



Inside This Issue: July 2014

In Review: A Changing Middle East

“[The Persistent Threat: The Evolution of al Qa’ida and Other Salafi Jihadists](#),” RAND Corporation

Interactive Guide: “[The Sunni-Shia Divide](#),” Council on Foreign Relations

“[Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War](#),” Brookings Institute

News Headlines: Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Yemen, Israel and Palestine

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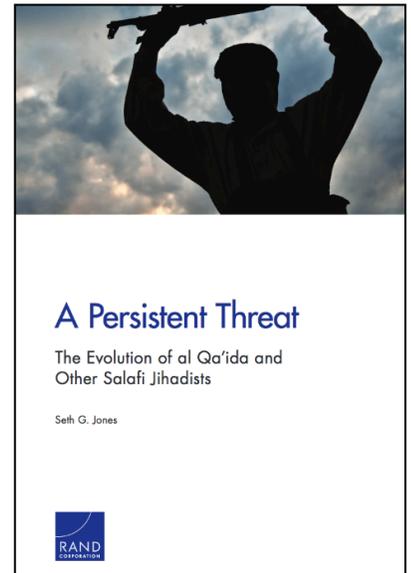
In Review: A Changing Middle East

Even for a region as consistently unstable as the Middle East, the past couple of months have provided a ceaseless barrage of Murphy’s Law: everything that could go wrong, has. From the escalating conflict between Israel and Palestine to the growing influence and territory of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) to the continuing civil war in Syria, the sheer scale of volatility has led several noted experts to propose that the Middle East is entering another phase. The following will consider how the region manages to constantly evolve while it may seem that all this news is just *history repeating itself*.

As difficult as it may be to imagine, the recent uptick in violent Salafi Jihadi movements make the decade-long hunt for Al Qaeda seem like a simpler time. The Syrian civil war combined with Iranian-Saudi posturing through sectarian proxies has complicated the landscape. Seth Jones, director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation, recently published an excellent report on “[The Persistent Threat: The Evolution of al Qa’ida and Other Salafi Jihadists](#).” While the whole report recommended, below are some of the main points:

Abstract

This report examines the status and evolution of al Qa’ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups, a subject of intense debate in the West. Based on an analysis of thousands of primary source documents, the report concludes that there has been an increase in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups, fighters, and attacks over the past several years. The author uses this analysis to build a framework for addressing the varying levels of threat in different countries, from *engagement* in high-threat, low government capacity countries; to *forward partnering* in medium-threat, limited government capacity environments; to *offshore balancing* in countries with low levels of threat and sufficient government capacity to counter Salafi-jihadist groups.



Key Findings

The number of Salafi-jihadist groups and fighters increased after 2010, as well as the number of attacks perpetrated by al Qa'ida and its affiliates.

- Examples include groups operating in Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Libya, Egypt (including the Sinai Peninsula), Lebanon, and Syria.
- These trends suggest that the United States needs to remain focused on countering the proliferation of Salafi-jihadist groups, which have started to resurge in North Africa and the Middle East, despite the temptations to shift attention and resources to the strategic "rebalance" to the Asia-Pacific region and to significantly decrease counterterrorism budgets in an era of fiscal constraint.

The broader Salafi-jihadist movement has become more decentralized.

- Control is diffused among four tiers: (1) core al Qa'ida in Pakistan, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri; (2) formal affiliates that have sworn allegiance to core al Qa'ida, located in Syria, Somalia, Yemen, and North Africa; (3) a panoply of Salafi-jihadist groups that have not sworn allegiance to al Qa'ida but are committed to establishing an extremist Islamic emirate; and (4) inspired individuals and networks.

The threat posed by the diverse set of Salafi-jihadist groups varies widely.

- Some are locally focused and have shown little interest in attacking Western targets. Others, like al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, present an immediate threat to the U.S. homeland, along with inspired individuals like the Tsarnaev brothers — the perpetrators of the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. In addition, several Salafi-jihadist groups pose a medium-level threat because of their desire and ability to target U.S. citizens and facilities overseas, including U.S. embassies.

Recommendations

- The United States should establish a more adaptive counterterrorism strategy that involves a combination of engagement, forward partnering, and offshore balancing.
- The United States should consider a more aggressive strategy to target Salafi-jihadist groups in Syria, which in 2013 had more than half of Salafi-jihadists worldwide, either clandestinely or with regional and local allies.

[\(RAND Corporation\)](#)



Background on ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. By Christian Roman on June 30, 2014. Reuters

Video source: [“Life in a Jihadist Capital: Order with a Darker Side: In a Syrian City, ISIS Puts its Vision into Practice,”](#) *New York Times*

The agility of non-state actors, specifically violent jihadist movements, is nothing new. As Al Qaeda responded to the U.S. deployments to Afghanistan and then Iraq with increasing campaigns against al Qaeda leadership, the group had to become more decentralized. This allowed for the self-empowerment of affiliates and splinter groups. Now as the Middle East deals with a different kind of instability that emerged from the aftermath of the Arab Spring movements, it is clear that we are not dealing with the same security threats as we were a decade ago, but there are disagreements as to what is causing this new Middle East.

The easy answer is often sectarianism. While Al Qaeda and even Islamic terrorism is modern phenomenon, the Sunni-Shia split has been testing the global Muslim community for centuries. In a [fascinating interactive guide](#) that examines the roots and consequences of the Sunni-Shia divide. Be sure to go through the excellent interactive timeline for a succinct yet informative list of significant historical factors that led to the current sectarian strife in the region and beyond. Below are some excerpts of the guide:

“An ancient religious divide is helping fuel a resurgence of conflicts in the Middle East and Muslim countries. Struggles between Sunni and Shia forces have fed a Syrian civil war that threatens to transform the map of the Middle East, spurred violence that is fracturing Iraq, and widened fissures in a number of tense Gulf countries. Growing sectarian clashes have also sparked a revival of transnational jihadi networks that poses a threat beyond the region.

Islam’s schism, simmering for fourteen centuries, doesn’t explain all the political, economic, and geostrategic factors involved in these conflicts, but it has become one prism by which to understand the underlying tensions. Two countries that compete for the leadership of Islam, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran, have used the sectarian divide to further their ambitions. How their rivalry is settled will likely shape the political balance between Sunnis and Shias and the future of the region, especially in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain.



Alongside the proxy battle is the renewed fervor of armed militants, motivated by the goals of cleansing the faith or preparing the way for the return of the messiah. Today there are tens of thousands of organized sectarian militants throughout the region capable of triggering a broader conflict. And despite the efforts of many Sunni and Shia clerics to reduce tensions through dialogue and counterviolence measures, many experts express concern that Islam’s divide will lead to escalating violence and a growing threat to international peace and security.

Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived peacefully together for centuries. In many countries it has become common for members of the two sects to intermarry and pray at the same mosques. They share faith in the Quran and the Prophet Mohammed's sayings and perform similar prayers, although they differ in rituals and interpretation of Islamic law.

Shia identity is rooted in victimhood over the killing of Husayn, the Prophet Mohammed's grandson, in the seventh century, and a long history of marginalization by the Sunni majority. Islam's dominant sect, which roughly 85 percent of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims follow, viewed Shia Islam with suspicion, and extremist Sunnis have portrayed Shias as heretics and apostates." ([Council on Foreign Relations](#))

On the other side of the recent analysis on a changing Middle East looks beyond sectarianism. In a report by that name, F. Gregory Gause, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute recently published "[Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War](#)," (summarized below) which argues that there is a cold war going on between Iran and Saudi Arabia that provides a fundamental explanation for what is gripping the Middle East:

"From Syria and Iraq to Libya and Yemen, the Middle East is once again rife with conflict. Much of the fighting is along sectarian lines, but can it really be explained simply as a "Sunni versus Shia" battle? What explains this upsurge in violence across the region? And what role can or should the United States play?

In a new Analysis Paper, F. Gregory Gause, III frames Middle East politics in terms of a new, regional cold war in which Iran and Saudi Arabia

compete for power and influence. Rather than stemming from sectarian rivalry, this new Middle East cold war results from the weakening of Arab states and the creation of domestic political vacuums into which local actors invite external support.

