



## Daesh in Syria: major potential for expansion

Fabrice Balanche

### ► To cite this version:

Fabrice Balanche. Daesh in Syria: major potential for expansion. Iraq at the crossroads, 2015. halshs-03175755

**HAL Id: halshs-03175755**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03175755>**

Submitted on 24 Mar 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

IRAQ AT A CROSSROADS

BY KARIM HAUSER, CASA ARABE - FES

DECEMBER 2015

## DAESH IN SYRIA: MAJOR POTENTIAL FOR EXPANSION

*Fabrice Balanche*<sup>1</sup>

With Daesh, jihadism has changed strategy. The aim is no longer to build an international network, but to secure territory. This new strategy is supported by Bin Laden's death and the dislocation of the al-Qaeda network, particularly since the self-proclaimed caliph al-Baghdadi broke off relations with Bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri. This strategy is in strict line with the one al-Zarqawi used in Iraq since 2006. It consists of taking root by sharing the fights of local Sunni populations, rather than undertaking spectacular attacks against international interests. Back then, a first "Islamic State" in Iraq was proclaimed by supporters of al-Zarqawi, led by one al-Baghdadi. American troops were a favourite target, but the main enemies were Shiites and Kurds. In Iraq, like in Syria, conflicts between the communities outweighed universal jihad and the destruction of Israel encouraged by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Qaeda's ideologist criticised this approach, which would lead to a *fitna ta'ifiyya* (communal strife) between Sunni and Shiite Muslims, distancing them from the supreme objective and weakening jihad. Shiite Muslims are heretics who must be eradicated, but their turn will come later.<sup>2</sup>

When it entered Syria, Daesh had already established solid support bases in Mosul and al-Anbar, Iraq's Sunni provinces, which acted as a source of fighters and financial resources. It had already set-up a parallel tax system to the Iraqi state. The Sunni Arab populations of Northern Iraq felt marginalised by the government in Baghdad. Used to leading the country, they were unhappy with the Shiite community having come to power in 2003.

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor in Political Geography at Université Lyon 2.

<sup>2</sup> Kepel G (2008). *Terreur et martyre: relever le défi de la civilisation*. [Beyond terror and martyrdom: the challenge of civilisation]. Paris: Flammarion.

Kurdish pressure on Mosul, Kirkuk and other disputed areas were also a cause for concern. The victory General Petraeus secured against al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia was fragile as it was founded on a balance of power between the Shiite government in Baghdad and the Sunni tribes who played a role in the counter-insurgency. When American troops left Iraq at the end of 2011, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki revived the tendency to marginalise Sunni Arabs. This trend was reinforced by a “Shia” nation-building process in Iraq.

#### DAESH BLOSSOMS IN THE EUPHRATES VALLEY

Since the summer of 2011, Daesh fighters (then belonging to the al-Nusra Front), began infiltrating Eastern Syria, leading the army to intervene in the Deir ez-Zor province. Some of these fighters were Syrians who had gone to fight in Iraq after 2003 and had become *personae non gratae* in Syria. The al-Nusra Front seemed to be a group like all the other myriad rebel groups that proliferated in the widespread militarisation of the opposition in spring 2012. Al-Nusra and Daesh were a single outfit until spring 2013, when al-Julani, the Syrian, clashed with al-Baghdadi, the Iraqi. Strategic divergence or clash of egos? It seems as though the Syrians in the jihadi group were increasingly unhappy about being led by foreign fighters and wanted to command the movement as they were fighting on Syrian soil. But al-Baghdadi maintained there was no longer any difference between Syria and Iraq – justifying his hegemony over a militia which was renamed as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL is its English acronym and Daesh is the acronym in Arabic), while al-Julani and his supporters kept the al-Qaeda franchise in Syria: the al-Nusra Front. It was not an easy divorce as the two groups were mixed together in the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor. On the other hand, al-Nusra was the only one of the two present in southern Syria (Damascus and Daraa). During the 2013-2014 winter, the Islamic Front, a pro-Saudi coalition led by Ahrar al-Sham, made an alliance with the al-Nusra Front to kick Daesh out of Syria. Al-Baghdadi's organisation was chased out of the province of Idlib and Western Aleppo, including the city itself. However, Daesh eliminated the other factions from the provinces of Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor, reigning over the whole of the Euphrates valley.

