



TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

If the Castle Falls

Exploring the
ideology and
objectives of the
Syrian rebellion



CO-EXISTENCE

Contents

Executive Summary **5**

Key Findings **7**

Appendices **19**

Note

This report was first published in December 2015. The research and findings of this report are reflective of the context of Syrian conflict at the time of publication, since which the dynamics of the conflict have shifted.

Islam of the Prophet Mohammad's first followers.

Its cruel and horrific acts rightly shock us. But it is not simply a 'death cult.' ISIS represents a continuation of a way of thinking that started before it existed and will carry on if it is defeated. The West risks making a strategic failure by focusing only on ISIS. Defeating it militarily will not end global jihadism. We cannot bomb an ideology, but our war is ideological.

If only ISIS is defeated, there is a high risk that dispersed ISIS fighters and other Salafi-jihadi groups will expand their horizons and launch attacks outside of Syria. "The West destroyed the caliphate" will be a new rallying cry. In a dangerous escalation, these groups could aim to compete for the spotlight – to ensure allegiance from the global fighters and financing that ISIS currently attracts.

Two years after being deported from the UK, the thinking of Abu Qatada, a leading ideologue of al-Qaeda, has featured prominently in its Syrian affiliate's English language magazine al-Risalah.

This briefing sets out who these groups are; their ideology, numbers, and alliances. Over several months our team has tracked and analysed a range of sources to come up with what we consider to be the most detailed analysis available of the major jihadis and rebel groups operating in Syria.

KEY FINDINGS

- 1** Sixty per cent of major Syrian rebel groups are Islamist extremists
- 2** Unless Assad goes, the Syrian war will go on and spread further
- 3** Syria's rebels cannot be divided into radicals and moderates
- 4** The world's inactions drives the growth of extremism
- 5** If we defeat ISIS, 15 groups wait in the wings

Key Findings

Our research has found 15 groups stand ready to succeed ISIS. This briefing sets out who these groups are; their ideology, numbers, and alliances.

1 SIXTY PER CENT OF MAJOR SYRIAN REBEL GROUPS ARE ISLAMIST EXTREMISTS

Our study of 48 rebel factions in Syria revealed that 33 per cent of the groups – nearly 100,000 fighters – follow the same ideology as ISIS. If you also take into account Islamist groups (those who want a state governed by their interpretation of Islamic law), this figure jumps to 60 per cent.

These Islamist groups include organisations like the Imam Bukhari Jamaat, an Uzbek transnational jihadi group that pledged allegiance in 2014 to former Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

Meanwhile, unlike Salafi-jihadis or Islamists, only 23 per cent of the militant groups in our sample had an ambiguous or undefined ideology. These groups –

often affiliated to the Free Syrian Army – are defined largely by objectives, not ideology. However, many are willing to fight with extremists, and would probably accept an Islamist political settlement to the civil war.

The rest of the groups we studied were Kurdish nationalists, or ethnic, religious and tribal protection groups following varied or ambiguous ideologies. Smaller protection groups often ally themselves to larger, more powerful neighbours.

For example, the Syriac Military Council, a protection force for Assyrian Christians in eastern Syria, falls under the command of the Kurdish nationalist People's Defence Forces (YPG), while holding on to its separate identity.

Such alliances frequently change according to short-term objectives and external events. For instance, the flare-up in violence between Turkey and Kurdish separatists the PKK has affected YPG operations in Syria.



Group Profile Jaish al-Islam

- Grouping of Salafi factions operating around Damascus, and the largest rebel group in the area.¹
- Controls al-Ghouta, near Damascus, which was subject to regime chemical weapon strikes in 2013.²
- Has described Jabhat al-Nusra as “our brothers,” saying “we don’t consider them Khawarij [heretics] as is propagated against us, we fight alongside them and they fight alongside us.”³
- Has allegedly used civilians in cages as human shields to deter Syrian and Russian airstrikes.⁴

1 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/05/03/Syria-army-tightens-siege-of-rebel-bastion-near-Damascus-monitor.html>

2 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/15/the-rebel-commander-of-damascus.html>

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zajo2GeKyV4>

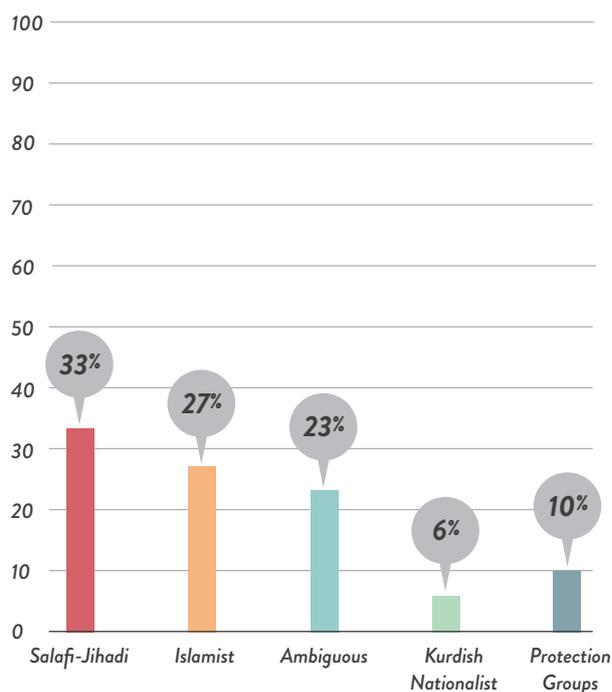
4 <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/syrian-rebels-use-caged-civilians-fighters-to-deter-airstrikes.php>

