



# Seizing Local Opportunities in Syria

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Despite its many external players, the Syrian war is ultimately a local conflict, with causes and drivers rooted in a complex, diverse country. Without an effective and nuanced local component, external, top-down attempts at reaching a lasting peace and defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) will likely fail; there are too many different, fluctuating realities on the ground. Although this dynamism and diversity complicate macro-solutions to Syria's crisis, they also allow localized opportunities to emerge that, if properly exploited by international actors, can be used as modules on which to build an eventual comprehensive solution to the war and defeat ISIS. In these cases, the United States and its partners would reach out to Syrian minorities seeking security, facilitate their cooperation with the Sunni-dominated insurgency, and build leverage over rebel groups looking for international partners. This approach would broaden the insurgency's popular base, protect vulnerable populations, weaken ISIS, and enable a political transition.

This paper identifies three opportunities to increase US leverage and develop partnerships that serve US interests: supporting Arab-Kurdish cooperation in northern Syria; enabling insurgent-Druze coordination in southern Syria; and engaging with the Jaish al-Islam (JAI) rebel group in Eastern Ghouta, a suburb of eastern Damascus. The authors do not ignore that the regime remains the key agent and driver of violence in Syria, and that the violence is unlikely to end until President Bashar al-Assad is removed from power. However, it is important that US policy aim to encourage sustainable political change at the local level through the broadest possible range of acceptable partners. In doing so, the United States can work through regional partners, especially Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, to engage with local players in Syria.

This paper relies heavily on the authors' access to local sources with key roles in shaping political and military

### Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East

The Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East studies political and economic dynamics in the Middle East and recommends US, European, and regional policies to encourage effective governance, political legitimacy, and stability.

developments in three geographies of the Syrian conflict. The authors present actionable insights and concrete recommendations. Applying them will not require the United States to radically change its strategy or goals in Syria. The policies proposed are fully aligned with the objectives of defeating violent extremists and facilitating an inclusive political transition that preserves as much governance capability as possible. The recommendations reflect the importance of local players and how the United States can best align these players' interests and achievements with its own, through outreach, mediation, and, where appropriate, financial and other material support.

In both north and south Syria, the United States can encourage inter-sectarian and inter-ethnic cooperation between Sunni Arabs and minorities, many of whom would welcome US support but tolerate the regime because they fear domination by the Sunni majority. Without minority support, including Alawite backing, the regime cannot continue to fight. If the regime is to be defeated, it should be by the broadest possible array of ethnicities and sects, so as to ensure a more inclusive and, therefore, lasting political settlement. An effective strategy would empower those social and military forces that enjoy local legitimacy and are least likely to threaten minorities, while offering guarantees to the minorities themselves. This would increase military and popular pressure on a regime that depends heavily on minority support and consistently portrays the insurgency as extremist. It would also strengthen local cooperation between Sunnis and minorities against ISIS.

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Members of the Druze community watch the fighting in Syria's ongoing civil war next to the border fence between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, June 16, 2015. *Photo credit: Reuters/Baz Ratner.*

For geographic, military, and political reasons, Eastern Ghouta does not lend itself as well to cross-sectarian cooperation or pluralism as north or south Syria. While JAI is not an ideal partner for the United States, Syrian minorities, or the population of Eastern Ghouta, it is capable and rejects the extremist ideology of the worst jihadist groups. The authors contend that a degree of US-JAI cooperation may be possible, and should at least be considered, in pursuit of ending the war, protecting minorities, and defeating ISIS. This assumes that the alternative—a competent, ambitious, but isolated JAI—would pose problems for US and Syrian interests that could outweigh the risks and compromises of a limited, cautious outreach to JAI, and deprive the United States of a potential bulwark against jihadist encroachment on the capital.

## Rebel-Druze Coordination in Southern Syria

### *The Druze Predicament*

The Druze are a small offshoot of Shia Ismailism, based in the Levant and comprising roughly 3 percent of the Syrian population.<sup>1</sup> They are concentrated in the southern provinces of Sweida, Deraa, and Quneitera. These areas' proximity to Damascus, and Deraa's role as the birthplace of the Syrian revolution, make them impor-

<sup>1</sup> US Department of State, "Syria" in *International Religious Freedom Report 2006*, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71432.htm>.

