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ISIS has turned the “Middle East Hydro-Politics” upside down

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ABSTRACT

The “Arab Spring”—a wave of pro-democracy demonstrations that began in Tunisia in late 2010 and swept across Libya and Egypt—finally reached Syria in early March 2011. The unrest resulted from a combination of socio-economic and political problems that had been building for years and that affect especially Syria’s large rural population. One of the things that preceded the failure of the nation-state of Syria and the rise of ISIS have been considered the effect of climate change and the mega-drought that affected that region. However, four years after the conflict began, it has degenerated into a civil war with more than 200,000 deaths and about 4 million registered refugees. And it has put Syria at the center of nasty geopolitical struggles. In most evaluations of the Syrian civil war an future, the most neglected analysis is: How water resources will affect the ongoing civil war and how changing situation will affect hydropolitics relations between countries after the war. A far more sustained and thoughtful consideration of Syria’s future, and how the country will be governed democratically, is needed. There are at least seven scenarios for the future of the country from Assad victory to, stalemate, country breaks up, regional conflict, chaos etc. In details, autonomy in some regions, confederal, federal, independent all or a bicameral parliament and highly decentralized provincial structures, whatsoever the type of New Syrian system will be, there will be transboundary water issues that are more conflicted and somehow different than it was before. ISIS has been the most important and powerful actor in the civil war. It has played a very important role to change the region till now. If current political system of the Syria is changed or fragmented after the civil war that is likely to be, we can easily say that ISIS has turned the “Middle East Hydro Politics” upside down. Even if it is not well known right now, this change will affect future of the regional stability with climate change effects in near future.

Keywords: ISIS; Hydro-politics; Orontes; Alawie State; New Syria; New Middle East Map

1. INTRODUCTION

The Civil War in Syria has become one of the most bloody and geopolitically important events to come out of the Arab Spring. While the war has become in many ways a sectarian Shi'a-Sunni battle, in Syria there is a third religious group that has played a pivotal role in the history of that country: the Alawites.

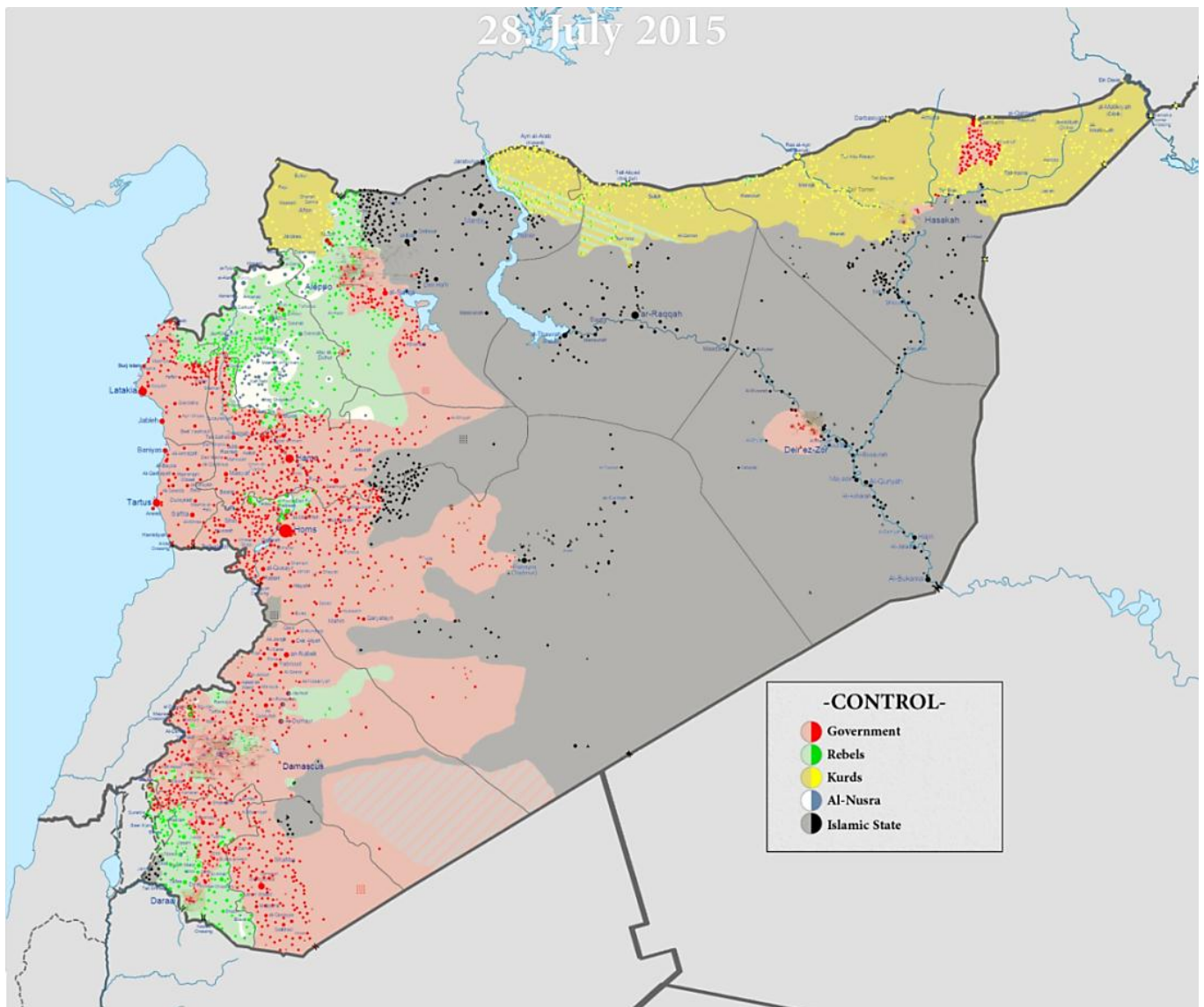


Figure 1. Situation in Iraq 28 July 2015.

