

JENNIFER CAFARELLA: Thanks so much. It's a pleasure to be here. Unfortunately, the subject matter in Syria is never fun to discuss, but certainly important. And it's evolving in interesting ways that I'm excited to talk with you all about today.

So I'm going to start with a brief presentation. I have a couple of slides here that include some unpublished material actually that we've produced at the Institute within the past few weeks that will be featured in a forthcoming report hopefully next week on the ISIS resurgence across Iraq and Syria. So one of the topics I'm going to discuss today is the US led fight against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria and to evaluate actually what the situation on the ground is now given President Trump's decision to withdraw and then to slow down the withdrawal and the lack of clarity that exists in the public policy debate right now on what the US role will be in Syria moving forward.

But I don't want to limit our discussion to the counter-ISIS fight. Because, of course, there is far more going on in Syria than our operations in the Northeast. So I'm going to start by taking you through the wider situation on the ground inside of Syria and the trends that we're seeing in mid-2019 and the likely trajectory that those trends create for the Syrian conflict.

A few brief notes about the Institute so that a little bit more about what perspective you're getting, we are an open source, non-partisan, non-profit research organization. Our goal is to inform American national security policy and to enable the implementation of that policy by supporting the US military and other instruments of national security policy abroad. So we're focused both in shaping the debate in Washington, but also enabling American and allied military commanders to succeed on the ground.

To that end, I've been involved in various capacities in supporting our mission against ISIS, but we also engage pretty broadly across the US government with the State Department, Congress, and the executive branch as well. So I'm happy to answer any questions that you have about ISW or my role. I actually am now the research director at ISW, so don't be alarmed when you see that title change.

We are broadly focused on the Middle East, but we do also have a Russia portfolio. We'll be publishing a report here in the next couple of weeks on Russia as well. And I mention that because the internationalization of the Syrian conflict is one of the key drivers actually of continued instability in Syria.

The Russians are not, in fact, fighting terrorists or brokering a peace deal. They are

accelerating the conflict. And they're also learning important military lessons using Syria as essentially a testing ground for capabilities that they intend to add to their arsenal moving forward, especially in the realm of hybrid operations.

So with that overview, I'd like to start just by giving you a map that we produce on the situation in Syria. I know that key is probably hard to read. But the key point from this graphic is the multiplicity of different actors on the ground inside of Syria.

We have four foreign militaries, including the US military, the Russians, the Iranians, and the Turkish armed forces occupying terrain inside of Syria. We also, of course, have the myriad of local armed actors within the Syrian conflict. That includes the armed opposition against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

It, of course, includes ISIS, which we'll talk about in a moment. But it also includes a strong and growing al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, which is now known by the name Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS.

I think it's important to start with the overview of how many actors are fighting on the ground inside of Syria, because I find that the policy debate in Washington and in the broader media can sometimes gloss over how complicated the military situation is on the ground, and therefore how extensive the requirements would be to actually accomplish some of the stated objectives-- for instance, the complete and verified Iranian withdrawal from Syria. Iranian or Iranian commanded forces are operating in essentially all of the terrain ostensibly under the control of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, which is the red color on this map. I say ostensibly, because the regime's gains since the Russians intervened in September 2015 are extremely brittle.

One of the biggest policy myths that continues to circulate even in June 2019 is that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has effectively won the war and what remains now is to broker a peace between the major actors on the ground inside of Syria in order to enter a post-conflict reconstruction phase. I say this is a myth, because, first of all, Assad did not seize the terrain that he managed to recapture since 2015. His forces were involved, but he never would have accomplished those gains without the Russians and the Iranians.

So Assad has done very little. That's important to note actually, because it means Assad cannot secure and hold the terrain that he has recaptured, which depended on the Russian Air Force and Iranian provided ground forces, some of which have actually started to draw down

inside of Syria or to re-prioritize in accordance with Iran's desire to use Syria as a base to challenge the state of Israel on a second flank. Assad did accomplish major gains on the ground in 2016, 2017, and 2018 that effectively secured his control in the near term, his ostensible control, over important commercial and logistical areas to include the city of Aleppo in the Northwest.

He secured his capital with the use of a chemical weapons attack on a rebel stronghold in the Northeast, the Northeastern sector of Damascus, which I'm going to talk about in a minute, the regime's use of chemical weapons. And the regime managed to gain control of all of Southern Syria bordering Jordan and the state of Israel in 2018 through a series of local surrenders of opposition groups to the Assad regime. This context is important, because Assad could not have seized all of that terrain outright.

What the Russians did to help Assad retake the South, which was a stronghold for moderate Free Syrian Army affiliated groups historically, was to "broker the reconciliation," quote unquote, of those groups with the Assad regime in order to enable Assad and his backers, including Iranian proxy forces, to move into the South in greater capacity and declare ostensible control over the Southwest. This led many observers to conclude that Assad has effectively won the war and all that remains is the bits of Northwestern Syria in brown and yellow that are effectively a Turkish protectorate that I'll get back to in a minute. What actually occurred in the South and in other areas that Assad reconciled was the moderate groups whose support had been terminated by the United States and Jordan agreed to a near term deal with the Russians, not the Assad regime, in the expectation that the Russians would protect them and their families from subsequent retaliation by Assad.

The Russians cannot deliver on that promise. And so we have already started to see a new insurgency in Western Syria reemerge despite Assad's gains on the ground. That new insurgency is still forming.

It has not yet begun to seize terrain away from Assad and his backers again. But it is gaining momentum. And we have crossed important watershed moments that indicate that the Syrian Civil War is far from over. And in fact, the next phase of the conflict between Assad, his backers, and their opponents could actually be even more deadly than the last.

The insurgency in the South includes popular protests against the Assad regime despite the fact that Assad's consolidation of this area has included the mass incarceration of once

peaceful protesters, the detention of reconciled rebel leaders and their families, and other measures in an attempt to assert Assad's psychological control over this population to include the issuance of death notices to hundreds if not thousands of families whose loved ones were incarcerated early on in the Syrian conflict.

The final dynamic in the South that is fueling the next phase of the unraveling inside of Syria is the issue of forced returns of refugees. One of the reasons for Assad's ability to consolidate in Southern Syria was actually that the Jordanians, as I mentioned earlier, pulled support from opposition groups and actually favored Assad returning control to the South in a desire to prevent further refugee flows into Jordan and hopefully to enable the Jordanians to repatriate refugees back into Syria. Some of those returns have not been voluntary based on reports from civilians on the ground and aid organizations.

These involuntary returns are leading to further perceptions of persecution and insecurity in the South, especially because Assad has proceeded to, again, round up, sometimes forcibly conscript, and sometimes imprison and torture those returning refugees. Assad has no intent to reconcile with his opposition, never has. For that reason, I am very concerned that this new insurgency that has begun to brew in areas ostensibly under his control will actually increasingly take on a jihadist character.

The effective defeat of moderate groups on this battlefield is a result of the deliberate targeting that the Russians, Iranians, and Assad did of moderate groups in order to defeat those who challenge Assad's political survival. Assad, the Russians, and the Iranians would rather face a jihadist threat than groups that could potentially achieve international support even if the US has been tepid in its willingness to support groups on the ground. This is important context, because that Turkish protectorate in the Northwest, which includes the province of Idlib and areas north of Aleppo city along the Turkish border, is one of the largest, if not the largest, sanctuaries for al-Qaeda since 9/11.

The al-Qaeda affiliate that is governing in Idlib and securing that terrain against the Assad regime is incredibly strong. It has been fighting inside of Syria since it entered the Syrian conflict in 2011. The full scale of its forces are unclear from openly available information. They have pretty good operational security for good reason, but it is on the scale of tens of thousands.