- In July 2015 released a brutal video purporting to “turn [ISIS] tactics against them,” by wearing the orange jumpsuits usually seen on ISIS’ victims while executing up to 18 members of the group.⁵



FIG. 2.1 Groups by Ideology

By percentage of rebel groups studied



[bels-use-caged-civilians-fighters-to-deter-airstrikes.php](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-rivals-jaysh-al-islam-turn-militant-groups-tactics-against-them-in-mass-execution-video-10357957.html)

5 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-rivals-jaysh-al-islam-turn-militant-groups-tactics-against-them-in-mass-execution-video-10357957.html>



FIG. 2.2 Division of groups by ideology (excludes coalitions)

2 UNLESS ASSAD GOES, THE SYRIAN WAR WILL GO ON AND SPREAD FURTHER

An assessment of the multiple – sometimes clashing – objectives of the groups we studied points to one overwhelming ambition: defeating President Bashar al-Assad’s regime. A full 90 per cent of the groups hold the ousting of Assad as a major goal. This finding makes it clear there can be no peace deal that keeps Assad in power.

Syria’s civil war began with the aim of removing Assad. Groups from every ideology in our sample stated that defeating him was an objective. So long as the West focuses more on ISIS than addressing the driving force of the conflict that the group exploits, extremists will continue to use his rule as a recruiting pitch. Fewer extremist groups, meanwhile, will seek help in achieving their aims wherever it can be found.

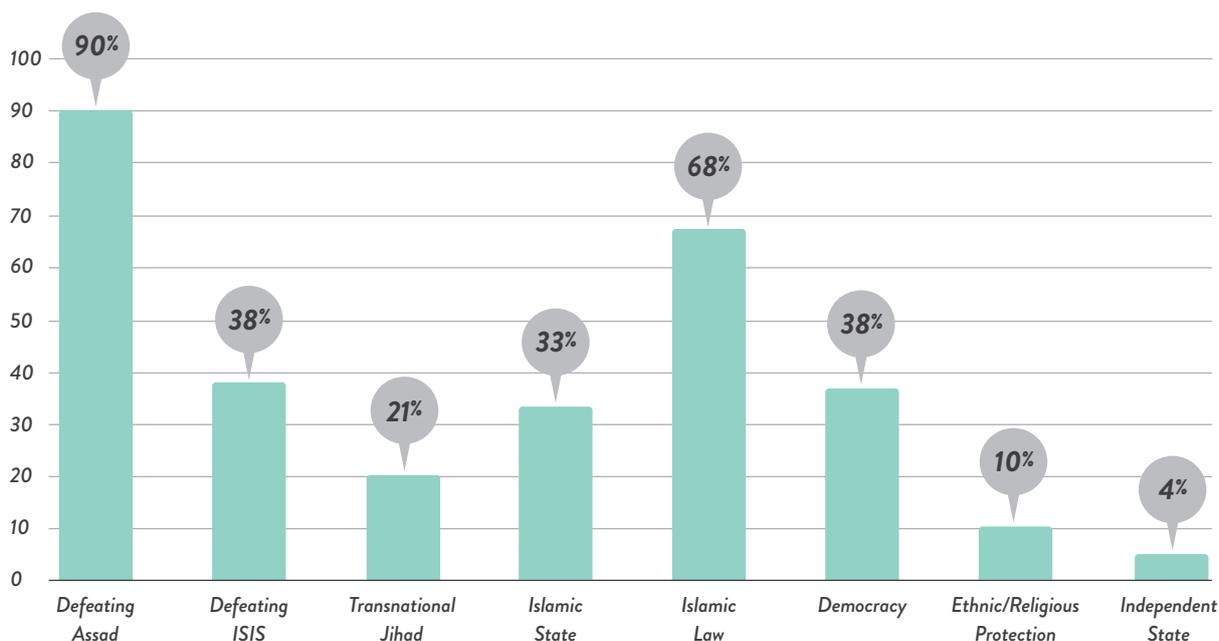
Defeating ISIS was a goal shared by 38 per cent of our sample. This ranged from Salafi-jihadi groups looking to usurp ISIS, to tribal, religious, and ethnic protection groups representing communities under threat from the self-proclaimed caliphate.

