



## Key Judgments

- ***Extremist Opposition Forces.*** Al-Qaeda (AQ), via Tanzim Hurras al-Deen (THD), has established itself in northwest Syria and it is almost certain to continue to unify the Salafi-Jihadi fighters in the region—bolstering its own recruitment and influence.
- ***The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).*** It is very likely that ISIS will continue to evolve into a large-scale insurgency, most prominently in central and eastern Syria.
- ***The Kurds.*** The Rojava-based insurgency group Harakat al-Qiyam (HAQ) very likely has informal links to the Turkish government and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Currently, HAQ appears to be operationally ineffective, but it has a roughly even chance of significantly increasing in strength and significance over the next four months.
- ***Domestic pro-Assad Forces.*** Undeterred by American airstrikes and now with increased Iranian support, it is almost certain that Assad will continue his offensives into the southern suburbs of Damascus and the Homs/Hama area and push on to Idlib Province once these areas are under government control.
- ***Foreign pro-Assad Forces.*** There will probably be a large-scale attack from Iran against Israel within the next month.
- ***Russia.*** It is very likely that Russia will create more conflicts in Syria as they continue to operate and strengthen their electronic warfare weapons and deliver their S-300 air defense system, which will probably increase tension between Israel and Russia.
- ***Israel.*** The increased military aggression and political rhetoric between Israel and Iran will probably initiate a regional war within the next six months.



## **Extremist Opposition Forces**

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(U) Since the April 2, 2018 COSA report, THD has firmly embedded itself into the Salafi-Jihadi ranks in northwest Syria. As of May 1, THD has merged with thirteen extremist groups ranging from Afrin to Dara'a—including the notorious ex-Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) special forces group, Fajr al-Sham. The group's largest operational expansion came on April 29, when THD announced the formation of the Nusra al-Islam alliance with Jund al-Aqsa (now known as Ansar al-Tawhid). An echo of the original AQ arm in Syria, the al-Nusra Front, the Nusra al-Islam alliance came with the first military operation by THD in Hama. In addition to the mergers and new operational alliance, THD has established the long anticipated new Syrian AQ media arm, Sham al-Ribat.

(U) The exponential growth in THD's infrastructure and capabilities indicates that its unification efforts over the past three months have been well received within the extremist opposition forces. THD and other pro-AQ individuals, like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, have been vigorously advocating for a cease to the devastating inter-Jihadi fratricide that has plagued the opposition forces since the beginning of the Syrian conflict and, on April 24, the turf war between HTS and Jabhat Tahrir al-Suriya (JTS) has come to an indefinite end. Shortly after the HTS/JTS peace treaty, HTS and JTS units were seen fighting alongside THD and the Nusra al-Islam alliance in the Hama raids.

(U) Though AQ Core (AQC) still hasn't formally affirmed THD's affiliation, it is almost certain that THD is AQ's affiliate in Syria due to AQC's pattern of not addressing affiliates to protect new group's operational security. THD's Emir, Abu Humam al-Shami, has addressed the lack of AQC affirmation attributing it to the *bay'ah* that still exists from the days of the original Nusra Front. The true threat comes from THD's ability to unify the fragmented Salafi-Jihadi movement in Syria. AQ's doctrine has always been one of global jihad, and its success in unifying the regional Jihadi movement will very likely continue as THD will almost certainly turn towards Global jihad.



## **The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria**

*(U) It is very likely that ISIS will continue to evolve into a large-scale insurgency, most prominently in central and eastern Syria.*

(U) Even though ISIS no longer holds territory in Palmyra, on April 19, ISIS carried out its first attack there in 6 months. The attack on the Assad regime forces and militiamen killed 18, demonstrating ISIS' lethality despite lacking a caliphate.

(U) On April 22, ISIS released its newest piece of propaganda "Al Furquan." This statement was Abu-Hassan al-Muuhair's, a prominent ISIS spokesman, first statement in 10 months. Contrary to his previous statement, where he called for increased attacks on the West, he called for attacks on Arab states and their "apostate" leaders. Due to al-Muuhair's statement, it is likely ISIS will continue to invest their resources in conducting operations in Iraq, and Syria, than in other countries where they have affiliates.

## **The Kurds**

*(U) The Rojava-based insurgency group Harakat al-Qiyam (HAQ) very likely has informal links to the Turkish government and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Currently, HAQ appears to be operationally ineffective, but it has a roughly even chance of significantly increasing in strength and significance over the next four months.*

(U) A variety of evidence suggests that HAQ very likely shares informal links with Turkey and the FSA. HAQ, Turkey, and FSA share a common hatred of the YPG/SDF, and they also share symbols, such as the Twitter accounts featuring the same three red stars pattern as on the flag of the FSA. Additionally, the new account's first post linked to the old account through a German language URL, and the new account occasionally uses Turkish-influenced Arabic and English writing, suggesting the involvement of a Turkish speaker. Lastly, a supposed former HAQ member gave an interview saying that Turkish intelligence (MIT) was involved with HAQ.

