head of al-Qaeda's Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), which later evolved into ISIS.<sup>19</sup>
- In August, a new, fully Moroccan jihadist organization called Harakat Sham al-Islam was created in Syria. The group reportedly aims not only to recruit fighters for the Syrian war but also to establish a jihadist organization within Morocco itself: "Although the [group's] name refers to Syria and its theater is Syria, the majority of group members are Moroccans. The group's creation was also announced in the Rif Latakia, where most Moroccan jihadists who go to Syria are based."<sup>20</sup>
- Last month, an Iraqi newspaper ceased publishing after receiving death threats from the Iranian-backed Shiite militia Asaib Ahl al-Haqq. Two bombs were placed in its office in Baghdad, and protestors carrying photographs of Asaib Ahl al-Haqq's leader demanded the paper be shut down. Members openly admit to "ramp[ing] up targeted killings."<sup>21</sup> The militia has been active in Iraq since the American-led war, in which it carried out thousands of attacks on U.S. soldiers, and currently has forces in Syria.<sup>22</sup>
- Last week Jordanian border guards foiled an attempt to smuggle a large amount of ammunition and other material not from Jordan into Syria, but from Syria in Jordan.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> David Barnett, "Blowback in Cairo: The Syrian Civil War Has Now Reached the Heart of Egypt," *Foreign Policy*, January 9, 2014, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/01/09/blowback\\_in\\_cairo\\_syria](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/01/09/blowback_in_cairo_syria).

<sup>19</sup> Mohannad Sabry, "Al-Qaeda Emerges amid Egypt's Turmoil," *Al-Monitor*, December 4, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/al-qaeda-egypt-sinai-insurgency-growing-influence.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Vish Sakthivel, "Weathering Morocco's Syria Returnees," *PolicyWatch* 2148 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 25, 2013), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/weathering-moroccos-syria-returnees>.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed Rasheed, "Militants Kill 16 Iraqi Soldiers in Overnight Ambush," Reuters, February 11, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/11/us-iraq-violence-idUSBREA1A1BC20140211>; Loveday Morris, "Shiite Militias in Iraq Begin to Remobilize," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Loveday Morris, "Shiite Militias in Iraq Begin to Remobilize," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2014; Aaron Y. Zelin and Phillip Smyth, "The Vocabulary of Sectarianism," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2014, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-vocabulary-of-sectarianism>.

<sup>23</sup> "Jordan Foils Bid to Smuggle Ammunition from Syria," Naharnet, February 24, 2014, <http://naharnet.com/stories/en/1199555>

None of this should surprise. Twenty-one years ago, INR reported that “the support network that funneled money, supplies, and manpower to supplement the Afghan Mujahidin is now contributing experienced fighters to militant Islamic groups worldwide.” When these veteran fighters dispersed, the report presciently predicted, “their knowledge of communications equipment and experiences in logistics planning will enhance the organizational and offensive capabilities of the militant groups to which they are returning.” A section of the 1993 report, entitled “When the Boys Come Home,” noted that these veteran volunteer fighters “are welcomed as victorious Muslim fighters of a successful jihad against a superpower” and “have won the respect of many Muslims—Arab and non-Arab—who venerate the jihad.”

At that time, these mujahedin returned to Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Libya, and beyond, where they trained local militants and further radicalized local groups. Libya, the 1993 report noted, was once one of the largest backers of Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (since then designated a terrorist by the United States and the United Nations)<sup>24</sup> but “now fears the returning veterans and has lashed out publicly against them.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, several of these Libyan veterans formed the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and became senior members of core al-Qaeda. In 2006, the U.S. government would note that “The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group threatens global safety and stability through the use of violence and its ideological alliance with al Qaida and other brutal terrorist organizations.”<sup>26</sup> Today, Libya’s Ansar al-Sharia is operating on the ground in Syria. In Latakia, the group has set up a bakery and is organizing Ansar al-Sharia-branded aid for Sunni communities.<sup>27</sup>