Gause contends that military power is not as useful in the regional competition as transnational ideological and political connections that resonate with key domestic players. The best way to defuse the conflicts, he argues, is to reconstruct stable political orders that can limit external meddling.

Noting the limits in U.S. capacity to do so, Gause recommends that the United States take a modest approach focused on supporting the states that actually govern, acting multilaterally, and remembering that core U.S. interests have yet to be directly threatened." ([Brookings Institute](#))



Fortunately, a lot of the same forces that are empowering violent non-state actors such as international influence, social media, and communications interconnectivity are the same forces that can be used by the coming generation of Middle Eastern youth who are weary of conflict. Though it is difficult to imagine, the same moderate and open-minded youth who were largely responsible for the sweeping protests in 2011 are still present in these countries. Though he is a contentious figure, Juan Cole (the Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate Professor of History at the University of Michigan) recently published a book that can be seen as the counter-narrative to the fringe yet influential violent extremists of the region, [The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation is Changing the Middle East](#). An excerpt is included below:

[Wired for Change: Millennials, Hashtag Activism and Today’s New Arabs](#)

From sex and politics to video games, the amazing story of millennials, Islam and the Internet

The New Arabs Are Wired

The role of the Internet in the revolutions that began in 2011 has provoked debate. Some observers argue that calling them “Facebook revolutions” is inaccurate and that traditional street politics was far more important, pointing out that only a little over half of the revolutionaries even had access to the Internet. Others question whether the revolutions could even have occurred had the youth been captive to state newspapers and news broadcasts that neglected to report protests or denigrated them as the insignificant acts of a few malcontents or paid agents for shadowy foreign interests. In order to assess these arguments it is important to understand the communication networks in which the millennials were embedded.

**Images:
Divergent Youth**
(left) Street art in downtown Cairo depicting young protesters killed during the 2011 uprisings.
(bottom)
[“Palestinian teen’s ‘revenge’ murder sparks riots”](#)
France24



The older members of this enormous stratum were in their late teens when the Internet was introduced on a significant scale in the Arab world, and they were its pioneers. As will be shown, the dictatorial regimes developed cyber-police to track and imprison or exile dissents. Unlike in previous generations, however, exile did not end their involvement in Tunisian politics.

(...)

The New Arabs Are More Literate

One of the reasons the Internet and social media were so much more popular among the youth than among the older generation is that users must be literate. In the beginning of the century they even



© Photo: AFP

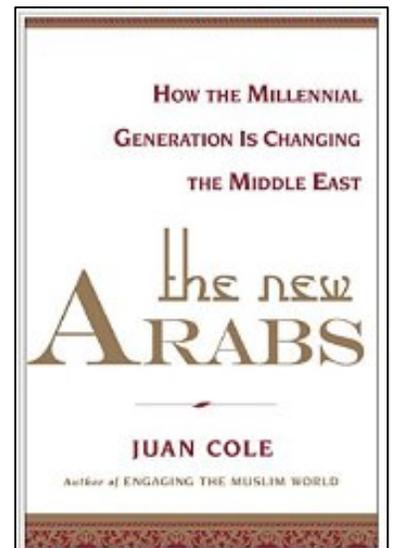
needed to have a basic grasp of Latin script, since web protocols did not yet allow for web addresses or URLs in Arabic script.

The literacy of the Arab Gen Y upset social hierarchies. Many sons could read and write, while their fathers could not, allowing the sons to take charge of certain areas of life for the family. Many sisters became an intellectual match for their father or brothers in a way unexampled in the generation of their mother and aunts. Anthropologist Farha Ghannam tells the story of Zaki and Zakiya, a brother and sister in a working-class neighborhood of Cairo. Zaki was allowed to run around the neighborhood doing errands and got a part-time job when only seven years old. He dropped out of school after the eighth grade. He was expected to lead a responsible, sober life, forsaking his late-night forays with friends into the city. Because of his limited literacy his prospects were few. In contrast, Zakiya was kept at home or in the neighborhood in her youth and on two occasions was beaten by her brother for staying out too late or going too far away. She studied hard and finished high school, and in her twenties got a good job as an overseer in a factory in a middle-class neighborhood about an hour away from her home. She shopped in malls and could afford more expensive clothing. Her income and mobility actually increased as her brother's declined, in part because of her greater literacy. Literate, urban young women are likely to use birth control and limit family size, helping them achieve a middle-class lifestyle.

Gen Y are far more likely to be able to read and write than their elders, giving them greater access to the Internet. In 1980 only about half the citizens of the Arabic-speaking states had these skills. By 2000 the average literacy rate was 61.5 percent in seventeen Arab countries, but among those fifteen to twenty-four, the rate was much higher, around 80 percent, for both men and women. Although in some countries as many as 50 percent of older women still could not read and write in 2000 to 2004, in those years the average literacy rate of Arab women age fifteen to twenty-four in the six countries where there were significant political upheavals, was 82 percent. In three of those countries—Tunisia, Libya, and Bahrain—it was over 90 percent! There is an enormous difference between expecting 50 percent of the people your age to be able to read a newspaper and expecting 80 percent of them to read. Generation Y is the most literate cohort of Arabs ever to exist. This large pool of educated young people in Egypt fueled the rise of newspapers that, despite the country's censorship regime, often demonstrated a streak of independence. The four most popular among the youth tended to have a secular orientation and often took their cues from bloggers and human rights NGOs regarding which stories to pursue.

(...)

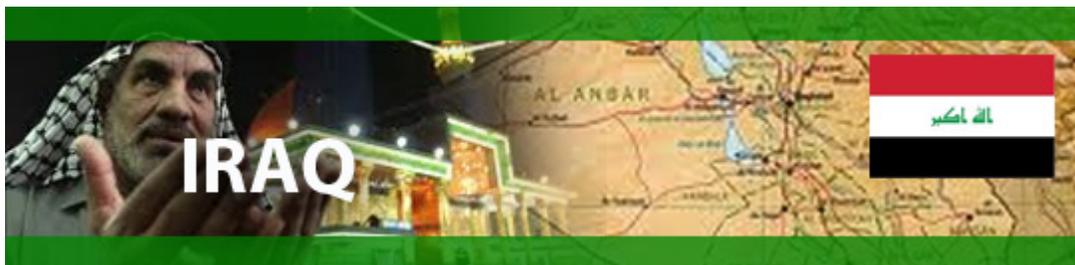
Literacy has long had implications for political mobilization. One of the keys to the long period of European rule in the global South, from the eighteenth century until after World War II, was that these empires largely presided over territories consisting of small rural villages, the inhabitants of which were unable to read or write and therefore were hampered in uniting against their foreign overlords. Some imperial rulers, such as Lord Cromer, British controller-general of Egypt from 1883 to 1907, were suspicious of educated “natives,” and consequently they underfunded education. Cromer was cruel, but his theory was correct: an illiterate Egyptian population was much less likely to be able to unite for anticolonial activities. (“[The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation Is Changing the Middle East](#)”)



Middle East News Headlines



With the backdrop of a changing Middle East, the rest of this news update will provide a series of articles and reports from several countries in the region. The sectarianism, the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the destabilizing effect of the 2011 protest movements and the Syrian civil war all provide a context within which these different factors have led to increased volatility in the region.