In Syria, the city of Raqqah became its capital and the centre for Daesh's expansion into the North East. With a third of the population illiterate, a birth rate of eight children per woman and over fifty per cent of the active population working in agriculture, the provinces of Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor suffer from low levels of development. While the Baathist state had failed to dissolve the tribal system, which relied on patronage, it successfully manipulated the local population to its own ends, notably through the Euphrates irrigation programme and fear. The construction of the Tishreen Dam on the Euphrates and a vast irrigation system designed to develop Eastern Syria absorbed nearly 20% of Syria's national budget from 1970-1990.<sup>3</sup> One of its objectives was to buy the loyalty of the Euphrates population by distributing agricultural land and water, two rare commodities in this semi-desert region. The development was designed as a political strategy rather than an end in

<sup>3</sup> Ababsa M (2009). *Raqqah: territoires et pratiques sociales d'une ville syrienne*. [Raqqah, land and social practice in a Syrian city]. Beyrouth: Ifpo.

## Daesh in Syria: major potential for expansion

itself, leading to waste and blockages as soon as the state reduced the money for maintaining and extending the irrigation programme. At the same time, the local population continued to grow due to high birth rates. Social unrest and the archaic nature of local society were particularly favourable to Daesh, which, having eliminated Baathist regime troops and secular opponents, imposed "authentic" Salafism on the population. It is worth underlining that the traditional way of life was not far removed from the lifestyle preached by Daesh, supported by a particularly strict form of Sharia law.<sup>4</sup>

Establishing Islamic courts is Daesh's best weapon when it comes to seducing the population. Having been ignored by the previous system,<sup>5</sup> victims of its arbitrary and corrupt nature, the lower classes regained their dignity under Daesh. Justice is fast and rulings are executed immediately. Nobody breaks the law and security reins in Daesh-held territory. Security is the primary demand of populations afflicted by three years of fighting – whether this is guaranteed by Daesh or the Syrian government. Daesh is also careful to provide food to the population. Its first actions were to empty the state's grain silos to supply bakeries, which are obliged to provide bread at modest prices. Water, God's gift, is now free for farmers in irrigated land, unlike the years leading up to the crisis when irrigation reform<sup>6</sup> accentuated a dissatisfaction heightened by drought and economic liberalisation. The last twenty years in North East Syria were particularly unstable as the change in economic policy and the end of major irrigation works hit this agricultural area hard. The villages expanded with no accompanying increase in public service or employment. The lack of water for irrigation and its increasing cost prompted thousands of peasant farmers to leave their lands, with no hope of finding work in the boomtowns. Paradoxically, North Eastern Syria is the main oil producing region in Syria, generating immense frustration among the local population. While Syria is not Iraq (it only produces 380,000 barrels a day), this situation led to all kinds of fantasies. Local inhabitants believed that the large numbers of Alawites in the Syrian Petrol Company were stealing their riches.

## CONTROL OF SYRIA'S OIL WELLS

Islamic State also re-distributes some of the finance from the Gulf's oil monarchies, rich private admirers or the states themselves – when they share strategic interests. But it is not satisfied with external resources – which make it too dependent, so it also taxed the movement of goods and trade and confiscated goods belonging to displaced populations. Petrol sales play a role in Daesh's financial autonomy.

As of spring 2015, control of the oil wells in the Euphrates valley between Deir ez-Zor and al-Bukamal provide a new source of revenue estimated as worth \$1-2 million

4 Ababsa M (2009). *La recomposition des allégeances tribales dans le Moyen-Euphrate syrien (1958-2007)*. [The re-working of tribal allegiances in Syria's Middle Euphrates Region]. In: Bonte P, Ben Hounet Y. *La tribu à l'heure de la globalisation, Etudes rurales [Tribes in Globalisation, Rural Studies]*. July-December, No. 184. Paris: EHESS, pp. 65-78.