But it is not just al-Qaeda-affiliated groups that are active in Syria. As the Treasury Department recently revealed, elements of the al-Qaeda core remain active and involved in the Syrian jihad. On February 6, the Treasury Department designated Iran-based Islamic Jihad Union facilitator Olimzhon Adkhamovich Sadikov (also known as Jafar al-Uzbeki and Jafar Muidinov) for providing logistical support and funding to al-Qaeda’s Iran-based network. An associate of Yasin al-Suri, a previously designated al-Qaeda leader in Iran, Sadikov serves as a Mashhad-based smuggler helping extremists and operatives to transit Iran in and out of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Iran-based al-Qaeda network also helps operatives and terrorist leaders travel from Pakistan to Syria via Turkey, and facilitates the transfer of funds from Gulf-based donors—including “an extensive network of Kuwaiti jihadist donors”—to al-Qaeda core and other affiliated elements, including Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. This Iran-based network, the Treasury Department noted, “operates there with the knowledge of Iranian authorities,” indicating that Iran is not only supporting Hezbollah and the Assad regime but also fanning the flames of sectarian violence by knowingly allowing al-Qaeda to support its elements in Syria from Iranian territory.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Designates Gulbuddin Hekmatyar a Terrorist,” February 19, 2003, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2003/02/20030219165118pkurata@pd.state.gov0.704632.html#axzz2t7LhTkjK>. “The List Established and Maintained by the 1267 Committee with respect to Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Other Entities Associated with al-Qaida.” United Nations, January 6, 2014, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/pdf/AQList.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), “The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous,” *Weekend Edition*, August 21–22, 1993, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/globalized-jihad-then-1993-and-now>.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury, “Treasury Designates UK-Based Individuals, Entities Financing Al Qaida–Affiliated LIFG,” February 8, 2006, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js4016.aspx>.

<sup>27</sup> “Ansar al-Sharia Aid Campaign: For Our People in Bilad al-Sham #3,” Al-Riyah Media Foundation, February 9, 2014, <http://justpaste.it/ecxu>.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of Treasury, “Treasury Targets Networks Linked to Iran,” February 6, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2287.aspx>.

And yet there are also signs that al-Qaeda core elements may be concerned that the Syrian jihad could leave them on the sidelines and undermine their relevance. Events in Syria are quickly changing the nature of the jihadist enterprise. Its epicenter is no longer Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, or Yemen, but the heart of the Levant—al-Sham—in Syria. There, both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra are fighting the Assad regime and its Shiite allies and more moderate Syrian rebels. The two groups have not merged, and only one (al-Nusra) has pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Indeed, when Zawahiri instructed ISIS to focus on Iraq and leave the Syrian theater to al-Nusra, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi flatly refused. This month, Zawahiri responded in kind, blaming ISIS for “the enormity of the disaster that afflicted the Jihad in Syria” and disavowing its ties to al-Qaeda. “ISIS,” Zawahiri insisted, “is not a branch of al-Qaeda and we have no organizational relationship with it.”<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, other Islamist groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, remain independent even as they share some ideological underpinnings with al-Qaeda. Today, the jihadist centers that are drawing new recruits, donations, and foreign fighters are not exclusive to al-Qaeda. Knowing that, Zawahiri perhaps felt the need to be able to claim something big that jihadist fighters of all shapes and sizes could rally around. What better than an attack on Israel? And so, on January 22, Israeli officials announced that, several weeks before, they had disrupted what they described as an “advanced” al-Qaeda terrorist plot in Israel. Although al-Qaeda-inspired jihadists had targeted Israel before (three men who had plotted an attack near Hebron were killed in a shootout with police in November), this marked the first time that senior al-Qaeda leaders were directly involved in such plans.<sup>30</sup>

The extent to which the Syrian jihad is driven by al-Qaeda core, its affiliates, or other violent Islamist groups is a matter of debate, but it is clear that there is no more of a single command center today than there was twenty-one years ago. The 1993 report describes several trends that remain issues of serious concern, including some of the same streams of financial support that continue to finance today’s militant Islamist groups (though not all—fundraising for the Syrian jihad through social media is now a significant issue). To the present-day reader, who will digest this 1993 report with an eye toward the conflict in Syria, perhaps the most disturbing analytical judgment—which could have been pulled out of a current National Intelligence Estimate—is this:

The war-era network of state sponsors and private patrons which continues to support the mujahidin has no rigid structure and no clearly defined command center, but receives guidance from several popular Islamic leaders and financial support from charitable Islamic organizations and wealthy individuals. Key figures who have emerged as the mentors of the mujahidin provide one another with the contacts and conduits needed to keep the militant groups they support in business.

