

# The New Great Game: How Regional Powers Are Carving Up Syria

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Articles & Testimony

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**Recognizing the various spheres of influence in Syria and working with its neighbors to stabilize each piece of the puzzle could be a vital first step toward putting it back together again.**

**J**ust two weeks ago, the first 54 graduates of Washington's trumpeted program to train and equip the Syrian opposition crossed from Turkey into Syria. They were immediately attacked by al Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra, which killed and captured a number of the trainees. The media and Congress rightfully focused on the inauspicious start to a program conceived well over a year ago, but lost in the shuffle was the fact that the unit's commander is a Syrian Turkmen -- an ethnic Turk with Syrian citizenship -- and that the area through which the unit marched into Syria, the same territory that Turkey now proposes as a safe zone, is dominated by the very same sect.

Turkey is hardly alone in efforts to carve out friendly zones in the mayhem of the Syrian war. For over two years, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is based southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq, has worked with its own local affiliate to establish Rojava, the Western province of Kurdistan. Jordan, whose intelligence services have been active in southern Syria for years, has been reaching out to local fighters and tribesmen in a bid to keep the Islamic State (also called ISIS) at bay. And some in Israel are considering working with Syria's Druze community, parts of which straddle the Golan frontier. On a regional level, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are also supporting groups in both northern and southern Syria, and Iran is sending record numbers of Hezbollah and Shia militiamen and billions of dollars annually to assist the Bashar al-Assad regime in western Syria.

As most of the world has stood by and watched Syria's disintegration, regional powers have been busy claiming spheres of influence in the country in the name of security and humanitarian assistance. Bit by bit, Syria's neighbors are redrawing that country's map, the balance of power in the Middle East, and U.S. foreign policy.

## TURKEY'S TAKE

Perhaps the most prominent country planning to carve out a sphere of influence in Syria is Turkey, which recently reached a tentative agreement with the United States to establish an "Islamic State Free Zone." The 60-mile-wide zone, extending from the northern Syrian border town of Azaz eastward to Jarabulus on the Euphrates River, is designed to insulate Turkey from ISIS and seal the Syrian-Turkish border. The catalyst was a massive bomb blast in late July, claimed by ISIS, which killed 32 and injured 100 in the Turkish town of Suruc. In theory, Syrian insurgents, supported by Turkish artillery and possibly protected by Turkish and U.S. air cover, will secure the zone. The agreement is a culmination of years of Turkish proposals to establish a no-fly zone in northern Syria that would serve as a staging area for rebels aiming to topple Assad.

Initial reports indicate that Turkish forces will not enter the zone. But the territory roughly overlaps with Syria's largest pocket of ethnic Turkmen, so Turkey could be planning to rely on them as a local base of support. Turkmen, who number only 300,000 in Syria, are ethnically distinct from Syrian Sunni Arabs, who represent about 65 percent of the Syrian population and make up the lion's share of the armed opposition.

## KURDISH CONNECTION

Also on Syria's northern border, the PKK is vying for influence. Two years ago, Syria's Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian offshoot of the PKK, and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) set up the Kurdish Supreme Committee, which declared the de facto autonomous region of Rojava. The new autonomous region consists of three cantons in Afrin, Kobani, and Hassakah. Although the Supreme Committee and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), insist that they are not the PKK, Turkey has sealed its border with Rojava over concerns that the units are but a fig leaf for the PKK. Ankara, as well as other Kurdish factions, openly dislike the support PYD receives from Iran and its tolerance of Assad regime forces in Hassakah.

Last month, the United States launched airstrikes against ISIS to support the People's Protection Units (YPG) and conducted an operation to seize the border region of Tal Abyad from ISIS. This key battlefield victory united the long separated cantons of Kobani and Hassakah, giving the Kurdish sphere perhaps the most territorial integrity in Syria outside of Assad regime areas. Some in the PYD now advocate pushing west to Afrin to form a Kurdish belt across the northern border of Syria. In response, Turkey and the United States agreed to keep the PYD out of Turkey's proposed safe zone.

## JORDAN'S ZONE

On Syria's southwestern border, Jordan is also preparing to carve out a sphere of influence. For years, Jordanian intelligence, which closely coordinates with the United States, has actively tracked and worked with rebels in southern Syria. As the conflict has worsened, Jordanian officials increasingly find themselves in a no-win situation. If the rebels take Damascus, further chaos just 60 miles from the Jordanian border is almost certain. If Assad wins and tries to retake the south, thousands more refugees would pour into Jordan. And, given the Assad regime's lack of manpower, Syria would still be extremely unstable. If the country's chaotic partition continues, the regime's continued use of chemical weapons and reliance on Iran would further push Syria's rebels into the hands of radical jihadists such as ISIS, a problem no country wants nearby.

A *Financial Times* report released on June 29 to coincide with the Turkish announcement of a potential safe area indicates that Jordan is planning to set up its own humanitarian buffer zone inside Syria in response to the Assad regime's battlefield losses and due to the fear of an ISIS expansion in southern Syria. The exact details of the plan remain sketchy. On June 14, Jordanian King Abdullah pledged to "support" the tribes of southern Syria and western Iraq to protect Jordan from ISIS, which was widely interpreted to mean that he would arm them. But on July 30, the Jordanian government issued a press release saying that the King's comments "were misinterpreted."