5 Balanche F (2011). *Géographie de la révolte syrienne [Geography of the Syrian Revolution]*. *Outre Terre*. No. 27, September.

6 Balanche F (2013). *Le programme de modernisation de l'irrigation en Syrie [The Programme to Modernise Irrigation in Syria]*. *Méditerranée*. Montpellier: Spring, 2013.

(€800,000 - €1.6 million) per day.<sup>7</sup> Crude or semi-refined oil feeds the illegal oil trade to Iraq, Turkey and even into the area controlled by Damascus. But local consumption is what provides Daesh with most of its revenue. Crude oil is sold to small local refineries that provide petrol to the Syrian and Iraqi population controlled by Daesh – roughly 3 million Syrians and 4 million Iraqis. This fuel is used for vehicles, the motorised pumps essential for irrigation and private generators. Syrian oil production collapsed with the conflict. It has now fallen to less than 50,000 barrels a day, having reached 380,000 barrels a day in 2011. The coalition against Daesh has bombed oil wells and local refineries, reducing production, but to an unknown extent. There are no oil wells burning, which means that strikes target facilities but not the wells themselves. And as the refineries are small-scale, they are easy to re-build. These facilities are not of a comparable size with Syria's only official refineries at Banias and Homs. There was no official refinery in North East Syria.

In Autumn 2014, Daesh made two attempts to seize the Shaer gas fields between Palmyra and al-Salamiyah that supply gas to the power stations at Homs and Damascus. The aim of these raids was purely military, not financial, as Daesh has no interest in selling gas. Raids into South West Syria indicate that the jihadi group has no intention of remaining confined to the Euphrates valley.

#### THE STRATEGY OF AVOIDANCE BETWEEN BASHAR AL-ASSAD AND DAESH

In Syria, Daesh's number one objective is not the fall of the Assad regime, but to unify other rebel groups under its banner. It therefore initially refrained from fighting the Syrian army. But in summer 2014, once the last insurgents in the Euphrates valley had been eliminated or converted, it attacked military bases at Deir ez-Zor and Raqqah, taking control of the Tabqa military airport. Daesh fighters took a base, famous for its defences thanks to two suicide attacks and executed 150 soldiers from the garrison.<sup>8</sup> This traumatised the Syrian army as state television had announced that the Tabqa airport was impregnable only the night before. Why would Daesh want to attack the Syrian army directly? It seems like these attacks were a response to the aerial bombardments suffered since July 2014, although Bashar al-Assad's air-force had avoided hitting them until that date.

This strategy of mutual avoidance allowed the Syrian opposition to accuse Bashar al-Assad of having created Daesh to divide and discredit the uprising. It supported this argument with the fact that Daesh's founders were released from Syrian prisons in 2011. The Syrian president did indeed release prisoners to calm international pressure and the rioters in 2011. Those freed included jihadis, but these were mainly behind Ahrar al-Sham and other fundamentalist movements – not Daesh. The Syrian security services undoubtedly believed that freeing these activists would accelerate incipient radicalisation and division, which could do away with the potentially dangerous moderate opposition

7 Bannier P (2015). *L'État islamique et le bouleversement de l'ordre régional [The Islamic State and the Overturning of the Regional Order]*. Brussels: Editions du Cygnes, 2015.

8 Syrie: l'Etat islamique enlève le dernier bastion du régime dans la région de Rakka [Islamic State Overturns the Régime's Last Bastion in the Raqqah Region]. *Le Monde*, 24 August 2014. Available in: [http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2014/08/24/l-etat-islamique-enleve-le-dernier-bastion-du-regime-syrien-dans-la-region-de-rakka\\_4475910\\_3218.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2014/08/24/l-etat-islamique-enleve-le-dernier-bastion-du-regime-syrien-dans-la-region-de-rakka_4475910_3218.html)

supported by the West. However, they did not manufacture jihadist movements or ship in Chechen fighters. They may also have underestimated these activists' capabilities. Was Abdullah II of Jordan aware of what he was doing when he released al-Zarqawi along with a hundred other prisoners to celebrate his accession in 1999?