The second most dominant objective in our sample was the establishment of some form of Islamic law. Again, a wide range of the groups we studied shared this goal, including Salafi-jihadi, Islamist, and ideologically ambiguous factions. Their views on applying Islamic law were by no means unified, however. Salafi-jihadi groups seek to implement a single interpretation of Islamic law on the state, according to a literalist reading of scripture. Islamists want a dominant role for an interpretation of Islamic law in legal, economic, and political spheres. Other groups simply wish to follow the lead of many Muslim majority legal systems, in which ‘sharia’ is the guiding principle of legislation.

Our sample was split when it came to two objectives: establishing an Islamic state (often transnational), supported by 33 per cent; and establishing democracy in Syria, supported by 38 per cent. There was no overlap between the two objectives. Most of the groups that support an Islamic state are Salafi-jihadi, while the majority that support democracy are ideologically ambiguous. There are some Islamist groups supporting each objective.

FIG. 2.3 Groups by Objective

By percentage of rebel groups studied (objectives overlap and do not add up to 100 per cent)



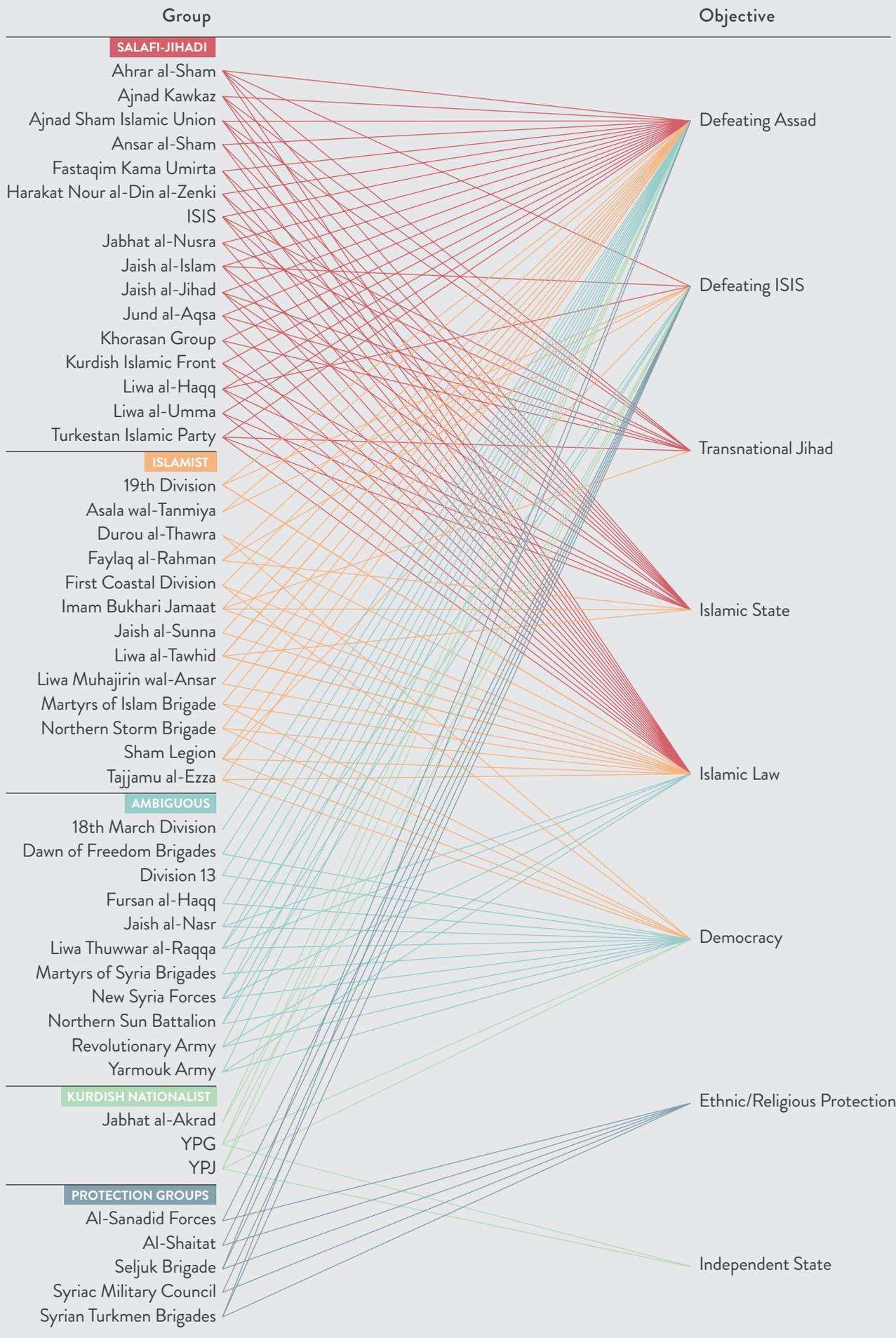


FIG. 2.4 Overlapping Group Objectives

3 SYRIA'S REBELS CANNOT BE DIVIDED INTO RADICALS AND MODERATES

Where short or long-term objectives overlap, groups form coalitions regardless of ideology. Across the country, Islamist and non-Islamists battle Assad and ISIS together. The dominant coalition in the south-west is the 30,000-fighter-strong Southern Front. Jaish al-Fatah, an al-Qaeda led coalition that seeks to create an Islamic state, rallies Islamists, Salafi-jihadis, and ambiguous groups. And Syrian nationalists and Kurdish separatists fight ISIS together in the Syrian Democratic Forces coalition in the east. Groups also tend to be spread out all over Syria; some fighting each other in one part of the country while other members are in coalition elsewhere.