Syria Civil war is entering into a very interesting situation in coming months. Even if reaching an agreement seems to be very difficult between parties, the Future of the Syria and Al Assad's future could be under discussion between external parties. Over the course of the Syrian civil war, there has been much speculation as to what the Assad regime's endgame plan might be. In this context has come the notion of establishing something along the lines of the "Alawite State" that existed under the French Mandate of Syria. A hypothetical Alawite State would be based along the northwestern Mediterranean coastline, including the traditional homeland of the rural mountains. Further, the port cities of Latakia, whose population is still predominantly Sunni, and Tartous would be included, being vital economic assets [20].

The Alawite region became a part of Syria as a by product of the notorious secret 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between France and Britain. It was placed under the French mandate after the end of World War I. Alawite cooperation with French authorities culminated on July 1, 1922 when Alawite territory became an independent state. The new state had low taxation and a sizeable French subsidy. This independence did not last long. Although Latakia lost its autonomous status in December 1936, the province continued to benefit from a "special administrative and financial regime." When war broke out in 1939, a new generation of Alawites proved more flexible in cooperating with Syrian nationalists, most of whom were Sunni urban elites. After the war, Syria obtained independence in 1946, but entered into a period of political instability, unrest, and experimentation with pan-Arab connections to Egypt. Once they recognized that their future lay within independent Syria, Alawites started to play an active role in two key institutions: the armed forces and political parties. About 15 percent of Syrians are Alawites, as is Assad.

1. 1. Fragmentation potential

There is still a lot of uncertainties to make a robust projection about the future of the region. For instance, whether the Alawites who do want to secure an autonomous Alawite enclave or state can succeed largely depends on how divided the rebels remain after Assad's fall. A Syrian professor says Iran hopes to fragment Syria and create an Alawite state to maintain power in the region. Syrian Professor Murhaf Jouejati, a member of the faculty at the National Defense University in Washington D.C said that [23].

"We were not talking about the fragmentation of the country before," Jouejati said. "However, the debate on the fragmentation of Syria is more serious than ever because the crisis in the country has become more sectarianized.

"We, Syrians, are against the division of the country which could lead to the establishment of an Alawite state."

There are numerous pressures- including social divisions among Sunnis (urban, tribal and so forth), ideological divides and personal power struggles among the rebel battalions, internal displacement owing to climate change and the civil war, and the issue of Kurdish autonomy. Climate change mentioned above will not only be effective on divisions among Sunnis, but also be effective on water resources most of them are transboundary and conflicted. These transboundary waters affected by climate change will be one of the most important actors that will shape of the future of the Syria as well as the region. This also

means that regional hydro-politics will affect new establishments in the region and will be drastically affected by the new shape of the Syrian political system.

2. WATER POTENTIAL IN SYRIA

2. 1. Hydrology

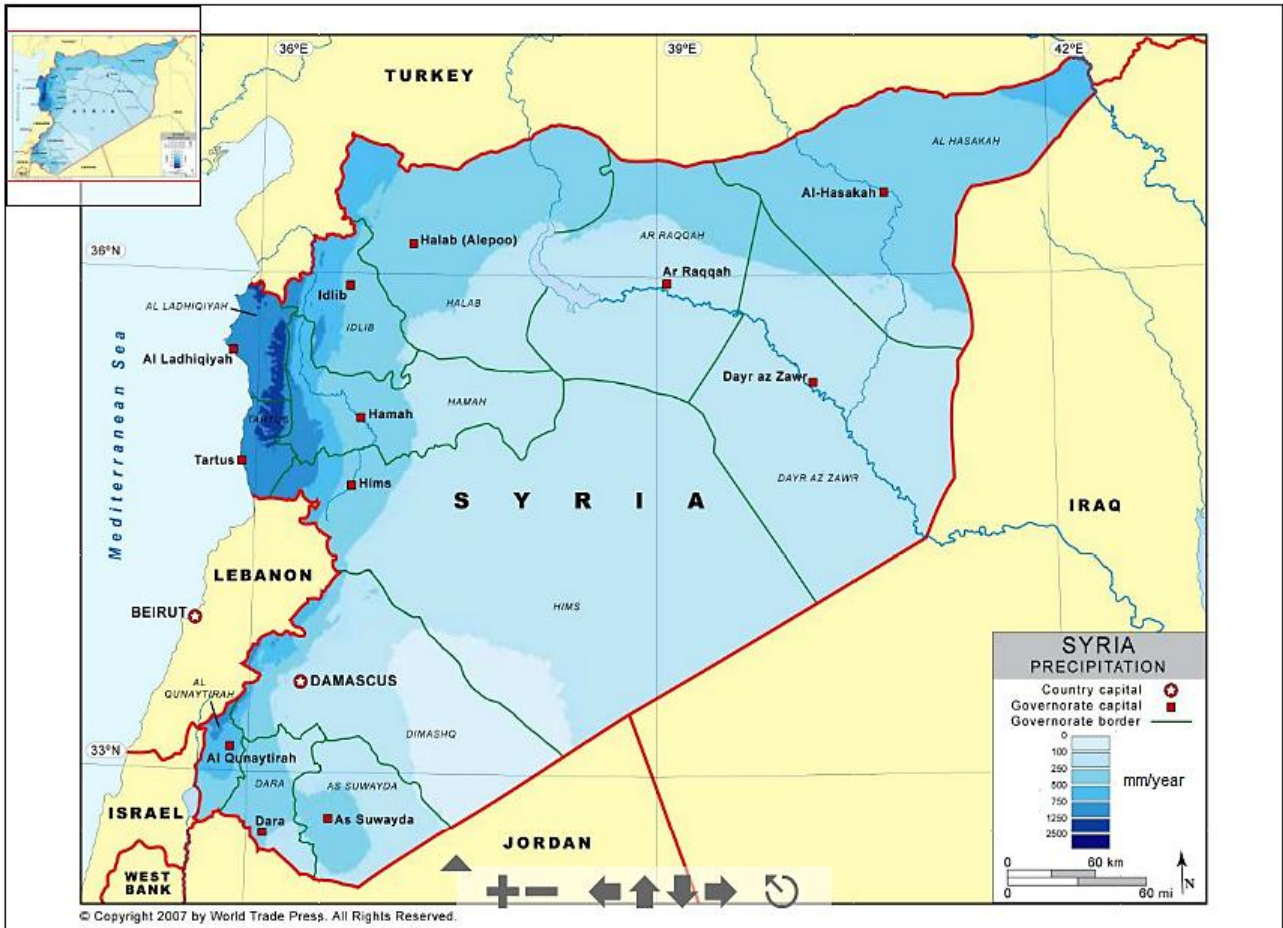


Figure 2. Rainfall in Syria.