It has allied foreign fighter groups that do not get discussed sufficiently in the media coverage

of this conflict in my view. It's an open question to me why these foreign fighters are still able to enter Syria despite the fact that the US has put so much effort and achieved Turkish support for disrupting foreign fighter flows. These foreign fighters include a strong Chinese Uyghur foreign fighter group allied with the Turkistan Islamic party. It includes Europeans. The Germans are featuring prominently in al-Qaeda propaganda in the Northwest and a number of additional groups to include Uzbeks and other Central Asian foreign fighter units that are operating with al-Qaeda in the Northwest.

There is a second al-Qaeda splinter group operating in this terrain known as the Guardians of Religion, which I mention because the proliferation of jihadist groups inside of Syria is going to ensure that this conflict does not stabilize even if that insurgency brewing in the Southwest does, in fact, taper off. I don't think that's likely, because I suspect that some of that insurgency actually reflects the activity of covert al-Qaeda elements as well as residual ISIS elements, which have actually begun to claim attacks in Southern Syria. I'm going to get to ISIS in a minute.

Al-Qaeda's strategy in the conflict has been to position itself as the only true defenders of the Syrian population against the war crimes of Bashar al-Assad and his backers. Al-Qaeda has worked with moderate groups, including groups that received reportedly US TOW missiles, as a way of bringing these groups into its fold and demonstrating to the population that al-Qaeda's priority is to fight Bashar al-Assad rather than immediately to force its will upon other opposition groups in the way that ISIS does. ISIS and al-Qaeda are two sides of the same coin. They have the exact same objectives, but they differ in their approach to achieving those objectives.

And so the existence and the competition of these two actors inside of Syria actually provides two complementary, not really competitive vectors for what was once a peaceful and then a pro-democracy rebellion against Bashar al-Assad to turn into the next jihad. Al-Qaeda's strategy has been to allow and to enable, in some instances, the defeat of certain moderate groups that challenge al-Qaeda, and then to spend its resources fighting Bashar al-Assad rather even than fighting ISIS in Eastern Syria.

Al-Qaeda is now making a significant stand in Idlib. It is ensuring that the kind of Russian brokered reconciliation deals that helped Assad regain most of Western Syria to include the Southern areas bordering Jordan, al-Qaeda is ensuring that those kind of deals will never happen inside of Idlib. Al-Qaeda has threatened to execute anybody that actually enters into

such a reconciliation deal. And at one point last summer when the Russians were really leaning in on trying to get those reconciliation deals and talk to local officials, al-Qaeda started building a gallows.

The coverage in the policy discussion and in the media of the situation in Idlib rightly, in my view, notes that a military offensive into Idlib would be a humanitarian catastrophe. There are something like at least 3 million civilians living in Idlib of which there are something like a million children. The US however faces this very difficult policy problem, because it is nonetheless a major stronghold for al-Qaeda.

Assad and his backers are hoping that the US will, therefore, allow the full slaughter of Idlib province in order to reassert Assad's control over all of Syria, which remains his objective and that of his backers. The US thus far has, again in my view, rightly condemned the massive and intentional bombing of civilians in Idlib that the Russians are doing. The Russians are not using precision targeting against al-Qaeda. They don't even perceive differences between al-Qaeda and other anti-Assad groups.

The US is also supporting the Turkish position inside of Idlib, which is what, in my view, is actually primarily preventing the next major wave of refugees from emerging from Syria and the next great humanitarian catastrophe from occurring as Assad and his backers try to take that province. Taking that province became their focus last year after they secured the South. And the Turks have responded by deploying and creating 12 military positions that they call observer posts or some such on the front line in order to block a potential offensive.

The Turks have provided anti-tank guided missile systems to opposition groups that are working with al-Qaeda in Idlib in order to defend Idlib. And we, therefore, have a very delicate and difficult military situation on the ground that is entwined in a political set of discussions in which the US is actually rather on the sidelines. The Turks and the Russians are effectively duking it out in Idlib. It is a very hot front line.

The Russians just enabled, for instance, a couple of weeks ago, a new military push that took two important towns on a front line. The Turks responded by, again, flowing in weapons and ammunition to enable a counter-offensive that has imposed significant casualties on the Syrians the Assad regime fighters and even some reported Russian forces that are supporting the offensive on the ground. The Turks and the Russians are fighting over Idlib, not actually because they care fundamentally if the front line remains in its exact position as it is described

on this map.

This isn't in the first instance about terrain for either of them. This is part of the wider set of negotiations in which the Russians are attempting to muscle the Turks into accepting a number of Russian goals inside of Syria. One is a ostensible negotiated settlement of the war that does not actually involve any meaningful anti-Assad groups and is essentially a rubber stamp for Bashar al-Assad that could enable or legitimize the flow of additional international aid into Syria, which in my assessment and the assessment of many others will almost certainly go into the coffers of the IRGC and to the Russians, including Russian mercenaries inside of Syria who have actually already received contracts from Assad to receive something like 40% of the revenue from oil and natural gas fields that Russian mercenaries helped the Assad regime seize.

So the Russians are very invested in attempting to convince the Europeans, the United States, and the wider international community that the war is over, so that people will invest in reconstruction that will enable the Russians to pay for their military operations in Syria and will likewise repay the Iranians for their lifeline to Bashar al-Assad, which has kept him in power. Thus far, the Turks are playing a very delicate game. They are participating in the negotiations, which are titled the Astana process to which the US is not a member, while still applying military pressure to prevent, from Turkey's perspective, another wave of refugees into Turkey that the Turks cannot support.

The Turks are also trying, I expect, to leverage the Astana negotiations to buy time and space for their own consolidation inside of Syria, which is occurring in this yellow portion bordering Turkey, which Turkey has effectively annexed. Turkish forces are securing this area. They are building up Syrian opposition forces in terms of both military forces as a proxy for the Turkish army and internal police forces in this area, which a number of key cities in the zone are actually hooked up to Turkish electricity grids and water grids. And the Turks are resettling some of their Syrian refugees into this zone in order to ameliorate their own refugee burden.

The entrenchment of this effective Turkish protectorate in Syria is another factor that will ensure that this conflict actually continues rather than de-escalate in the near term. This zone of yellow control is now the only real stronghold of formerly Free Syrian Army affiliated groups. They are now proxies of the Turks.

That does not mean the Turks completely control them. Syrian opposition forces are very

rarely ever completely controlled by their backers. They retain some measure of independence.

But the zone remains committed to opposing the regime of Bashar al-Assad. And Assad cannot retake it without fighting against the Turkish military. Assad likely will at a future phase in this conflict.

But the Russians right now have more interest in keeping the Turks involved in their political process and exploiting the wedge between the United States and Turkey inside of Syria as a way for Russia to undermine NATO. Therefore, Russia is unlikely actually to support a Turkish-- or, sorry, Assad offensive against the Turks in the North. Therefore, this part of Syria is in an unsteady equilibrium, but it will not stay.

Because as I mentioned, the al-Qaeda presence in Idlib will not stay contained to Idlib. Al-Qaeda remains committed to the overthrow and complete destruction of the Assad regime. And it now has an opportunity, due to the effective defeat or co-optation by the Turks of moderate groups, which leaves al-Qaeda alone standing as the resistance against Bashar al-Assad. We've started to see very targeted and capable al-Qaeda attacks behind regime front lines in places like Latakia, Tartus provinces on the Syrian coast that in some instances have actually targeted Russian forces.

These operations are a sign of the wave of al-Qaeda attacks that will likely follow. Al-Qaeda is likely to continue to fight hard to defend Idlib province where it is governing, because al-Qaeda's ultimate goal, just like the Islamic State, is to create a caliphate. And it has a proto-state right now in Idlib that it can defend. But it has not abandoned its intent to operate in the rest of Syria. And one of al-Qaeda's objectives at this phase in the war is to prevent the consolidation of the Assad regime and to return to an earlier stage of the conflict in 2012, in 2013, when we had major al-Qaeda suicide attacks and other targeted operations behind front lines that forced a contraction of the regime and imposed casualties on its forces.

