

Player at the sidelines NATO and the fight against ISIL

by Andreas Jacobs and Jean-Loup Samaan¹



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On December 3rd 2014, NATO hosted the first meeting between the foreign ministers from the countries forming the US-led coalition against the so-called “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL).² Although all NATO members are officially part of the coalition and the Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, attended – as an observer – the meeting, participants said to the media that NATO would “*only provide the building*.”³ Despite this word of caution, the event marked a new step in NATO's indirect involvement in the fight against ISIL. The ad-hoc coalition did materialize on the margins of NATO's Wales Summit last September. The question now is: will NATO merely play a role of a forum where coalition members meet, or could this lead to further participation?

The sweeping advance of ISIL in Syria and Iraq took the international community by surprise. Along with the huge territorial gains of ISIL, the group openly displayed brutality against their opponents and religious minorities, and the despicable beheadings of Western journalists and NGO-workers have convinced Western leaders to take action. In mid-August several NATO member states decided on a series of unilateral measures against ISIL. The United States, France and the United Kingdom and other nations conducted a number of air raids against camps and positions of the terrorist organization, allowing Kurdish and Iraqi forces to partially regain ground; other countries gave military equipment and humanitarian assistance to the Iraqis and Kurds and/or sent military advisers. At its summit at the Welsh city of Newport in the United Kingdom on 5 September 2014, NATO found common ground in collectively condemning the jihadi terrorist organization. However, in Wales NATO neither came up with a collective strategy against ISIL nor did it define a clear idea of NATO's contribution to the international efforts to degrade and destroy it. Asked in November, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, said, “*there has been no question, no request for a NATO role in Syria [...] I think that underlines that NATO is often*

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² The group is also known as “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS), the “Islamic State” (IS) or under its Arabic Acronym Dae'esh that stands for *Dawlat Islamiyya lil Iraq wa ach-Cham*. On 14 May 2014, the US Department of State announced its decision to use “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL) as the group's primary name making it the most commonly used name in security politics. Therefore, in this paper the name ISIL is used.

³ Adrian Croft, “Ministers from coalition against Islamic State to meet December 3,” *Reuters*, 26 November 2014.



[...] *the answer to many crises. But NATO is not always the only answer.*"⁴ Given the diversity of perceptions and interests among NATO member states and the general intervention fatigue, it is already clear that NATO stands at the sidelines in the fight against ISIL. Nevertheless, standing at the sidelines should not equal fence-sitting. With military and humanitarian action unfolding, there should be a lively debate on what NATO can and should do to support the fight. In that perspective, this paper provides an analysis of the on-going efforts of the coalition against ISIL. It then specifies the current domains in which NATO plays a role and explores three scenarios that allow us to see under which circumstances NATO may change its position.

1. The Global Coalition against ISIL

NATO is neither a member of the international coalition against ISIL nor does it have a mandate to play a coordinating or facilitating role in the fight. However, the various activities of the anti-ISIL coalition directly or indirectly affect NATO institutions, NATO interests and also some ongoing or expired NATO missions.

1.1 The Wales Summit and the making of the coalition

Although the latest NATO Summit at Newport was dominated by the crisis in Ukraine, the situation unfolding in Iraq and Syria and the challenges posed by ISIL played an important role. This could not be taken for granted at the time. When it became obvious that US president Barack Obama planned to use the summit as a forum to establish a coalition against ISIL, some participants allegedly raised objections against such a step. In response, Obama and other Heads of State initiated a diplomatic initiative to dispel these reservations prior to the summit. A day before the meeting, Obama and the British Premier David Cameron published a joint opinion piece in *The Times of London* noting that, "*Developments [...] in Iraq and Syria, threaten our security at home. And NATO is not just an alliance of friends who come to the aid of each other in times of need. It is also an alliance based on national self-interest. Whether it is regional aggression going unchecked or the prospect that foreign fighters could return from Iraq and*

Syria to pose a threat in our countries, the problems we face today threaten the security of [...] the wider world."⁵

Regardless of this appeal the support for Obama's plan for an international coalition remained limited at first. In the Wales Summit Declaration⁶ NATO Heads of State only referred to the threat ISIL posed, declared their solidarity with the people in the region, and made clear that a "*coordinated international approach is required.*"⁷ By not explicitly elaborating the role and contribution of NATO to such an international approach, NATO members emphasized that the Alliance should neither be the primary actor nor the main coordinating body for the anti-ISIL strategy. In fact, they agreed in Newport that the United States should provide a framework through which other countries can contribute, leaving room for the Alliance to assist upon request. In the summit declaration, NATO member states also pointed out that they regard an active request by the Iraqi government as a main requirement for any NATO involvement.