If the regime has not attacked Daesh as much as other groups, this is because they do not threaten the front line it defends between Lattakia, Homs, Damascus and Jordan. It is only directly fighting Daesh in Deir ez-Zor and al-Hasakah, elsewhere the steppe acts as a buffer between the two armies. Daesh also serves a perfect dissuader for the Syrian population. It allows the Syrian government to rally hesitant or even hostile populations behind its counter-insurgency strategy as they do not want to fall under Daesh control. Since spring 2014, Daesh has been threatening the Ismaili city of al-Salamiyah, to the East of Hama. The people of al-Salamiyah have always been hostile to the Assad regime. Riots have shaken the city since spring 2011 and young Ismailis refuse to do their military service. Faced with the threat of Daesh, Ismaili leaders petitioned the Syrian president for protection. He replied that over 20,000 young people in the region were refusing to do their military service, so all they had to do was to convince them to join the army or national defence forces, and they would be drafted to protect the city.<sup>9</sup> The same scenario has been repeated in several locations threatened by the jihadis.

Since winter 2014-2015, Daesh has been infiltrating the region of Damascus and Qalamoun, demanding local rebels' allegiance. Could this be a prelude to an offensive against the Syrian capital? Or is it part of a strategy to lead the Syrian uprising and eliminate al-Nusra? Their hated brother now commands rebel groups in the West of the country. It eliminated the "moderate" Hazm group and the Syrian Revolutionary Council from Jabal al-Zawiyah. Both groups had been supported by the West and received sophisticated weapons.<sup>10</sup> Damascus expects the two jihadi groups to confront each other once they have rallied or eliminated moderate rebels, which will leave its foreign critics with no alternative. Nevertheless, the danger is that al-Nusra and Daesh could join forces – as nothing separates them on the ideological front. But to date, the factors dividing them are too strong and the Syrian regime is perfectly capable of maintaining competition between both players, as it has done between the Lebanese militias for years.

#### KURDS, SHIITES AND CHRISTIANS: VICTIMS OF ETHNIC CLEANSING

In Syria, Daesh is pursuing the same policy al-Zarqawi used in Iraq: sharing local battles in order to establish an Islamic State. The main threat to Sunni Arabs in North Eastern Syria are the Kurds. The creation of Kurdish territories and autonomous governments is a reversal of power that Arabs, who are used to ruling over the Kurds, find unacceptable. Daesh, like previous Baathist regimes, uses this anti-Kurd sentiment, subjecting this minority to a clear strategy of ethnic cleansing. It does not matter to them that the Kurds

<sup>9</sup> Interview with an al-Salamiyah resident, February 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Un groupe de rebelles syriens modérés jette l'éponge. [Moderate Syrian Rebel Group Throws in the Towel]. *Le Temps*, Genève, 7 March 2015. Available in: [http://www.letemps.ch/Page/Uuid/5717cdf2-c447-11e4-a445-d520cd1a7313/Un\\_groupe\\_de\\_rebelles\\_syriens\\_mod%C3%A9r%C3%A9s\\_jette\\_l%C3%A9ponge](http://www.letemps.ch/Page/Uuid/5717cdf2-c447-11e4-a445-d520cd1a7313/Un_groupe_de_rebelles_syriens_mod%C3%A9r%C3%A9s_jette_l%C3%A9ponge)

are Sunni Muslims, for al-Baghdadi does not find their form of Islam sincere. It is true that the Marxist-Leninist Democratic Union Party's (PYD) domination over Syrian Kurds indicates a distance from religion that is tantamount to apostasy for the jihadis. But not all Kurds are militant atheist Marxists, most Syrian Kurds are believers.