The al-Qaeda expansion of operations in areas that are not marked in brown on this map include into areas that US forces and our partner, the Syrian Democratic Forces, have cleared from ISIS. Al-Qaeda claimed its first attack in the Euphrates River Valley in Southeastern Syria a few weeks ago demonstrating the return of al-Qaeda's at least covert presence to these highly tribal areas in which al-Qaeda actually operated before ISIS took over in 2014. Al-Qaeda made a strategic decision to withdraw from Southeastern Syria and relocate most of its

operations to the West in order to avoid expending resources fighting another jihadist group. This is core to the al-Qaeda ideology.

But al-Qaeda is now returning in order to exploit America's degradation of the Islamic State and to re-establish its human networks in Southeastern Syria in preparation, likely, for future operations against the Syrian Democratic Forces. The unraveling of the US led gains against ISIS has, therefore, already begun. The ISIS resurgence that we are watching unfold is gaining momentum and will overlap with any campaign that al-Qaeda is able to generate in the East.

I don't want to overstate what we've yet seen from al-Qaeda, because it's relatively small. But if al-Qaeda is openly claiming operations, we are likely only seeing from unclassified sources the tip of the iceberg of what al-Qaeda is attempting to do. However, the ISIS re-emergence in the East is even more pronounced and likely to accelerate.

So this is a map. I know it's hard to read. The place names are too small in here. I am happy to provide these slides to anybody that's interested in them.

This is a map of ISIS Sanctuary. That is a signature ISW product. We've been producing it since actually before ISIS emerged in 2014. We were warning in 2013 actually, months before the fall of Mosul, that in fact ISIS was going to try to take Mosul. And we've continued to use this product as a way of assessing and depicting ISIS's operations across Iraq and Syria.

The sort of brownish color is what we assessed to be support zones in which ISIS forces are operating and conducting logistics and other support functions which can include networks of safe houses. It can include mountainous terrain in which ISIS has cave systems for storing weapons and ammunition and placing command and control nodes, et cetera. It also includes areas where we assess ISIS has infiltrated a population, but is not yet attempting to seize and secure outright control.

Red areas are then attack zones. This map is current as of April 2019. And as you can see, it indicates a rather robust level of ISIS activity despite the US declaration of the defeat of this organization.

The reason why ISIS is able to operate across such a broad swath of Syria and Iraq is because ISIS waged a pretty sophisticated campaign to evade the defeat of its physical caliphate by morphing back into an insurgency, preserving forces, equipment, and other key

capabilities for a new phase of the conflict in which it would reclaim the initiative and fight back in ways in which the US and our partnered forces are not best equipped or positioned to fight. ISIS began the strategy, we assess, after the fall of Mosul and Raqqa respectively in July and October of 2017, after which ISIS began conducting massive withdrawals and relocations from urban centers that it otherwise would have fought hard to defend. These ISIS forces dispersed and began reconstituting an insurgent network even while the US continued to fight to seize the last remaining control zone that ISIS did hold onto in Southeastern Syria, which US backed forces finally seized in March of 2019.

ISIS's goals have not changed. Its senior leadership has suffered attrition due to US led strikes and the effect of the US led ground campaign, but nowhere near on the scale that al-Qaeda in Iraq was degraded, for instance, by our operations during the surge. It retains its strategic vision to establish and declare an Islamic caliphate. And it is continuing to fight in pursuit of that objective.

Right now, it is exploiting gaps in Iraq, which I can get into if anybody's interested in the details. But it is also resurging in parts of Syria that US led forces cannot reach. You'll notice that we have drawn extensive ISIS support in attack zones in Idlib province, which ISIS is using in order to attack and try to undermine the legitimacy of al-Qaeda's governing project. Because ISIS believes that it has established the Islamic caliphate, and there can be no competitor.

ISIS is also using Idlib province, we expect, to gain access to the Turkish border to funnel weapons and supplies and foreign fighters into and out of Syria. And we have statements from US officials, actually, that ISIS does continue to receive somewhere between 50 and 100 foreign fighters per month. That's nowhere near on the scale of the foreign fighter flow to ISIS at the height of its caliphate in 2014. But it does still indicate that this organization remains intact and continues to attract foreign fighter flows despite the fact actually that ISIS has started ordering foreign fighters to flow to different battlefields to include Yemen, Afghanistan, and Libya.

ISIS is also, as I mentioned earlier, beginning to claim attacks in regime held areas, which likely indicates that ISIS will scale up an insurgency against the regime of Bashar al-Assad and his backers in order, again, to position as the defender of the Sunni population inside of Syria, which is a title that al-Qaeda and ISIS are both competing to claim. ISIS's attacks are not the action of a desperate and destroyed military force. The attacks are complex.

One of the attacks, for instance, in Central Syria near the town of Palmyra where there's a lot of oil and natural gas infrastructure-- this is the part of Syria where we see a lot of activity of Russian mercenaries. The ISIS attack included a complex ambush against a regime convoy and then an attack farther East to prevent the deployment of regime reinforcements to then break the encirclement in Central Syria. ISIS's forces are reconstituting capabilities that were damaged by US led operations, which include Vehicle-Borne IEDs or VBIEDs.

VBIEDs are a signature ISIS attack capability. They are not unique to the ISIS organization. Al-Qaeda also conducts VBIEDs.

And actually we have indications that the US partner force, the Syrian Kurdish YPG, has also conducted VBIED attacks or forces affiliated with the YPG have conducted VBIED attacks against the Turks in Northwestern Syria, which is a dynamic I can get into more in a minute. But this map here reflects the VBIEDs we assess are likely attributable to ISIS from the period of July 1, 2018 to June 7, 2019. As you can see, the breadth and scope of these operations is extensive.

ISIS has begun a resurgence akin to the resurgence that it conducted after US forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011, but this time at greater scale. Because it's happening across Iraq and Syria, and because conditions are far more favorable to ISIS now than conditions were favorable to AQI, Al-Qaeda In Iraq, when US forces withdrew. There has been no reconciliation in either Iraq and Syria between families alleged to have affiliations with ISIS and those who suffered under ISIS's rule.

In fact, a campaign of retribution against alleged ISIS family members has been happening in Iraq where bodies are washing up in the rivers and civilians are afraid to relocate from IDP camps back into their homes in liberated areas for fear of retribution either by security forces or by other civilians who suffered under ISIS. Similar abuses have occurred inside of Syria where the political situation for the predominantly Sunni population is even worse.

The international community is not intervening against Assad. The US did conduct strikes against Assad in retaliation for that chemical weapons attack in Damascus that I mentioned, however have taken no further action to constrain Assad. And the large scale bombing that is happening in Idlib, which as I've mentioned, is resisted militarily right now only by the Turks.

The grave conditions of humanitarian disaster and the lack of hope for the population in Syria

for an end to the war or an end to Assad's tyranny will continue to create opportunity for ISIS to resurge as well as creating opportunity for al-Qaeda. The decision by President Trump to withdraw from Eastern Syria further inflamed sense of abandonment and hopelessness within this population that creates ISIS's greatest inroads. In my view, the decision to slow the withdrawal is positive.

However, it is my assessment that the US does in fact complete the withdrawal, it is a matter of time-- likely months, if not weeks-- before ISIS seizes territorial control again. The US is focused rightly, in my view, on deescalating the tensions between Turkey and our partner force the Syrian Kurdish YPG. For those that are not following this particularly dramatic storyline, the Syrian Kurdish YPG does have links to the Turkish PKK, which is a Turkish-Kurdish insurgency against the Turkish state.

The YPG is, from all reports, not conducting active operations inside of Turkey and states that it does not have intent to do so. However, the group's affiliation with the wider PKK movement caused Turkey originally to invade Northern Syria and establish that de facto protectorate that we talked about in the future. As I'm sure you've seen in the headlines, the Turks have threatened to invade Eastern Syria in order to cause further disruption and ideally, in Turkey's perspective, the defeat of the US partner force.