Consequently, the summit document renewed the Alliance commitment to the NATO-Iraq partnership and re-committed security assistance to the Iraqi armed forces.⁸ NATO also called upon the new Prime Minister of Iraq, Haydar al-Abadi, to form an "*inclusive Iraqi government with cross-sectarian representation*" in order to appeal to disenfranchised Sunnis. With a new Iraqi government in power, the coalition anticipated that Iraq would formally invite Western military forces into the country to combat ISIL. Altogether, the Wales Summit did not develop a comprehensive NATO-strategy against ISIL. Rather, it made clear that most NATO states have little intention of intervening directly in Iraq or Syria. However, all NATO partners acknowledged the necessity to contain and ultimately defeat ISIL. Additionally, the Wales summit left the main responsibility for the fight to the US.

Therefore, the US took the lead in forming and guiding an international coalition against ISIL after Wales. By the end of November, 60 states had joined the coalition by providing military, financial, technical, logistical or ideological support to the fight, among them many Arab countries.⁹ All NATO allies officially committed to the

⁴ "NATO: A unique Alliance with a Clear Course", Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the German Marshall Fund, Brussels, 13 November 2014.

⁵ Barack Obama, David Cameron, "We will not be cowed by barbaric killers," *The Times*, 4 September, 2014.

⁶ Wales Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales from 4 to 5 September 2014, (http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm)

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Wales Summit Declaration, *op. cit.*, paragraph 34.

⁹ Kenneth Katzman, Christopher Blanchard, Carla Humud, Rhoda Margesson, Alex Tiersky, Matthew Weed, The "Islamic State" Crisis and US Policy, Washington, Congressional Research Service, 12 November 2014, p.14.



coalition efforts.¹⁰ The unfolding strategy against ISIL is based on several military and non-military measures. These measures range from air strikes, training activities for Iraqi, Kurdish and some (moderate opposition) Syrian ground forces, intelligence cooperation, and the fight against financing of terrorism to humanitarian support of the victims of ISIL and the development of religious counter-narratives to ISIL ideology.

1.2 The Air Campaign Against ISIL

Airstrikes have been the main and probably until now the most effective tool of the anti-ISIL strategy.¹¹ Between the end of August and the end of November 2014 almost 1000 raids against bases and terrorist-camps in Iraq and Syria were conducted. Their purpose was to kill ISIL leaders, destroy ISIL infrastructure and financial resources, and to support Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces. First successes are already visible. Supported by coalition airpower, Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces were able to retake crucial infrastructure, such as the dam in Mosul, from ISIL. The defense of the Kurdish town of Kobane by Kurdish forces was also at least partly based on air support.

But airstrikes alone will not defeat ISIL. The US government decided in November 2014 to increase the number of non-combatting troops in Iraq to identify targets, guide planes and coordinate with local military.¹² And this is not the only problem the air campaign is facing. The fight is complicated by the ongoing civil war in Syria. Here, the Alliance faces the dilemma that the fight against ISIL would reinforce the position of Syrian President Bashar al Assad.¹³ Consequently, the Assad regime uses the ISIL crisis as leverage to present itself as the “lesser evil” and regain international legitimacy and credibility. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem elucidated this interest on 26 August 2014 when he called for international cooperation with the Syrian authorities to fight ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra. According to anonymous Syrian sources, some Western officials expressed interest in cooperating with the Syrian military to confront ISIL,

but are reluctant to deal with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.¹⁴ In Damascus, one rumour says that Iraqi officials are channelling American communications to Assad’s circle.¹⁵ For an increasing share of observers and practitioners, a unity government encompassing the Syrian military and the moderate opposition forces seems to be the only tangible way out of the Syrian dilemma. However, there is little traction on this front in Damascus as Western powers continue to insist that any change in the Syrian government should include the departure of Assad.