Syria, with an area of about 185,180 km and a total population of 21.13 million, has five agro- 2 10 ecological zones depending on rainfall. Humid zones are located in the west, along the Mediterranean coast (Fig. 1). Arid and semiarid zones are located in the east, north, and south. There is a large seasonal variation in water resource availability.

The annual rainfall in Syria decreases from about 900 mm at the coast to about 60 mm in the eastern parts (Fig. 2). More than 60% of the country receives less than 250 mm/year, which makes the country water scarce. About 1300 mm/year in the western parts and reaches 3000 mm/year in the eastern and south - of Syria. Renewable and available water resources were estimated using all publicly available data on surface and groundwater [4]. Fig. 2 shows that the rainiest part of the country is now under governmental control part.

2. 2. Surface waters

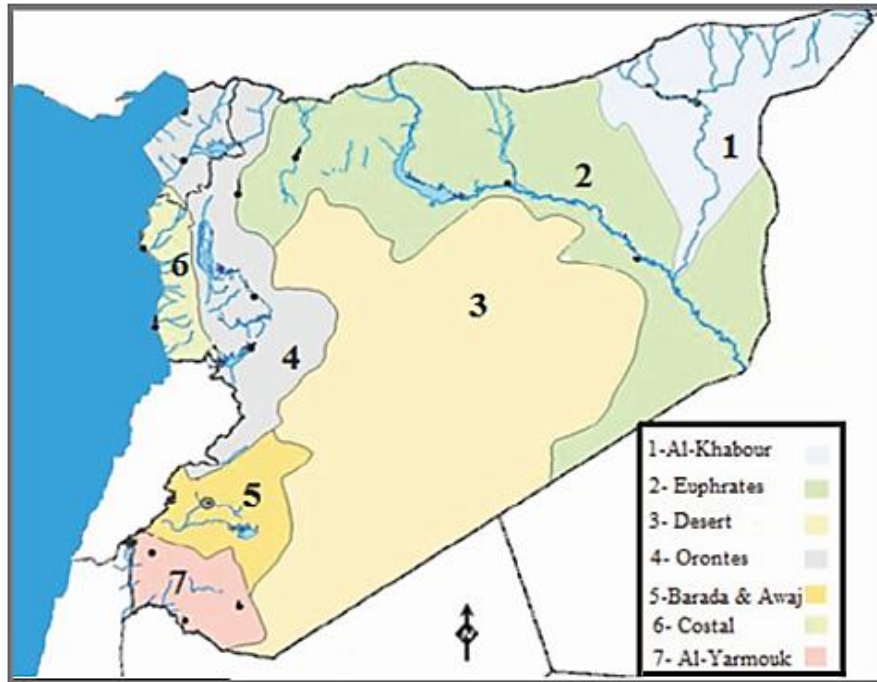


Figure 3. Hydrological basins in Syria.

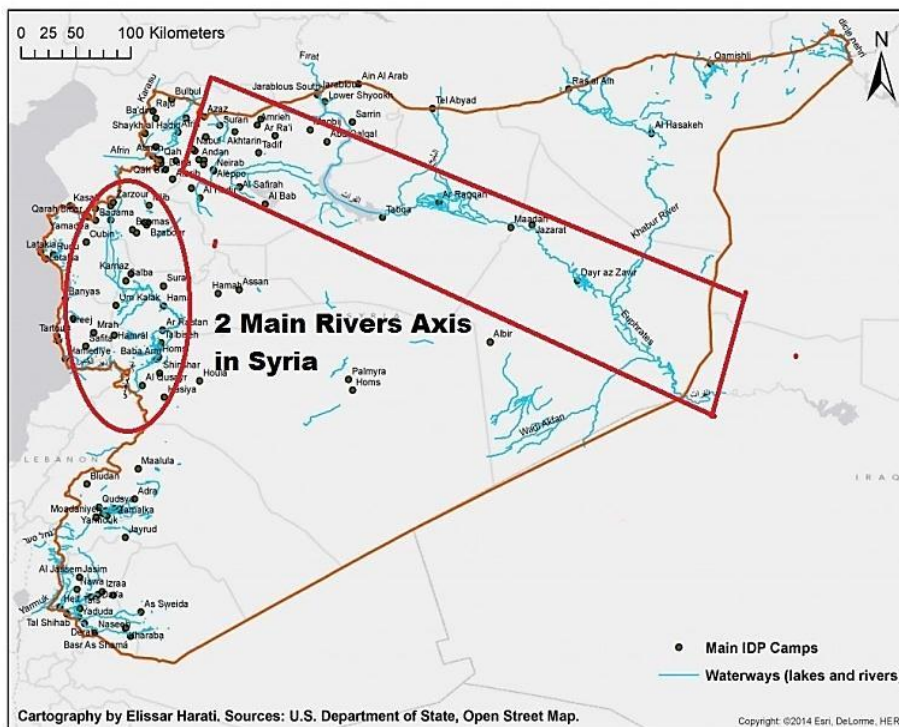


Figure 4. Main River Systems in Syria.