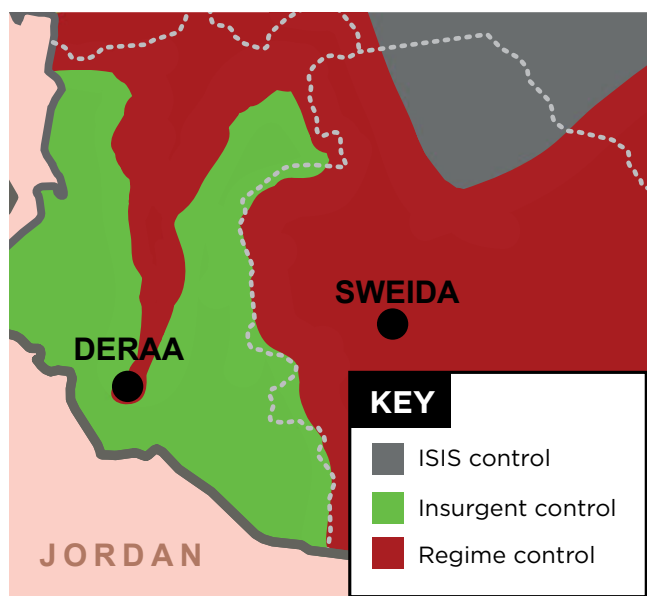
tant for both the insurgency and regime. A large-scale Druze defection from the regime would deprive Assad of important territory and increase the rebel threat to the capital. Syria's neighbors, including Israel and Jordan, are likely in contact with the Syrian Druze community. The United States, however, does not appear to be cooperating extensively with the Druze, although it works closely with Sunni insurgents near the Druze heartland, particularly the Southern Front.

Although the Druze have historically relied on the regime for security, they did not defend it in the initial period of the Syrian revolution.<sup>2</sup> The Druze position changed as the revolution became increasingly militarized and Islamist, at which point the Druze began joining the Syrian army and local militia. Their fight against the insurgency, however, has been predominantly limited to Druze territory, and contingent on the regime providing food, money, and weapons while exempting the Druze from fighting outside their territory.

This Druze position is now coming under pressure, however. Increasingly short of manpower, the regime has intensified efforts to conscript from the several thousand

<sup>2</sup> Muntaha Atrash, the daughter of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash (who led the Druze revolt against the French occupation in the 1920s) played a leading role in the early months of peaceful protests. See "Who's Who: Muntaha Atrash," *Syrian Observer*, December 23, 2013, <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Who/26375/Whos+who+Muntaha+Atrash/>.

## Deraa-Sweida Areas of Control as of August 1, 2015



Based on research from Thomas van Linge (@arabthomnes) featured on [pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com](http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com).

Druze eligible for military service to fight outside their territory, antagonizing some in the sect.<sup>3</sup> Druze confidence in the regime's ability to protect them was also undermined by the latter's recent failure to defend areas outside its perceived heartland in central Syria, including Idlib, Kobani, and Palmyra. Meanwhile, the insurgency has lately made substantial gains against the regime near Druze territory. Some Druze are calculating that, if the rebellion has staying power, they might benefit from allying with it or, at the very least, driving regime forces out of their own territory and concentrating on protecting themselves from jihadists. They are far more likely to align with US-backed insurgents against Assad and the jihadist threat if they enjoy US support and protection.

### *The Case for an Insurgency-Druze Alignment*

An understanding and alignment between the Druze and insurgents—specifically the non-jihadist brigades comprising the Southern Front coalition—would serve US interests. It would significantly broaden the anti-Assad base and increase pressure on the regime, while demonstrating that Syrians need not choose between Assad and the jihadists. The most important audience would be minorities—including but not limited to the Alawites—who need strong evidence of an opposition with whom they can coexist in the longer term, if they are to

3 Christopher Kozak, "The Assad Regime under Stress: Conscription and Protest among Alawite and Minority Populations in Syria," *Syria Update Blog*, December 15, 2014, <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-assad-regime-under-stress.html>.

break with the regime. The regime's ongoing efforts to salvage Druze support highlight the sect's importance to Assad's government.<sup>4</sup> Finally, such an alignment would facilitate cooperation between Sunni insurgent groups and the Druze against jihadists. In short, the Druze are potentially valuable partners for both the United States and US-aligned insurgent groups, and the authors' research indicates that important Druze actors are seeking an external patron or protector.