For now, the only chosen course of action of the US and its allies remains to enhance support for the moderate Syrian opposition. President Obama suggested that NATO partners could enlist “moderate” rebel forces in Syria to join the fight against ISIL. Western aid to Syrian rebel groups has been limited until now due to fears that weapons could fall into the hands of ISIL linked factions. While NATO agreed in Wales that the goal to “destroy” ISIL would eventually require action in Syria,¹⁶ it is still unclear how this would play out. Activities such as disrupting the recruiting and financial networks of the Islamic State are in some cases only feasible if a tacit agreement with the Assad regime is in place, as is the case for airstrikes in Syria or in the vicinity of its borders. The coalition faces the dilemma that it could either be exposed to the surface-to-air missiles of the Assad regime or in-effect act as Assad’s air force.¹⁷ To further complicate things, Russia and Iran pointed out that military action in Syria without a UN Security Council mandate would be considered as an act of aggression.¹⁸

Given the complexity of the Syrian theater, the ambition of airstrikes against ISIL in Syria is limited as they are hardly part of a combined effort between airpower and ground forces as they do in Iraq. Although it has been stated by President Obama and others that the international coalition fights ISIL in Iraq and Syria, it is obvious that the operational priorities are in Iraq. This has also been made clear by US-Joint Chiefs Chairman

¹⁰ Justine Drennan, “Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition Against the Islamic State?” *Foreign Policy*, 12 November 2014.

¹¹ According to Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the US-Joint Chiefs of Staff, airstrikes have disrupted ISIL’s infrastructure, its command and control and logistic abilities, *Al Arabiya News*, 1 December 2014 (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/09/26/U-S-led-strikes-target-ISIS-oil-refineries-in-Syria-.html>)

¹² The 1 500 additional troops will join the 1,600 military advisers to Iraq since the start of the IS offensive in June.

¹³ This discussion has been reinforced by the recent airstrikes of the Syrian regime against Raqqa, the unofficial capital of ISIL, Hugh Naylor “Syria, U.S. attack same Syrian city, than trade barbs”, *The Washington Post*, November 28, 2014

¹⁴ Antoun Issa, “Syria, West explore cooperation to fight Islamic State,” *Al-Monitor*, September 4, 2014 (www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/syria-us-islamic-state-cooperation-terror-assad-italy.html)

¹⁵ Private conversations with Syrian sources based in Damascus, November 2014.

¹⁶ Craig Whitlock, Griff Witte, “West to reach out to Syrian rebels to fight Islamic State,” *The Washington Post*, 5 September, 2014.

¹⁷ Sabrina Siddiqui, “Striking ISIS In Syria May Require Coordination With Assad Regime,” *The Huffington Post*, 4 September 2014.

¹⁸ Adrian Croft, “Action against Islamic State would prevent genocide-NATO,” *Reuters*, 15 September 2014.



Gen. Martin Dempsey: “*This is an Iraq-first strategy.*”¹⁹

1.3 Support for Anti-ISIL Forces on the Ground

In addition to the air campaign, the US and its allies have been enhancing the level of financial and military support to the anti-ISIL forces on the ground. These include the Iraqi armed forces, some vetted Syrian rebel groups, and Kurdish fighters. The support can take several forms such as the permission for the use of national airspace. For instance, Albania is a takeoff point for Australian aircraft delivering arms to Kurdish fighters in Iraq. It also refers more specifically to the military support to the Kurdish fighters that include small arms ammunition, artillery shells and hand grenades. Noticeably, Germany sent equipment including anti-tank rockets, thousands of assault rifles, mine-clearing equipment, and night-vision goggles.²⁰ France pledged the provision of military advisors to train the Kurds. Italy sent \$ 2.5 million worth of weaponry. The United Kingdom also shipped a package to the Kurdish fighters valued at approximately \$2.6 million.²¹

1.4 Countering Networks and Finance of ISIL

Efforts to stop the flow of money to the terrorist group by cracking down on oil smuggling and curtailing contributions from private donors is an important element of the anti-ISIL strategy. Additionally, US officials are pressing other NATO members to share intelligence about the Islamic State - which has drawn thousands of foreign fighters from Europe, North Africa, the United States and elsewhere. The Obama administration is paying close attention to Turkey, a NATO member, which is affected by the spillover of thousands of refugees from Syria.