Syria can be divided into seven main water basins: Khabour, Barada and Awaj, Al-Yarmouk, Orontes, Dajleh and Euphrates and Aleppo, Desert, and the Coastal Basin, each of which has its own geological, meteorological, hydrological, and demographic characteristics (Fig. 3). For these basins, Syria has 21 main rivers, 12 of which are shared with other countries in the region and some of them are now seasonal streams [4]. But the main river systems in Syria can be considered as Euphrates with Khabur and Orontes as shown in Fig. 4. Distribution of agricultural land can be seen in Fig. 5.

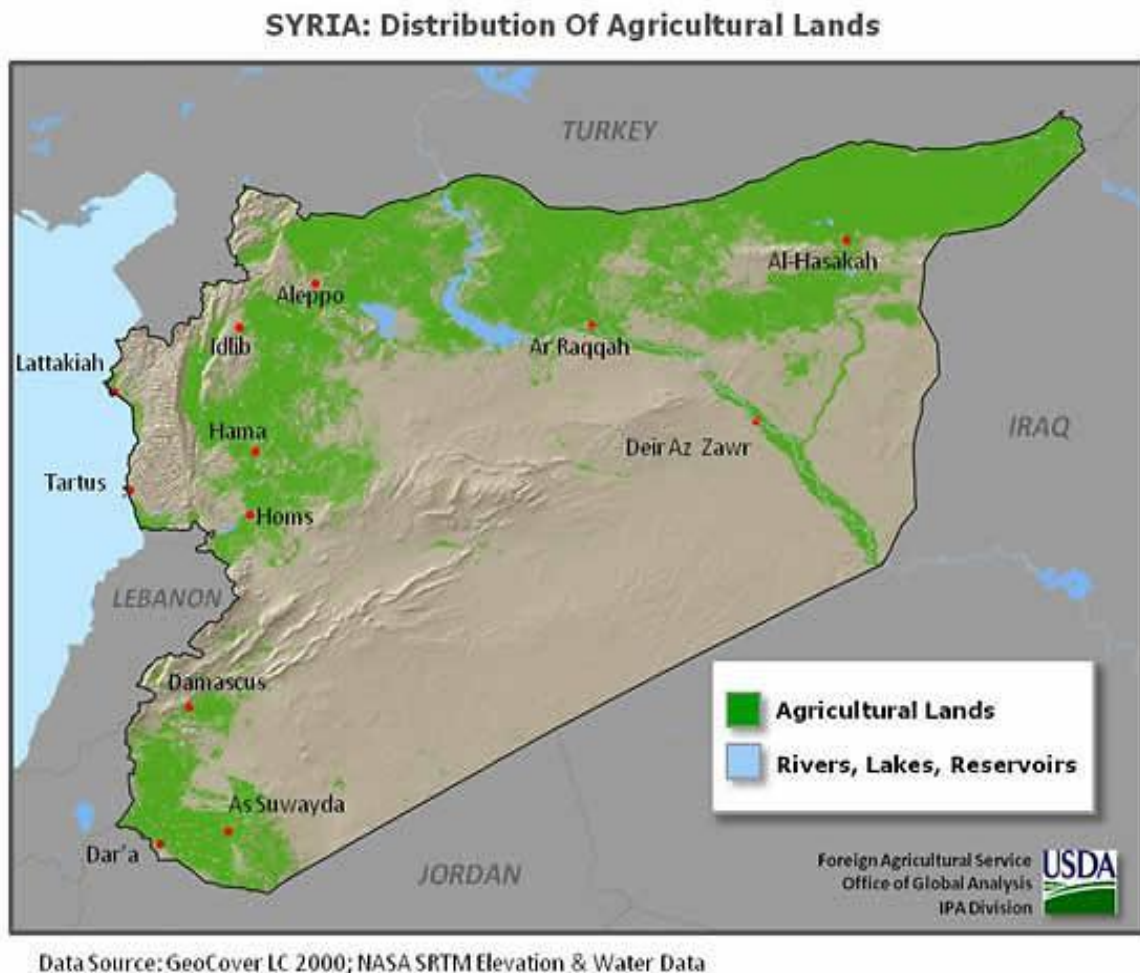


Figure 5. Distribution of agricultural land in Syria.

Syria has made treaties with its neighbors, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey to ease managing shared water resources in the region. For the Euphrates River, shared between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, Turkey agreed to release at least $500 \text{ m}^3 / \text{s}$ to Syria. Syria will use only 42%, while the rest is released to Iraq [4]. Two agreements were made with Lebanon. The first in 1994 concerned the Orontes River. The agreement states that Lebanon can use an annual amount of 80 MCM during years when the average river flow is more or equal to 400 MCM/ year and otherwise 20%.

The second agreement in 2002 was in the Al-Kabir Al-Janubi River with an average annual flow of 150 MCM. The agreement divided the water into 60% for Syria and 40% for Lebanon regardless of hydrological circumstances [5]. The total annual amount that enters Syria, according to these agreements, can thus be assumed to be $320 + 90 = 410$ MCM.

2. 3. Groundwater

The MoI estimated average annual spring flow at about 1350 MCM and the total annual amount of renewable groundwater at about 4811 MCM, which includes almost all springs and legal wells. For groundwater flow, on the other hand, about 1200 and 130 MCM annually enter Syria from Turkey and Lebanon, respectively. However, also about 90 and 250 MCM annually leave Syria to Jordan and the Occupied Lands, respectively [6].

3. THE CIVIL WAR AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

When we looked at the civil war and its development direction in Syria and Iraq, we can see that reaching regional stability will take time. But when the current chaos and civil war settle down it is highly probable that we will see a new political map of the region. It can be called the New Middle East. In this case the main and skillful “international actor’s name” of this “progress” is “ISIS”.

ISIS was formed in April 2013, growing out of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). It has since been disavowed by al-Qaeda, but has become one of the main jihadist groups fighting government forces in Syria and Iraq. Its precise size is unclear, but it is thought to include thousands of fighters, including many foreign jihadists. Prof Peter Neumann of King's College London estimates that about 80% of Western fighters in Syria have joined the group. IS claims to have fighters from the UK, France, Germany and other European countries, as well as the US, the Arab world and the Caucasus. Unlike other rebel groups in Syria, IS is seen to be working towards an Islamic emirate that straddles Syria and Iraq. The group has seen considerable military success. In March 2013, it took over the Syrian city of Raqqa - the first provincial capital to fall under rebel control [19].