Although the case for a Druze-insurgent alignment is growing stronger, it would face practical obstacles. The upheaval of war has weakened the Syrian Druze's traditional leadership, including the authority of the spiritual and communal figures (known as *Mashaikh al-Aql*) and their followers. The Druze are, therefore, not united around a particular, dominant leader with whom the United States and its regional allies could partner. A deputy in an important Druze faction based in Sweida told the authors that, despite Walid Jumblatt's high regional profile as leader of the Lebanese Druze, he has little influence among Syrian Druze and has not been able to rally them against the regime, partly because they are not ready to confront the latter.

This does not mean that there is nothing the United States can do to establish a deeper relationship with the Druze, or encourage rebel-Druze cooperation against the regime and jihadists. Local insurgents have a better understanding of the sect's complex politics, but the United States can provide security guarantees to the Druze that would decrease the risks they would face by breaking with the regime. From and with the cooperation of Jordan, which enjoys close relations with many parties across the border in southern Syria, the United States can establish a sustained, aggressive outreach to Druze in southern Syria. This can be used to encourage, incentivize, and enable Druze-rebel cooperation in fighting the regime and ISIS and governing liberated areas. This could involve mediation, extending security guarantees, brokering prisoner swaps between the two sides, and providing financial and humanitarian support including to provisional councils in the Druze area of Sweida and its suburbs. If necessary, the United States can explore providing weapons, ammunition, and funding for Druze self-defense against the regime or other hostile parties (such as the jihadists of the Nusra Front and ISIS).

The Sunni-dominated Southern Front is a coalition of nationalist, non-jihadist insurgents based in southern Syria. They receive US material support and guidance in

4 "Interior Minister: Syrian State Will Never Abandon Suweida," republished in the *Syrian Observer* from *Al-Thawra*, July 7, 2015, [http://www.syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29452/Interior\\_Minister\\_Syrian\\_State\\_Will\\_Never\\_Abandon\\_Suweida](http://www.syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29452/Interior_Minister_Syrian_State_Will_Never_Abandon_Suweida).

their fight against the regime, and have made important battlefield gains as a result. The United States can use this support as leverage to pressure the insurgents to keep out of Druze territory (unless the Druze request otherwise) and prevent jihadist groups from threatening minorities. The United States is already reportedly using a similar strategy in southern Syria. For example, a source close to the Southern Front told the authors that the United States often calibrates material support for the insurgents to fit its own tactical priorities, which constrains insurgent actions on the battlefield.<sup>5</sup> A senior commander in the Southern Front told the authors that the group respects Druze red lines and protects them from jihadists. At the same time however, a deputy in an important Druze faction in Sweida considering breaking with the regime insisted to the authors on Jordanian mediation between the Druze and the insurgency, though the deputy did not specify how exactly this would help the Druze position. A Jordanian security guarantee would certainly be useful for example, but a US assurance would be more powerful still. The United States is stronger, and a US guarantee would signal to other minorities that the United States is committed to both them and to the opposition.

## Arab-Kurdish Cooperation in Northern Syria

### *The Arab-Kurdish Landscape*

The Arab-Kurdish dynamic in northern Syria is more complicated than the rebel-Druze relationship in the south, due to Turkish-Kurdish rivalry and because the Kurds' aspiration for autonomy raises Arab suspicions, whereas Syria's Druze have no such ambitions. However, Arab-Kurdish military cooperation has already shown results against ISIS, with some military support from the United States, and there are ongoing attempts to formalize political cooperation as well. Together, the People's Protection Units (YPG)—the dominant Kurdish militia—and Arab insurgent groups—particularly though not only the Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade—have driven ISIS out of key strongholds northern Syria.<sup>6</sup> This has disrupted ISIS supply lines and put Kurdish and Arab fighters within thirty miles of Raqqa, ISIS's self-proclaimed capital. Both Kurdish and Arab senior sources in northern Syria told the authors that territory liberated from

5 A report in *EA Worldview* corroborates this. See Scott Lucas, "Syria Feature: Joint Operations Room in Jordan Halted Rebel Assault on Key Regime Airbase," *EA Worldview*, June 17, 2015, <http://eaworldview.com/2015/06/syria-feature-joint-operations-room-in-jordan-halted-rebel-assault-on-key-regime-airbase/>.

6 According to local sources, the Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade includes some eight hundred fighters, with several hundred more on standby in Raqqa or Turkey. It is led by Ahmad Othman al-Alloush (also known as Abu Issa), and draws recruits from tribes and revolutionary activists from Raqqa province.

ISIS will fall under joint or divided Arab-Kurdish control, to include policing and military responsibilities.

