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Battle for Iraq and Syria in maps

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>

Syria's Electronic Armies

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2015/06/syria-electronic-armies-150617151503360.html>

European Union's counterterrorism chief: ISIS recruiting 'increasingly young' europeans

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2,000 Russian are fighting for ISIS in Syria and Iraq

18 GIUGNO 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



Director of anti-terrorism center in the Commonwealth of Independent States (international organization) announced on Wednesday, that about 2,000 Russian citizens are fighting in the ranks of the ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Andrei Novikov said in an interview for the Russian Interfax news agency: “According to intelligence agencies, there are about 2,000 Russian citizens are fighting in the ranks of ISIS, and according to expert estimates, the number is about five thousand fighters.”

The Russian Federal Security Service Director Alexander Portnefok estimated, in the beginning of this month, the number of Russian citizens who are fighting in Iraq by about 1,700 people.

Chad bans burqas after islamist terror attacks

18 GIUGNO 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



Chad on Wednesday banned the full-face Muslim veil and ordered security forces to seize burqas from markets and burn them after 33 people were killed in suicide bombings blamed on Nigerian Islamist group Boko Haram this week.

“Wearing the burqa must stop immediately from today, not only in public places and schools but throughout the whole of the country,” Prime Minister Kalzeube Pahimi Deubet said in a speech to religious leaders the day before the start of the holy Muslim festival of Ramadan.

Any type of clothing that leaves only the eyes visible is a form of “camouflage” and is now banned, he added, asking the religious leaders to spread the message in their mosques, churches and holy places.

Prime Minister Deubet said instructions had been given to security forces to “go into the markets and to seize all the burqas on sale and burn them”.

Anyone found wearing a burqa would be “arrested, tried and sentenced in summary proceedings”, he added.

Monday’s bombings, the first such attacks in the capital of Muslim-majority Chad, have been blamed on Boko Haram jihadists who have previously carried out bloody assaults on villages along the border with Nigeria.

The Islamist militants have used female suicide bombers to launch attacks in the past by hiding explosive devices under their clothes.

Chad’s government on Tuesday declared three days of national mourning for the 33 people killed and more than 100 others wounded in the blasts.

President Idriss Deby said he was “not surprised” the country has been targetted because of the leading role

its army is playing in a regional offensive against Boko Haram fighters operating out of northeastern Nigeria.

'Don't drop your guard'

"I have continually told the government to not drop its guard," he said, urging the international community to back the states in their struggle.

Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Benin and Cameroon agreed last week to set up a regional task force of 8,700 soldiers, police officers and civilians, based in N'Djamena.

Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau had threatened several times to attack Chad and other countries that joined forces against the militants, whose bloody six-year insurgency is increasingly spilling across Nigeria's borders.

Although Boko Haram has yet to claim responsibility for the bombings, France, which relies heavily on N'Djamena in the fight against jihadist groups in the Sahel region, accused the militants of being behind the attack.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon also condemned Monday's attacks and praised Chad "for its courageous role in the fight against Boko Haram".

Security was stepped up in N'Djamena Tuesday, with scores of police and soldiers patrolling the streets and stopping cars for security checks.