The group has gained a reputation for brutal rule in the areas that it controls. However, it was its conquest of Mosul and Mosul Dam in June 2014 threatening floods with death and destruction that sent shockwaves around the world.

In September 2014, the director of the US National Counterterrorism Center said IS controlled much of the Tigris-Euphrates river basin - an area similar in size to the United Kingdom. Seven months later, the US military declared that IS had lost about a quarter of its territory in Iraq, but that its area of influence in Syria remained largely unchanged, with losses in some areas offset by gains in others. In fact in reality, IS militants exercise complete control over only a small part of that territory, which includes cities and towns, main roads, oil fields and military facilities. They enjoy freedom of movement in the largely uninhabited areas outside what the Institute for the Study of War calls "control zones", but they would struggle to defend them.

Similarly, it is not entirely clear how many people are living under full or partial IS control across Syria and Iraq. In March 2015, the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross puts the figure at more than 10 million.



How much territory does IS control?



The territorial gains this summer by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in both showed that a new Middle East political map is coming true even if some experts have opposite idea. American bombing helped to turn back some of its recent gains in northern Iraq, but no one claims that ISIS has been defeated.

3. 1. Regional Instability caused by ISIS

ISIS can be seen as an outgrowth of the new Middle East map. The root cause of this region-wide crisis is the failure of state authorities to be able to control their borders and their territories, to provide services to their populations and, ultimately, to forge a common political identity that could be the basis of the political community.

This collapse of normal state authority has not only occurred in large swathes of Syria and Iraq; it is also occurring in Lebanon, Yemen, Libya and perhaps even in parts of Egypt. In the absence of central government control, local forces emerge, based on sectarian, ethnic, tribal and regional identities, to fill the gap. The Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Huthi movement in Yemen and the various sectarian militias in Syria and Iraq are, in their different ways, similar manifestations of the failure of centralized governance in these countries. Some experts say that ISIS is extremely well organized and disciplined. One of its great strengths at the propaganda level is that it is not the client of a foreign power [19].

3. 2. How ISIS has turned the “Middle East Hydro Politics” upside down ?

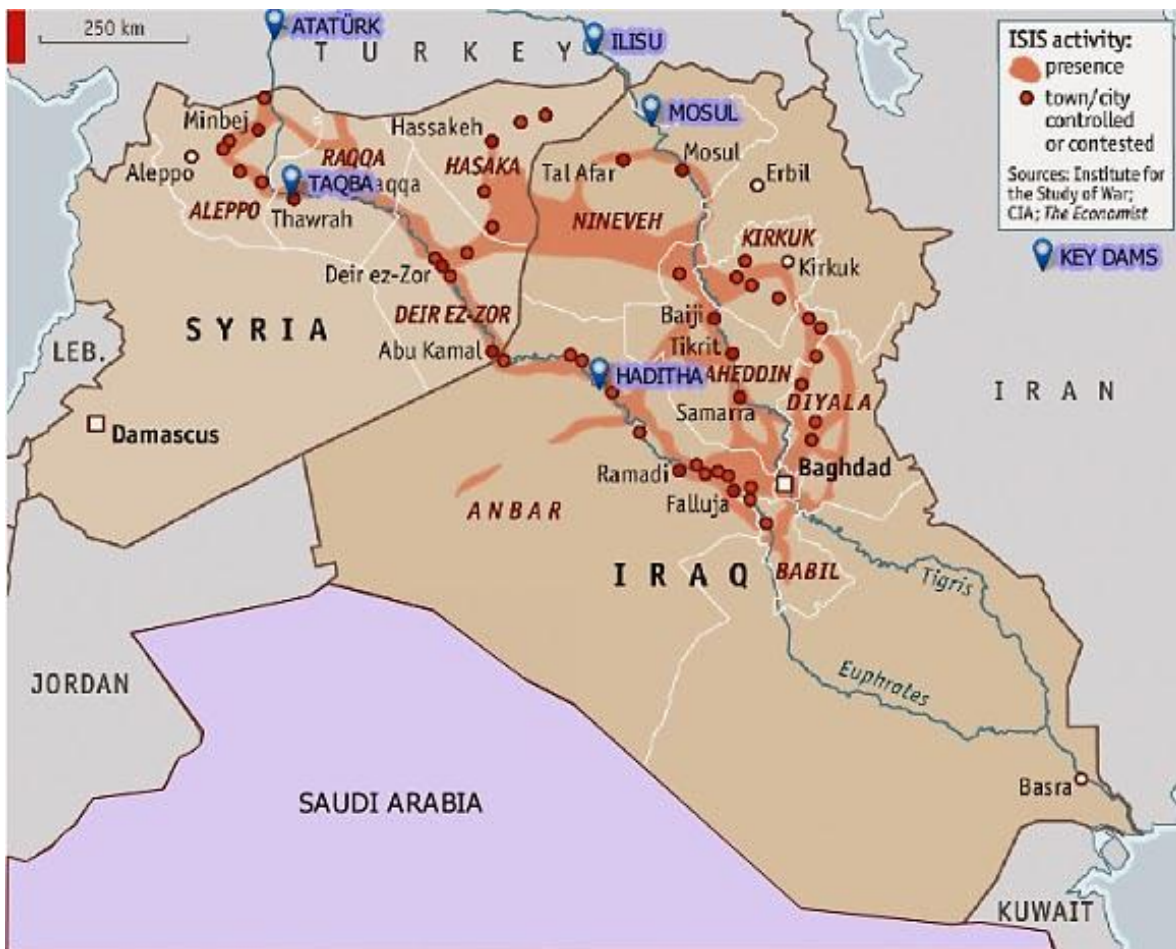


Figure 6. ISIS activity and control lands in the Euphrates and Tigris River Basin.