Experiments in Arab-Kurdish cooperation are also underway in political and civil affairs. Kurds and Arabs have formed joint local civilian councils, and activists driven out by ISIS are reportedly returning to participate. In some areas, the YPG militia has apparently permitted some civil society organizations to provide aid to local populations. One senior official with the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—the YPG's political wing—told the authors that under a joint Arab-Kurdish council, bread, water, and gas provisions have resumed in and around the critical border town of Tal Abyad.<sup>7</sup>

## US MEDIATION AND SUPPORT WOULD ENABLE DRUZE-REBEL COOPERATION AGAINST ISIS AND THE REGIME AND STRENGTHEN LOCAL GOVERNANCE.

Despite these accomplishments, the Arab-Kurdish experiment is fragile and risky. Arabs fear Kurdish plans to dominate or even ethnically cleanse northern Syria. Some fighters have joined Arab insurgent groups cooperating with the YPG to ensure protection against Kurdish forces. Arabs resent the Kurds' stance on the regime, which they see as ambivalent if not supportive.<sup>8</sup> They also resent that the United States coordinates air strikes with the YPG against ISIS, but not with local Arab forces fighting that same enemy.<sup>9</sup> The Kurds, on the other hand, doubt the Ar-

7 Sources within governing parties are not impartial, of course, and may be inclined to overstate the degree of political and military harmony in liberated areas. Nonpartisan sources confirm, however, that there is indeed a significant degree of cooperation over governing and security, although it is difficult to gauge whether or where the YPG is the dominant partner.

8 Kurds never really joined the insurgency, and the regime continues to hold positions near and indeed within Kurdish areas in the northeast province of Hasaka. There is evidence of opportunistic collaboration between Kurdish and regime forces. See John Caves, "Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD)," December 6, 2012, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder\\_SyrianKurds.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder_SyrianKurds.pdf); Christopher Kozak and Genevieve Casagrande, "The YPG Campaign for Tel Abyad and Northern ar-Raqqa Province," *Syria Update Blog*, Institute for the Study of War, June 17, 2015, <http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2015/06/the-ypg-campaign-for-tel-abyad.html>.

9 Liz Sly, "Rout Shows Weakness of the Islamic State and U.S. Strategy in Syria," *Washington Post*, July 6, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/in-syria-the-weaknesses-of-islamic-state-and-us-strategy-on-display/2015/07/06/9bf49114-15e6-11e5-8457-4b431bf7ed4c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-syria-the-weaknesses-of-islamic-state-and-us-strategy-on-display/2015/07/06/9bf49114-15e6-11e5-8457-4b431bf7ed4c_story.html).

Arabs will accept them as a legitimate political force, given the history of oppression of Kurds by Arab states.

There are media reports of YPG violence against Arab residents in liberated areas. Given the Kurds' open aspirations for greater autonomy in northern Syria, some Syrian and outside observers perceive a Kurdish ethnic cleansing campaign against Arabs.<sup>10</sup> Thus far, the authors have found no evidence of this. There has been Kurdish violence against Arabs and their property, but the authors' Arab and Kurdish local sources insist these have targeted alleged ISIS members or supporters, and/or are part of the inevitable violations of war.<sup>11</sup> The YPG has apparently displaced civilian populations, though both Arab and Kurdish sources insist this was done in the context of active fighting with ISIS in these areas, after which civilians were allowed to return.

Additionally, there is a potentially fatal geopolitical obstacle to Arab-Kurdish cooperation in northern Syria. Turkey opposes the creation of an autonomous, Kurdish-dominated political entity along its border, and can sabotage any Arab-Kurdish experiment that facilitates this. It can do so either through direct military action or by deploying Turkish-aligned Syrian militant groups, particularly in Aleppo province against the YPG and its local allies. That said, Turkey's concerns are linked directly to perceptions of Kurdish dominance, and would be allayed somewhat by an Arab-Kurdish alignment that the latter do not dominate outright. Kurdish hegemony in the north, or success at setting up a formal or de facto Kurdish state, would almost certainly provoke Turkish aggression.

Finally, while Kurdish forces have fought effectively in heavily Kurdish territory, they appear less able or willing to fight ISIS deeper into majority-Arab territory. A strong Arab military component is necessary to protect and expand the joint Arab-Kurdish gains against ISIS, and secure the experiment in cooperative warfare and governance.