The network circa 1993 was not an exact parallel to today’s combination of al-Qaeda operatives (a smaller but no less committed cadre), affiliated networks, virtually networked like-minded followers, and homegrown violent extremists. But the 1993 warning of an unstructured network of jihadists moving on from their current area of operations to other battlefronts could have been written this morning.

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<sup>29</sup> Tim Lister, “Al-Qaeda ‘Disowns’ Affiliate, Blaming It for Disaster in Syria,” CNN, February 4, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/03/world/meast/syria-al-qaeda/>; Aaron Y. Zelin, “Al-Qaeda Disaffiliates with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” Policy Alert (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 4, 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-disaffiliates-with-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham>.

<sup>30</sup> Yaakov Lappin, “3 East Jerusalem al-Qaida Recruits Arrested, ‘Planned Massive Bombings,’” *Jerusalem Post*, January 22, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/3-al-Qaida-recruits-arrested-planned-massive-bombings-339002>.

## Sectarian Proxy War in the Levant

The Syrian war is also a classic case of a proxy war, in this case between Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf states, on one hand, and Iran, on the other, with the additional, especially dangerous overlay of sectarianism. The sectarian vocabulary used to dehumanize the “other” in the Syrian war is deeply disturbing and suggests both sides view the war as a long-term battle in an existential, religious struggle between Sunnis and Shiites.<sup>31</sup> This suggests further that the war in Syria is now being fought on two parallel planes, one focused on the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, and the other on the existential threats the Sunni and Shiite communities each perceive from one another. The former might theoretically be negotiable, while the latter almost certainly is not. The ramifications for regional instability are enormous, and go well beyond the Levant. But they are felt more immediately and more powerfully in Lebanon to the west and Iraq to the east than anywhere else.

Allow me to focus briefly on Lebanon in particular. Over the past couple of years, Hezbollah’s combatant role in Syria has become more formal and overt. At the same time, intercommunal violence has increased significantly in Lebanon, including gunfights between Sunni and Alawite militants in Tripoli, between Sunnis and Shiites in Sidon, and of course bombings by Sunni militants—including Jabhat al-Nusra in Lebanon—in Shiite neighborhoods in Beirut and Hermel. Hezbollah’s stronghold in the Dahiya suburb of Beirut has been struck on multiple occasions, and even the Iranian embassy in Beirut was the target of a double suicide bombing.

By siding with the Assad regime, its Alawite supporters, and Iran, and taking up arms against Sunni rebels, Hezbollah has placed itself at the epicenter of a sectarian conflict that has nothing to do with the group’s purported *raison d’être*: “resistance” to Israeli occupation. One Shiite Lebanese satirist put it this way: “Either the fighters have lost Palestine on the map and think it is in Syria,” he said, “[o]r they were informed that the road to Jerusalem runs through Qusayr and Homs,” locations in Syria where Hezbollah has fought with Assad loyalists against Sunni rebels.<sup>32</sup>

The implication is clear: for many Lebanese, Hezbollah is no longer a pure “Islamic resistance” fighting Israel, but a sectarian militia and Iranian proxy doing Assad and Ayatollah Khamenei’s bidding at the expense of fellow Muslims. And it therefore does not surprise that the pokes come from extremist circles too. In June, the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a Lebanon-based al-Qaeda-affiliated group, released a statement challenging Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and his fighters “to fire one bullet at occupied Palestine and claim responsibility” for it. They could fire at Israel from either Lebanon or Syria, the statement continued, seeing as Hezbollah “fired thousands of shells and bullets upon unarmed Sunnis and their women, elderly and children, and destroyed their homes on top of them.”<sup>33</sup>

But while taunts might be expected from radical Sunni extremist groups, Hezbollah now faces challenges it never would have anticipated just a few years ago. For example, the day before Nasrallah’s August speech Lebanese president Michel Suleiman called, for the first time ever, for the state to curtail Hezbollah’s ability to operate as an

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<sup>31</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin and Phillip Smyth, “The Vocabulary of Sectarianism” *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2014, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-vocabulary-of-sectarianism>.