Turkey has come under criticism for allowing foreign fighters from Europe to cross its borders to join the Islamic State. In response to accusations, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president of Turkey, stated before the Wales-summit, “*We have no tolerance regarding the crossings into Syria.*”²² Turkish officials also responded to criticism and reminded NATO allies of their own responsibility. Turkey, to their

understanding, is the one who should complain about the jihadist problem because their efforts to crack down on foreign jihadists seem insignificant in the absence of security measurements by its European allies.²³ Since the summit in Wales, NATO officials and heads of state are determined to overcome scapegoating. When Obama met Erdogan in Newport, he told reporters: “*I want to express my appreciation for the cooperation between U.S. and Turkish both military and intelligence services in dealing with the issue of foreign fighters, an area where we still have more work to do.*”²⁴ Then, on the 2nd of October, the Turkish parliament approved the use of Turkish territory to launch military operations in Syria and Iraq. However Turkish long-term security interests may conflict with short-term expectations from the US-led coalition. This was epitomized in the protracted battle against ISIL in the Kurdish city of Kobane. To defeat ISIL forces meant helping Syrian Kurdish forces such as the Democratic Union Party which is not only close to the Kurdistan’s Workers’s Party (PKK) but has also been siding with Assad forces against the rebels in past battles.²⁵ Beyond the fight against ISIL this leaves the future of Turkish security uncertain.

2. NATO’s Involvement in the Fight against ISIL

In the fight against ISIL, NATO has been, to this day, a dependent variable. The international coalition against ISIL was pulled together and led by the United States. NATO was needed as a mobilisation platform that only partly succeeded. At the Wales Summit, allied support for US plans was initially a cautious one: acknowledging the critical demands of the Syria-Iraq theater but without committing NATO itself to the fight. This restrained posture of the Atlantic Alliance reflects the general aversion of NATO to intervene militarily in Iraq and/or in Syria. However this does not mean NATO is completely absent from the debate. It does already play a significant role in four domains: air defense in Turkey, military training and education programs with Iraqi forces, the monitoring of foreign fighters and the ongoing strengthening of its Middle Eastern partnerships.

¹⁹ Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, “Fight the Islamic State in Iraq? Sure. In Syria? Not So Much,” *Defense One*, 16 September 2014.

²⁰ Communiqué from the Bundeswehr, “Nach dem MG – jetzt Einweisung an Panzerfaust 3 und Unimog,” 22 October 2014, available at: http://www.einsatz.bundeswehr.de/portal/a/einsatzbw/ut/p/c4/LYvRCoJAEEX_aMeNouxNkaDHeil7kVUHGDJZGWcTpI9vF7oXDlwOF14Qy-5Dg1Py7EZ4Qt3RuV1Nu_byIPHi-dIszKIsGIC3wEND4t7wSO8eTecZNVGRISIHcerFzF50TCaIRGOohzqzVWmP--wf-81vh_xS2N2pupZ3mKep-AF0h_Eg/

²¹ “Britain to send machine guns and ammunition to Iraqi army, Kurds,” *Reuters*, 9 September 2014, (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/09/us-iraq-crisis-britain-guns-idUSKBN0H41HA20140909>)

²² Craig Whitlock, Griff Witte, *op. cit.*

²³ Mehmet Akif Madenoğlu, “Turkey dismisses claims of being a ‘Jihadist Highway,’” *Daily Sabah*, 6 September 2014.

²⁴ Reuters, “Turkey may play quiet role in U.S. coalition against Islamic State,” 5 September 2014.

²⁵ Jean-Loup Samaan, “The New Logic of the Syrian Conflict and its Meaning for NATO,” *Research Paper n.86*, NATO Defense College, December 2012, p.4.