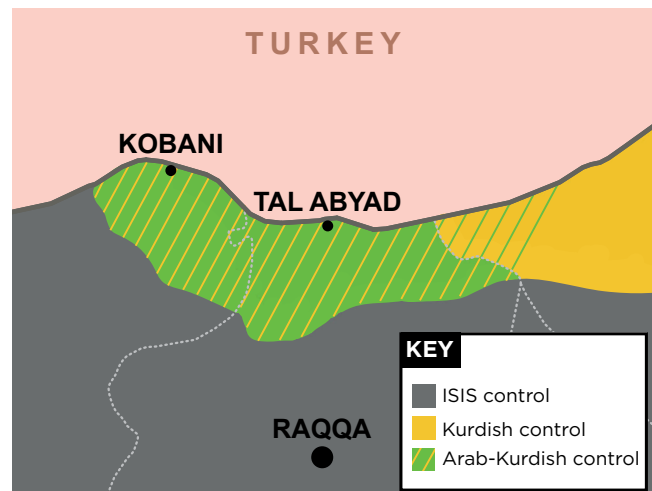
### Arab-Kurdish Cooperation: Why and How

Mutual suspicion between Arabs and Kurds is an obstacle to cooperation against ISIS and the regime, and therefore to advancing US interests in Syria. At the same time, the parties' anxieties create space for the United

States to act as a mediator and guarantor, deepening both the Arab-Kurdish partnership and US leverage in northern Syria.

Successful Arab-Kurdish cooperation would serve US interests in many ways. Most immediately, Arab and Kurdish territorial gains on the main frontline against ISIS would expand. More Syrian minority members would perceive a stake in a post-Assad Syria, and functioning governing institutions in northern Syria would be strengthened. This would also allay US fears of both state collapse and persecution of minorities in Syria in the event of regime defeat. Arab-Kurdish cooperation would also have broader implications for the anti-jihadist struggle in Syria. It would empower tribal and revolutionary groups rather than radical elements of the Arab population—the same forces fighting ISIS alongside the YPG. Together with Kurdish forces, those Arab insurgents could help check the advance of the Nusra Front from the west. Finally, a balanced Arab-Kurdish partnership in which the PYD and YPG are not dominant would help stave off a Turkish military intervention in Syria that would likely bog down Kurdish groups and their Arab allies that are fighting the regime.

### Northern Syria Areas of Control as of August 1, 2015



Based on research from Thomas van Linge (@arabthomnes) featured on [pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com](http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com).

The United States need not radically revise its Syria strategy to promote Arab-Kurdish cooperation in northern Syria. It is already committed to defeating ISIS; replacing it with a workable alternative; strengthening nationalist forces in Syria; applying sufficient pressure on the regime to compel a political settlement; and building and preserving institutions that would survive Assad's defeat or surrender. A functional Arab-Kurdish partnership would further each of these goals, but to

10 Louisa Loveluck and Magdy Samaan, "Syrian Rebels Accuse Kurdish Forces of 'Ethnic Cleansing' of Sunni Arabs," *Telegraph*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11676808/Syrian-rebels-accuse-Kurdish-forces-of-ethnic-cleansing-of-Sunni-Arabs.html>.

11 "Kurds Deny Ethnically Cleansing Arabs," *NOW*, June 3, 2015, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565377-kurds-deny-ethnically-cleansing-arabs>; "Syria Rebels Accuse Kurds of Ethnic Cleansing; Kurds Deny It," Associated Press, June 15, 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jun-15/302161-syria-rebels-accuse-kurds-of-ethnic-cleansing-kurds-deny-it.ashx>.



Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters take up positions inside a damaged building in Hasaka city, as they monitor the movements of ISIS fighters whom are stationed in an adjacent neighborhood, July 22, 2015. *Photo credit: Reuters/Stringer.*

secure it the United States would need to modify some specific policies.

Firstly, the United States can help establish an Arab-Kurdish balance of power by strengthening Arab rebel capability against ISIS, thereby making the anti-ISIS alliance more effective and sustainable, and curbing the threat of Turkish military intervention. This can be done by supporting Arab rebels cooperating with Kurdish ones against ISIS.<sup>12</sup> The United States should extend these partners the same partnership they have with the YPG, including air support to advance deeper into ISIS territory. The YPG is competent, but the Kurds are a fraction of Syria's population, and cannot defeat ISIS alone. A balanced Arab-Kurdish alliance is more likely to endure and to translate into inclusive political and governance institutions.