[The Islamic State is the Newest Petrostate](#)

The Islamic State, the world's richest terror group, is reaping millions of dollars a day from selling stolen oil to shady businessmen across the Middle East. The homicidal maniacs of the Islamic State, like many shady and not-so-shady groups before it, are apparently getting into the oil business. And it seems to suit them as they reportedly are making millions of dollars per day off of it. The militants who have conquered broad swaths of Iraq and Syria are turning to good old-fashioned crime -- oil smuggling, in this case -- to underwrite its main line of work. The money it can earn from illicit oil sales further bolsters the group's status as one of the richest self-funded terrorist outfits in the world, dependent not on foreign governments for financial support but on the money its reaped from kidnappings and bank robberies. The group has also managed to steal expensive weaponry that the United States had left for the Iraqi military, freeing it from the need to spend its own money to buy such armaments. But even the millions of dollars a day that the Islamic State seems to be raking in by trucking stolen oil across porous borders is not enough to meet the hefty obligations created by the group's own headlong expansion. Taking over big chunks of territory, as in eastern Syria and in northern Iraq, could also leave it forced to take on the sorts of expensive obligations -- such as paying salaries, collecting the trash, and keeping the lights on -- usually reserved for governments. (Foreign Policy)

[A Foothold on the Euphrates, a Boot Heel on the Tigris](#)

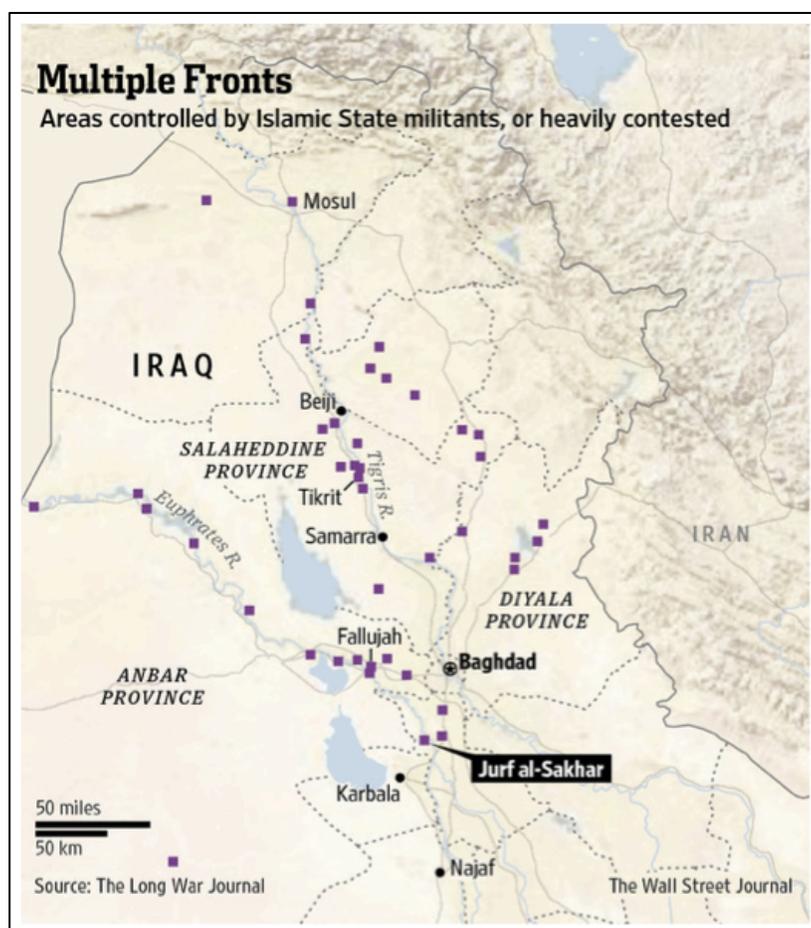
When Raqqa was seized by the rebels in March 2013, anti-government Syrians hoped the city could serve as a successful model for a future democratic and pluralistic Syria. In a cruel twist of fate, however, a new authoritarian force soon came to power: In the mayhem that characterized the transitional period, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham gradually emerged as the strongest force in the city and transformed Raqqa into its de facto capital, using it as a base of operations to launch an offensive that has captured large swaths of territory across Iraq and eastern Syria. The story of how the jihadi organization gained one of its most important footholds in the Middle East shows its patience in coexisting with other groups while it established itself -- and its ruthlessness in crushing them once its strength grew.

Today, Raqqa serves as a military staging base for the group formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), now just the Islamic State, as well as a testing ground for its harsh interpretation of Islamic law. Following its capture of the Iraqi city of Mosul in early June, the group staged a military parade in Raqqa featuring tanks, a Scud missile, howitzer artillery pieces, and U.S.-made Humvees, presumably captured in Iraq. One [video](#) showed ISIS fighters doing doughnuts with a BMP infantry fighting vehicle in Raqqa's city center.

But the seizure of power -- and its cruel application -- came slowly. Back in the middle of last year, several months after it took control of the city, ISIS announced that male Christians would be forced to pay jizya, a tax levied on non-Muslims, as in the times of the Prophet Mohammed. The move foreshadowed the jihadi group's implementation of jizya in Mosul, where it also publicly marked the houses of Christians to identify them -- measures that caused most Christians [to flee](#) the Iraqi city. According to a Human Rights Watch [report](#), ISIS has also established a network of prisons in Raqqa governorate, where it has tortured detainees -- including children -- by flogging them with cables and administering electric shocks. Some of those imprisoned by ISIS were members of rival armed groups, while others were accused of such "crimes" as smoking cigarettes. ISIS [even created](#) an all-women brigade in charge of monitoring and disciplining other women. (Foreign Policy)

[U.S. Approves More Hellfire Missiles for Iraq](#)

The U.S. government has approved plans to send an additional 5,000 Hellfire missiles to Iraq to help the embattled [Baghdad government tackle the threat posed by Sunni militants](#), the Pentagon said on 29 July. The \$700 million deal for the missiles, made by [Lockheed Martin](#) Corp. comes amid other signs that Washington is tackling a backlog of approvals for weapons sales to one of the largest defense-export markets for U.S. contractors. Pressure on the Pentagon's procurement budget has pushed U.S. defense companies to focus more on export markets. Iraq has emerged in recent years as one of the fastest-growing, with billions of dollars in deals for fighter jets, helicopters, armored vehicles, radar equipment and munitions. In response to the expanding attacks in Iraq by forces centered around the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, the U.S. has stepped up surveillance flights over the country, and dispatched more than 700 U.S. forces there to determine how the U.S. might help. But U.S. defense officials have been concerned that weapons sent to Iraq could fall into hands of the ISIS forces. (Wall Street Journal)



[France Offers Iraq Christians Asylum after Mosul Threat](#)

The French government says it is ready to offer asylum to Iraqi Christians forced to flee by Islamist militants in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. **Many fled Mosul after the Islamic State (IS) group which seized much of northern Iraq told them to convert to Islam, pay a tax or face death.** Iraq is home to one of the world's most ancient Christian communities. Two top ministers said, "We are ready, if they so desire, to help facilitate asylum on our territory." It was a joint message from Laurent Fabius and Bernard Cazeneuve, respectively foreign minister and interior minister in the Socialist government. A senior Christian cleric in Iraq, Patriarch Louis Sako, estimated that before the advance of IS, Mosul had a Christian community of 35,000 - compared with 60,000 prior to 2003. According to the UN, just 20 families from the ancient Christian minority now remain in the city, which Isis has taken as the capital of its Islamic state. (BBC)

[Iraq: Kurdish Politician Massoum Named President](#)

Kurdish politician Fouad Massoum has been named the new president of Iraq following a parliamentary vote.

Massoum, 76, is one of the founders of current President Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party. He is considered a soft-spoken moderate, known for keeping good relations with Sunni and Shiite Arab politicians. The vote for president -- a largely ceremonial post -- was

delayed for a day when the Kurdish bloc requested more time to select a candidate. They named Massoum as their pick late on 23 July. **Under an unofficial agreement dating back to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, Iraq's presidency is held by a Kurd while the prime minister is Shiite and the parliamentary speaker is Sunni. (...)**

Al-Maliki has come under increasing pressure to step aside, with critics accusing him of monopolizing power and alienating the country's Sunni and Kurdish minorities. He has vowed to remain in the post he has held since 2006, and his bloc won the most votes in April elections. The vote for president -- a largely ceremonial post currently held by Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani -- was to take place later on



Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Associated Press

Image source: "[Iraqi Leader Maliki Loses Backing of Shiite Figure of Iran for New Term.](#)" *Wall Street Journal*

24 July after being delayed the day before when the Kurdish bloc requested more time to select a candidate. (USA Today, Associated Press)

[Iraq Conflict Breeds Cyber-War Among Rival Factions](#)

A cyber-civil war is being waged alongside the armed conflict in Iraq, research by security firms suggests. As well as using social media to rally supporters and spread propaganda, some factions are employing hackers to gather intelligence. Well-known attack programs have been re-

purposed in a bid to subvert routers and other systems inside Iraq. More broadly, cyber-thieves are also using the conflict to help trick people into opening booby-trapped messages.

