

ISIS and Syrian Instability

By: Jeremy Roberts

As the Islamic State's brutal hold on [an area straddling the Iraq-Syria border](#) tightens, Western governments have felt the increased threat that a new [caliphate](#) in the region poses. Especially in the wake of filmed beheadings of two American journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, IS ([or ISIS, or ISIL](#)) has drawn significant media coverage and political attention in North America and Europe—the man who appeared in both videos spoke English with what sounded like a London accent, stoking fears of homegrown radicalism. Journalists and other interested parties have scrambled in recent weeks to explain this radicalization process, coming up with answers ranging from a [savvy terrorist media campaign](#) to the [supposed role](#) that hair colour plays. Whatever is compelling these young people to travel half a world away to fight for a cause anathema to the only existence they had previously known, one thing has become clear: IS is not simply a regional problem. The rise of a Sharia state and efforts to combat that rise have profound international implications, not least for the promotion of democracy in the region.

IS has effectively stolen the spotlight. The 24-hour news cycle has gone into overdrive reporting on the Foley and Sotloff murders, as well as the American and European reaction. The big news story out of Syria today is not the ongoing civil war; instead, the rise of the Islamic State and its attendant brutality has taken center stage, giving the Assad regime a little bit of wiggle room. It has taken advantage of the opprobrium that IS has drawn and [claimed to be an ally of the West](#) in fighting the militants, further muddling what is, for many, an already confusing conflict.

It is, really, a classic game of “divide and conquer”. The Assad regime, facing off against a multitude of rebel groups with varying ideological leanings and end-goals, [has welcomed](#) the divisions that IS has introduced—or at least exacerbated. The war, in effect, has become a melee, with IS militants [seizing territory from rival factions in the Free Syrian Army, and squeezing supply lines linking Western-backed militants with Turkey](#). Such maneuvering has been decisive. In January of 2014, for example, the Syrian opposition squared off in a six-week battle with IS near the Syrian border with Turkey, which they won at a cost of 2500 lives and allowing the Assad regime to surround Aleppo, [“a move which is likely to prove decisive in the Syrian civil war.”](#) When resources are finite, their distribution is important to any outcome. IS is effectively disrupting the Syrian opposition's supply lines and drawing their fire away from Assad, loosening that group's grip on victory.

While it seems unlikely that IS will ever actually form a lasting or recognized state in the region—there is simply too much division and IS [has too many enemies](#)—its existence, as the above example of the encirclement of Aleppo illustrates, can be useful to other, not-so-democratic actors. IS, with its almost unbelievable barbarism, has given players as divergent as the United States, Hezbollah, Iraq, the Kurds, the Assad regime, and even [Russia](#) a common enemy. (As an interesting aside, it appears that in Iran, an ally of the Assad regime and therefore an enemy of IS, there is a widespread [belief that the United States is behind IS as a way to destabilize the region](#).) International relations are often more complicated than “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”, but not significantly so.

What does IS mean for democracy? Should they actually form a state, it would be among the least democratic in the world, with [brutal punishments](#), a limited franchise with women—especially women of religious or ethnic groups that IS sees as inferior—[allowed almost no rights](#), and essentially [nonexistent freedom of religion](#). But that does not seem a likely outcome. What is more likely to happen is that IS, subject to the military power of Western and

Arab powers, as well as that of Syrian opposition and Kurdish Peshmerga forces, will eventually recede. The effort expended in the campaign against IS, however, will have been effort not expended on toppling Assad in Syria. He will likely emerge from the IS conflict with a firmer grip on power than he had before, making it unlikely that his regime will be defeated by remaining fractured rebel factions.

The evil that IS has perpetrated before the world's eyes is undeniable, but we cannot forget that the Assad regime, whatever their conciliatory rhetoric in the wake of IS's rise, has also been responsible for some truly heinous crimes against the Syrian people. They have [bombed markets](#), [committed sexual assaults on children](#), and are likely responsible for [the use of chemical weapons](#) against civilians during the conflict. Assad's Syria is an authoritarian regime that is unafraid to use extreme force to maintain control over its population. His continued hold on power is not a desirable outcome. Unfortunately, the way events are transpiring in the Middle East right now, his ouster is looking improbable. Democracy, in short, does not appear to be waiting in the wings in Syria.

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