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The Assad Regime Is Using ISIS to Justify its Activities in Eastern Syria

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Brief Analysis

To combat the effects of the regime's destabilizing activities in eastern Syria, the United States can focus on supporting local Arab tribes.

Actors in eastern Syria are continuing to use the fight against ISIS to justify the presence of their forces and conceal their violent actions against the local population. In particular, the Assad regime has continued to highlight what it [characterizes as ISIS offensives](#) both as ways to conceal its own brutal actions and push the international community towards a political solution in eastern Syria favorable to its interests. In combatting these activities justified as measures to counter ISIS, the United States [could begin supporting local Arab tribes](#), a large population in eastern Syria who have not yet claimed an official allegiance with any side in the conflict.

In March 2019, the Trump administration and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [announced that ISIS had been totally eliminated from Syria](#). Today, however, ISIS is certainly operating in the region. For one, there are ongoing concerns about conditions in the al-Hol camp, where significant numbers of ISIS family members are held and [recent raids captured one senior ISIS member](#). Furthermore, ISIS still controls small [enclaves](#) in Syria and northern Iraq that require consistent attention to prevent their spread. Nonetheless, ISIS activity in Syria is nowhere near what it was before 2019, and ISIS is far from being the most consequential or dangerous actor in the country at present.

Regardless of its highly weakened status, however, the elimination of ISIS continues to serve as a justification for entering the struggle over Syria's eastern region, which is rich in oil. In this regard, the Assad regime has mastered the strategy of creating an enemy for the international community and then touting its own ability to fight and eliminate it alone. The regime then uses that "fight" to achieve other goals. The Assad regime has already used this

strategy several times, including under Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, who used the presence of terrorist groups as an excuse to support resistance against the U.S. forces in Iraq in the nineties. In addition, the regime's intelligence institutions have used terrorist groups to destabilize any stability in neighboring countries.

Similarly, during the Syrian Civil War, the regime has used ISIS as a scapegoat to conceal its own brutal behavior. This trend is apparent in the 2012 kidnapping of the American journalist Austin Tice from an area near Damascus. Initially, a video recording of the incident was released to media showing armed men kidnapping Tice, yet experts determined the video was fake. It was only in 2016 that U.S. officials received information from regime personnel indicating that Tice was being held in the military prison of the Republican Guard—affiliated with Bashar al-Assad directly. The United States has since attempted to negotiate Tice's release to no avail, and U.S. officials believe that there are four other American hostages being held by the regime in Syria—Biden administration officials continue to work towards Tice's release.

Moreover, Tice's case is far from the only forced disappearance or killing executed by the regime or its partners and blamed on ISIS. In 2013, the dissident Lieutenant Abdul Wahhab Muhammad al-Khalaf was kidnapped in Raqqa from the ISIS checkpoint of al-Maqs. His kidnapping sparked outrage among members of his Al-Busrai clan that almost led to an armed clash between it and ISIS, until ISIS issued a statement that it had not been responsible for this kidnapping incident, providing evidence that he had instead been kidnapped by the Assad regime. What's more, the incident coincided with the disappearance of the Jesuit father Paolo Dall'Oglio from the same region, where it likewise became clear after extensive research and investigations conducted by the security office of the Ahrar al-Sham Movement that the regime, and not ISIS, was likely responsible for his disappearance.

This kind of behavior has continued up to recent years and goes beyond kidnappings and disappearances. Last March, more than 21 people in the Maadan region in the Badia of Raqqa—most of them local shepherds—were killed in an attack attributed to ISIS. Locals and politicians, however, held the Assad regime responsible for the incident. More recently, in April, 2020, shepherds were again attacked in the Al-Tebbiy area by an armed group driving off-road vehicles that continued from five in the afternoon until after midnight. The shepherds sought the help of local residents to resist this attack on them, which resulted in the disclosure of the party. The uniforms and the vehicles used by the group indicate that they belong to an Iranian militia in league with the regime. This notion has been further substantiated by some figures working within the regime who have knowledge of the region. Officials from the Baggara clan have intervened to prevent revenge fighting against the Iranians, compensating the shepherds for their losses and treating the wounded with the condition that the matter be settled as an ISIS attack.

In addition to its use of ISIS as a cloak for the regime's own actions, the regime's military activities ostensibly meant to counter ISIS are hardly serving their supposed purpose. In fact, some analysts have even pointed out that the regime's military tactics will preserve the presence of ISIS in the Badia region without a shift in their scope. As such, instead of weakening ISIS, the regime's anti-ISIS efforts serve important economic and political goals for the regime unrelated to counterterrorism. For one, the regime's attacks against ISIS are focused on retaining important supply routes that support regime-held Syria's beleaguered economy. In addition, the Assad regime, which is proficient in presenting phony enemies to advance its interests, seeks to use the ISIS issue in order to rid itself of international detractors and apply pressure for international acquiescence to a 'political solution' in Syria. This solution, which Russia has consistently promoted, would serve to maintain the regime's control over the country.

This political solution is especially attractive to Assad and its sponsor, Russia, given the stagnant situation in eastern Syria. While Syria's decade-long war has shaped and scarred the entire country in its own way, the east faces a particularly entrenched, complex state of conflict. The multiplicity of players and the complicated nature of the conflict in eastern Syria has produced a dynamic that closely resembles proxy wars during the Cold War, with Russia and the United States both supporting local forces while only occasionally involving themselves directly. Now, with the

U.S.-backed majority-Kurdish SDF controlling much of northeastern Syria east of the Euphrates river, and the Russian-backed regime forces controlling much of the neighboring territory west and south of the river (along with regime-aligned Iranian-backed militias), the situation in the region has locked into a **festering stalemate**.

Until a favorable political solution is reached, however, the Assad regime can benefit from continued instability and conflict in eastern Syria. For that reason, it fuels the fire of disagreement between the components of the population in order to prevent the stability of the region, often using ISIS to justify its destabilizing activities. As part of that strategy, the regime **exploits the lack of U.S. support for local Arab tribes**, which are the largest component in the Deir Ezzour region in the east. These tribes are in serious need of international and U.S. support, in order to fight the ISIS forces which displaced them from their homes, resist Iranian penetration and to stand in the face of Russian and regime ambitions.

Given the fact that these tribes are often the victims of regime attacks blamed on ISIS, the United States could support the Arab tribes in the region as a way to combat the destabilizing activities of the regime in eastern Syria while keeping them from acquiescing to Russia or Iran. This support would also help prevent any agreement by local groups to a political solution that favors the regime's interests.

In general, the United States should be quick to recognize the use of ISIS as a scapegoat for Syrian regime activities and should continue to clarify the truth about ISIS activities in Syria so as to weaken the regime's propaganda efforts. In doing so, the United States could support local Arab tribes, already in desperate need of international attention, and solidify anti-Russian and anti-Iranian sentiment among local populations in the region. ❖



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