ISIS fighters have launched large amount of Syrian land as shown in Fig. 1 as of July 28 2015 . As it is seen in the figure, the land under government control is surrounded in the western part of the country. ISIS has been controlling the most of the Euphrates and Tigris River basin as shown in Fig. 6.

4. NEW MIDDLE EAST

4. 1. Could an Alawite State be Established

It is not easy to say that yes. If reduce support of Russia and Iran, Assad may be lost Damascus, Al Assad for destruction of the civil war in 2011, started in establishing an Alawi state on the Mediterranean Coast. And was made a great humanitarian and military buildup in the region. In fact, as shown in Fig 1. This land has been already an Alawi state in terms of the majority of the ethnic population.

If Free Syrian Army conquered to Damascus, secular Sunnis and some Christians can come to this region and some of them can migrate to Lebanon.

If Russia and Iran don't give essential support for Assad to keep Damascus, but they will give a huge support to keep Nusayris. Because the region is in the hand of Assad's vital for Moscow and Tehran. Russia, for the Mediterranean Sea and Tehran for continued connection with Hizbullah wants to remain region in the hands of Assad.

Some experts claim, "Assad is guaranteeing the future Alawite state with a 60,000-strong militia." The Popular Defense Units have been set up not only in the Mediterranean belt, but in other regions, too. Those units are not made up solely of Alawites. The units are dominated by Sunnis in Sunni areas and by Alawites in Alawite areas. In Damascus and Hama, for instance, their majority is Sunni. It is vice versa in Latakia and Tarsus. Young people have assumed duty at checkpoints in their hometowns. Those in Damascus are more professional and take part in military operations alongside the army [1].

The most critical question here is that: *Do the Alawites want an Alawite state?* An Alawite from the region gave this answer [22]:

- "The Alawites in Latakia, Tartus and Baniyas are absolutely against living by themselves. The Alawites who fled from Aleppo to Latakia remember their Sunni neighbors with gratitude. But if the jihadist Salafists come to power, the Alawites and the Christians will retreat to the coast as a last resort.

In fact the biggest fear of the Alawites is that they could be completely purged. Thus, the Latakia-Tartus-Baniyas belt could be considered the last way out of annihilation. It is obvious that we cannot understand the civil war raging in Syria without understanding the Alawites community that became the most important power bloc in Syria after the 1970s.

The current situation map and development of the civil war show us former Syria regime can only reborn in the Eastern Mediterranean coasts of the country that has enough rainfall, rivers and agricultural lands (Fig. 5, Fig. 7).

The war has had little impact on life in Latakia and Tartus. Despite the tight control, daily life remains vibrant and the cafes are packed in the evenings. The bodies of more than 20,000 people have arrived in the region, but this is how things stand on the ground.

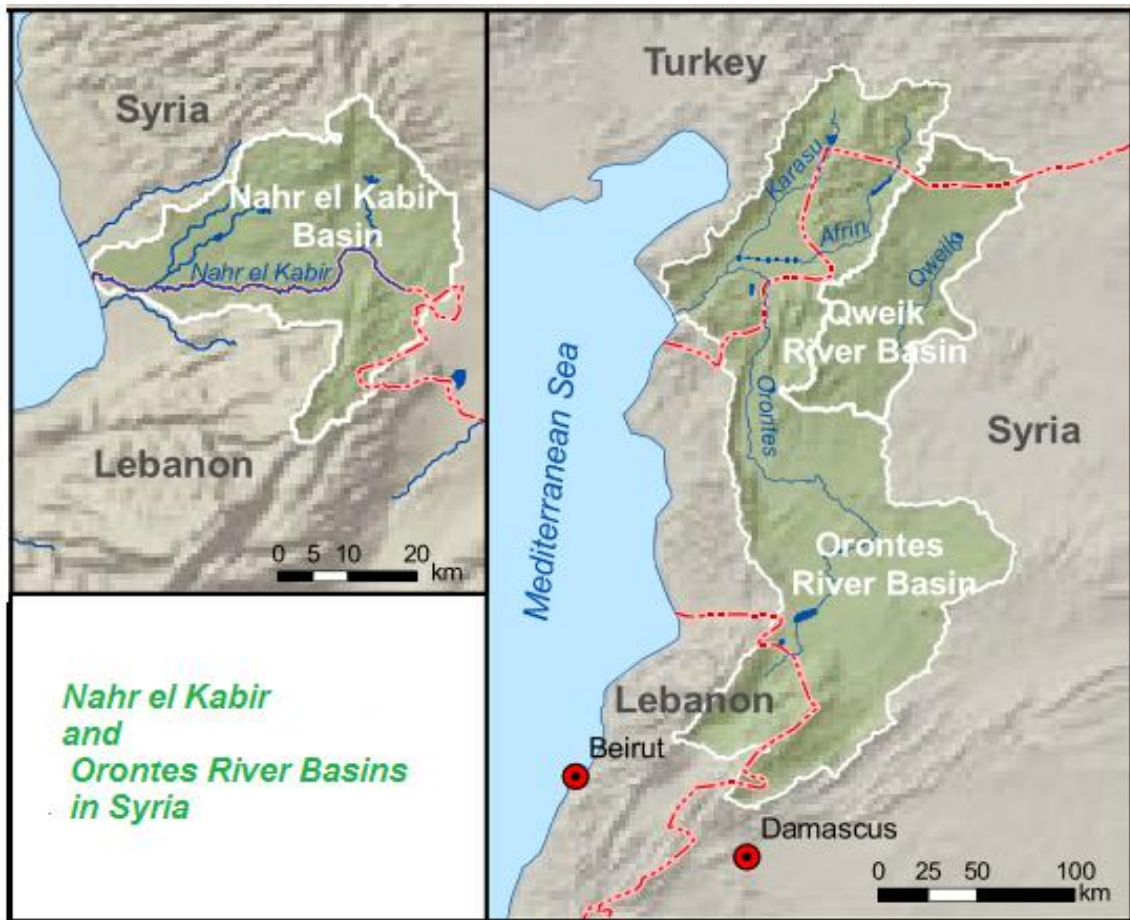


Figure 7. River basins in the land mostly controlled by governmental forces.