(...) Attackers attempt to infect potential victims using social media, said Mr Komarov but they are also scanning the net within Iraq seeking routers that they can then subvert using their own tools. The majority of these attacks are concentrated on four Iraqi cities, Baghdad, Basra, Mosul and Erbil. "The reasons for doing this are intelligence gathering against local protest, opposition parties, as well as their contacts in civil population, or government and vice versa," he said. Intel Crawler gathered its information by monitoring activity on Iraqi cyberspace and via intelligence contacts in the region. Cyber-security firm Kaspersky Labs said the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and other Middle Eastern nations had spawned a whole series of attacks that were hitting people across the region. Senior security researcher Mohamad Amin Hasbini said many of the attacks had been "heated" by the continuing conflict, but it was not clear whether they were all politically motivated. However, he said, there was evidence that attackers were exploiting interest in the conflict to trick people into opening booby-trapped attachments or visiting pages that exploit vulnerabilities in browsers. (BBC)

[Iraq Struggles to Halt Militants' March on Baghdad](#)

In mid-July, the Iraqi army said it had retaken a town the government said was a base for Sunni jihadists. Baghdad's stated victory was short-lived. Two days later, Sunni extremists from the Islamic State drove five Humvees into the town, Jurf al-Sakhar, and blew themselves and others up, setting off a new round of fighting to control the town. On 28 July, the government's retaliatory airstrikes killed 27 people, a local security official said. The fight for Jurf al-Sakhar within what U.S. forces in Iraq once called the "Triangle of Death" — a major combat zone during the American occupation — shows how Iraqi forces are struggling to stave off the insurgents encroaching on the capital. While in the north the government has blunted the Islamic State's drive toward the capital beyond Tikrit, the militants are pushing the frontline toward Baghdad from the south. Jurf al-Sakhar is a case in point. Iraqi military officials say majority Sunni towns in the province bordering Baghdad in the south, such as Jurf-al-Sakhar, have become command posts for the Islamic State, an al Qaeda spinoff that used to call itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.

The town, in Babyl province, has a strategic significance out of proportion to its 50,000 population. It borders Anbar province, which is held by Sunni insurgents, giving it a pipeline to fighters and supplies. And it lies on the highway that links Baghdad to the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. (Wall Street Journal)



[U.S. Unveils \\$378 Million in New Humanitarian Aid for Syria](#)

The United States on 30 July unveiled \$378 million in new humanitarian aid for the Syrian people, denouncing "appalling 'starve or surrender' tactics" by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. "The regime is asphyxiating half a million Syrians in Aleppo by obstructing deliveries of food, water, and medicine," Secretary of State John Kerry said in a statement. "Syrians all over the country are being butchered at the hands of a ruthless tyrant," Kerry said, strongly condemning "the brutally indefensible and illegitimate Assad regime." The regime was "dropping dozens of barrel bombs a day on the city and surrounding suburbs," he said. "The

world must act quickly and decisively to get life-saving assistance to the innocent civilians who are bearing the brunt of this barbaric war,” the top U.S. diplomat added. The new aid brings the US total released for Syria since the start of the war three years ago to \$2.4 billion, and Kerry insisted that it was “having an impact on the ground -- right now.” Some \$1.2 billion has gone towards helping more than 4.7 million people inside Syria, and \$1.2 billion is going towards aid efforts for some three million refugees who are being sheltered in neighboring countries. (Al Arabiya, AFP)

[Syria Records One of its Deadliest Weeks Ever](#)

In mid-July, 700 people died in two days in Syria, in what has been described as the deadliest 48-hour period in the country since its conflict began more than four years ago. And 1,700 are reported to have died in the last seven days, in one of the [worst weeks on record](#). As the global spotlight shifted to Gaza, the past month has been particularly brutal in Syria. Why? Experts cite a bloody fight between Assad forces and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for control of the large Shaar gas field, east of Homs; an increased regime offensive in Aleppo; and clashes between ISIS, which is rapidly consolidating its territory in the east, and rebel factions like Jabhat al-Nusra.

Joshua Landis, Editor of Syria Comment and Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma:

Deaths have increased because fighting has increased. ISIS is attacking the regime now and they're also trying to consolidate, and they're attacking the other militias. They are on a real tear. The whole of Deir Ezzor province saw lots of fighting this month, and there's been a lot of fighting in the Kurdish areas as well. There's also been a lot of fighting among the more moderate militias, because everyone is jockeying for territory – they want to get their own states. Nusra announced more than a week ago that it was establishing an emirate. And once you do that, you need to fight to gain exclusive authority in your territory. The ISIS declaration of a caliphate caused a domino effect, and there's a big scramble for northern Syria, which means militias have gone to war with each other.

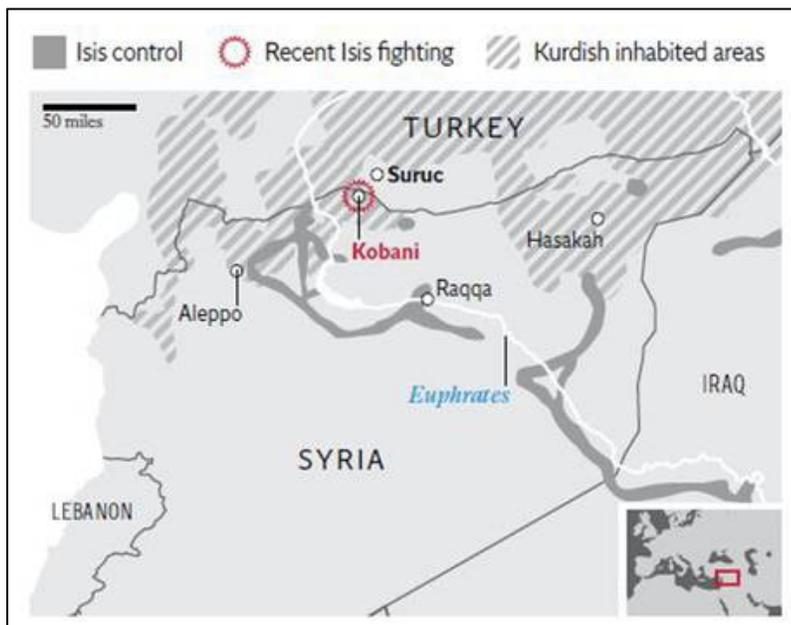
Theodore Karasik, director of research and development at the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA):

It seems that ISIS's advance into Iraq and also its swing back into Syria has ignited other groups to act out on their own. The various Islamic groups are fighting to make gains. The siege of Aleppo factors in because it has become a main area of power and influence for all sides, and that has catapulted the issue of Aleppo's future front and center. The death toll is rising rapidly because the nature of the battles is producing higher casualty rates – they're occurring in urban areas, and during the holy month of Ramadan. For me, an uptick of violence during Ramadan is tied to religious discourse about the significance of [the idea of being martyred during] the holy month. Under the concept of strategic distraction – [with the world watching] events that are occurring in Gaza and even in the Ukraine – this might be an opportune time [for all sides] to try to make advances, with Syria off the front page. (ABC News, Syria Deeply)

[Syria Conflict: Syrian and Turkish Kurds Unite to Battle ISIS Threat](#) – **“We shoot them like sheep, but next day double the number return”**

Following its success in Iraq, Isis has directed its forces towards Kobani, a Kurdish town close to the Turkish border and the Kurds are struggling to hold them off. At night, the battle for the

Syrian Kurdish stronghold of Kobani, which is under attack from three sides, can be heard in Turkey. Rockets screech and there are regular explosions and the popping of rifle fire. In mid-July, the Turkish Kurdish Workers' Party, (PKK) said 1,000 fighters had gone to help their brethren fight Isis. "We announced the number of fighters to make people pay attention to what is happening in Kobani," says Ismail Kaplan, a local Kurdish leader. "Since Isis came back from Mosul with US weapons, they are much more powerful so we need to give the Kurds a hand – if Isis becomes stronger, we will attack to help the Kurds in Syria." Gaining Kobani, known as Ain al-Arab in Arabic, would be a huge strategic victory for Isis, allowing it to control a large section of the Turkish border.