(U) HAQ has thus far botched multiple assassinations: they appear to have successfully used IEDs, but with firearms they have failed to assassinate their targets. Their media/recruitment is also occasionally inept: they have provided spotty updates and their videos often have bad English, strange rhetoric, and poor editing. However, their attack frequency and media presence have increased in the past two months. If Turkey and/or the FSA seek to expand insurgency operations in the Rojava region—as some analysts have suggested they likely would—HAQ may be an appropriate choice for operational investment, even if that includes reforming HAQ. Overall, there appears to be a roughly even chance that Turkey and FSA will support and integrate HAQ in a broader insurgency plan.



## **Domestic Pro-Assad Forces**

*(U) Undeterred by American airstrikes and now with increased Iranian support, it is almost certain that Assad will continue his offensives into the southern suburbs of Damascus and the Homs/Hama area and push on to Idlib Province once these areas are under government control.*

(U) Two weeks ago, Assad forces launched a major offensive in the southern Damascus suburbs al-Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk Camp. ISIS controls most of the area, except for a pocket in western Yarmouk Camp controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The government offensive, which has consisted mostly of tank deployments and airstrikes, has been launched on all sides of the extremist-held territory, and so far, the government has made minimal gains in the rural southern part of al-Hajar al-Aswad. The Assad forces are joined in this offensive by the Al Quds Force—a Palestinian group not to be confused with the IRGC international wing—and the Iraqi Republican Guards. Both the Al Quds Force and the Iraqi Republican Guards are backed by Iran and have close ties to the IRGC.

(U) The Assad regime has also launched the beginnings of a major offensive in the region between the cities of Homs and Hama, which both lie directly south of Idlib province. Currently, the government is conducting airstrikes in the region, which have killed dozens including Rawad al-Aksah, a commander of Jaysh al-Islam. This past Sunday, the Syrian Minister for National Reconciliation said that the government's next step after securing the area around Damascus was to retake Homs. Once the government has control of the Homs/Hama region, they will have united all of coastal Syria—the Alawite heartland. Once Homs/Hama is taken, it is very likely that the government will start making advances in Turkish-controlled Idlib province.

## **Foreign Pro-Assad Forces**

*(U) There will probably be a large-scale attack from Iran against Israel within the next month.*

(U) The conflict between these two countries has been mainly through proxy fighters, however, due to the growing numbers of overt action against one another has led tensions to a boiling point. The recent build-up started in February of 2018 with the downing of an Iranian drone by Israel. Iran reacted and downed an Israeli F-16. Since then, there has been a growth in overt rhetoric from both countries. Israel has also bombed multiple Iranian targets in Syria killing multiple Quds Force personnel, including the Colonel in charge of drone operations in the region. Iran has shown force by a buildup of Hezbollah and Shia militias in the Golan Heights area in Syria. This significant shift from proxy combat to overt action against each other is almost certainly leading to a large-scale incident between them.



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### Russia

***(U) It is very likely that Russia will create more conflicts in Syria as they continue to operate and strengthen their electronic warfare weapons and deliver their S-300 air defense system, which will probably increase tension between Israel and Russia.***

(U) Russia is now promising to deliver their S-300 system to Syria soon. The S-300 system is an anti-aircraft system with surface-to-air missiles used for air defense. The S-300 will very likely create a source of tension between Israel and Russia because Israel believes the S-300 threatens their ability to attack military sites in Syria that pose a threat to Jerusalem. The S-300 will very likely improve Russia's ability to control airspace in Syria, which threatens the air-capabilities of opposition forces in the region.

(U) Another tactic that is threatening the opposition forces in Syria is Russia's growing electronic warfare capabilities. Russia is now using Syria as a testing ground for their new and improved electronic warfare capabilities, making Syria the most aggressive electronic warfare environment. These electronic warfare systems have operational impacts on military operations in the region as they are starting to attack forces by jamming surveillance drones and disabling aircraft systems.

### Israel

***(U) The increased military aggression and political rhetoric between Israel and Iran will probably initiate a regional war within the next six months.***

(U) On April 29, Israel conducted a precision airstrike in Syria hitting three targets, most notably, the Iranian 47<sup>th</sup> Brigade base. The airstrike, which registered as 2.6 earthquake on the Richter scale, allegedly destroyed 200 Iranian missiles and killed 11 IRGC members. Shortly after, the national legislature of Israel, the Knesset, authorized a law giving the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the right to declare war after minimal consultation (only the approval of the Minister of Defense is required). Both of these events were likely conducted in lieu of the conference Prime Minister Netanyahu held for the world on April 30, which demonstrated a gigantic cache of intelligence indicating that Iran is in violation of the JCPOA.