2.1 The Defense of NATO Territory

In the Wales Summit Declaration NATO member states renewed their commitment to the collective defense “against any potential threat” against Turkey.²⁶ Back in November 2012, Turkey requested the deployment of six Patriot batteries following multiple incidents at its borders with Syria, such as the shelling by Syrian forces of Turkish town of Akcakale that led to the death of five civilians and retaliation by Turkish artillery. As a result, NATO’s North Atlantic Council held consultations which resulted in the decision by Germany, Netherlands and the United States to contribute to Turkey’s defense by providing two Patriot batteries each that are under NATO command. The deployment was made effective in early 2013.

In October 2014, during a visit to Turkey, NATO’s Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, told troops operating the Patriot missiles there, “Your mission is more important than ever.”²⁷ In January 2015, the Dutch units will be replaced by Spanish Patriot batteries. Until now, the Patriot mission has been clearly defensive. For the last two years, NATO officials emphasized that this build-up was not to be read as an initial step toward the implementation of a no-fly-zone. During a visit to Turkey, German Defense Minister Thomas de Maizière reiterated: “*The position and range of the Patriots makes it impossible to enforce a no-fly-zone or attack Syria.*”²⁸ An extension of the mandate remains subject to speculations.

2.2 The Conduct of Training Missions

NATO’s latest Strategic Concept, adopted at Lisbon in November 2010, emphasized the added value of a capabilities-building approach with partners and local forces in crisis zones. Even before the Lisbon Summit, NATO had such experience in Iraq.

In June 2004, Iraq’s Prime Minister Ilyad Allawi sent a letter to then NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, requesting NATO support through training.²⁹ Due to the deep diplomatic crisis that the 2003 invasion of Iraq had engendered between transatlantic allies – namely between the US, France and Germany – it would take about four years to see the initiative implemented. Between 2008 and 2011 the NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I) trained nearly 9 000 Iraqi Federal Police,

2 500 Iraqi officers, 200 Senior Non-Commissioned Officers (SNCOs) and sent over 1800 members of Iraq’s Security Forces on out-of country training courses.³⁰ Following the US withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, NTM-I officially came to a conclusion and was replaced by a much more modest NATO Transition Cell that channeled diplomatic and military exchanges between Iraqi Authorities and the Alliance. Although the training dimension was put aside, NATO maintained a limited, but still significant, role in the field of military education with several courses delivered by the NATO Defense College (NDC) in Iraq and with officials from Iraq’s National Security Council attending NDC’s Regional Cooperation Courses in Rome. For instance, in January 2014, representatives of NDC travelled to Iraq to give lectures and conduct a crisis management exercises with officials from Iraqi National Security Council and National Defense University. Organized as part of NATO Defense Education Enhancement Program with Iraq, this visit was to be the first of several others. However, following the fall of Mosul in June 2014, NATO paused all major cooperation activities with Iraq.

NTM-I faced some criticism against the backdrop of the poor performance of the Iraqi army during the events of 2014. For instance, the establishment of a very hierarchical top-level decision-making structure with no empowerment downwards along with a flawed Western presumption of local loyalty to the state might have contributed to the marginalization of the Sunni minority in the military. Additionally, the tendency to impose Western organizational structures and operating practices led to useless and unused structures that might have concealed the real (i.e. Shiite dominated) decision-making and command structures in the country. An assessment of NTM-I shows that local cultural understanding and knowledge are absolutely critical to an effective military capacity building.³¹

Despite these shortcomings, NATO has acquired a military know-how and sustained cooperation with Iraqi authorities that could be easily reactivated. This was the message conveyed by the Wales Summit Declaration in which Heads of State declared: “*We re-affirm NATO’s continued commitment to the NATO-Iraq partnership, through which we will revitalise our effort to help Iraq build more effective security forces [...] Should the Iraqi government*

²⁶ Wales Summit Declaration, *op. cit.*, paragraph 35.

²⁷ Robin Wright, “The Vortex: A Turkish city on the frontier of Syria’s War,” *The New Yorker*, 8 December 2014.

²⁸ Jean-Loup Samaan, “The Coming Unknown For NATO’s Policy on Syria,” *Al Monitor*, 26 February 2013.

²⁹ For a detailed assessment of NTM-I, see Florence Gaub, “Building a new military? The NATO Training Mission-Iraq,” *Research Paper n.67*, NATO Defense College, April 2011.