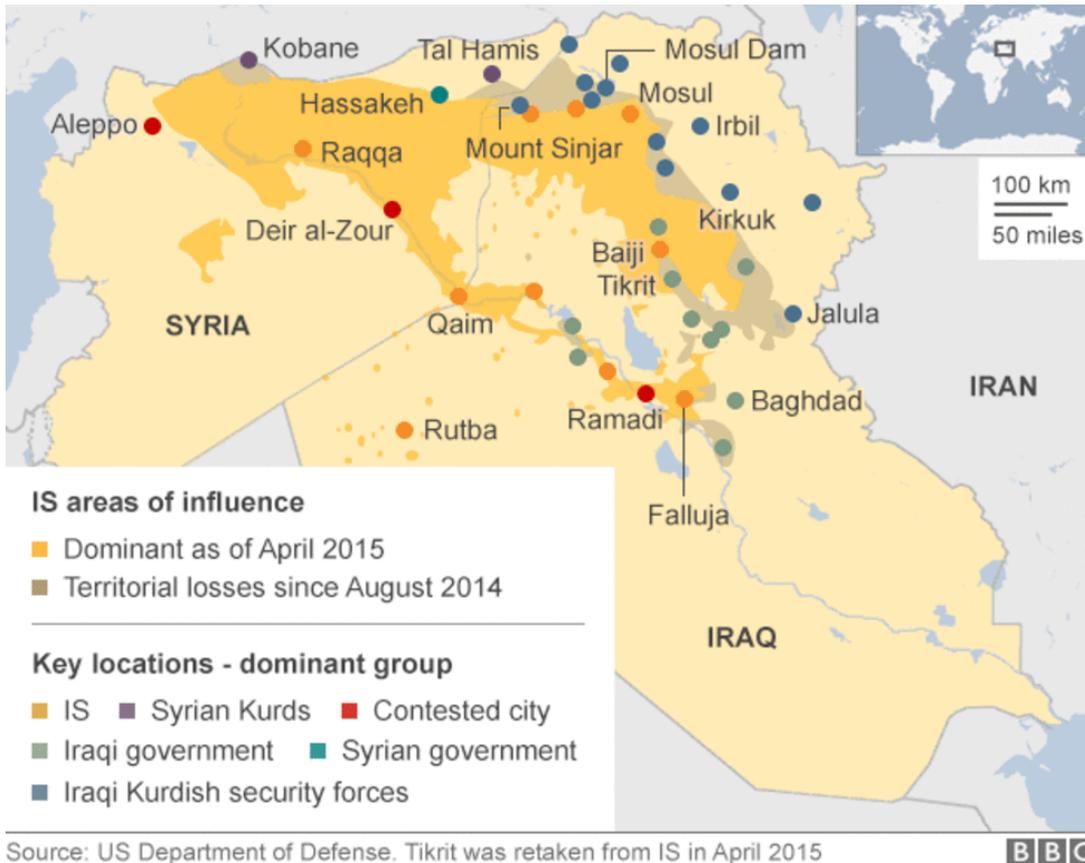
Vehicles with tinted windows had been barred from the streets, and the area around the presidential palace and the police headquarters – which was one of the bombers' targets, along with a police academy – had been sealed off.

The burqa ban was ordered by a crisis committee formed on Tuesday after the president returned from an African Union summit in South Africa. Prosecutors also arrested several people on the same day.

"Strict instructions have been given to the government and security services... additional measures were (also) taken by the head of state," said Deubet.

Battle for Iraq and Syria in maps

55 minutes ago | [Middle East](#)