At the border, the Kurds have established, a camp-cum-lookout post complete with speakers and a stage adorned with flags for evening entertainment. When the Kurds are not peering through binoculars across the border they sing patriotic songs and raise morale. Their purpose is to alert Syrian Kurdish forces of Isis activity below and to protect Turkish Kurds from the invasion they fear could be imminent. The line between Syria and Turkey is blurring as the Kurds rise together to defend the Syrian Kurds' autonomous region which was declared for the first time a year ago. There are no Turkish border guards near the camp. Just a couple of miles along the border Turkish soldiers are inspecting a section of the barbed-wire fence which divides Turkey and Syria.

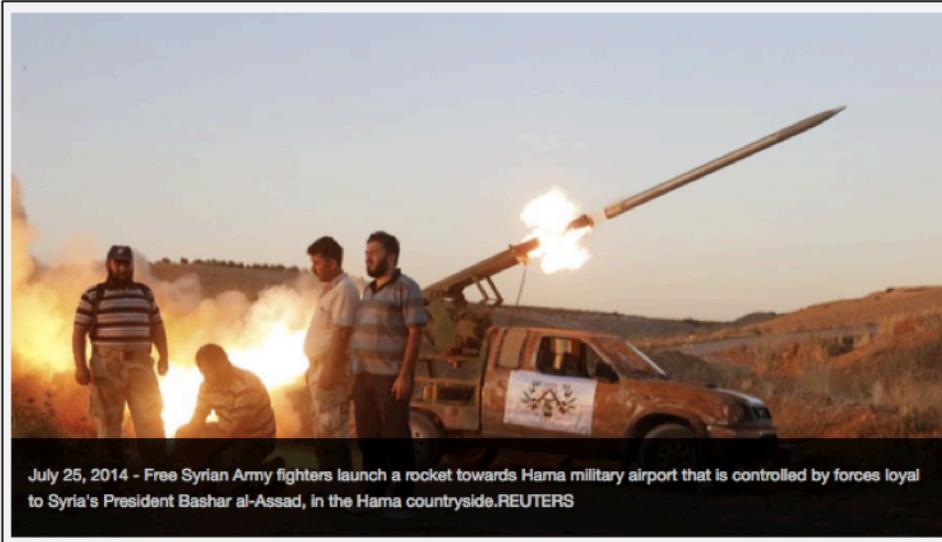
(...)

Turkish Kurds have begun conscripting everyone aged 18 to 30 to fight Isis across the border. By the border, a group of 10 youths sitting under the shade of the tree in the fierce summer sun was waiting for the border to open to cross the train tracks to Kobani and pick up their weapons once again. But the traffic is not all one way. Not more than a mile from the official Murşitpinar crossing on the Turkish side, Lami Cicek is mourning the death of his 18-year-old brother at his home. Muzlem was fighting for the Kurds for nine months until he was hit by a bullet just below his left armpit in mid-July. He later died. "He was so bright and educated – a musician! He used to play for the fighters," Mr Cicek said, "But as soon as he signed up, we knew he would die there." (Independent)

Interview with Noah Bonsey, Beirut-based senior Syria analyst at the International Crisis Group: [ISIS Dominates Eastern Syria, Now Eyes Key Regime Bases](#)

*Since reaping money and military equipment in a June offensive on the Iraqi city of Mosul, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has effectively opened the border between Syria and Iraq and pushed further east through Raqqa, Deir Ezzor and Hassakeh provinces, becoming the dominant force there over Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups. **Now it has two major objectives: to overtake any remaining opposition groups and to start chipping away at areas under the***

Assad regime, as it began to do this month in a bloody attack on the government-held Shaar gas field in Hama province. "Crushing hostile rebel groups thus remains ISIS's top strategic priority in Syria, and an escalation near Aleppo that coincided with regime gains there could go a long way towards accomplishing that goal," says Noah Bonsey, the Beirut-based senior Syria analyst at the International Crisis Group.



July 25, 2014 - Free Syrian Army fighters launch a rocket towards Hama military airport that is controlled by forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, in the Hama countryside. REUTERS

Image source: "[More than 2,000 Dead in Syria in 2 Weeks as Violent Jihadists Consolidate](#)," Associated Press

Syria Deeply: How strong is their recruitment right now? Are they attracting enough recruits from the Islamic Front and Jabhat al-Nusra so that they aren't as dependent on foreign fighters?

Noah Bonsey: ISIS remains disproportionately dependent on foreign fighters in Syria, but recently it has won some notable defections from Jabhat al-Nusra and it appears to be attracting limited numbers of Islamic Front fighters. This should be expected, given the fluidity of the militant scene,

the tendency of fighters to gravitate towards groups that enjoy better resources and battlefield momentum, and the fact that Islamic Front factions are currently experiencing resource shortages.

The big question that remains: To what extent can ISIS continue to attract recruits from groups that have waged bitter war against it in recent months? ISIS is betting that its resource advantages and the attractiveness of its "Caliphate" brand among Salafi fighters will allow it to overcome its poor reputation and the animosity generated by its abuses.

One key variable that will help determine ISIS's success or failure in this regard is the relative viability of anti-ISIS rebel forces. Insofar as the organization, resources and performance of rebel groups improve, it will be easier for them to retain fighters and gain new recruits. On the other hand, setbacks suffered by rebel groups, whether at ISIS or regime hands, help swell ISIS ranks.

(...)

Syria Deeply: Are you surprised that they are going after the northeast so soon after the Iraq offensive – are they stretching themselves too thin? Does it imply that their confidence is very high in Syria?

Bonsey: At the moment, ISIS is deploying significant resources towards capturing remaining regime bases in the east. In my opinion, the key question is where ISIS will seek to concentrate next once it concludes that effort. It may escalate its fights against Kurds, but alternatively it may choose to dedicate more substantial manpower towards a campaign against rebel groups, aiming to recapture ground north of Aleppo that it lost early this year. I think the latter is more likely.

Regime advances in Aleppo are weakening rebel forces in the area, providing ISIS with an opportunity to exploit the situation with a renewed offensive, just as the regime did when rebels entered into war with ISIS in January. (Syria Deeply)

WARNING GRAPHIC IMAGES - [Syrian Defector: Assad Poised to Torture and Murder 150,000 More](#)

Congress was shocked 31 July when a Syrian defector recounted how he documented Assad's killing of over 11,000 innocents. But that's only the tip of the iceberg, according to 'Caesar.' The regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad is holding 150,000 civilians in custody, all of whom are at risk of being tortured or killed by the state, the Syrian defector known as "Caesar" told Congress on 31 July. The State Department reportedly worked to thwart the public hearing where Caesar displayed [new photos](#) from his trove of 55,000 images showing the torture, starvation, and death of over 11,000 civilians. The defector smuggled the pictures out of Syria when he fled last year in fear for his life. Caesar's trip had been in the works for months and repeatedly delayed; the [State Department](#) finally granted him a visa to enter the U.S. only this month. (...) **International war crimes prosecutor David Crane, who led the first large research project looking at the Caesar photos, said that the atrocities evoked memories of the Holocaust, a sentiment expressed last month by the State Department's Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Stephen Rapp. "We rarely get smoking gun evidence in my business... but what we found was just that," said Crane. "The photos show crimes the likes of which we have not seen since Auschwitz."** (The Daily Beast)



[Kuwait: Fear over Freedoms as Nationalities Revoked](#)

The Kuwaiti government's decision to revoke the nationalities of the owner of a pro-opposition TV channel and newspaper, and a former MP along with three members of his family, has sparked fears for the political future of the Gulf state. Kuwait's dynamic political scene and vocal opposition have distinguished it from its Gulf neighbours, but recent years have been fraught with unrest and power struggles within the ruling family, resulting in growing dissatisfaction among Kuwaitis and calls for reform.

'Threat to state'

A cabinet statement said that the decision to strip the nationality of Ahmed Jabr al-Shemmeri, a naturalised Kuwaiti and owner of Al-Yawm satellite channel and Al-Alam Al Yawm newspaper, was based on an article in the nationality law relating to those who pose a threat to the state. The government gave the reason for former MP Abdallah al-Barghash and his three siblings having their citizenships withdrawn as being that they had been obtained on the basis of false information. Mr Shemmeri's TV station and newspaper also had their licences revoked and were ordered to shut down, with the Information Ministry citing the reason as "losing some of the terms and conditions for obtaining a licence".