This shows that any attempt by international powers to distinguish between acceptable 'moderates' and unacceptable 'extremists' is flawed. Such overlaps are endless. In one battle in Jisr al-Shughour this year, Jabhat al-Nusra fighters were used as shock troops, with fire support from Western-armed rebels.⁶ Meanwhile, a Free Syrian Army group vetted and supplied with arms by the United States is reported as having lied about its collaboration with Jabhat al-Nusra.⁷

Western attempts to divide the rebellion into moderates and radicals have frequently encountered problems. Four groups reported to have been vetted and supplied with US anti-tank missiles⁸ are ideologically Islamist or Salafi-jihadi: Liwa Muhajirin wal-Ansar, Faylaq al-Rahman, Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki and the First Coastal Division. The claim that there are 70,000 moderate fighters ready to support international airstrikes against ISIS is highly questionable. A recent study⁹ of the probable factions included in this figure included 19,000 militants that we classify as Islamist or Salafi-jihadi (see Table 2.1).

6 <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/jabhat-al-nusra-moves-towards-mainstream>

7 <http://europe.newsweek.com/moderate-rebels-please-raise-your-hands-283449?rm=eu>

8 <https://hasanmustafas.wordpress.com/2015/05/08/the-moderate-rebels-a-complete-and-growing-list-of-vetted-groups-fielding-tow-missiles>

9 <http://blogs.new.spectator.co.uk/2015/11/yes-there-are-70000-moderate-opposition-fighters-in-syria-heres-what-we-know-about-them/>

Group	Fighters
Fastaqim Kama Umirta	1,000
Asala wal-Tanmiya	5,000
Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki	1,500
Faylaq al-Rahman	2,000
Sham Legion	4,000
Ajnad Sham Islamic Union	3,000

TABLE.2.1 Source: Spectator



Group Profile

Khorasan Group

- Small cell of veteran al-Qaeda members operating in Syria. Ambiguous relationship with Jabhat al-Nusra, most likely a 'state within a state.'
- Little is known about the group, although al-Qaeda propaganda has referred to 'Jaish Nusra,' a small cell within Jabhat al-Nusra serving in a 'special operations' role.
- Named the 'Khorasan group' by US intelligence, after a historic region in south and central Asia, because of the prevalence of fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan in the group.¹⁰
- Targeted by US airstrikes from September 2014 to disrupt an "imminent attack" on western targets, after Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said that the group "may pose as much of a danger" as ISIS.¹¹
- A Saudi national, Sanafi al-Nasr, described by US Secretary of Defence Ash Carter as the leader of the 'Khorasan Group,' was killed in an airstrike in Aleppo province in October 2015.¹²

10 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/25/the-strange-story-behind-the-khorasan-groups-name/>

11 <http://time.com/3421701/khorasan-al-qaeda-iraq-isis-syria/>

12 <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/10/us-military-confirms-it-killed-senior-al-qaeda-strategist-sanafi-al-nasr-in-airstrike-in-syria.php>