US negotiations over a withdrawal from Syria are, therefore, focused on establishing some kind of de-escalation agreement that would prevent a large scale fight between Turkey and the US partner force, in large part because that fight would inevitably create further opportunity for ISIS to resurge. Kurdish forces are based in Kurdish parts of Northern Syria, which happen to be located exactly along the Turkish border. Therefore, our Kurdish led partner force has a much more difficult time and relatively less interest securing the parts of Southeastern Syria where ISIS's resurgence is likely to happen the fastest. That's the part of Syria where ISIS was able to hold on for the longest against a US led counter ISIS operations.

So the US is rightly, in my view, focused on finding some way to prevent another Turkish invasion of Syria. However, if we do not remain committed to supporting the SDF militarily, we are going to watch our gains on the ground unravel. And I am actually concerned that the next ISIS land grab in Iraq and Syria, if we are not careful and do not mitigate these trends, could be even larger than its operations in 2014.

I hate to end on such a gloomy note, but I am aware that I have been talking a long time. And I

definitely want to get into questions and answers and a wider discussion. So I will stop there. And let me know what else you'd like me to get into. Yeah.

AUDIENCE: So what I'm hearing is we won, and we can bring everybody home, right?

JENNIFER Yes, in fact.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: And excuse my ignorance, but--

JENNIFER No.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: --if I had to do a side by side AQI versus ISIS, what would be the highlights?

JENNIFER So that will actually be featured in our upcoming report next week. So you can let me know if we did justice to this. But what you'll find is so the metrics-- OK.

CAFARELLA:

It's hard to compare AQI and ISIS for a couple of reasons. AQI was an insurgency. ISIS was a proto-state, right?

It had built a huge governing bureaucracy. It was functioning as a quasi-conventional military force. And so at its height, ISIS was a fundamentally different organization in terms of its structure and capabilities and the functions it was performing than AQI.

However, by the end of the counter-ISIS fight, when ISIS had lost all of its terrain, as I mentioned earlier, it had reverted to an insurgency. And we can kind of compare what that ISIS insurgency looked like in March of 2019 when we declared its defeat and what the AQI insurgency looked like when we withdrew from Iraq. What you'll find is that the estimates of the number of fighters, for instance, for AQI in 2011 were something like 700 to 1,000.

The Defense Intelligence Agency estimated in, I believe, August of 2018 that ISIS still retained 30,000 fighters across Iraq and Syria. So simply in terms of scale of forces, ISIS far surpasses what AQI had. ISIS also benefits from conditions, as I sort of alluded to earlier, that AQI could not exploit, which includes that the Iraqi State does not have a monopoly on the use of force.

Iranian proxies within the popular mobilization act with impunity, actually some of whom are deployed inside of Syria conducting operations on behalf of Bashar al-Assad. So ISIS also has increased freedom of movement caused by the gaffes and seams, as well as the fact that the

Iraqis on the whole actually took their focus off of ISIS after the then prime minister declared the defeat of ISIS in late 2017.

So ISIS has fighters. It retains some of its command and control. It retains these VBIED capabilities.

Now, these VBIED capabilities are not at the scale of AQI. And that's a point I wanted to mention. Within the first year of AQI's resurgence, it was conducting waves of six or more VBIEDs in a single city or in multiple cities on a given day.

ISIS is not yet conducting that scale of these VBIED operations. So ISIS's insurgency is not accelerating in exactly the same way that AQI's did, in part because it's more dispersed. And it's operating over a larger geographic area.

So there are differences in these organizations. But the scale of ISIS and the fact that most of its mid-level and key senior leaders actually have remained alive advantages ISIS in its reconstitution. And I do fear it will enable it to start to over match the ability of local security forces to defend against it.

AUDIENCE: Can I just ask some follow-ups from what you were saying?

JENNIFER Sure.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: And there are three. One's pretty easy. Who is leading AQI in Syria?

The second question is on your map here you've got the VBIEDs, but you're showing that ISIS is in that AQI area, which is kind of inconsistent from kind of, I guess, their policy of not fighting each other. And the third question I had is I see from one of the other maps that ISIS is obviously not in that Erbil region where the oil production is. But you show its support zone.

And so the oil production in that area, is it still operating? And if so, where is that oil going? Because traditionally it goes South, which would be through the support lines.

JENNIFER Yeah, awesome questions. I'll take them in order. So first, who leads al-Qaeda in Syria?

CAFARELLA:

There are effectively two prominent al-Qaeda groups. The first is Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. I regard that as al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the official affiliate inside of Syria.

It is the rebranding of the original al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra and has been thus designated by the US and a few others. Its leader is a Syrian named Abu Mohammad al-Julani. He is a relatively charismatic figure inside of Syria and has done a number of international sort of media appearances to include Al Jazeera and Orient News and other regional outlets.

So he shows his face. He's very prominent. And he is very vocal in trying to convince Syrians that they have never and will never have an opportunity to negotiate a resolution of this war and their option is only jihad. So he's the forefront leader of al-Qaeda in Syria.

There is, however, a second group that splintered away from him, which is named the Guardians of Religion or Hurras ad-Din. It splintered for a number of reasons. There's a lot of argument happening within senior cadres of al-Qaeda in Syria about how best to fight the jihad.

And Hurras ad-Din opposes the establishment of the Turkish military positions in Idlib province, which Julani and his group actually secured. They escorted the convoys of Turkish forces into Syria based on all reports. So that disagreement over how much Turkish involvement to allow created a splinter. So there's the second group, which includes prominent military commanders, such as a man named Abu Humam al-Shami, who the US targeted in an airstrike, but did not kill. So there are senior figures in that group as well.

ISIS and Idlib-- right. So we have, on this map, ISIS support zones in Idlib and, on this map, a high concentration over the past year of VBIEDs. The desire to avoid spilling the blood of fellow jihadists is actually an al-Qaeda perspective that ISIS does not share.

ISIS has declared war on al-Qaeda and continues to very aggressively target it, which is causing actually another source of incredible friction within the al-Qaeda organization, which has some of its leaders have issued fatwas or religious rulings that it's acceptable to fight against ISIS defensively, but not offensively. And it causes this whole sort of religious debate. ISIS is going after al-Qaeda precisely to destroy the competitive governance structures.

I say that these are VBIEDs likely attributable to ISIS. That caveat here is because we have some indication that covert cells of the Assad regime are also operating in Idlib and may be enabling these ISIS attacks or conducting VBIED attacks of their own. The Assad regime has conducted IED attacks to include attacks in Turkey, which occurred early in the Syrian conflict.

And it is possible that the Assad regime is enabling or adding onto the ISS attack campaign to further destabilize Idlib to try to create an opportunity for Assad to then advance on the ground. So we have a very complex military situation in that province.

Finally, oil production in Iraqi Kurdistan. Yes, we have assessed ISIS support zones in Iraqi Kurdistan. This includes we assess remnants of an Iraqi Kurdish Salafi jihadist group Ansar al-Islam, some of whom pledged allegiance to ISIS and likely provided the group some sort of footholds in some of the mountainous regions of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Iranians have reported that ISIS has been projecting into Iran attack cells from this part of Iraqi Kurdistan, possibly including the deadly attack that ISIS conducted in, I believe, 2017 in downtown Tehran. So ISIS is certainly present here. We do have some indication that it is expanding its operations in Iraqi Kurdistan to include the use of female recruiting cells in an attempt to exploit gaps in security.

And so we are concerned about it, but it has not yet, to my knowledge, caused a large scale disruption in oil production or delivery. That said, ISIS is attacking service infrastructure across Iraq to include oil pipelines. Those attacks have been concentrated right now in the disputed internal boundaries of Iraq, which is the areas shaded in this map, which I'm sure you can't see, with stripes, which are disputed between the Iraqi government and Iraqi Kurdistan.

There are, therefore, security gaps caused, which I can get into if anybody's interested. And that's where we see most of the ISIS attacks on oil infrastructure. But we could certainly see more moving forward. Great, yeah.

AUDIENCE:

Taking what you presented as fact, what should US international policy be or goals or activities, to what end? What is likelihood that that will actually happen? What would be the legal basis for this under international law? And what humanitarian implications do you have if that was executed with respect to the news and potentially the new problems with respect to refugees and IEDs both existing and then perhaps additionally?