Increasing US influence among Arabs and Kurds and deepening cooperation between them also requires strengthening local governance through technical and material support to local councils. Areas liberated from ISIS are in a poor state. Kobani was destroyed by months of fighting. In Tal Abyad, where Arab-Kurdish coopera-

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12 Brigades in the "Euphrates Volcano" operation room that helped liberate much of northern Raqqa from ISIS are strong candidates for US support and proof that the United States has options to work with among Arab insurgents with local tribal support.

tion has shown some results, war and deprivation have driven the population down from around seventy-five thousand people to a reported ten thousand.<sup>13</sup> Activists report to the authors that food, water, and electricity are scarce, as is international aid. The local actors and social networks needed for governing already exist. Many Syrians gained experience in organization and local governance after the revolution broke out but were driven out by ISIS. They will increasingly return as territory is liberated from ISIS, but they need resources in order to prevent governance collapse. Building examples of functioning, pluralistic governance is key to narrowing the regime's popular base, encouraging defections, reassuring minorities, and establishing institutions that would survive Assad's removal.

## A Potential Opportunity near Damascus

### *Examining Jaish al-Islam*

Eastern Ghouta is a large agricultural belt east of Damascus, beginning some five miles from the city center. If the regime's position in and around Damascus weakens further, whoever controls Eastern Ghouta would be well-placed to move on the capital. This makes JAI, the most powerful group in that area, a key player in the war. The question of what the United States should do about JAI

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13 Conversation with the authors and a senior PYD official.

is tactically, strategically, and morally complicated, but the answer depends on whether US interests would be better served by engagement or disengagement. Presently, aside from intermittent covert communication, the United States has not engaged JAI substantially, although there are indications that the group is looking for international partners.

JAI was formed as a coalition of some fifty smaller brigades in September 2013 of which Zahran Alloush's Liwa al-Islam is the most powerful, making him JAI's leader. Alloush, a Salafi activist and prisoner of the regime before the revolution, claims to control some seventeen thousand trained fighters (although this figure is not verified) and has reportedly received substantial financial support from Saudi Arabia.<sup>14</sup> JAI dominates Eastern Ghouta, politically and militarily. It has mounted complex, large-scale operations including against ISIS, and runs a legal-judicial system.<sup>15</sup> The fact that JAI has survived years of war with the regime (including chemical weapon attacks, likely by regime forces), a crippling siege, and fighting with multiple enemies (including the Nusra Front and ISIS) proves its capability and staying power.<sup>16</sup>

This makes JAI an indisputably important actor in both the war and eventual peace, one to whom the United States should pay attention. Nevertheless, it should proceed with caution when assessing its relationship with JAI, a purportedly Sunni Islamist militia whose leader has a history of Salafi activism. However, the group's leadership has been inconsistent and vague in articulating its exact political agenda and ideology. It is difficult to gauge, from either private conversations or public statements, how many of its fighters (or indeed its leaders) are ideologues, and how many joined for nonideological reasons (such as fighting the regime or material gain). Regardless, JAI's attitude toward and treatment of its rivals raise concern. It has also been accused of kidnapping activists critical of the group.<sup>17</sup> While this behavior is not rare in Syria, the United States ought to be vigilant about how JAI wages war, who it targets, and

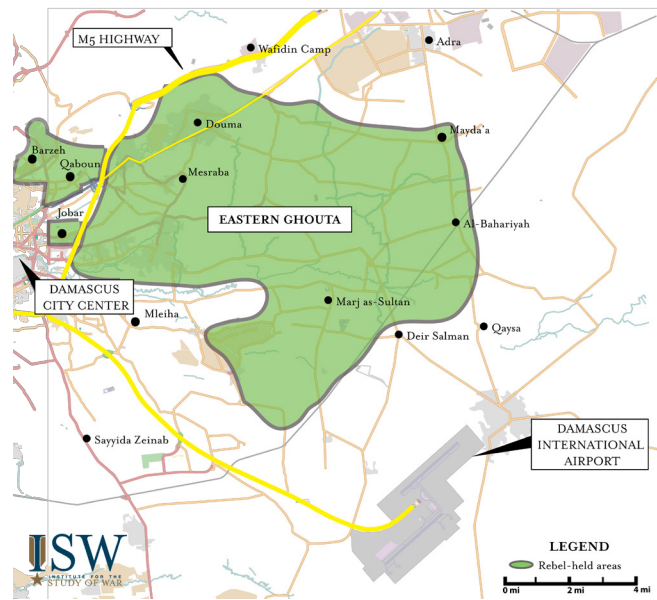
14 Shelly Kittleston, "Syrian Opposition Defends Eastern Ghouta Situation," *Al-Monitor*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/syria-jai-sh-al-islam-ghouta-bombing-alloush-islamist.html#>; Roy Gutman and Mousab Alhamadee, "Islamist Rebel Leader Walks Back Rhetoric in First Interview with U.S. Media," *McClatchyDC*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article24784780.html>.