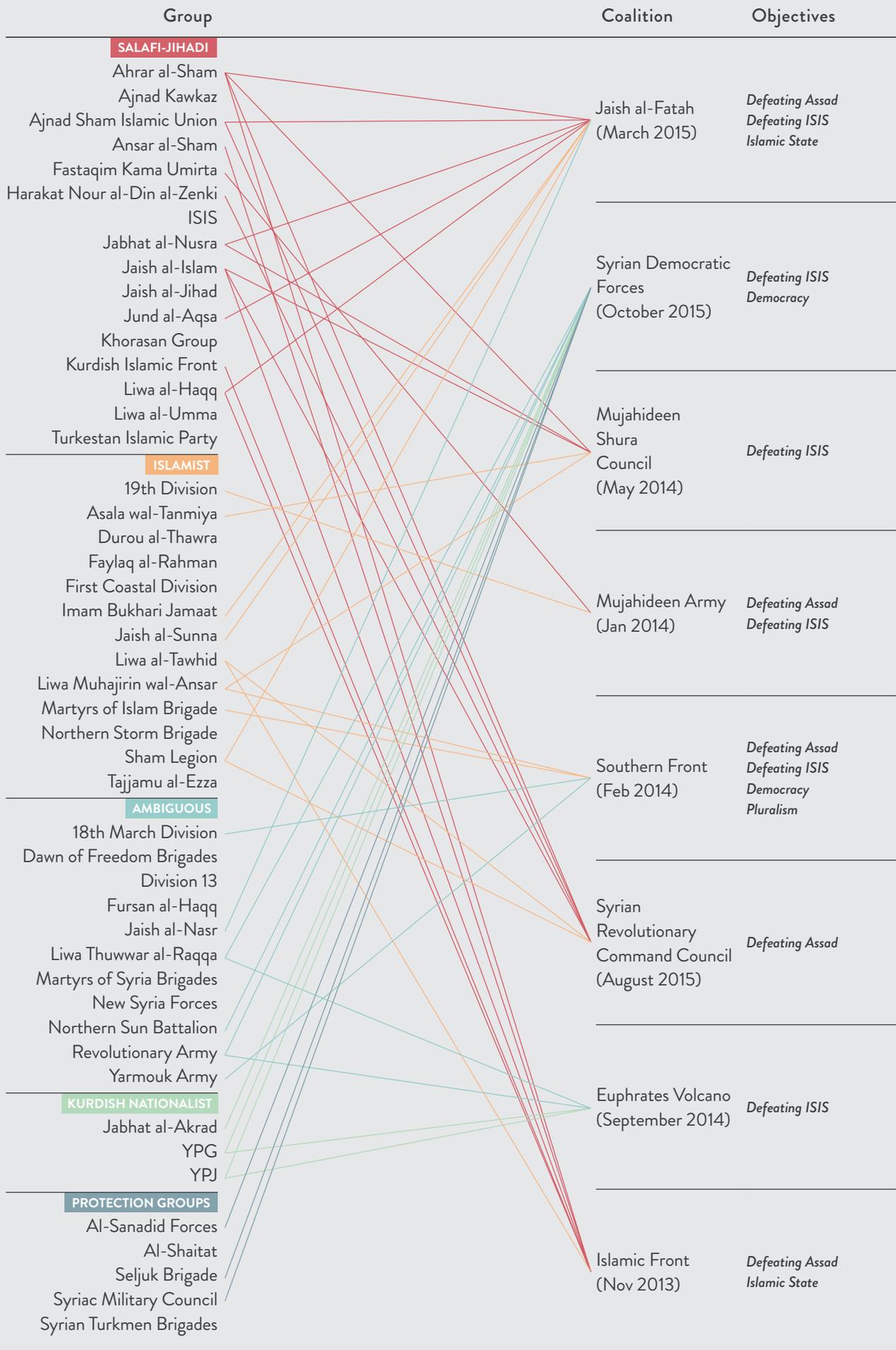


FIG. 2.5 Overlapping Ideologies in Rebel Coalitions

4 THE WORLD'S INACTION DRIVES THE GROWTH OF EXTREMISM

The 48 groups in our study are all still active in the Syrian conflict, though their founding dates range from the start of the rebellion in 2011 to autumn this year. Most of the active Salafi-jihadi groups were formed in 2011 and 2012; many of their leaders were released from prison in a general amnesty in 2011.

The rise of jihad in the Syrian civil war is an interesting contrast with Libya, where international action put a stop to the rebellion, but the failure to stabilize the country left a vacuum for extremist groups to grow. In Syria, extremist groups were prominent in the civil war from the beginning. The fall of Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in November 2011 was followed by a growth in rebel groups in Syria, encouraged by signs that the rebellion could succeed. Meanwhile, the rapid rise in the number of Salafi-jihadi groups indicates that, as the war went on, factionalism (often driven by a drive for ideological purity) caused groups to divide and multiply.