JENNIFER

Sure. Great question. thank you. So it is my perspective that the Syrian conflict will continue for a decade or more. And I think we need to set policy priorities and expectations on that timeline.

CAFARELLA:

So I do not believe that there is a near-term outcome in Syria that favors US interests that is achievable if you define near-term as in the next three years. I think that we have achieved

important gains against the Islamic State that have decreased the terror threat to Europe, that have liberated subjugated populations, that are incredibly important to sustain and possible to sustain despite the already reemerging ISIS insurgency. So my recommendation-- the priority is to stabilize and hold onto what we've already fought for. That alone would require a significant effort.

The US would need to retain forces in Eastern Syria. We may need to increase forces in Eastern Syria. And it is my view that we would also have to provide stabilization assistance to help rehabilitate, at least on a basic level, the communities who have been devastated by ISIS and then whose entire cities have been destroyed by counter-ISIS operations.

It would require a US military training and assistance, in particular, in my view, to the Arab elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are not terribly combat capable. Because they include tribal mobilization elements that the US sort of developed as the counter-ISIS campaign unfolded, who do not have the military experience, the organization, the discipline to fight in a counterinsurgency campaign effectively. The US relied on the Kurdish forces that Turkey opposes to destroy the physical caliphate, because those Kurdish forces were good.

They were able and willing to fight. And they could take terrain with support of the US Air Force. So they were, in some respects, the center of gravity of our counter-ISIS campaign. However, they are not the most important element of the SDF for holding onto what we have taken.

To hold onto what we have taken, we need Arab military forces and governing structures that are perceived as legitimate by the local population, that are responsive to their requirements, and that have the capability to eliminate ISIS cells without relying on Kurdish forces to come into Arab areas and kick down doors, which creates this cycle of grievances that will continue to enable ISIS to reemerge. Fixing that is a significant effort. I think that's where the US needs to start.

We also need to be prepared to resist potential future attempts by the Assad regime and its backers to undermine what we are building in the East. As I'm sure you all know, a Russian mercenary company called the Wagner group attacked a SDF military position in February of last year, causing the US to engage and effectively destroy that entire unit. The goal of that attack was to seize important oil infrastructure that is highly lucrative, as well as, I expect, to test our willingness to defend the SDF.

Thus far, we have been willing to defend the SDF. But if we agree to an enduring military commitment inside of Syria, I do expect we will have Assad and his backers try again to challenge us, probably not in that exact same way given how that went. But we have already seen Assad, the Russians, and the Iranians reaching out to tribes across the river. They are based on the Western bank of the river. We're based in the Eastern bank.

They're reaching out to tribes across the river in order to try to gain local support to then fuel, I expect, insurgent operations of their own against the SDF. So we'd have to be prepared to defend against that. Those steps, including the humanitarian aid that I would recommend flow into Eastern Syria, will not end the war. They will not defeat ISIS.

But they will give us a opportunity to develop a partner force in the East and a political structure in the East that can provide an alternative to Assad over time. It will not save Idlib. And I do think the US needs to remain, as well, committed to deterring the use of chemical weapons, which Assad has already begun to test our resolve to do.

There are reports of a attack-- it appears to be chlorine, but it could have been sarin gas mixed with chlorine-- on an al-Qaeda affiliated position. I believe it was actually that Uyghur foreign fighter group, the Turkistan Islamic party, in the mountainous area of Southwestern Syria near the outskirts of Idlib province a few weeks ago. I believe Assad conducted that attack in a remote mountainous region against foreign fighters in order to test whether the US is willing to uphold the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons, even if those weapons are used against terrorists.

The US response has been to comment and to decry the use of chemical weapons. But we have not taken action. And I expect that Assad will continue to test those thresholds. And that would be another recommended pillar of an American approach in Syria moving forward, in my view. I saw a hand. So, yes, sir.

AUDIENCE:

Jennifer, can you tell us a little more about the Iranian footprint in Iraq in relation to political influence within the Iraqi government, militias, and militia control, population support, whatever generally we ought to know about for the Iranian footprint in Iraq and whether it's a growing footprint?

JENNIFER

Yes. It is a growing footprint. The US led campaign against ISIS had tunnel vision. The

CAFARELLA:

Iranians built proxies and exploited our focus against ISIS to set the military and ultimately political conditions for them to win in the Iraqi elections that occurred in May of 2018.

The US took no steps to mitigate or reduce that Iranian effort, because it was not the focus of our military campaign. Therefore, the Iranians had time and space to cultivate this Shia popular mobilization and to actually position itself as the liberators of Iraq, despite the fact that they did not accomplish nearly any significant military gains against ISIS on the scale of what the Iraqi security forces achieved with US support. Nonetheless, they very capably and successfully positioned themselves as the defenders of all of Iraq, including Sunni Iraq, and one the second most seats in the Iraqi election beating the US favorite candidate, the then Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who had actually defeated ISIS or accomplished the major gains against ISIS in Iraq.

The Iranian strategy was very sophisticated, as Iranian strategies are, and successful in winning the peace after the defeat of the Islamic State. They have continued to consolidate both their military power in Iraq through proxies and their political influence after the election. This includes on the ground actually some pretty aggressive action by Iranian proxies to basically extort from local populations and to insinuate themselves in sort of an organized crime kind of way in the reconstruction, such that it is occurring of places like Mosul, where we actually have reports, for instance, that Iranian proxies are achieving almost exclusive control over very lucrative sort of local trade to include the recovery of damaged infrastructure and the repurposing of some of that steel, et cetera, for construction projects elsewhere.

All of that resources are going out of Sunni Iraq and into Iraqi Kurdistan, which is lucrative and into other parts of Iraq. So the Iranians do continue to see Iraq as a release valve economically to enable their proxies to gain access to resources despite the US sanctions. Although the threat of US sanctions in Iraq is, in fact, producing a difficult environment for the Iranians as the sanctions on Iran itself have started to bite.

So that is not to say that the Iranians have a free hand in Iraq by any measure. However, the relatively limited US support to the Iraqi security forces after counter-ISIS operations have ended have sort of allowed additional time and space for these groups to proliferate. And frankly, I don't think it's receiving the level of policy attention that it needs to.

It is my view that a strategy against Iran in this region does need to have a component of what to do about Iran's proxy project across the Middle East. That aspect of our strategy does not yet meaningfully exist. And therefore, the Iranians are continuing to build that out in ways that enable them, not only in Iraq, but also, as I mentioned earlier, in Syria.

And we're even starting to see worrying language from some of the Iranian proxies in Iraq that they may be willing to fight in Yemen in the future. That hasn't yet happened to my knowledge. But it is the kind of regional build out that I would expect to see from the Iranians moving forward. Yes.

AUDIENCE: You mentioned that there were critical elements of the SDF. You also mentioned the YPG. Is there any sort of cross-over in terms of personnel or coordination between YPG and SDF? Do they work as a coalition at all, or [INAUDIBLE]?

JENNIFER CAFARELLA: Great question. And I'm sorry for not being clearer on that. The Kurdish elements of the SDF is the YPG. The YPG is a Syrian branch of the PKK.

Its political wing existed in Syria before the war. And it established its military wing and built it out pretty quickly after the revolution broke out. It is actually perceived by much of the Syrian rebellion as a group that is aligned with the Assad regime, because it never fought Assad.

Assad actually ceded control to the YPG and may have even provided it weapons and did provide it oilfields for revenue in order to use the YPG as an auxiliary, so the regime could focus on destroying the opposition. The US intervened in Syria in 2014 when ISIS had launched a blitz offensive to the Syrian Turkish border that had the YPG on the brink of defeat in a very important town of Kobani. And the US then enabled the YPG to begin a counter-offensive against ISIS to push ISIS away from that Turkish border, which, of course, was giving ISIS additional access to attack vectors into Europe, et cetera.