Stifling of dissent

The order for Musallam al-Barrak's detention sparked days of protests, bringing at their height thousands of Kuwaitis onto the streets to call for his release. During the subsequent crackdown on the demonstrations images were shared widely on social media by activists and protesters allegedly showing the Special Forces using tear gas and rubber bullets against them. The Interior Ministry released a statement denying the use of tear gas and rubber bullets, saying that only stun grenades had been used to disperse the protesters, having previously warned that it would "respond firmly to those conducting illegal and uncivilised acts". Other Gulf states have in the past revoked citizenship as punishment for political activity deemed a threat to state security. In 2012, the UAE stripped the nationalities of six Islamists calling for reform. But the recent decision of the Kuwaiti government is viewed by many as part of a systematic stifling of the opposition.

(...)

Bandar al-Khairan, the secretary-general of the opposition Kuwait Democratic Forum, said the threat of revoking nationality would not prevent the forum from continuing its activities. He told the BBC: "We're not afraid because we didn't commit any crimes. We will continue to demand our rights and call for reform." Human rights defender Nawaf al-Hendal expressed concerns that the recent decision is part of a long-term move by the government towards imposing greater restrictions on freedoms in the country. "It's true that Kuwaitis previously had more freedom than other Gulf countries, but in recent years the government has been implementing harsher measures on dissent and freedom of expression", he told the BBC. **He said that following protests in 2012, the number of Twitter users arrested for posting tweets deemed offensive to the Emir increased dramatically, in what he believed was a sign of growing intolerance of politically sensitive debate.** (BBC)

Opinion: [Why Kuwait's Protests are Important](#)

The thousands of Arab demonstrators marching in the streets of an Arab capital city this week demanding political reform and the release of their jailed leaders were met with riot police firing tear gas and stun grenades to disperse them. These events in early July were typical for a hot summer evening in today's Arab world, and occur regularly in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Sudan and other Arab lands. These events are especially noteworthy, however, because they happened in Kuwait, and because they keep happening there every few months. The importance of the [Kuwait](#) situation in my mind is enormous, for several reasons that transcend the borders or sentiments of Kuwait itself. Kuwait continues to reveal the fundamental political grievances of citizens in a small, quite homogeneous and wealthy Arab country that has also enjoyed a relatively lively public political sphere for many decades, including an elected parliament and a boisterous press sector.

The charges have led to street demonstrations rather than vigorous parliamentary debates because most opposition groups are no longer represented in parliament, which they boycotted in protest against an amended electoral law that they feel favors pro-government majorities. The citizens who are demonstrating – gassed, sometimes beaten, and in some instances jailed – embody a critically important dynamic that has defined the uprisings across the Arab world in recent years: the insistence by ordinary citizens that they have rights, that they can peacefully demand those rights in public, that they can achieve those rights through political action, and that they can engage their national leaderships in a political debate that touches even sensitive issues such as corruption by members of ruling families. **Kuwait highlights the new**



An image made available by the Kuwaiti Interior Ministry on July 4, 2014, shows supporters of Kuwaiti opposition leader and former parliament member Musallam Al Barrak as they protest late on July 2, 2014 in Kuwait City. AFP Photo

Image source: [“Kuwait Issues Warning Following Protests,”](#) *The National*

reality that Arab citizens are now demanding rights from their governments simply on the basis of being entitled to those rights, and not necessarily because they are poor, suffer uneven access to social services, or have been politically abused and oppressed, as was the case with uprisings in countries such as Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Syria.

Kuwait also speaks of deeper discontents among other citizens in oil-rich Gulf states who can only express their grievances through websites and social media. This is

evident in several Arab countries, which, like Kuwait, try to suppress public political accusations and grievances, even by jailing individuals who Tweet sentiments that are critical of state policies.

The demonstrators in Kuwait are not calling for the overthrow of the regime, but rather for constitutional political reforms. The demonstrators this week chanted their demands to reform the judiciary. When such basic, reasonable and non-violent demands are almost totally ignored across most of the Arab world, citizens have only a few options, including expressing themselves through social media or via pan-Arab satellite television, or by taking to the streets. As with almost every other public protest throughout the world, the actual number of citizens on the street is not the most important factor. (The Daily Star)

[Kuwait Court Upholds Twitter Jail Sentence](#)

Kuwait's top court has upheld a 10-year jail sentence for a Shiite Twitter user for insulting the Prophet Mohammed, his wife and companions. Hamad al-Naqi, 24, was also charged with insulting Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and spreading false news that undermined Kuwait's image abroad, the verdict said. The court's ruling is final and can only be commuted by the ruler. He has been in prison since his arrest in March 2012 for posting tweets deemed offensive to the Prophet Mohammed, his companions and Gulf leaders. (...) Human Rights Watch strongly criticised the sentence and urged authorities to immediately release him after the appeals court confirmed the sentence in October last year. The New York-based rights watchdog said the ruling was another example of violations of the right to free speech in Kuwait. During the past two years, Kuwaiti courts have given jail sentences to several online activists for various charges, mostly insulting the ruler through social networks. (3News, New Zealand)



[Lawmakers Voice Skepticism on Iran Nuclear Deal](#)

The Obama administration officials engaged in nuclear negotiations with [Iran](#) ran into a wall of skepticism at two congressional hearings on 29 July, with members of both parties insisting on a vote on any final agreement with the Tehran government and administration officials strongly hinting that they have little intention of complying. The disagreements surfaced after [Wendy R. Sherman](#), the under secretary of state for policy and the lead American negotiator with Iran, made the case that the four-month-long extension in negotiations agreed to by the administration, along with modest additional sanctions relief, were warranted “because we have seen significant progress in the negotiating room.” Specifically, she said the progress had been made in discussions about redesigning a plutonium reactor so that it would not produce weapons-grade fuel and converting Iran’s deep-underground uranium enrichment site, called Fordow, to another purpose. Yet Ms. Sherman also acknowledged that Iran has revealed few details of its suspected efforts to design a weapon to international inspectors, and she was vague on the question of how much Iran’s capacity to enrich uranium would have to be degraded before a deal was considered acceptable. In July, Iran’s foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, in [an interview](#) with The New York Times, proposed freezing Iran’s production capability for three to seven years, then allowing it to resume production unimpeded. Ms. Sherman insisted that “any nuclear agreement with Iran must have an extremely long duration,” which American officials have previously said would have to be at least a decade. (New York Times)

[U.S., Israel Fear Pickup in Iranian Support of Hamas](#)

Iran’s support for the Palestinian militant group Hamas has diminished significantly in the past three years, limiting Tehran’s influence over talks to end the war in the Gaza Strip, according to U.S. and Israeli officials. But the longer the war between Israel and Hamas drags on, these officials said, there’s growing concern that Tehran could try to increase arms shipments to Hamas. On 29 July, Iran’s Supreme Leader **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei** called for the replenishing of Hamas’s military arsenal. “The Muslim world has a duty to arm the Palestinian nation by all means,” he said in a speech ending the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Iran’s security services have historically been the largest supplier of arms and cash to Hamas, the Islamist group that gained control of Gaza in 2007 following an internal military conflict with the secular Palestinian party Fatah. Tehran is also the major backer of a second Palestinian militia, Islamic Jihad, which has joined Hamas in firing rockets into Israel from the Gaza Strip over the month of July. Iran, however, has significantly scaled back its support for Hamas since 2011, due to both economic and political considerations, according to Israeli and American officials. Iran and Hamas split over their support for Syrian President **Bashar al-Assad** following the breakout of a civil war in Syria that year. Shiite-dominated Iran has since stepped-up its backing of the Syrian regime, while Hamas, a Sunni organization, pulled its leadership from its Damascus headquarters nearly three years ago after Mr. Assad began a violent crackdown on his largely Sunni opponents. “Hamas has lost friends, particularly military supplies and training” that Iran provided to the organization through Syria, said a senior Israeli defense official. “And Iranian funds were diverted to PIJ [Palestinian Islamic Jihad] from Hamas.” (Wall Street Journal)