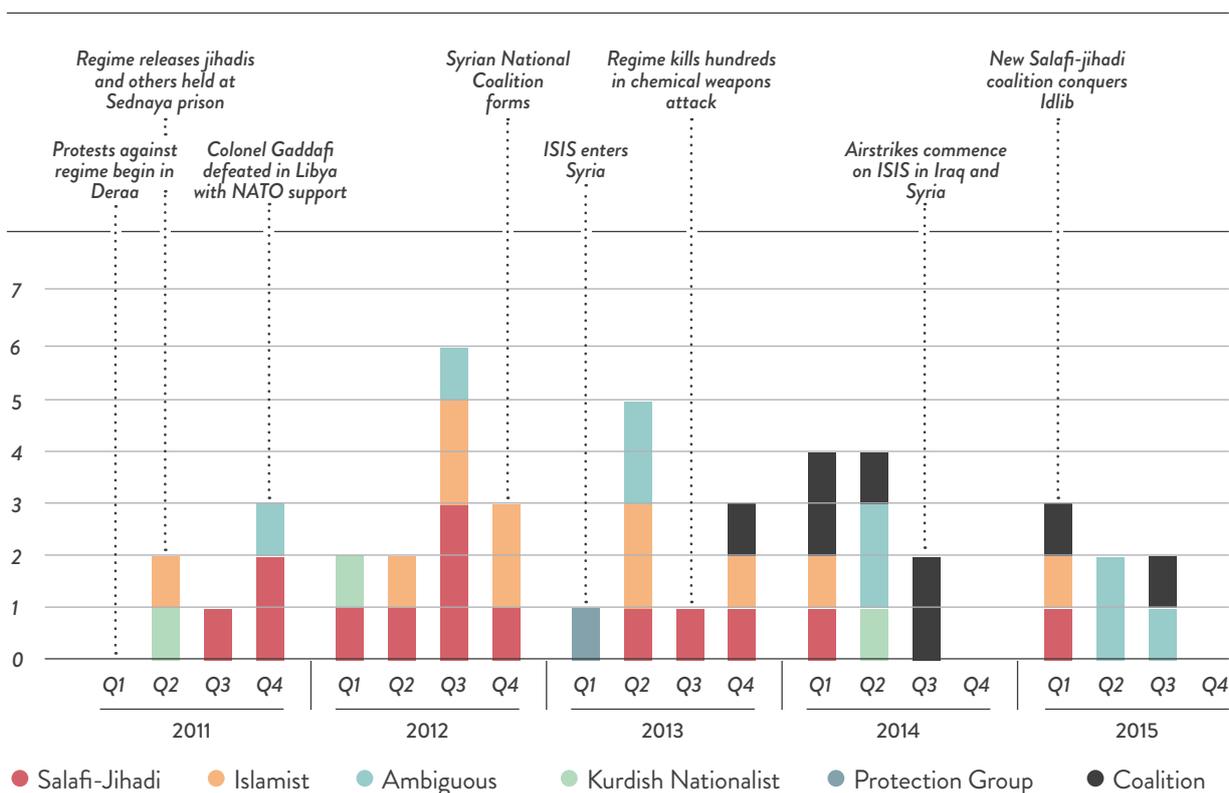
Factionalism slowed when ISIS entered the fray in Syria in April 2013. In the face of its subsequent seizure of territory from other groups, including ideological peers such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, rival forces consolidated, forming the Salafi-jihadi Islamic Front coalition.

Coalition	Formation Date
Islamic Front	November 2013
Mujahideen Army	January 2014
Southern Front	February 2014
Mujahideen Shura Council	May 2014
Syrian Revolutionary Command Council	August 2014
Euphrates Volcano	September 2014

TABLE 2.2

FIG. 2.6 Formation of Groups and Coalitions

Groups and coalitions formed since start of Syrian conflict, by ideology (excluding Afnad Kawkaz and Turkestan Islamic Party)



2011	
Q2	YPG
Q2	Northern Storm Brigade
Q3	Jaish al-Islam
Q4	Ahrar al-Sham
Q4	Martyrs of Syria Brigades
Q4	Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki
2012	
Q1	Jabhat al-Nusra
Q1	YPJ
Q2	Liwa Muhajirin wal-Ansar
Q2	Liwa al-Umma
Q3	Khorasan Group
Q3	Durou al-Thawra
Q3	Liwa al-Tawhid
Q3	Ansar al-Sham
Q3	Liwa al-Haqq
Q3	Liwa Thuwwar al-Raqqa
Q4	Martyrs of Islam Brigade
Q4	Asala wal-Tanmiya
Q4	Fastaqim Kama Umirta
2013	
Q1	Syriac Military Council
Q2	19th Division
Q2	ISIS
Q2	18th March Division
Q2	Imam Bukhari Jamaat
Q2	Division 13
Q3	Kurdish Islamic Front
Q4	Faylaq al-Rahman
Q4	Ajnad Sham Islamic Union
Q4	Islamic Front
2014	
Q1	Sham Legion
Q1	Jund al-Aqsa
Q1	Mujahideen Army
Q1	Southern Front
Q2	Dawn of Freedom Brigades
Q2	Northern Sun Battalion
Q2	Jabhat al-Akrad
Q2	Mujahideen Shura Council
Q3	Syrian Revolutionary Command Council
Q3	Euphrates Volcano
2015	
Q1	Jaish al-Sunna
Q1	Jaish al-Jihad
Q1	Jaish al-Fatah
Q2	Revolutionary Army
Q2	New Syria Forces
Q3	Jaish al-Nasr
Q3	Syrian Democratic Forces

TABLE 2.3 Groups and coalitions formed since start of Syria conflict, by ideology (excluding Ajnad Kawkaz and Turkestan Islamic Party)

But perhaps one of the most interesting developments followed the Assad regime killed hundreds in a chemical weapons attack in August 2013. With no international intervention after the attack in Ghouta, six coalitions still active in the conflict today were established within just over a year. This indicates that, in lieu of significant global support, the rebel groups consolidated to strengthen their hands against the regime.

Meanwhile, the longer the war continues without comprehensive international action to support rebels' dominant goal – defeating Assad – the greater the danger of more of Syria falling to groups that share ISIS' ideology. We can already see this in the fall of the city of Idlib to the Jaish al-Fatah coalition in March 2015. This coalition is dominated by Salafi-jihadis determined to create an Islamic state. Idlib was the second provincial capital to fall entirely to rebel groups after ISIS captured Raqqa.