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Birke, “Hezbollah’s Choice,” *New York Times*, August 6, 2013, <http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/06/hezbollahs-choice/>.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “Online Jihadists Discuss Fate of al Qaeda Operative Held by Saudi Arabia,” *Long War Journal*, June 27, 2013, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/online\\_jihadists\\_dis.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/online_jihadists_dis.php).



independent militia outside the control of the government.<sup>34</sup> By sending fighters to Syria, many Lebanese believe Hezbollah has put its interests as a group ahead of those of Lebanon as a state, something that flouts Hezbollah's longtime efforts to portray itself as a group that is, first and foremost, Lebanese. Now the group that describes itself as the vanguard standing up for the dispossessed in the face of injustice, and that has always tried to downplay its sectarian and pro-Iranian identities, finds those assertions challenged over its refusal to abide by the Lebanese government's official position of noninterference in Syria. To the contrary, its proactive support of a brutal Alawite regime against the predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition undermines its long-cultivated image as a distinctly Lebanese "resistance" movement.

Hezbollah has doubled down in its support for the Assad regime, even after bombs started going off in Dahiya, in southern Beirut. Nasrallah was crystal clear: "If you are punishing Hezbollah for its role in Syria, I will tell you, if we want to respond to the Dahiye explosion, we would double the number of fighters in Syria—if they were 1,000 to 2,000, and if they were 5,000, they would become 10,000." Indeed, Hezbollah—and Nasrallah himself—has cast its lot with Assad to the end. "If," Nasrallah added, "one day came, and required that Hezbollah and I go to Syria, we will do so."<sup>35</sup>

At one point, Nasrallah tried to paper over the fact that Lebanese Shiites and Lebanese Sunnis were now openly battling one another in Syria, and threatening to drag that sectarian fighting across the border into Lebanon, by proposing that Lebanese Shiites and Sunnis agree to disagree over Syria. Addressing Lebanese Sunnis, Nasrallah said in a speech last May: "We disagree over Syria. You fight in Syria; we fight in Syria; then let's fight there. Do you want me to be more frank? Keep Lebanon aside. Why should we fight in Lebanon?"<sup>36</sup> But that pitch did not go over so well with Nasrallah's fellow Lebanese, who wanted an end to Lebanese interference in the war in Syria, not a gentleman's agreement that Lebanese citizens would only slaughter one another across the border.

In that same speech, Nasrallah addressed the "two grave dangers" facing Lebanon. The first, he argued, is "Israel and its intentions, greed, and schemes." The second danger, Nasrallah added, is related to "the changes taking place in Syria." As for Israel, Nasrallah warned that it threatens Lebanon every day. And as for Syria, the regime there faces an "axis led by the United States which is for sure the decision maker." The British, French, Italians, Germans, Arabs, and Turks are involved too, but "all of them work for the Americans." But the true force behind the "changes taking place in Syria"? "We also know that this axis is implicitly supported by Israel because the U.S. project in the region is Israeli cum laude." Hezbollah is not fighting in Syria as part of a sectarian conflict, Nasrallah insisted, but combating a radical Sunni, *takfiri* project with ties to al-Qaeda that "is funded and backed by America" out of an American interest to destroy the region. In other words, the war in Syria is no longer a popular revolution against a political regime, but a place where America is seeking to impose its own political project on the region. Nasrallah concluded: "Well, we all know that the U.S. project in the region is an absolutely Israeli project." And so, by fighting in Syria, "today we consider ourselves defending Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria."<sup>37</sup>

There are, however, few takers for the contorted logic that the Syrian rebellion is an American or Israeli scheme outside Hezbollah's staunchest Shiite supporters. And the proportion of Shiites in Lebanon has fallen considera-

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<sup>34</sup> Anne Barnard, "Pressed on Syria, Hezbollah Leader Urges Focus on Israel," *New York Times*, August 2, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/03/world/middleeast/under-fire-on-syria-hezbollah-leader-urges-focus-on-israel.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/03/world/middleeast/under-fire-on-syria-hezbollah-leader-urges-focus-on-israel.html?_r=0).

<sup>35</sup> Ali Hashem, "Nasrallah Threatens to Double Hezbollah Forces in Syria," *Al-Monitor*, August 16, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/nasrallah-double-forces-syria.html>.

<sup>36</sup> "Hezbollah Leader Hassan Nasrallah's Speech on Syria," *Voltaire Network*, May 25, 2013, <http://www.voltairenet.org/article178691.html>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

bly since the war in Syria began. There are now as many as an estimated 1 million mostly Sunni Syrian refugees who have fled to Lebanon, marking a significant shift in the sectarian balance of a state whose confessional political system is based on a sense of proportional representation (albeit outdated) among its confessional communities. This has, to say the least, exacerbated sectarian resentment.