The US made a decision to then take the YPG into Arab areas to defeat ISIS there. And in order to take the YPG into Arab areas, the US recruited tribal Arab elements that were willing to work along with the YPG, which remains in a leadership role over both the military wing and the political wing that is now governing Eastern Syria. And we actually have some indications that not only is the YPG in control of both military and political wings, that it is only cadres within the YPG that the senior PKK leadership trusts that are allowed to occupy those positions.

And so even if you are YPG, if you are not perceived as deeply PKK affiliated, they are sometimes excluded from those leadership positions. So it's difficult composition. Yeah.

AUDIENCE: Can you talk a little bit about the policy goals of Syria and Russia and, more specifically, on where they actually differ in Syria?

JENNIFER Sure. So Russia is in Syria to gain, which it has, a air and naval base on the Eastern
CAFARELLA: Mediterranean, which advantages it in a future confrontation with NATO.

AUDIENCE: Tartus?

JENNIFER Tartus. Yup. So there's a naval base in Tartus.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: They have four, though, correct?

JENNIFER It is a pre-existing Syrian base that the Russians are building out. And the Russians establish
CAFARELLA: an airbase in Latakia that, likewise, was a pre-existing Syrian base that the Russians have now built out. They've signed-- excuse me-- a 50-year lease with Assad for that infrastructure, and therefore intend to remain in Syria for the foreseeable future.

The Russians are using those bases to project force onward into Africa, for instance, where we're seeing a proliferation of Russian mercenaries conducting various operations in Africa, but gaining access to lucrative sort of protection of natural resources. Much of it is projecting from those bases inside of Syria. So Syria gives the Russians a foothold in the Middle East to then project power elsewhere.

The Russians also see Syria as a way to again, as I mentioned earlier, exploit the wedge between Turkey and the United States inside of Syria, which is a way that the Russians further undermine NATO by their involvement in the Syrian conflict. The Russians also do intend to prevent any regime change inside of Syria as a matter of principle. They're opposed to US efforts or perceived efforts at supporting revolutions. And they intend to keep Bashar al-Assad in power for that reason.

Where they differ is on some of the time lines and the scale of what Assad wants to accomplish versus what the Russians want to or can support militarily. For instance, Assad intends to expel the Turks from Syria. And it's not clear that the Russians are willing to do that at least at this stage, as I mentioned earlier. Because it benefits Russia to have Turkey in its orbit.

You didn't ask this. But I'm going to take it as an implied question, that there are differences between the Russians and the Iranians inside of Syria.

AUDIENCE: I meant to ask that. I'm sorry. I think I said Syria instead of--

JENNIFER Yeah.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: Yeah.

JENNIFER Good, OK.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: The Iranians and the Russians, yeah.

JENNIFER Good. Cool, yeah. The differences include that the Iranians intend to be a regional hegemon.

CAFARELLA: And the Russians don't particularly intend to enable them to do that. The Russians prefer to play both sides. This is one of the reasons why they reach out to Saudi Arabia and are trying to cultivate that relationship in addition to cultivating a relationship, which the Russians have done, with Israel.

So the escalation pattern between the Israelis and the Iranians right now is potentially a problem for Putin and Russia. But I say potentially, because it doesn't necessarily actually drive a divergence in how the Russians and the Iranians cooperate inside of Syria. They're agreed on the fundamentals.

The Iranians aren't, to my knowledge, trying to provoke a conflict with the Israelis at this current stage. And so what the Russians are doing is allowing the Israelis to strike Iran and basically treating that as Iran's problem. That's causing some friction, as you might imagine, as the Iranians keep getting struck and the Russians keep allowing that to happen.

But it hasn't yet actually amounted to any meaningful efforts by Russia to constrain Iran's footprint on the ground inside of Syria, which the Russians are claiming to do, and it is a lie. Nor has it resulted in a breakdown of their military cooperation, for instance the cooperation between Hezbollah on the ground, which is, of course, an Iranian proxy and the Russian Air Force. From what we can tell, the Hezbollah elements are highly involved in coordinating that Russian air power. And we haven't seen any meaningful break in that relationship despite the Israeli air campaign. Yeah.

AUDIENCE: Where are--

JENNIFER Oh, let's take both questions. Yeah.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: Mine's short. Just where are the captured ISIS fighters being detained?

JENNIFER Yeah, good question. What's yours?

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: Actually, I had two questions.

JENNIFER OK.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: OK, the first one, for the al-Qaeda group in the Northwest corner of the country, what level of military hardware are they able to field? For example, are they able to openly travel in convoys of armored vehicles, like ISIS did at its height? [INAUDIBLE].

JENNIFER Great questions. First, captured ISIS fighters, it differs, of course, across Iraq and Syria. The
CAFARELLA: fighters detained in Iraq-- actually many of the ISIS fighters that surrendered to counter-ISIS forces deliberately surrender to the Peshmerga rather than surrendering to the ISF, likely out of fear that they would be executed by either the ISF or PMF forces nearby.

So there are a number of prisons in Iraqi Kurdistan that have a high concentration of ISIS fighters. Although there are other prisons in Iraq likewise. In Syria, there are a number of prisons-- I don't have them on this map, but there will be a map in the future report-- in Iraqi Kurdistan that are-- in, sorry, Syrian Kurdish parts of Syria that include detained foreign fighters as well as detained Syrian fighters.

Now, the YPG has been releasing Syrian ISIS fighters in an attempt to-- or alleged ISIS fighters. I don't think they're being meaningfully tried-- in an attempt to appease local tribes in Arab areas that are demanding the comprehensive release of prisoners from the YPG. But we also have a dynamic that I find concerning of IDP camps, Internally Displaced Persons camps, being de facto detention centers in parts of Northeastern Syria, where the SDF is not allowing the civilians to leave and is actually concerned, in some measure rightly, about an ISIS infiltration into these camps.

This includes a major camp that is in Northeastern Syria southeast of that town of Hasakah. This is the al-Hawl camp, where when the final ISIS stronghold surrendered to the SDF

something like 63,000 civilians emerged from a subterranean infrastructure, including a very large number of ideologically committed ISIS wives and their children. Those individuals are being held in the IDP camp of al-Hawl, which is effectively a quasi detention center, because these are ideologically committed individuals. Although the SDF does not know, I don't think, who actually participated in military operations. Although there are some indications that some of the wives actually were involved in internal police functions within the Islamic State, creating a pretty difficult environment.

That camp also includes 30,000 detained Iraqi ISIS members and/or their families, as well as a number of foreign fighters. I think it's in the low thousands. But the overall foreign fighter population that the SDF has detained is posing a particular problem.

Legally, I'm not obviously a legal expert. So I can't comment, I'm afraid, on that aspect of this. The countries aren't willing to take these foreign fighters back on the whole.

The French are encouraging the fighters to be sent, it seems, to Iraq to be executed. And the SDF does not have the infrastructure and the capabilities to conduct this kind of detention operation, much less to actually process meaningfully the individuals in that camp. So that's one of the big policy concerns that I have, which leads me to my recommendation that in the near term what we have to do is address the situation in the East.

What I'll say is just one more note on this, since you've got me talking about it, is that population of ISIS sympathizers, or however you characterize them, includes tens of thousands of children. And there is not a good policy that I'm aware of for what to do with that number of children. You don't deradicalize children. You provide them trauma care. And the problem that the SDF and the aid organizations are facing in some of these areas is the mothers are denying access to their children.

So it's a very difficult problem. And it will fuel that next ISIS insurgency. So I'm glad you asked about it. Other questions? Comments?

Oh, yes. Sorry, AQ hardware. Yes, they do move in big convoys. Now, the Russians will target them. They will try to.

Russians actually aren't doing that much precision strike. It's mostly dumb bombs. So they are able to mass forces on multiple fronts. They have all measure of hardware to include hardware seized from the Assad regime, including, you know, personnel carriers and other

kinds of armored.

We haven't actually seen that much use of tanks in Idlib recently. It now occurs to me. But they do have them. And they use them in addition to other robust artillery systems.