Group Profile

Ahrar Al-Sham

- Sectarian, linked to atrocities against Alawis and Shia.
- An internationalist group, with stated aims to 'destroy with our hands Sykes-Picot's walls.'¹³
- Its statement of aims includes the complete "overthrow [of] the Assad regime in Syria and build[ing] an Islamic state whose only sovereign, reference, ruler, direction, and individual, societal and nationwide unifier is Allah Almighty's Sharia (law)."¹⁴
- Foreign fighters among its members, including from the West.¹⁵
- Close ties to al-Qaeda, with previous senior members (including Abu Khaled al-Suri, a veteran jihadi killed by ISIS in 2014) having

¹³ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/ahrar-al-sham-s-apocalyptic-vision-syria-and-beyond-455405201>

¹⁴ <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2014/09/20149147499306405.htm#a2>

¹⁵ <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>

been very close to the al-Qaeda leadership.

- The group has executed those who violate its interpretation of Islamic law in the territory it controls, and beheaded captured opponents.

■

Group Profile

Jabhat Al-Nusra

- Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, reaffirming in December its commitment to the group's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹⁶
- Has successfully embedded itself into broad coalitions fighting Assad, alongside factions including the FSA in the battle for Idlib city.
- Destroyed the US-trained anti-ISIS group 'Division 30' immediately after it re-entered Syria, showing off captured US weaponry.¹⁷
- Thought to have the second-largest number of foreign fighters in Syria.
- In August 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra chief spokesman Abu Firas al-Suri said "our goals are not limited to Syria, but our current battle is."¹⁸

■

16 <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/12/al-nusrah-front-leader-refuses-to-break-with-al-qaeda.php>

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

18 <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaeda-plays-a-long-game-in-syria>

5 IF WE DEFEAT ISIS, 15 GROUPS WAIT IN THE WINGS

The 16 Salafi-jihadi groups fighting in the Syrian civil war have some 96,000 fighters in their ranks. According to the latest CIA estimate, ISIS accounts for only 31,000 of these.¹⁹

Previous research from the Institute revealed the shared ideology of Salafi-jihadi groups.²⁰ ISIS is no more extreme than al-Qaeda, Ahrar al-Sham or any other group that shares its ideology. Their short-term objectives may differ, but ultimately all such groups pose a threat to the West if they operate unchallenged.

If ISIS is defeated, there are at least 65,000 fighters belonging to other Salafi-jihadi groups ready to take its place. Of these groups, four are large enough to hold territory and build their utopian Islamic state: Ahrar al-Sham (15,000), Jabhat al-Nusra (10,000), Jaish al-Islam (17,000), and Liwa al-Umma (6,000). That's a total of 48,000 militants, who have also shown willingness to join forces in coalitions.

Group	Fighters
Ahrar al-Sham	15,000
Ajnad Kawkaz	50
Ajnad Sham Islamic Union	3,000
Jabhat al-Nusra	10,000
Jaish al-Jihad	400
Jund al-Aqsa	1,000
Turkestan Islamic Party	1,000
Khorasan Group	50