15 Theodore Bell, "Increased Rebel Unity Threatens Assad in Damascus and Southern Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, October 28, 2014, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Theo\\_Damascus\\_Background.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Theo_Damascus_Background.pdf).

16 "Syria Chemical Attack," *BBC News*, September 24, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23927399>.

17 Ziad Majed, "Zahran Alloush Is in Turkey: Where Are Razan, Samira, Wael and Nazem?," *NOW*, April 22, 2015, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565159-zahran-alloush-is-in-turkey-where-are-razan-samira-wael-and-nazem>.

## Eastern Ghouta Areas of Control as of August 14, 2015



how it would capitalize on further military successes, particularly should the regime's hold on Damascus weaken.

Accordingly, the authors contacted JAI's leadership to better understand its motives, strategy, and ideology and gauge whether there was any room for cooperation, however limited, between JAI and the United States. In a conversation with the authors, a senior official sought to portray JAI in Eastern Ghouta as tough but fair. He denied that JAI had targeted activists who criticized it, insisting that all of approximately 2,400 prisoners held in Eastern Ghouta were jihadists or criminals, convicted by a sharia court.<sup>18</sup> The source denied accusations that JAI sees the United States as an enemy and instead insisted that it could play a key role in ending the war. The source appeared genuinely concerned about the ISIS threat, attributing recruitment to financial motives, lack of alternatives, and opportunities in Eastern Ghouta. When pressed on JAI's hostile sectarian statements, he claimed that he personally opposed these statements and that they were mere "communications errors."<sup>19</sup> The contact

18 Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Human Rights Organizations Mark Birthday of Razan Zaitouneh with Renewed Call for Release of 'Duma Four,'" April 28, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/28/syria-human-rights-organizations-mark-birthday-razan-zaitouneh-renewed-call-release>.

19 In a public interview, Zahran Alloush, the leader of JAI, adopted the same tone, describing the Alawites as "part of the Syrian people" and professing support for a "technocratic" government whose character would be determined by the population. When asked to account for previous anti-democratic statements, he replied: "There's speech for the internal audience and for the external audience," and that "the internal speech is devoted to saving our sons from joining the Islamic State." See Roy Gutman and Mousab Alhamadee, "Islamist Rebel Leader Walks Back Rhetoric in First Interview with U.S. Media," op. cit.



A Jaish al-Islam fighter prepares to launch rockets toward regime forces near the Damascus International Airport from Eastern Ghouta, February 24, 2015. *Photo credit: Reuters/Stringer.*

cited specific instances in which JAI had protected Druze, Ismailis, and Christians in Eastern Ghouta from jihadists, when the regime had refused to take them in.

#### *US Options in Eastern Ghouta*

The United States has largely kept its distance from JAI. This is understandable. Engagement with an armed group with an unclear ideology and agenda, a history of suppressing dissent, and a tendency to use sectarian rhetoric carries reputational and moral risks. Yet ignoring JAI is also risky: it deprives the United States of leverage over JAI, limits the latter's capabilities against the Nusra Front and ISIS, and misses an opportunity to apply pressure on the regime and its foreign patrons in pursuit of a political transition. It also ignores that, as a key wartime player, JAI will also have a say in any political settlement to the conflict, as either a participant or potential spoiler.

Regarding JAI, the United States should consider its options in the context of the Syrian civil war and, specifically, of Eastern Ghouta. This area has been under siege and regime bombardment for several years. It is also an area in which jihadist groups like the Nusra Front and ISIS are trying to make inroads. Its isolation narrows JAI's political and military options. This is not to excuse

wrongdoings by JAI or Zahran Alloush, but to highlight that different environments produce different types of winners and survivors. JAI is a product of the circumstances of Eastern Ghouta. It is difficult to imagine this environment producing more moderate players and easy to imagine worse ones, such as ISIS and the Nusra Front, taking over.