And as I mentioned, the Turks are flowing in, from what we can tell, additional advanced systems to include ATGMs. There is some indication that al-Qaeda has managed to seize TOW missiles that the US provided to moderate groups. There has not, to my knowledge, been any instance of the actual proliferation of those weapons where they were actually handed over or sold to al-Qaeda. But the vulnerability of those US backed groups on the battlefield enabled al-Qaeda just to attack them and seize the warehouses. And so there is some of that capability as well.

AUDIENCE: Can I ask a follow-up--

JENNIFER Sure.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: --question to her question? Given the reports that I've read about ISIS fighters who have surrendered, particularly to the Peshmerga, that their accounts have been that senior commanders, governors from ISIS have ordered them to.

JENNIFER Yup.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: Do you think that represents an ISIS ploy to reintegrate some element of their forces back into the civilian population after they have been processed through whatever judicial system they're working through?

JENNIFER Awesome questions. Yes, I do. And we cover this in the report that is coming. But I do think
CAFARELLA: that ISIS deliberately embedded in the civilian flow out of ISIS held areas, which includes embedding their family members in this flow, but then also likely ISIS fighters in order to seed that next insurgency.

But the surrenders to the prisons, I don't know that ISIS actually expects that those guys are going to be released from prison. In fact, many are being executed by the Iraqis. But I think that ISIS has a strategy, as its predecessor did, AQI to break those individuals back out of prison.

So large scale prison breaks were a hallmark of the resurgence from 2011 to 2014 along with those VBIED waves. And we've already started to see some limited attempts at prison breaks in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Syrian Kurdistan. I don't yet know if that was just the detained fighters taking the initiative to try or if it demonstrates that ISIS is testing in preparation for future prison break operations. But I do expect those prison break operations to begin to occur. Yeah, you got it. Yes.

AUDIENCE: You mentioned that the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria had stated an objective is starting in caliphate.

JENNIFER Yes.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: And my question is, is that a new strategy for al-Qaeda? And do we have any evidence that they are changing direction and using that tactic in other places?

JENNIFER It is actually not a new strategy, but al-Qaeda has had a significant degree of success inside of Syria, which actually has created some problems for the organization trying to figure out how to exploit that success and how to capitalize on it to build towards the future. Al-Qaeda's desire has always been to create an Islamic State. It intends to create an emirate in Syria and emirates in other key places like Yemen where al-Qaeda is operating that will be future components of a global caliphate.

Al-Qaeda does conduct similar governance operations in places like Yemen, where its affiliate is particularly strong. But the Syrian war has just provided such an opportunity, in part because of the ease to get access to Turkey and to get, therefore, access to Europe in that foreign fighter flow. So we started to see al-Qaeda prioritize Idlib after they withdrew, as I mentioned, from ISIS held areas.

They focused immediately on governance. In fact, al-Qaeda has always been focused on governance even when it was in Eastern Syria. They had built a system of Sharia courts to incorporate rebels and other local community leaders in a Sharia based system of governance that was not the full implementation of al-Qaeda's ideology, but the start of a gradual al-Qaeda campaign to push basically as hard as the local population and the rebel forces will allow them to push.

So over the Syrian conflict, you've seen al-Qaeda take steps forward in asserting its ideology

and the implementation of its governance. You can watch it face resistance in some areas and then start to pull back. And then usually what they do when they face resistance is they go conduct a major operation against Assad, gain their credibility again as the defenders of the population. And then they return and do another governance push.

Or they attack a partner a US partner force in order to defeat it. So it's this back and forth of fighting Assad and imposing its will on the population that makes al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria so, well, dangerous, but also successful.

Al-Qaeda also exploited the failure and perceived, and I think actual, corruption of Free Syrian Army affiliated governance structures. Because al-Qaeda could claim a level of discipline. And it held its fighters accountable.

That gave it, for instance, inroads in governance where it would be trusted to actually deliver aid or provide services without the scale of corruption that FSA forces were accused of. So that has been ongoing. But we've started to see a step change in the level of implementation of that governance in Idlib, which is why I mentioned it.

Right now, it seems voluntary, but al-Qaeda is pushing very hard religious education programs for women and the use of burqas across especially Idlib city and other key urban centers. And we've actually started to see ISIS-- not ISIS-- al-Qaeda conduct public executions not yet of those accused of violating Islamic law. Right now, the public executions are focused on alleged ISIS cells and cells of the Assad regime.

But the resumption of that kind of execution is a telltale sign to me that they're testing their ability to implement what kind of sort of law and retribution. So did that answer your question?

AUDIENCE: Yeah.

JENNIFER OK, good. Yes.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: Can I ask you a question about your organization?

JENNIFER Yes.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: My first question is, how do you make these maps based off-- you know, where are your

sources, considering it's open source? And the second question is in your bio it's mentioned that you advise ground commanders.

JENNIFER Yeah.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: I'm just kind of curious what you're bringing to the table. Don't take that the wrong way. But what is your capacity or the variable that the ground commander wants that they are not getting from their own analysts?

JENNIFER Sure. Great questions. The first is the maps are made in Adobe Illustrator by the analysts, which is what keeps people up until 2:00 in the morning. So these are all made just by like your average analyst.

AUDIENCE: No, I meant--

JENNIFER I know you mean the data. But I feel the need to mention that, because the graphics are not as pretty as they could be. And I do apologize for the complexity. But you have analysts making them.

CAFARELLA:

The analysts are making them, because it is the analysts that are immersed in the data every day, and therefore know the situation at a tactical level on the ground. We perform daily collection and analysis on kinetic political and information operations in the areas that we study, which gives us the high fidelity picture that you see on this map. That informs the publications that we conduct.

Our granular understanding of these conflicts is the key value add that we can offer. Because in particular, it is unclassified. So the ability to put maps together, for instance, of what the Russians are actually targeting in Syria and to provide all of this unclassified means it can be provided, for instance, to our partner forces.

And it means it can be used without, you know, concerns of security. It can be used in a coalition environment, for instance, where otherwise classification gets in the way of coordination. So that's one key aspect.

Another is that we can simply advise. The Institute for the Study of War is non-profit, as I mentioned. We're non-partisan, which means we're not political in any way. And we don't take any government money.

So if we support the US military, we do it free of charge just based on a volunteer basis. And we do that to preserve our intellectual independence, so that we can call it like we see it. And we've built a reputation for not only being right, but being forthright and always telling the truth in the situation as we see it. So that's primarily what we offer.

AUDIENCE: So just to follow-up from that, if you're advising General Vogel, are you saying, hey, look, you're getting this wrong? Is that the type of--

JENNIFER Well, if they're getting it wrong.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: Right.

JENNIFER So we can offer pre-deployment trainings, for instance, for units going overseas, which is a situation lay-down. Hey, here's what to expect. We also put together war games and tabletop exercises to be able to do simulations to say, all right, here's the situation.

CAFARELLA:

Now, you are the IRGC Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani. What do you do in this situation? And it can be very helpful to get people out of the mode, this is my mission, this is my mission, this is what I have to accomplish, to be able to spend time immersed in the mindset of an adversary.

And so that's another thing that we offer that is helpful. But then we advise on implementation strategy. How to prevent the SDF from fracturing would be one thing that we're currently working on, for instance.

AUDIENCE: Let me just follow up on that for a moment. Now, I've followed organizations in the national security field for more years than I'd like to acknowledge. This is an absolutely extraordinary organization.

It's just amazing. Almost nothing like this that I know of has ever existed before. And if you're not familiar with Institute for the Study of War and what they're doing good and their work, you really need to follow.

Because other than following this on a classified basis within the United States government or another very, very good intelligence service, there is nothing like it out there. They're just absolutely remarkable. I think the kind of briefing that you heard today suggests the capabilities that they have. Sorry.

JENNIFER CAFARELLA: No, I appreciate that. Thank you very much. I would mention just one more quick thing, if I may, which is another thing ISW offers that is pretty unique to us is forecasting. So we will publish or provide in a private setting forecasts of what to expect 6 months, 12 months, 18 months out.