As for the Shiites, they are simply to be eliminated as heretics. After centuries of domination, Sunnis in Iraq have been unable to bear the Shiite rise to power following the fall of Saddam Hussein. In Syria, the Sunni majority contest Alawite domination resulting from the 1963 Baathist revolution. This is one of the parameters of the Syrian revolt. In the Euphrates valley, a few Shiite communities have in fact recently converted from the Sunni faith, under the influence of Iranian preaching. The Iranians have founded mosques across Syria, along the route of the prisoners (Hussein's wives and daughters who were taken to Damascus in captivity after the battle of Karbala), or to commemorate Shiite wisemen. This is the case in Raqqah where the construction of a major Shiite tomb in the 1990s led to the conversion of a few hundred families in the region.<sup>11</sup> Those that did not flee before Daesh arrived were massacred. This was the case in the village of Hatlah,<sup>12</sup> which lies between Deir ez-Zor and Raqqah, in June 2013.

Raqqah, Tabqa and Deir ez-Zor are home to Christian communities, notably descendants of the survivors of the 1915 Armenian genocide, when the Ottomans led Anatolian Armenians into the Syrian desert and left them to die of hunger. In principle, Christians are considered "people of the Book" and should be tolerated as *dhimmi*, so long as they pay a special tax: the *jizya*. In Deir ez-Zor, the Armenian memorial complex and the city's churches have been destroyed. The city church in Raqqah is closed and the few remaining Christian families have been banned from practising their faith. Most of the Christian population has fled Daesh-held territory, as their safety may come under threat at any time – Christian Assyrians in the Khabur valley are subject to murderous raids and hostage-taking missions.

Daesh wants to eliminate any community that could be used to support a later reconquest: the Sinjar Yazidis are seen as heretics, but the mountain range in this part of Iraq is above all a strategic location that threatens Mosul and ensures continuity between Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish enclave of Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) is hindering Daesh progress towards Aleppo; it is therefore vital to eliminate this threat before making progress towards the South West. Al-Salamiyah, to the East of Hama, is inhabited by Ismailis (Shiites) and Alawites, and will surely be the next target, more because of its strategic position on the new route connecting Homs to Aleppo than due to its "heretic" population. Al-Baghdadi wants to reign over a territory cleansed of non-Arab and non-Sunni elements to guarantee his security: he is not interested in Baghdad, with its Shiite majority, unlike Aleppo, which is a more accessible target.

As in Iraq, in Syria Daesh is made up of local fighters, primarily recruited from the younger members of the lower classes, who dream of reversing the traditional power

11 Ababsa M (2001). Les mausolées invisibles : Raqqa ville de pèlerinage chiite ou pôle étatique en Jazîra syrienne? [Invisible Mausoleums: Raqqa, City of Shiite Pilgrimage or a Pole for the State in Syrian Jazira]. *Annales de Géographie*. No. 622, pp. 662-79.

12 Available in: <http://www.diplomatic.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/syrie/la-france-et-la-syrie/actualites-2013/article/syrie-massacre-de-60-chiites-dans>

structure of patriarchy and tribalism, for their own benefit.<sup>13</sup> But it does not overlook traditional territorial structures: tribal chiefs are asked to marry their daughters to Islamic State's "emirs" and to send their sons to fight in their ranks. As a result, the entire support network tips towards Daesh, which risks complicating any counter-insurgency strategy based on Sunni tribes – like that used by General Petraeus in 2006.

#### HOW FAR CAN THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION GO IN SUPPORTING THE KURDS IN SYRIA?

Following their victory in Kobane, the Kurds managed to take back most of the region's villages, deserted by those who fled to Turkey before the advancing Daesh. The US supported PYD in Syria because they fought Daesh, despite the fact that this movement is linked to the PKK, which is on the official list of terrorist organisations. The fight against Daesh and US pragmatism has overcome moral considerations. Support was given without any commitments from PYD as the US needed effective supporters to fight Daesh in Syria. This questions the situation of the Free Syrian Army – who had received US support since the start of the Syrian crisis. In fact, the West has run out of supporters in a Syrian rebellion that has become dominated by fundamentalist groups. In collaboration with Turkey, the US decided to train "moderate" fighters to fight against Islamic State, and, at Turkey's express request, against Bashar al-Assad (without great conviction). But it is not enough to train Syrian rebels; they also need to want to fight, and they have no desire to confront Daesh.