The United States should consider whether shifting toward greater, albeit cautious, engagement with JAI might yield some benefits that would offset the ensuing risks. These benefits may include restraining JAI and curbing its potential excesses; establishing some leverage over it should it emerge as a major post-war player; checking the potential advance of ISIS and the Nusra Front into the Eastern Ghouta area; and using the relationship as leverage to pressure the regime's domestic and foreign backers to reassess support for Assad.

As an initial step, and at the very least, the United States could establish a regular line of direct communication with JAI. Zahran Alloush's recent visits to Turkey and Jordan indicate he is looking to broaden JAI's foreign relations—both of those states offer a potential channel through which the United States can engage JAI. Saudi Arabia, which already has an established relationship



with JAI, could play an important mediating role here, and supply insight into and intelligence on the group. Absent such relationships, JAI is likely to pursue its interests unhindered, perhaps more recklessly and aggressively. For example, it could move on Damascus prematurely and precipitate government collapse; or its fighters could commit or fail to prevent atrocities against civilians.

**US ENGAGEMENT WITH JAI COULD HELP CHECK POTENTIAL JIHADIST GAINS NEAR THE CAPITAL, PRESSURE THE REGIME'S FOREIGN BACKERS, AND HELP BRING JAI INTO A POST-WAR SETTLEMENT.**

Should the United States identify further avenues for cooperation, it can consider using financial means to increase influence over JAI (since Eastern Ghouta is besieged, JAI's most efficient means of securing resources is by buying them from regime-held areas). That does not mean the United States should extend an unlimited and unconditional cash line to JAI. Initial support can be piecemeal, limited, and calibrated to reflect how well JAI respects constraints and limits set by the United States, which could include protecting minorities and refraining from targeting civilians. If this proves productive, the support could be used to help preserve fragile institutions that serve basic needs in the area, and bolster JAI's fight against ISIS and the Nusra Front.

Lastly, a US relationship with a group that poses a proximate military threat to Damascus could increase pressure on the regime's patrons to accept a political transition in Syria. Just as the United States alternatively encourages and restrains its insurgent allies fighting the regime in southern Syria, it could try to do so in the even more critical territory of Damascus. If successful, this would be in line with the US goal of changing the calculus of the regime and its supporters, in favor of a political settlement that excludes Assad.

In Zahran Alloush and his associates, Eastern Ghouta appears to have produced competent warlords with strong local roots and a commitment to fighting ISIS and the Nusra Front. They would not be the first warlords to play an important role in both war and the ensuing peace, and they are likely to if (or when) the regime's position in Damascus weakens. Nor would they be the

first with whom the United States has established a relationship in wartime. There may be ways for the United States to try to curb JAI's worst excesses, and room to explore building and using leverage over JAI. The key point is that US interests may well be better served by trying to manage rather than ignoring JAI, which appears here to stay anyway.

## Conclusion

The United States' key goals in Syria are a durable political settlement to the conflict and a decisive defeat for the jihadists that feed off of it. This requires applying pressure on the regime and its patrons by broadening the support base against both the regime and jihadists. These goals are inextricably linked: for enough Syrians to abandon Assad, they must be able to see working examples of governance, security, political stability, and the provision of public services in opposition areas. Perhaps most importantly, both minorities and Sunnis who have yet to turn against Assad must be reasonably sure that they will be safe, and ideally active participants, in a post-Assad Syria. None of these goals can be achieved without the United States developing as many useful local partnerships and coalitions as possible.

More than four years into the conflict, it is increasingly clear that top-down, centrally planned strategies alone are unlikely to achieve US goals in Syria. This is because the conflict, which is often portrayed exclusively as a civil war, is also a revolution, constantly producing new actors and power centers, and undermining old political and social structures. Its complexity mirrors that of Syrian society amid its ongoing changes. Coalition governments and insurgent training programs based and directed outside Syria are at a serious disadvantage compared with local players that emerge from within the conflict. It is around these local players that modules of cooperation can be built.

As the case of JAI in Eastern Ghouta makes clear, not all of the key local players in Syria are to the United States' liking. After four years of large-scale violence and destruction, few if any groups in Syria are. Neither the Druze nor the YPG, Southern Front, and Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigade are without their serious flaws. Yet all are important groups who, despite their shortcomings, have something useful to offer to the United States, and some may well be more harmful if ignored. Identifying and harnessing local partnerships and brokering cooperative arrangements are the surest means of securing US interests in Syria, and bringing about a more inclusive and enduring political settlement.

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