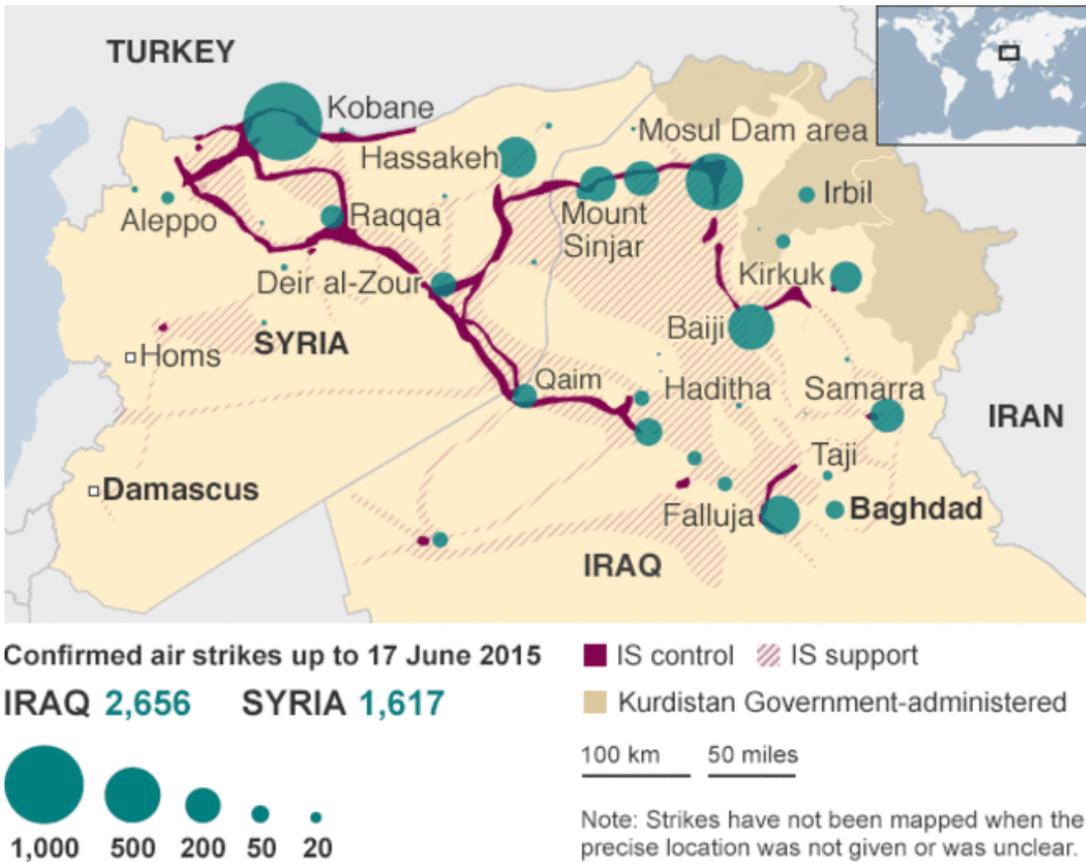
The rapid advance across Syria and Iraq by militant fighters from Islamic State (IS) in 2014 threw the region into chaos and led to US air strikes against their key positions.

The jihadist group, which has fighters from across the world, announced the establishment of a "caliphate" - an Islamic state - stretching from Aleppo in Syria to the province of Diyala in Iraq.

The US went on to assemble a coalition to fight the militants, and has launched more than 2,600 air strikes against IS targets in Iraq since the campaign began on 8 August 2014. The UK launched its first air strikes on 30 September 2014.

In neighbouring Syria, the US, along with Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, has also carried out more than 1,600 attacks on IS-held areas since 23 September 2014.

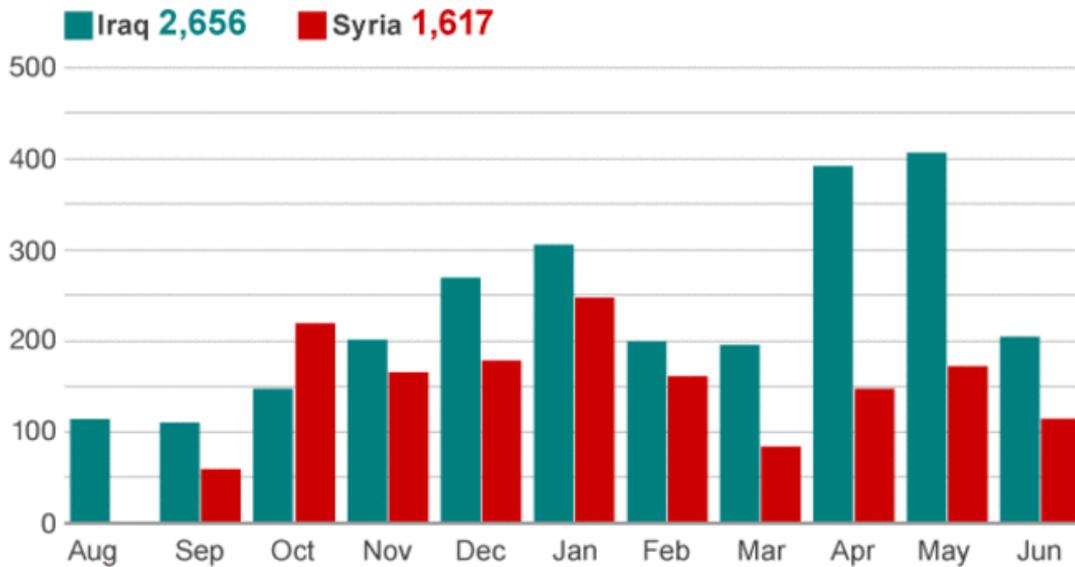
US President Barack Obama has warned his coalition allies they are facing a "long-term campaign".