[Israel Calls Up 16,000 Reservists to Replenish Forces in Gaza](#)

Israel's military said on 31 July it was calling up 16,000 reserves for its campaign against Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip, a day after some of the [deadliest fighting of the 23-day conflict](#). Israeli officials said the military had yet to complete one of the operation's main goals—destroying [cross-border tunnels Hamas uses to infiltrate fighters](#) into Israel. The military said it has uncovered 32 tunnels so far. "We are determined to complete this mission—with or without a cease-fire," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in public remarks at the start of a cabinet meeting at the Defense Ministry compound in Tel Aviv. "Therefore I won't agree to a proposal that doesn't allow the Israel Defense Forces to complete this important task." Mr. Netanyahu and his top security advisers decided on 30 July to press ahead with the offensive, defying international pressure to end it. At the same time, Israel sent a delegation to Egypt, which has been trying, with U.S. support, to broker a cease-fire. (...) Israel rejected a U.S.-backed cease-fire proposal in mid-July, saying it failed to address its demand for disarming Hamas, the Islamist group that runs Gaza. Hamas leaders have said they won't stop the fight without guarantees that a seven-year-old blockade of Gaza's borders by Israel and Egypt would be lifted. (...) In Geneva, the U.N.'s top human rights official accused both Hamas fighters and Israel of committing war crimes in their latest military confrontation. Navi Pillay, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that by putting and firing rockets within both heavily populated areas both sides were violating international law and therefore committing war crimes. "Locating rockets within schools and hospitals, or even launching these rockets from densely populated areas are violations of international humanitarian law," said Ms. Pillay, referring to Hamas, but added that doesn't "absolve" Israel from disregarding the same law. (Wall Street Journal)

[13 IDF Soldiers Killed in Gaza as Operation Protective Edge Death Toll Climbs to 18](#)

Latest Israeli military fatalities all from Golani Brigade; IDF completing identification process of fallen troops. In multiple battles with terrorists in Gaza, 13 Golani Brigade soldiers were killed on 20 July, in the heaviest day of fighting since ground forces entered the Gaza Strip. As of press time, the IDF released the names of two of the fallen soldiers, Oz Mendelovich and Sean Carmeli. The total number of military fatalities in Operation Protective Edge stands at 18 Israelis. The army is still in the process of identifying the bodies of the newly fallen. Some were killed in the Shejaia region of Gaza during clashes with Hamas terrorists who used civilian homes as positions from which to attack. (Jerusalem Post)



Image source: "[Israeli Shell Are Said to Hit a U.N. School](#)," *New York Times*

Relatives carried the body of a child killed during the shelling of the school. Palestinian health officials said at least 20 people were killed by what witnesses and United Nations officials said was the latest in a series of strikes on United Nations facilities that are supposed to be safe zones in Israel's battle against Hamas and other militants.

[US Supplies Israel with Bombs Amid Gaza Blitz](#)

The United States has allowed Israel, waging an offensive in the Gaza Strip, to tap a local US arms stockpile in late July to resupply it with grenades and mortar rounds, Rear Admiral John Kirby, the Pentagon's press secretary, has said. The munitions were located inside Israel as part of a programme managed by the US military and called War Reserves Stock Allies-Israel (WRSA-I), which stores munitions locally for US use that Israel can also access in emergency situations. Washington allowed Israel to access the strategic stockpile to resupply itself with 40mm grenades and 120mm mortar rounds to deplete older stocks that would eventually need to be refreshed. (Al Jazeera)



Image source: [“The Man Who Haunts Israel,” Time](#)

“Mashaal made a rare visit to Gaza in 2012. Standing before a giant replica of an M75 rocket in the heart of Gaza City, he told a crowd of cheering Palestinians, ‘We will never recognize the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation, and therefore there is no legitimacy for Israel.’”

[The Man Who Haunts Israel](#)

Today, Khaled Mashaal and Benjamin Netanyahu are again adversaries in an international crisis, as Israel wages war with Hamas in what might be its bloodiest fight yet against the militant group that controls the Gaza Strip. In the 58-year-old Palestinian, who is now Hamas’s political leader and most visible spokesman, granting [interviews](#) to the likes of Charlie Rose and the BBC, Netanyahu faces an enemy who has only grown in stature since their existential encounter. Although he does not rule Hamas by fiat, Mashaal “is one of the most

influential figures in Palestinian politics,” says Nathan Thrall, a Jerusalem-based analyst for the International Crisis Group. Thrall says Mashaal is even a plausible candidate to lead the larger Palestinian national movement once the presidency of moderate Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who is 79, has ended. Today, Khaled Mashaal and Benjamin Netanyahu are again adversaries in an international crisis, as Israel wages war with Hamas in what might be its bloodiest fight yet against the militant group that controls the Gaza Strip. In the 58-year-old Palestinian, who is now Hamas’s political leader and most visible spokesman, granting [interviews](#) to the likes of Charlie Rose and the BBC, Netanyahu faces an enemy who has only grown in stature since their existential encounter. Although he does not rule Hamas by fiat, Mashaal “is one of the most influential figures in Palestinian politics,” says Nathan Thrall, a Jerusalem-based analyst for the International Crisis Group. Thrall says Mashaal is even a plausible candidate to lead the larger Palestinian national movement once the presidency of moderate Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who is 79, has ended. (Time Magazine)

Saudi Arabia's Family Feud

The usual somnolence of Ramadan in Saudi Arabia is being broken this year by intense politicking within the royal family. Official Saudi work hours for the holy month are [limited](#) to just six hours a day, but key princes in the House of Saud are working long and late. Just after midnight local time on July 1, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) announced a "royal order" making Prince Bandar bin Sultan -- formerly the long-serving ambassador to Washington and later the intelligence chief -- King Abdullah's special envoy. Four minutes later, another SPA story announced that Bandar's cousin, Prince Khalid bin Bandar, had been made head of the Saudi intelligence agency.

The two appointments have both domestic and international significance. The Islamic State's invasion of Iraq leaves Saudi Arabia's borders exposed to the chaos of what is left of the "Arab Spring." Bandar bin Sultan, who was replaced as intelligence chief in April after spending several years spearheading Saudi attempts to depose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, is now needed to make sure that the jihadists' successes in Iraq threaten Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki without threatening the kingdom. At home, Khalid bin Bandar's elevation to the top position in the country's intelligence community came after he became the victim of a surprisingly public feud within the royal family that saw him pushed out as deputy defense minister a mere six weeks after his appointment. The turnover at the Saudi Defense Ministry has probably prompted at least one foreign embassy in Riyadh reporting home to recall Oscar Wilde's line from the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." Prince Khalid's exit from the apparently dysfunctional ministry made him the fourth deputy defense minister to lose his job within the space of 15 months. Like his predecessors, he seems to have fallen foul of a junior cousin, Muhammad bin Salman, a 30-something son of Crown Prince Salman, the defense minister and heir apparent. The elder Salman, who turns 78 this year, has been widely reported [to be suffering](#) from dementia -- the accounts run the gamut from memory issues to Alzheimer's -- making him personally incapable of running the Defense Ministry.

Muhammad bin Salman has come out of nowhere, relatively speaking. While the major royal players below the level of King Abdullah and the other sons of the late Abdul Aziz, also known as Ibn Saud, are in their 50s and 60s, Muhammad's great -- and perhaps only -- strength is that he is liked and trusted by his father. Starting as a mere advisor, he was made head of the crown prince's court last year and he was further boosted this year to minister of state, which gives him a seat at the weekly meeting of the Council of Ministers.