³⁰ NATO’s Assistance to Iraq, http://www.jfcnaples.nato.int/training_mission_iraq/page55563220.aspx

³¹ Stephanie Blair, “Assisting Host Country Militaries. Assessing Lessons from NATO, EU, and Member State Experience,” Report of the cosponsored workshop of the NATO Defense College and Wilton Park, December 2013.



request it, NATO will stand ready to consider measures in the framework of NATO's Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative with an eye to launching such an effort in the near term."³²

This was complemented a few days later by comments delivered by James Appathurai, NATO's deputy assistant secretary general for political affairs and security policy. Addressing European parliamentarians, Appathurai said that NATO "could consider a capacity-building mission in Iraq." Such a mission would of course require an official request from the Iraqi government.³³ NATO Secretary General Rasmussen stressed at the same time that "Should the new government in Baghdad request our assistance, NATO as an alliance stands ready to consider a defense-building mission to strengthen the ability of Iraq security forces to defend their own country."³⁴

In any case, a new NTM-I would have not only to learn the lessons from past experiences, but moreover, it would only be conceivable as part of a broader political-military platform to strengthen the new Iraqi state.³⁵

2.3 The Fight against Foreign Fighters

Awareness in Western public opinion on the presence of American and European citizens among ISIL forces grew in earnest in late 2014. Already in August, the Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, General Phillip Breedlove, was declaring in an interview for the German daily *Die Welt* that NATO had to get prepared for the infiltration of violent foreign fighters into NATO territory. To that aim, he suggested a closer coordination between NATO members in the field of police and intelligence.³⁶ Again, this is an issue that was acknowledged by the Wales Summit Declaration: "Allies will seek to enhance their cooperation in exchanging information on returning foreign fighters."³⁷ Intelligence cooperation including domestic agencies would be a new field of security cooperation for NATO. Already, the Alliance has some instruments and a modest infrastructure that deals with violent extremism. First, the Science and Technology Organization (STO) of the Alliance already started to explore the consequences of radicalization and engaged Mediterranean Dialogue and other NATO-partner countries in an exchange of

information and expertise. Additionally, the Center for Excellence for Defense Against Terrorism might provide another mechanism for engagement in NATO's fight against radicalization, if it expands its scope of research on the field of counter-radicalization.³⁸

2.4 The Strengthening of Partnerships

Finally, the ISIL crisis underlined the importance of cooperative security on NATO's agenda. NATO partners in the region play a substantial role in degrading and defeating ISIS.

Saudi-Arabia, Iraq, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, UAE, Oman and Qatar are not only members of the anti-ISIL coalition, they also have long term diplomatic and military contacts with NATO through the Mediterranean dialogue (MD), the Istanbul cooperation initiative (ICI) and the Partners Across the Globe framework. Increased interest in NATO's partnership initiatives is evident. The Alliance is now going through a process of reinforcement of these ties, both bilaterally and multilaterally. First, NATO is now promoting a "deepening dialogue and practical cooperation as part of the enhanced opportunities within the Partnership Interoperability Initiative" with five partner countries, including Jordan.³⁹ Second, the development of relations with regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League is a new priority. Reinvigorating NATO partnerships, more particularly in the Arab world, paves the way for better cooperation in front of the ISIL challenge.

All in all, NATO does already play a role, yet indirectly, in the ongoing developments. This means that if the Alliance was later to get involved, preexisting diplomatic and military frameworks and instruments could be quickly activated. Still, this does not explain the specific missions that NATO could or should undertake in the future to confront ISIL.

3. Scenarios for NATO's Involvement in the Fight against ISIL

As the current political debate excludes a change in the

³² Wales Summit Declaration, *op. cit.*, paragraph 34.

³³ Julian Hale, "NATO Weighs Training Mission to Iraq," *Defense News*, 12 September 2014.

³⁴ Anders Fogh Rasmussen, "The Dual Threat to Western Values," *op. cit.*

³⁵ General John R. Allen, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, underlined the relevance of training missions and military education through his visit at the NATO Defense College in Rome in November 2014.

³⁶ Stefanie Bolzen, "Die Nato muss auf grüne Männchen vorbereitet sein," *Die Welt*, 17 August 2014.

³⁷ Wales Summit Declaration, *op. cit.*, paragraph 34.