### **Trending Toward Instability**

The humanitarian crisis resulting from the Syrian civil war is a catastrophe that grows worse by the day. In a region long known for its instability and sparse resources, Syria's neighbors are simply not equipped to handle 2.4 million registered refugees. Lebanon has taken in Syrians equal to at least one fifth of the country's population, a refugee camp is now Jordan's fourth-largest city, and 13,000 new refugees are registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) every day. Within Syria itself, more than 6.5 million have been displaced and more than nine million need humanitarian assistance.

Such numbers are more than just a depressing snapshot of the situation on the ground today, they suggest a long-term outlook that is no less dire. Taken together, the Syrian crisis and its secondary and tertiary effects create a set of "looming disequilibria," to borrow a phrase from the National Intelligence Council's (NIC's) excellent study *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*.<sup>38</sup> Consider, for example, the combined impact on the region of a years-long conflict, exacerbated by sectarianism and fueled by funds and weapons from the backers of respective proxies. From education, health, poverty, and migration patterns to humanitarian assistance needs and the economic impact on fragile economies, the consequences of the Syrian war for the region would be massive even if the war itself ended tomorrow.

Let us focus for a moment on refugee migrations, which have long been noted as factors that increase the likelihood of militant disputes.<sup>39</sup> In today's migration displacements, the vast majority of refugees are Sunni Muslims, posing a serious threat to the sectarian balance of the region, especially in Lebanon. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have moved into Jordan's cities and put a heavy strain on local economies. Neither country can sustain for long the added burden to public services, from water and electricity to health care and education. This stress can open doors for externally financed terrorist organizations to take the place of the state, as was the case with Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s. Without considerably more international aid, the entire region could well be facing increased instability and opportunities for extremists for the foreseeable future. Indeed, according to one study, "hosting refugees from neighboring states significantly increases the risk of armed conflict." Refugee camps provide militant groups with recruits and supplies, and refugee flows include within them fighters, weapons, and radical ideologies. Then there are the financial and social burdens on the host country, including disruption to the local economy and upsetting of the local society's ethnic balance. In the case of Syria, these researchers found, refugee influxes to Lebanon raise its risk of civil war by 53.88 percent, and raise Jordan's conflict risk by 53.51 percent.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (National Intelligence Council, December 2012), [http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/GlobalTrends\\_2030.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/GlobalTrends_2030.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> Idean Salehyan, "The Externalities of Civil Strife: Refugees as a Source of International Conflict," paper presented at the conference on *Migration, International Relations, and the Evolution of World Politics* (Princeton, N.J., Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, March 16–17, 2007), <http://www.cas.unt.edu/~idean/RefugeesWar.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Conflict Spillover," *Political Violence @ a Glance*, February 11, 2014, <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2014/02/11/the-syrian-refugee-crisis-and-conflict-spillover/>.

## Conclusion

There is no question that the ongoing, deeply sectarian proxy war in Syria will undermine regional stability in ways both predictable and not. This testimony did not even touch on Iraq, Turkey, or Israel, for example, all of which are neighboring countries deeply affected by the war in Syria.

Even before the war in Syria got as bad as it has, projections for the region suggested we were headed in this general direction. I leave you with a quotation from the NIC's *Global Trends 2030*:

Chronic instability will be a feature of the region because of the growing weakness of the state and the rise of sectarianism, Islam, and tribalism. The challenge will be particularly acute in states such as Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria where sectarian tensions were often simmering below the surface as autocratic regimes co-opted minority groups and imposed harsh measures to keep ethnic rivalries in check. In [the] event of a more fragmented Iraq or Syria, a Kurdistan would not be inconceivable. Having split up before, Yemen is likely to be a security concern with weak central government, poverty, unemployment and with a young population that will go from 28 million today to 50 million in 2025. Bahrain could also become a cockpit for growing Sunni-Shia rivalry, which could be destabilizing for the Gulf region.

And yet, I doubt anyone could have anticipated the catastrophe we now face in Syria, and the instability that is the result of the regional spillover from that conflict.

I submit that the United States is not doing anywhere near enough to address these critical problems. Failure to respond effectively to this crisis has led to tangible and horrific consequences today. Failure to quickly reassess our policies and roll out a far more pro-active stance toward both the humanitarian crisis and the conflict itself will have equally damaging and painful consequences tomorrow.

I thank you for your attention and look forward to answering any questions you may have.