Rebels likely to fight Daesh are those whose territory is under threat or who were involved in fighting in the winter of 2013-2014, an episode that left its mark in the Aleppo region. The West can therefore only count on resistance to Daesh where locals are under threat, but it is impossible to rely on these rebel groups to go on the offensive. What's more, these rebel groups share the same fundamentalist ideology as Daesh (al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham), and the Pentagon cannot arm them. Al-Nusra and its allies recently eliminated acceptable groups to prevent the West from using them as support.

As a result the PYD is the only remaining option – their Marxist-Leninist ideology is unlikely to bring them alongside Daesh. But their objective is not to advance as far as Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor to chase Daesh out. Like the Iraqi Peshmerga, their aim is to free Kurdish territory from the Arabs so as to build a single autonomous region stretching from Afyrn to the Tigris, which involves occupying Arab (Tell Abyad and Jarabulus) and Turkmen (Azaaz) territory, pushing these populations into the arms of Daesh. After re-taking Kobane, the PYD's objective is to join up with the Kurdish canton of Jezireh. To do so, they need to take Tell Abyad, a small city with a majority Arab population.

In the spring of 2013, the PYD seized control of Tell Abyad for a few days, angering the Arab population who called on Daesh for help. The Kurdish militia fighters were rapidly chased from the city, along with the Kurdish families living in Tell Abyad, whose houses were pillaged then burned. A return of PYD Kurdish militiamen could be accompanied by these families' revenge, forcing the city's Arabs to flee.

13 Lund A (2014). Who are the Soldiers of the Islamic State? In: Carnegie Endowment [online]. Available in: <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrDaesh/?fa=57021>



# TOWARDS AN ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE INTERNATIONAL COALITION AND BASHAR AL-ASSAD?

Western intervention against Daesh is not an easy task, as relying on local populations means involvement in ethnic, religious and tribal conflicts in this complicated region. In Iraq, Sunni Arab populations in the North see the army as an occupying Shiite force, while the Kurdish Peshmerga who now control Kirkuk are also rejected as they are accused of wanting to carry out ethnic cleansing in order to extend the territory of the Kurdistan Regional Government into these "disputed" areas. The same is true in Syria, where Kurdish strategy is to create an uninterrupted territory stretching between their three cantons in the North, which means that Arab and Turkmen populations in these areas would have to accept their new minority status or leave the future Rojava. Supporting the Syrian Army is a consideration for the West, as they cannot effectively fight Daesh in Iraq without forcing them out of Syria; their Kurdish allies have no desire to fight Daesh outside Rojava and they cannot rely on "moderate rebels" as these no longer exist.

A programme to train an army of moderate rebels was launched in Turkey in the spring of 2015. But at least a year is needed to train 5,000 fighters, and there is no guarantee that they will be capable of fighting Daesh, or whether they will have any desire to do so. For the Syrians did not take up arms against Daesh, but against Bashar al-Assad. The inevitable "collateral damage" to the civil population has brought him new support. With no terrestrial support in Syria, coalition strikes will soon prove ineffective, and even be counter-productive. The international coalition is therefore faced with a Cornelian dilemma: renew relations with Bashar al-Assad or allow Daesh to prosper in Syria and risk it spreading to Jordan and Lebanon. Operations in Iraq, led in coordination with Iran, should prepare the ground for an alliance reversal as Daesh has now become the main threat in the region, making authoritarian regimes the lesser evil. The United States priority is to preserve Syrian institutions in order to avoid a Libyan scenario,<sup>14</sup> yet Bashar al-Assad (who retains the support of Iran and Russia) is the keystone in a system that must be preserved in the face of jihadism and chaos.

14 Speech by a US State Department representative at a seminar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in Washington on 12 February 2015.