³⁸ See Jaqueline Page, "The Home Game: Countering violent extremism and preventing terrorist attacks within Alliance territory," *Research Paper n.104*, NATO Defense College, September 2014.

³⁹ The four other countries are Australia, Finland, Georgia, and Sweden.



Alliance's absence in the fight, one needs to explore the ways this position would be challenged. In other words, the relevant drivers for change have to be identified. Forecasting the evolution of the Syria-Iraq battleground may be a daunting exercise, especially when one looks in retrospect at the pace with which a group like ISIL went from the fringes of the rebellion against Bashar al Assad to being the biggest threat in the region. However, three key factors appear to be relevant for any scenario on the fight against ISIL:

1. Military effectiveness of the ongoing campaign (do the air strikes degrade ISIL power? do they lead to a decisive breakthrough?);
2. Cohesion of the international coalition (does the US sustain the momentum gained by the creation of the coalition? Do its allies remain committed to the mission?);
3. Strength of local partners (Do Kurdish and Iraqi Forces make a difference on the ground? Does the Iraqi government reconcile its society?).

Based on these three key factors three distinct scenarios can be identified and detailed.

3.1 The Resolution Scenario: NATO keeps low profile

After several months, air strikes conducted by the international coalition start making a difference on the ground, in both Syria and Iraq. In Northern Syria, after a long war of attrition, the Kurdish forces assisted by Western arms supplies finally retake the control of key posts and the ISIL jihadists are forced to retreat. Likewise, in Iraq, ISIL suffers major setbacks and the killing of its key commanders in several raids disrupts its order of battle. Additionally, ISIL increasingly suffers from financial problems due to targeted attacks on its different sources of capital by the international coalition. This then paves the way to a counterattack from the Iraqi armed forces to regain territories previously left to ISIL. Subsequently, the Iraqi government of Haydar Al-Abadi announces a process of reconciliation between Sunni and Shia communities that relies on a more inclusive government and security apparatus. As a result, the authorities in Baghdad distance themselves from the Iranian regime. Meanwhile, in Syria, the demise of ISIL triggers a call for unity among the various rebel factions under the command of the Free Syrian Army. Galvanized by the victory in the north, the rebels find new momentum to launch a new, this time decisive, attack against the regime of Bashar al Assad and finally force him out of office.

In this scenario, NATO posture vis-à-vis the conflict is unlikely to change as the *ad hoc* coalition and its partners

on the ground remain the primary actors to defeat IS. However, in the middle term, as the situation in Iraq improves, NATO could become a key player to support the Baghdad government, particularly in the field of military training and education. In due time, the relaunch of a training mission targeting non-commissioned officers and the reopening to Iraq of various partnership activities at diplomatic levels would help normalize relations with the country.

3.2 The Muddle Through Scenario: NATO reconsiders involvement

Air strikes conducted by the US Air Force and its allies lead to some substantial gains but no breakthrough is in sight. Lack of intelligence on the ground hinders the accuracy of the targeting while the fighting forces against ISIL remain weak. The battle of Kobane has led to a protracted stalemate in the North-East region of Syria. Each side launches one counterattack after another without being able to clear and hold territory. In the meantime, on the Iraqi battlefield, the countries from the coalition face delusions as, contrary to their expectations, ISIL proves resilient in spite of major strikes that decapitated its leadership. Despite the increasing support of the US military, Iraqi forces prove unable to defeat the jihadists and to stabilize the lost regions. The financial cost of the air operations, combined with the military training and advising mission, is skyrocketing for the US, and after months of inconclusive results, the White House starts facing tremendous criticism from the Congress. In the midst of a general sentiment of war fatigue, the coalition strategy is reassessed with talks of containing the Syria-Iraq crisis rather than solving it.