4. 2. What next?

But the most important question here is that “What next”? It seems that if an international strong agreement hasn’t been reached under the guarantee of Russia and Iran, Al Assad can’t be comfortable in this state for a long time of period. Primarily opposition group will battle for Damascus and for that reason Assad will be relaxed for a period. On the other hand, the already fragile peace in Lebanon, after the great waves of immigration coming from Syria, which is completely transformed into a new phase of civil war. In summary, the Syrian-Iraqi civil war, the Middle East has already turned into a regional civil war situation. Middle East regional civil war in this new stage can spread the next 10 years to structurally. That in itself risks includes, Israel will enter a long period of time to relieve. If Russia and Iran would not support Assad, Assad will be drawn from Damascus, War comes to an end like this? But in this case the second phase of the war starts in Syria. In fact the efforts to build an Alawi state will no doubt be supported by Iranian proxies and Alawi militias, who would have interests in the establishment of such a state. However, a retreat to an Alawi stronghold would represent a failure of the regime, and Assad has made it clear that he will live or die in Damascus [3]. Many analysts have argued that the Syrian regime has been setting the stage for a retreat to Syria’s coastal mountains, the traditional homeland of President Bashar al-

Assad's Alawi sect, and that sooner or later Assad will abandon Damascus for the coast [3,15]. If a new map of the Middle East will come true in this way, this will totally change the Hydro-politics of the region.

4. 3. Last Situation and Future

The situation in mid-2015 shows roughly who controlled which parts of Syria. The government dominated in the Alawite, Shi'a, Christian, Druze, and mixed Sunni areas in the west, with the rebels holding much of the corridor along the Euphrates River and areas in the southwest of the country. The Kurds are defending the land in the north that has already been a zone in this area. At this point, a stalemate is very likely. The two sides are not strong enough to control all or even most of the country. If either side makes significant gains, the other is likely to be reinforced from abroad [22]. In February 2015, U.S. defense, intelligence officials assessed that the conflict was "trending in the Asad regime's favor," but predicted that pro-Asad forces would "continue to struggle and be unable to decisively defeat the opposition in 2015." [17]. Nevertheless, by mid-2015, U.S. defense officials were acknowledging rebels' subsequent gains, describing pro-Asad forces as "much weakened," and discussing the possibility that Asad could cede large areas of the country by withdrawing forces from some regions. Some observers have argued that regime losses in confrontations with IS forces and with other opposition forces are creating public pressure on the government to improve military performance and leadership or to negotiate.

President Obama said in February 2015 that, in his view, "***The Syrian civil war will only end when there is an inclusive political transition and a government that serves Syrians of all ethnicities and religions.***" Formulation suggests that the current conflict could persist or evolve in response to any negotiated settlement seeking to replace the current Asad-led government with a government of national unity or other inclusive formulation. But a big threshold here is the new election of Presidency in USA. If the democrats are not continuing in the power, expectations and projections will be different and the formula might be changed drastically.

Rand Cooperation Report 18] says that:

"Syria's civil war is about whether Bashar al-Assad will continue to lead Syria's government, but the war increasingly reflects broader sectarian undercurrents that divide the country and the region. This is a central pathology of the Syrian conflict. It will impede its resolution".

According to Al Monitor [22] western officials see the equation as follows:

"Russia and Iran are providing full support for the regime, and Moscow may raise its support after the events of Ukraine. There are no indicators that Tehran's policy will change. The regime is regaining control over areas in the Damascus countryside and is linking them with the coast. It is also increasing its grip on Damascus and closing the supply corridors from Lebanon. The military opposition is divided on the north between moderates and Islamists and between Islamists and jihadists and between the northern and southern fronts. The political opposition is facing challenges. The terrorist threat in northern Syria is rising, while it is limited in the south, and there are indicators that it is expanding in the Golan Heights."

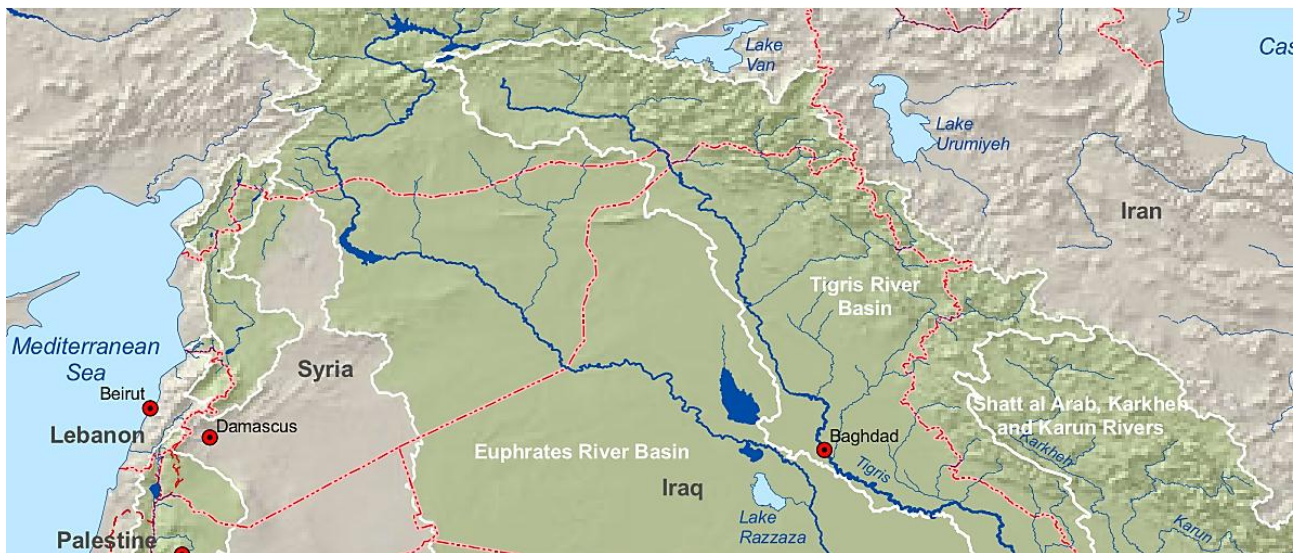


Figure 8. Physical Map of Iraq and Syria.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Conflict in Syria enters its fourth year with high uncertainty regarding the circumstances on the ground, potential outcomes, and long-term consequences that need continual comprehensive analysis in many respects.