Regardless, the announcement followed a debate in the Jordanian press on Hashemite interests in southern Syria, which date back to the Great Arab Revolt of 1916-18. Traditionally, Jordan's sphere of influence roughly overlaps with the Houran, the volcanic plateau south of Damascus that straddles the Syrian–Jordanian border. By relying on Houran-based fighters and tribesmen, with whom Jordanians share kinship, Jordan has successfully kept ISIS out of southern Syria (so far) and kept Nusra, whose southern leadership also hails from the Houran region, in check. Some Jordanians even insist that local Nusra leaders could be "peeled away" to more moderate battalions.

## ISRAELI AREA

Jordan's sphere of influence in Syria partially overlaps with that of Israel, which is increasingly concerned about the political and military vacuum to the east of the Golan frontier. For years, Israel has quietly engaged rebel groups in southern Syria, provided extensive medical support to those fleeing the fighting, and tolerated weakened Assad regime forces on the northern Golan. Israel and Jordan share common goals in southern Syria, most notably keeping ISIS and Iran out of the Houran and Quneitra. But Israel's policy options have been constrained by two hard realities: first, that the most effective rebel units in southern Syria are jihadists, who are fundamentally opposed to the State of Israel, and second, that the only way the Assad regime, which Israel had generally tolerated, can retake all of southern Syria is with direct help from Iran, which is Israel's primary strategic enemy.

Some Israelis see a potential middle path through the Druze, an ethnic minority that resides in both Syria and Israel and whose brethren are historically close to the Assad regime. Over the last year, several Israeli officials have quietly indicated that they owe the Druze a debt for their service in the Israeli armed forces. Outreach to the Druze is complicated by the fact that some Druze are actively involved in Hezbollah-inspired IED attacks along the Golan fence. But a series of Assad regime withdrawals from Druze areas over the last few months have reportedly caused some Druze to look for options to defend themselves against jihadists.

## IRAN'S GAME

Iran's multilayered attempt to prop up the Assad regime has carved out what is arguably the largest sphere of influence in Syria. Based out of Lebanon, Iranian-backed Hezbollah are active in the border region of Qalamoun and in the Assad regime's northern and southern campaigns. Iraqi and Afghan Shia militias imported by Tehran are actively involved in the same campaigns. Perhaps the most prominent example of Iranian influence has come via Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Quds Force activities to develop Syria's paramilitary, which by some estimates is now as large as the Syrian army. This comes in addition to an estimated \$6 billion in annual economic and energy support from Tehran that has helped prop up what is left of the Assad regime.

Iran's motivations for what, by most estimates, is the largest foreign intervention in Syria are to ensure a safe corridor for arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon, maintain a presence on the Golan Heights to attack Israel, and ensure that what is left of the Assad regime does Iran's bidding. Despite the Assad regime's recent battlefield defeats, even moderates in Iran say their support to the regime can outlast that of the rebels.

## GULF GOALS

Although they lack a territorial foothold, the Gulf Arab states, which are mainly looking to counter Iran, have established influence in Syria by supporting Turkish and Jordanian efforts to arm rebel factions. When, in the summer of 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama decided not to arm the moderate Syrian opposition, Arab Gulf countries stepped in to directly fund Islamist and moderate groups in Syria. Some of these funds made it into the hands of extremists, which spread rapidly in opposition-controlled areas of Syria.

Concerned about the rise of extremists, Gulf Arab countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia publicly supported U.S., Turkish, and Jordanian efforts in 2014 to shut off support to Islamists and jihadists in Syria. Yet since then, Qatar

and Saudi Arabia have only increased the money they send to Syria. The exact recipients are unclear, but it appears that the Gulf countries mostly support moderate and Islamist factions while tolerating those factions' coordination with jihadists such as Ahrar al-Sham and Nusra in the Jaysh al Fateh, or Army of Conquest. This group has proven a formidable challenge to the Assad regime in northern and southern Syria.

## UNMAPPED TERRITORY

The map of Syria is changing by the day. Its neighbors have brought their own political, military, and sectarian tensions to the civil war there, which has made it more complicated and bloody. Despite recent diplomatic overtures, agreement between Iran, Israel, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey over what to do in Syria seems unlikely anytime soon, as does a softening of the hardline positions of both the Assad regime and jihadists such as ISIS and Nusra.

But the creation of regional spheres of influence does open some possibilities for diplomacy, something Obama hinted at in his remarks following the Iran deal announcement concerning conversations with Tehran about "a political transition that keeps the country intact and does not further fuel the growth of ISIL and other terrorist organizations." In the short term, neighboring countries and regional forces could use their influence to isolate and punish the most extreme groups in their areas. That would require the White House to orchestrate a balancing act of cutting political deals with neighbors and regional actors on such sticky issues as the role of President Assad, the means of his departure, and what a transition in Syria means. And, in the event an agreement is reached, each country would be given a key role in enforcing it.

In order to open the door for this possibility, the United States needs to recognize that Syria is a broken state that will not be repaired anytime soon -- something it has been reticent to do. But recognizing regional spheres of influence in Syria and working with Syria's neighbors (rather than with Russia in yet another top-down attempt at peace talks) to stabilize each piece of the puzzle could well be a vital first step in putting it back together again.

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