King Abdullah's prompt action in promoting Prince Khalid to head of intelligence just two days after he was forced to resign from the Defense Ministry suggests that the monarch may act decisively to bring order to his government. "Swiftness" in Saudi terms is a relative concept -- especially during Ramadan -- but, at the very least, Abdullah seems unlikely to appoint another deputy defense minister in the current circumstances and would also be unlikely to allow Crown Prince Salman to press the nomination of his son, Muhammad, to this role. The crisis also provides an opportunity for Abdullah to complete the sidelining of Salman. This began in early 2013, when the king appointed his half-brother Muqrin as second deputy prime minister, a title which allowed him to chair Council of Ministers meetings in the absence of the king or crown prince. Then in March of this year, Abdullah [gave](#) Muqrin the new title of deputy crown prince, putting him on the road to be king when Salman and Abdullah die or become incapacitated. The monarch attempted to lock in this decision by forcing senior princes to give an advance oath of

allegiance to Muqrin. A majority -- though not all, significantly -- did so. How such a commitment would work in practice is a matter of speculation: If Abdullah dies first, Salman's supporters would likely press for Salman to be able to declare his own crown prince, ignoring Muqrin's claim on the position. (Foreign Policy)

[BAE Looks to Saudi Arabia to Bolster Order Book](#)

[BAE Systems](#) PLC said on 31 July that it expects to win Saudi Arabian deals to bolster its international order book this year as it pursues new

buyers for the Typhoon combat jet to sustain production that is otherwise due to run out in early 2018. "We are pretty active on some very vibrant campaigns," Chief Executive Ian King told reporters. The company is targeting orders for about 100 more of the twin-engine fighter planes. "We are not lacking opportunities," Mr King added. BAE Systems has been looking to grow exports to help offset long-running weakness in its core U.S. and British markets, where military spending has lacked growth. (...) Saudi Arabia, which currently has 38 of the jets out of 72 ordered, has indicated that it could buy more Typhoon aircraft. Mr. King said that performing well on the current program would help secure a follow-on deal. (...) BAE Systems, Europe's largest defense company, also said it was at "an advanced stage of negotiations" for £1 billion of U.K. sole-source naval contracts. (Wall Street Journal)

Opinion - [Saudi Arabia: Don't Blame it All on the Islamic State](#)

Pundits continue to speculate about the role Saudi Arabia plays in the escalating crisis in Iraq. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki seeks the assistance of his main benefactors, Iran and the US, to battle against the Sunni rebellion. But in the decision-making circles of Saudi Arabia, the consensus is that the problem is rooted in the practice of allowing neighbouring Iran to wield inordinate influence in forming a government in Baghdad. For Saudi Arabia, the turmoil in both Iraq and Syria is viewed from the same prism. Riyadh opposes any attempts at lumping all actors in Iraq in a single basket, in this case, the Islamic State group, formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. The problem, as per the Saudi view, originates from the fact that any effort to form an Iraqi government must be negotiated in Tehran, rather than Baghdad. For Iran to be able to maintain influence over Baghdad - and have all Iraqi politicians undertake a political pilgrimage to Tehran - it must continue to rely on theologically extremist recruitment techniques as well as some Shia actors and Shia militias. The sense of sectarian identity must be very high in order for this Iranian strategy to work. Otherwise, why would Shia Muslims exclusively rally around Shia actors and militias? In order to maintain this strong sense of identity, a global atmosphere of conflict and instability must be prevalent. Thus, crises are the source of Iranian diplomatic capital. (Al Jazeera)



Image source: "[Saudi Spy Chief Prince Bandar Steps Down](#)," *Al-Monitor*

"Saudi expert David Ottaway told the *Wall Street Journal* the move could be understood as part of a wider shift in recent months in which the Saudi leadership had found Bandar's Syria strategy had over promised and under delivered, the paper said.



LEBANON

[Hezbollah, Syrian Regime Battle Rebels in Northeast Lebanon](#)

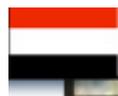
[Hezbollah](#) and the Syrian regime tightened the noose on armed rebels fighting in the mountainous regions straddling the border between [Lebanon](#) and Syria, in a major push to uproot fighters opposed to the embattled Assad regime. Hezbollah fighters gained control of hills surrounding rebel hideouts in the border province of [Qalamoun](#) and in the mountains bordering Shiite villages in northeastern Lebanon, helping seal off food and ammunition supply lines to the stranded fighters, a security official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told The Daily Star. Most of the fighters belong to the Al-Qaeda affiliate, the Nusra Front, the security source said. But some of the fighters are believed to have pledged allegiance to the Al-Qaeda splinter group the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater [Syria](#) (ISIS), after its advances in Iraq. (The Daily Star, Lebanon)

[IMF Gives a Blunt Appraisal of Lebanon's Economy](#)

The International Monetary Fund has delivered a stark assessment of Lebanon's economy: Growth is subdued, fiscal imbalances are widening, and public debt is rising. The Lebanese economy expanded by 2.5 percent in 2012 and slowed to just 1.5 percent in 2013, according to the IMF. The country's traditional pillars of growth — real estate-related activity, construction and tourism — have wilted in the face of increasing political uncertainty and a worsening security situation. And if anemic levels of growth weren't cause for concern alone, Lebanon's external current account deficit was an eye watering 13 percent of GDP in 2012–13. To be fair, not all of Lebanon's economic woe is self-inflicted. The crisis in Syria is having a dramatic impact on the country. According to some estimates, Lebanon is now home to more than one million refugees from Syria – that's about a quarter of its entire population. (Wall Street Journal)

[Lebanese Minister: Parliamentary Elections Will Likely be Canceled Again](#)

[Lebanese](#) Health Minister Wael Abou Faour revealed that discussions are underway over extending the term of parliament for a second time, reported An Nahar daily on 26 July. He told the daily: "It does not seem that the parliamentary elections will be held any time soon." The Progressive Socialist Party official said however that the party supports holding elections on time, "everyone knows though that there are no possibilities to stage them." An Nahar noted however that efforts have been underway recently to hold the parliamentary elections. Interior Minister Nouhad al-Mashnouq is leaning towards calling the electoral bodies to stage the polls before November 20, it added. In May 2013, parliament voted to extend its term, consequently postponing parliamentary elections that were scheduled for June of that same year. Both pro- and anti-Syrian blocs, except for the Change and Reform bloc, agreed to the 17-month extension, which was prompted by deteriorating security conditions related to [Syria's turmoil](#) and lawmakers' failure to agree on a parliamentary electoral law. The decision marked the first time that parliament has had to extend its term since [the country's](#) own 15-year civil war ended in 1990 and underlines the growing turmoil in Lebanon spilling over from the conflict in its neighbor. (Al Bawaba)



YEMEN

[Army Breaks Up](#)

[Protests as Yemen Raises Fuel Prices](#)

One woman was killed in protests that erupted in Sanaa on 30 July after the Yemeni government announced a rise in fuel prices. Witnesses and a medical source told Reuters the protester was

killed as the army fired into the air in an attempt to break up a demonstration near the presidential palace. A security source later confirmed the death to the state news agency and said another protester was injured. The government increased fuel prices after spending about \$3 billion on energy subsidies last year, nearly a third of state revenue. [Yemen](#) has been trying for over a year to secure a loan of at least \$560 million from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) but the fund is pressing for subsidies to be slashed. Yemen's [finance](#) minister told Reuters in May that the Fund's board was expected to finalize the deal this month. (...) More civil unrest in the country of around 25 million - where a third of the population lives on less than \$2 a day - could feed into the country's general instability which a range of anti-government forces could try to exploit, including al Qaeda-affiliated militants. Yemen's president took other measures regarding public sector spending in July, including a feasibility review of state-owned companies and a ban on all but [economy](#) class travel for ministers. (Reuters)

[The Sana'a Illusion: Why Yemen is Not a Model for Iraq](#)

In June, U.S. President Barack Obama suggested that Yemen could be an example for how to bring stability to Iraq. "You look at a country like Yemen -- a very impoverished country and one that has its own sectarian or ethnic divisions," he said. "There, we do have a committed partner in President [Abdu Rabbu Mansour] Hadi and his government." His comments came as a shock to most Yemenis. The contradiction between their country's political reality and its reputation as an Arab Spring success story has always been glaring, but now it had become absurd. Just days before Obama spoke, demonstrations -- which were largely ignored by the international media, since few foreign journalists are allowed into country these days -- had broken out in the capital. Angry protesters shut down Sanaa's main streets, burning tires and shouting chants against the transitional government and against Hadi, the man who heads it. Yemenis, it seemed, had simply snapped under the strain of severe fuel shortages, kilometer-long lines at gas stations, and 20-hour electricity blackouts. (Foreign Affairs Magazine)

Ask an Expert

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