In that scenario, the 28 Allies would very likely make sure NATO does not get caught in the protracted conflict. In the name of caution, NATO-Iraq partnership would remain on pause and any discussion of an intervention on the ground would be overruled. The only matter of relevance would be the sustainment and the expansion of NATO mission to defend Turkey through the stationing of Patriot batteries in the south to contain any spill over. Discussions about a no-fly zone in Northern Syria imposed by NATO could receive new impetus with a direct support of (moderate) Syrian opposition forces by NATO member states. Syrian opposition forces have little means to prevent the barrel bombs, ballistic missiles, and heavy artillery that the Syrian regime uses against civilian targets. Only an Iraqi-style no-fly zone imposed by NATO and the extension of its Patriot mandate in Turkey could prevent missiles from within regime territory attacking opposition population centers. However, the political costs of such an involvement, the extension of the Patriot mandate, or the declaration of a no-fly zone in parts of Syria would completely change the



equation for NATO.⁴⁰

3.3 The Escalation Scenario: NATO leads the fight

The coalition forces stumble on the unexpected resistance of ISIL fighters. In Northern Syria, fierce fighting engenders huge casualties for Kurdish and other forces. Inside Iraq, the situation worsens as the Iraqi military proves unable to deliver. But more preoccupying, the Iraqi government is said to rely more and more on Shia militias such as the Badr organization rather than on the regular army. One air strike conducted by Western countries hits accidentally a densely populated area in the Mosul region. Rumours start spreading that the Iraqi government purposely provided distorted intelligence to proceed to ethnic cleansing. Despite denials from all sides, the accident triggers major awe in the Arab world and countries such as Gulf monarchies and Jordan decide to leave the international coalition. Meanwhile in retaliation to the last strikes, the fighting intensifies and ISIL threatens to target US and NATO bases in the region. Intelligence agencies report that ISIL may have acquired short-range ballistic missiles loaded with chemical weapons.

As any worst case scenario, this narrative has a low degree of likelihood but would have very high consequences. Relations between Western countries and Iraq would suffer significantly from an increasing and openly sectarian tone in Baghdad's policies and NATO's position would reasonably be one of suspension of diplomatic relations. But the most challenging factor would be the combination of a weakening coalition with a rising threat to the Alliance's territories. At first, the potential for an ISIL aggression against Turkey would call for a revamping of the NATO defense mission to one of its members.⁴¹ NATO's containment approach of the Syrian conflict relied on the Patriot missiles as means of stabilization at Turkey's borders with Syria. They imposed explicit red lines that seem to be well understood by Bashar al-Assad, de-escalating the brewing conflict between Turkey and Syria. However, the rise of ISIL, a non-state actor whose rationality may differ from Assad's, challenges the NATO calculus. Furthermore, it would eventually lead to critical

talks at the level of the North Atlantic Council regarding the relevance of a proper NATO intervention to degrade the military power of ISIL and prevent chemical attacks. The first step would be through the use of NATO military infrastructures. There has already been some discussion for NATO to provide C2 and air asset-management services, presumably via its fleet of AWACS aircraft, to the anti-ISIL coalition. In some ways, this would look similar to NATO's involvement in the Libyan crisis back in 2011 with Operation Unified Protector.

Although the escalation scenario is an unlikely evolution of the conflict, policy and military officers should work at the level of contingency planning on a detailed assessment of its ramifications and the demands that would put on the shoulders of the Alliance.

4. Conclusion

As conceived, the first two scenarios (a combination of the two) are the most likely to occur and the outcome will only vary depending on the evolving battle on the ground. In both cases one can already say that NATO would remain on the sidelines of the conflict. It is only in the case of an emerging post-conflict environment that the Alliance would start playing a significant role. Though we evoke a distant horizon, this role would by no means be a benign one. ISIL is only a symptom of fundamentally unsolved issues in the region that will remain in any scenario. As underlined before, the demise of ISIL would not settle the security concerns of Turkey or those of NATO's partners bordering the Syria-Iraq theatre. Furthermore, the foreign fighter issue is unlikely to disappear soon.

For all these reasons, the long term challenge remains the one of the regional security architecture. To address it, the Alliance's partnership policy could play a significant role to reintegrate Iraq to the regional system with regards to other key partners such as Jordan and Gulf Cooperation Council members. This is why, in the future Levant, the involvement of NATO as a political-military platform would surely make a difference.

⁴⁰ See Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Struggling to Build an Alternative to Assad," *SWP Comments* n°35, July 2014, p.8.

⁴¹ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has repeatedly emphasized that the protection of Turkey is NATO's main responsibility in the conflict. "NATO will protect Turkey, says Secretary General," *Euronews*, 6 October 2014.