And we're willing to do that in terms of offering here's the most likely outcome. But here are the some of the most dangerous outcomes that are not likely, but you should start to prepare for. And we find that our willingness to go out there and make a forecast even at risk of being wrong makes us valuable, because there is some conservatism within analytic communities for desire not to be wrong.

We're willing to be wrong. We'll tell you if we were wrong. And we'll give you the best possible forward-looking assessment that we can develop. And we found that that's very helpful often to commanders.

AUDIENCE: Jennifer, strategically the first question that US policy makers are supposed to ask themselves, what are the vital national security interests of the United States concern before we deploy US forces abroad? And then what realistic objectives must we attain to protect those vital national security interests? So my question is, what are the US vital national security interests in Syria? And one of the real objectives should be attempting to achieve in order to protect those vital national security interests?

JENNIFER CAFARELLA: Yes, sir. Great question. There are many ways to skin this particular cat. It is my view that the US need only start with the interest of preventing further attacks, terror attacks on the United States and our allies to require a robust Syria strategy.

ISIS and al-Qaeda, as I've already mentioned, are very strong inside of Syria. But the Syrian conflict itself, the war crimes of Bashar al-Assad that I think probably amount to crimes against humanity against his population are one of the single largest, if not the single largest driver, of radicalization globally on Earth. So the US, in my view, will fail to defend the homeland, but also to defend and support our allies in NATO if we do not reduce the conditions of violence and the conditions of state collapse inside of Syria.

I say reduce, because, again, I want to be realistic that this is going to be a generational war. And I don't think the US can feasibly set out to end the Syrian conflict in any straightforward sense. I think that we have suffered somewhat from the tunnel vision of the counter-ISIS fight,

because we assumed that it was possible to defeat ISIS without getting involved in the broader civil war.

I have contested that view since the start of the US led intervention. Because, in fact, ISIS emerged from the conditions of the civil war and benefits from the conditions of violence in Western Syria even while we were focused in Eastern Syria. So I would say defending against terror threats is the priority concern.

I would honestly list al-Qaeda higher than ISIS, though. I am more concerned about the al-Qaeda presence in Syria than I am about the ISIS presence. Because al-Qaeda has something that ISIS does not, which is popular support. ISIS forced its will on the pop on the local population and subjugated them which created a vulnerability that the US exploited, that the population did not want to live under the Islamic State.

Al-Qaeda is much more difficult. Al-Qaeda has been fighting and dying in the trenches with the Syrian opposition and the civilians who rebelled since 2011. It is not imposing its will in anywhere near the scale of what ISIS did on the population. And al-Qaeda is waging a very sophisticated campaign to convince Syrians in the first instance not to conduct attacks in Europe, but to convince Syrians that the international community wants Assad to slaughter them and to convince Syrians not to care if al-Qaeda attacks in Europe.

I think the condition within Syrian society that al-Qaeda is going for is to take what was originally a pro-democracy rebellion that was the antithesis of what al-Qaeda hoped to achieve in Syria and to convince that population to say, so what if people die in Paris again? Nobody cared when we were being barrel bombed. People barely cared when we were being gassed with chemical weapons.

So who cares? And I think that al-Qaeda is dangerously close to that objective. And I fear that, if we do not act soon, al-Qaeda will succeed in convincing a generation of Syrians that the only hope to protecting themselves and their families from Bashar al-Assad is to wage a global jihad.

I think the US does have other vital interests in Syria. I would rank humanitarian interests among them, not only because the humanitarian conditions drive terrorism, as I mentioned, but because of the instability that the human flows create in the region. Therefore, halting and reversing the refugee flow would be an objective.

But I would not advocate-- in fact, I'm strongly against-- the kind of forced returns that we've seen. Assad does not intend to reconcile with his population. I, therefore, think the US needs to view the existing refugee population as the future of Syria, which I think it is, and to invest in them as part of a long-term strategy, hopefully in the future to enable their return, but not under conditions where they will be rounded up and tortured if not executed.

Finally, I think the US has vital interest in constraining Russia's move into the Middle East and disrupting Russia's ability to project forward from Syria and to use Syria as a live fire training exercise for its Spetsnaz, its GRU, its-- name your additional units.

The Russians actually are engaged in a deliberate military learning process to extract lessons learned from Syria and use them to inform not only Russian operations in Ukraine, but also the development of Russian military doctrine and its future force development. The Russians are learning very valuable lessons in Syria. They're engaged in difficult fighting against al-Qaeda in Idlib.

They are having to innovate how to defend their airbase against swarms of drone attacks that al-Qaeda is conducting. And these kind of lessons are extraordinarily valuable to the Russian armed forces. And I think it is in the US interest not to continue to allow Russia to have a free hand to, first of all, kill Syrians. But second of all-- to use this as a testing ground for capabilities it will use to bear against NATO, it will bring to bear against NATO in the future. Did I answer your question?

AUDIENCE: I--

JENNIFER Partially.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: --appreciate the response. I'm not sure I agree with it.

JENNIFER OK.

CAFARELLA:

AUDIENCE: But I appreciate the response, OK? Yeah.

AUDIENCE: A couple of years ago, I read an account when the Islamic State controlled a lot of the oil producing areas that groups fighting the Islamic State were having to buy oil from middlemen selling it for Islamic State in order for those groups to power the hospitals, to help their

wounded fighters, so they could go back and then fight Islamic State. And there was this kind of interesting circle. So I was wondering, in your esteem, how you feel the overarching goals of groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State, how do you think intertwine with economic interests as far as a broader macro goal?

**JENNIFER
CAFARELLA:**

Sure. I would simply say that this is a war. It is a wartime economy. All sides do business with the other sides.

That has been true since the start of the Syrian revolution. And it remains true. Al-Qaeda has established somewhat of a monopoly, for instance, over oil sales in Idlib and gas sales in Idlib and is reportedly trading with the regime.

That happens on all sides of this conflict. I don't think it is in any way unique to ISIS. That said, I do think it is a problem or a challenge for US policy that the SDF, our local partner, is selling oil to the Assad regime, while the US is trying to sanction the Assad regime and constrict its access to resources.

So I think it's very difficult in this environment where Syrians are not receiving humanitarian aid on the scale that they need to. For instance, in areas we're operating in the East, the SDF's answer is, if you're not going to give us humanitarian support, then we have to sell oil to the regime. It's the only way we can make money.

And objectively, economically, that's true. So I think, you know, the US needs a more integrated approach to preventing that, but needs to recognize that in this kind of a wartime economy some measure of that is going to happen.

AUDIENCE:

Well, why the regime? Why not Turkey? You know, why wouldn't they just do business along that line?

**JENNIFER
CAFARELLA:**

I don't think the Turks are willing to buy oil from the PKK affiliated YPG. In fact, the Turks have cut off the border and don't allow access. Yup.

AUDIENCE:

We have time one more question.

**JENNIFER
CAFARELLA:**

OK.

AUDIENCE:

So is Assad's only objective his own power? And the Russians are sort of able to exploit his

tunnel vision sort of?

JENNIFER

Yeah. Yup, I think so. The Assad regime intends to defeat the original rebellion and re-

CAFARELLA:

establish its control in the region. It recognizes that it can't do that in the immediate term. And that's why it accepted Russian and Iranian help.

So I do think the regime now has additional objectives about how to rebuild the state, how to retain independence despite its dependence on its backers. And that does create some friction. For instance, you see Syrian regime units clashing with Russian units and Iranian units in some places on the ground as they are competing for access to local criminal networks and other sources of revenue.

So that's a difficult environment. But Assad's primary goal is to not just stay in power, but to reassert control over all of Syria. His backers support that goal, but for different reasons and with additional objectives.

AUDIENCE:

Jennifer, once again, great presentation. Thank you very much.

JENNIFER

Thank you.

CAFARELLA:

[APPLAUSE]