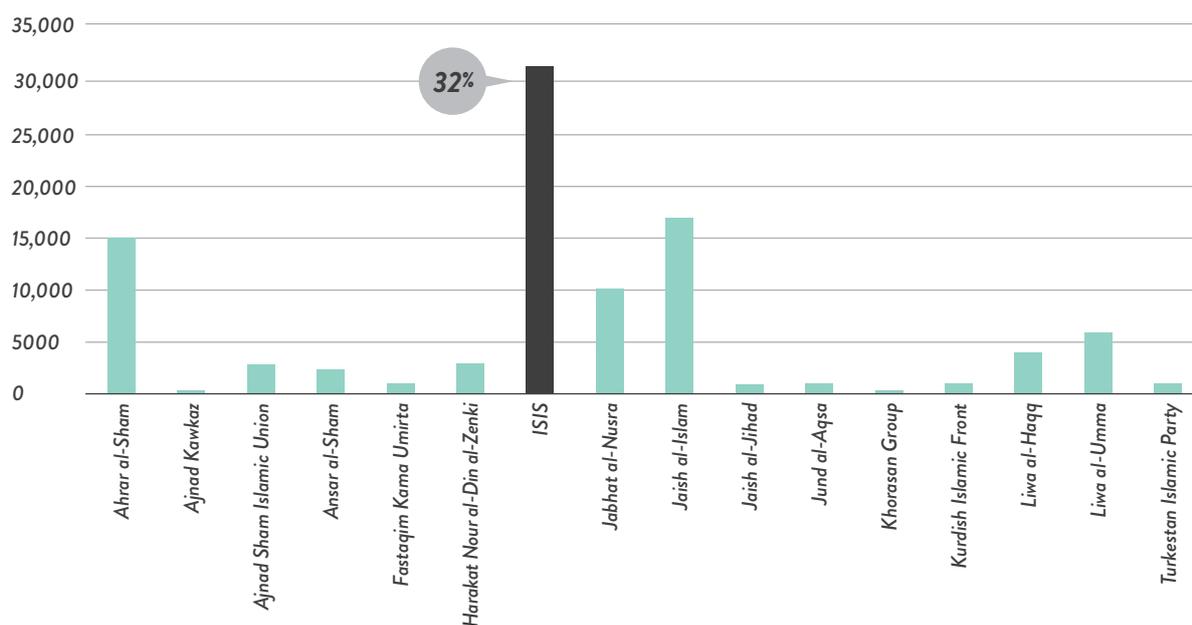
TABLE. 2.4

In our study alone, there are 15 Salafi-jihadi groups, many opposed to ISIS, which share the group's vicious ideology and will benefit from its defeat. Of

19 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29169914>

20 'Inside the Jihadi Mind: Understanding Ideology and Propaganda', October 2015. <http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/reports-analysis/report/inside-jihadi-mind>

FIG. 2.7 Fighters for Salafi-Jihadi Groups
Strength in Salafi-jihadi groups in Syria, by number of fighters



these, eight have explicitly committed themselves to international jihad, making them highly likely to support attacks on the West.

These eight transnational Salafi-jihadi groups alone account for over 30,000 militants, including foreign fighters.

Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, has claimed that 30 per cent of his force is made up of foreign fighters.²¹ If these militants reflect the proportions of foreign fighters in the wider conflict,²² this would indicate over 70 British citizens fighting for the group.

CONCLUSION

These figures – which represent just a selection of currently active groups in the Syrian conflict – demonstrate the importance of a holistic approach to the conflict. The vast majority of militant groups in the civil war, regardless of their ideological affiliations, wish to depose Assad. Unless Assad goes, any peace deal will fail.

²¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/nusra-leader-conflict-isil-syria-150604021024858.html%3E>

²² http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate4.pdf

However, without regional support to pacify the country, the defeat of Assad alone will not end the conflict either, and will leave it vulnerable to domination by extremist forces. International attempts to divide the rebellion into moderates and extremists are bound to fail, because the rebels themselves rarely make the same distinction.

The greatest danger are the groups that share the ideology of ISIS, but are being ignored in the battle.

While some groups apply tests of ideological purity to their allies, others are more pragmatic, and will work with whatever group supports their objectives. With the dominance of Islamist and Salafi-jihadi groups in the conflict, this makes it highly likely that any ultimate settlement of the conflict will have an Islamist hue.

The greatest danger to the international community are the groups that share the ideology of ISIS, but are being ignored in the battle to defeat the group. While military efforts against ISIS are necessary, policy makers must recognise that its defeat will not end the threat of Salafi-jihadism unless it is accompanied by an intellectual and theological defeat of the pernicious ideology that drives it.

Methodology

The data in this briefing represents a cross-section of 48 groups from across the Syrian rebellion. The CRG's analysts drew these groups from a sample of 90 that are active in the Syrian civil war, including pro-regime forces. The 90 groups in our full sample do not represent a comprehensive analysis of every group active in the conflict. The groups were chosen on the basis of their significance (in terms of media and government interest) or size.

Our assessment of the ideology and objectives of each was calculated on the basis of its official statements, reported statements of its senior membership, public government and intelligence assessments, and open-source reports.

Membership figures for groups were calculated where possible on the most recent publicly available intelligence assessment. Where this was not available, our analysts drew a reasonable estimate from public reports and statements by group members.

Glossary

Salafi-Jihadism / A transnational religious-political ideology based on a literalist reading of scripture and a belief in violent jihad to enforce a return to the perceived Islam of the Prophet Mohammad's first followers.

Islamism / A modern religious-political ideology requiring a dominant role for an interpretation of Islam as state law.

Ambiguous / Rebel groups without any clearly stated ideological goals.

Protection Groups / Tribal, ethnic, and religious groups primarily focused on protecting their respective communities.

Kurdish Nationalist / Groups emphasising Kurdish national identity based on shared ethnic or cultural attributes.

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Five years on from the secular rising in the Middle East commonly known as the “Arab Spring,” Syria now hosts the largest gathering of jihadi groups in modern times.

The current focus on a military defeat of ISIS does not consider the other groups in Syria (and around the world) with exactly the same global ideology and ambition.

Our research has found 15 groups stand ready to succeed ISIS. Their ideology is Salafi-jihadism: a transnational religious-political ideology based on a belief in violent jihad to enforce a return to a perceived Islam of the Prophet Mohammad’s first followers.

Its cruel and horrific acts rightly shock us. But ISIS is not simply a ‘death cult.’ The group represents a continuation of a way of thinking that started before it existed and will carry on if it is defeated. The West risks making a strategic failure by focusing only on ISIS. Defeating it militarily will not end global jihadism.

Over several months our team has tracked and analysed a range of sources to come up with what we consider to be the most detailed analysis available of the major jihadis and rebel groups operating in Syria.

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