The conflict seems to be an existential struggle for all concerned, so not even the fall of Assad will bring an end to the violence. As of 2015, more than 4 million of the Syrian population is living as refugees, which will exacerbate existing sectarian tensions in neighboring countries that is very much important for future international relationship.

Uncertainty is unavoidable in the region and there is much that we do not know to make a stronger prediction. Even if there is a long term international coalition strategy about the region, it is not certain what will happen next in short. We may describe the situation as event-driven. It has changed dramatically during the past four years and is likely to continue to change. These continuing changes and instability could bring a disaster with the climate change effects in foreseeable future. Therefore stability in soon will be vital not only the countries but also whole region including Eastern Mediterranean. But on the other hand, instability in Syria is a platform for allowing all players to have their chance at furthering their agenda. Therefore It is not easy to predict future of Syria. Some experts say “The most likely scenario is a continuing armed conflict lasting many years.” But in the end, The outcome could result in a more traditional single power ruling Syria, a hybrid of the current array of players, or a regional free-for-all. According to some experts the Syria conflict could easily last another decade. If the longer the war goes on in Syria, the more likely country breaks up will happen. Whichever scenario came true we should be aware of that civil war has already turned the “Iraq, Syria and Regional Hydro Politics” upside down. This changing will also be effective for future of the region. It is still effected on the lack of the international relations between riparian. If currently disintegrated political system is changed like federation, confederation or independent states in Syria, this new state not only will be influenced from existing water resources but also it will change the hydro politics of the

region. For instance, if there will be an independent Alawi state in mostly governmental controlled land, this new state will be an upstream country with its only river of Orontes as controversial to the Syrian's downstream situation in the past (Fig. 8).

We should be aware of that Syria's problem is not as simple as Assad's presence in power; removing his regime would not by itself harmonize the interests embedded in the country's patchwork quilt of ethnic and sectarian identities. Syria may be unique, but the problems of governing a multi-ethnic country are not. A far more sustained and thoughtful consideration of Syria's future, and how the country will be governed democratically, is needed. But Confederal, federal, independent all or a bicameral parliament and highly decentralized provincial structures, whatsoever the type of New Syrian System will be, there will be transboundary water issues that is more confused than before.

Undoubtedly, global warming and climate change will only exacerbate the Middle East's water problem. UN studies project that, by 2025, seven additional Middle Eastern states (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Libya, Morocco, Oman and Syria) will be added to the existing 11 nations already experiencing water shortages (Algeria, Bahrain, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen).

These dynamics formed the background for the warning issued, in the not-so-distant past, by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to the effect that the next wars in the region will be over water.

Hydropolitics gives great cause for concern for the future of the region. But the picture need not be so dire and bleak. They say that "desperation is sometimes as powerful an inspirer as genius." In fact, collective dependence on scarce water resources represents a great opportunity for the region to work collectively toward the establishment of a regional cooperative regime – to begin with, through schemes of cooperation on the regulation of water usage, water sanitation and water management.

Water is not priority issue in the current civil war situation for the time being. The first things to be done is to stop the war and to avoid the civil war's worst situation in the region. But when tidal waves of the civil war lessen in short or long term, the sustainable peace and stability of the region will mostly be depend on new hydropolitics.

New Hydropolitics' footsteps in the Middle East.

The Hydropolitics will be more explosive issue in the Middle East in the near future. Water is prone to become a highly politicized issue with the new political systems or long term instability. It seems highly unlikely that, political stability of the region cannot be accomplished in soon. Therefore, different from 1915 it is obvious that water will play a more important role than oil in redesigning and stabilization of the region. Over the next decade, the region is sure to experience great changes, not only political, but also hydropolitical, climatological, environmental.

IS fighters control most of the upper areas of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flow from Turkey in the north to the Gulf in the south. All of Iraq and a large part of Syria rely on these rivers for food, water and industry. This is itself a considerable change in domestic hydro policies in Iraq. Civil war period has been a long term lack of improvement of water management system in Iraq as well as Syria. This period also represents the lack of trust building in Hydropolitics Relations between riparian countries.

In addition to this we will see that future uncertainty and drastically changing hydropolitics will play more important role in the future of the Region.

Contrary to some news and analyses, we think that IS' attempts to control certain water resources would somehow change current water policies and water management, but wouldn't lead to a water crisis in the region. But in the long run, ISIS and other anti-governmental forces began to change the hydro-politics and create a new water equation of the region. In fact, looking at the current situation and possible political future alternatives, we could say that the hydro-politics of the region has already been turned upside down.

It is so much important for the region because of that **“no peace without water, no water without peace” in the Middle East.**

Biography

Dursun Yıldız is a hydro-politics expert and Director of the Hydro-politics Academy Association located in Ankara-Turkey. He is a civil engineer and used to be Deputy Director at State Hydraulic Works in Turkey; completed hydroinformatics post graduate course at the IHE in Delft, Technical training programme in USBR-USA and a master's degree in Hydro-politics at the Hacettepe University-Turkey. He has over 5 years of teaching experiences in some Turkish Universities and now works as head of his own Hydro Energy & Strategy consulting company located in Ankara. He has published several international articles and 11 Books. He received the Most Successful Researcher Award on International Water Issues from Turkish Agricultural Association in 2008.

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