Source: Institute for the Study of War, US Central Command



Air strikes in Iraq and Syria

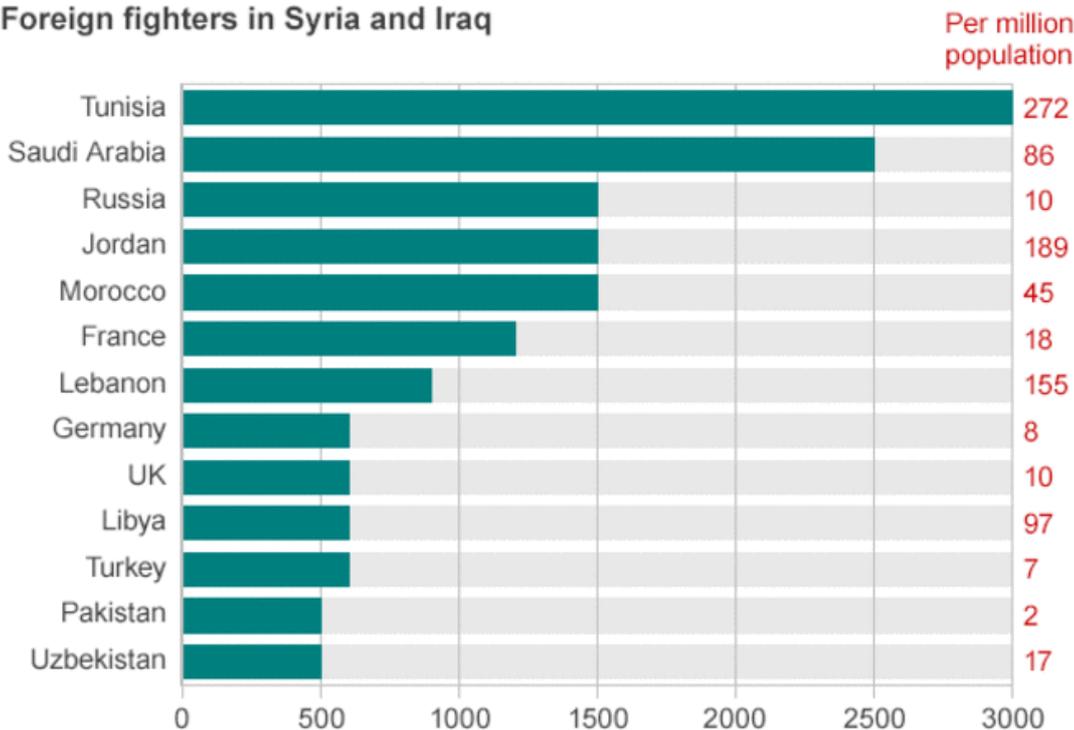


Figures are up to 17 June 2015

Militants from abroad

The US Central Intelligence Agency believes IS may have up to 31,000 fighters in the region, many of whom are foreign recruits.

Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq



Note: Upper estimates used. Countries with fewer than 500 fighters not included
 Source: ICSR, CIA World Factbook

sending 450 more troops to a base in Anbar province to advise the Iraqis on how to retake Ramadi.



Tikrit battle

The Shia militias were key to the recapture from IS of another city, Tikrit, in April after it had been held for more than eight months.

The Iraqi government declared a "magnificent victory" over Islamic State militants after a month-long operation.



Another battleground has been the fight for the Kurdish town of Kobane, on the border between Syria and Turkey.

Thousands of residents were forced into Turkey to flee the fighting, while coalition airstrikes targeted the advancing Islamic State fighters.

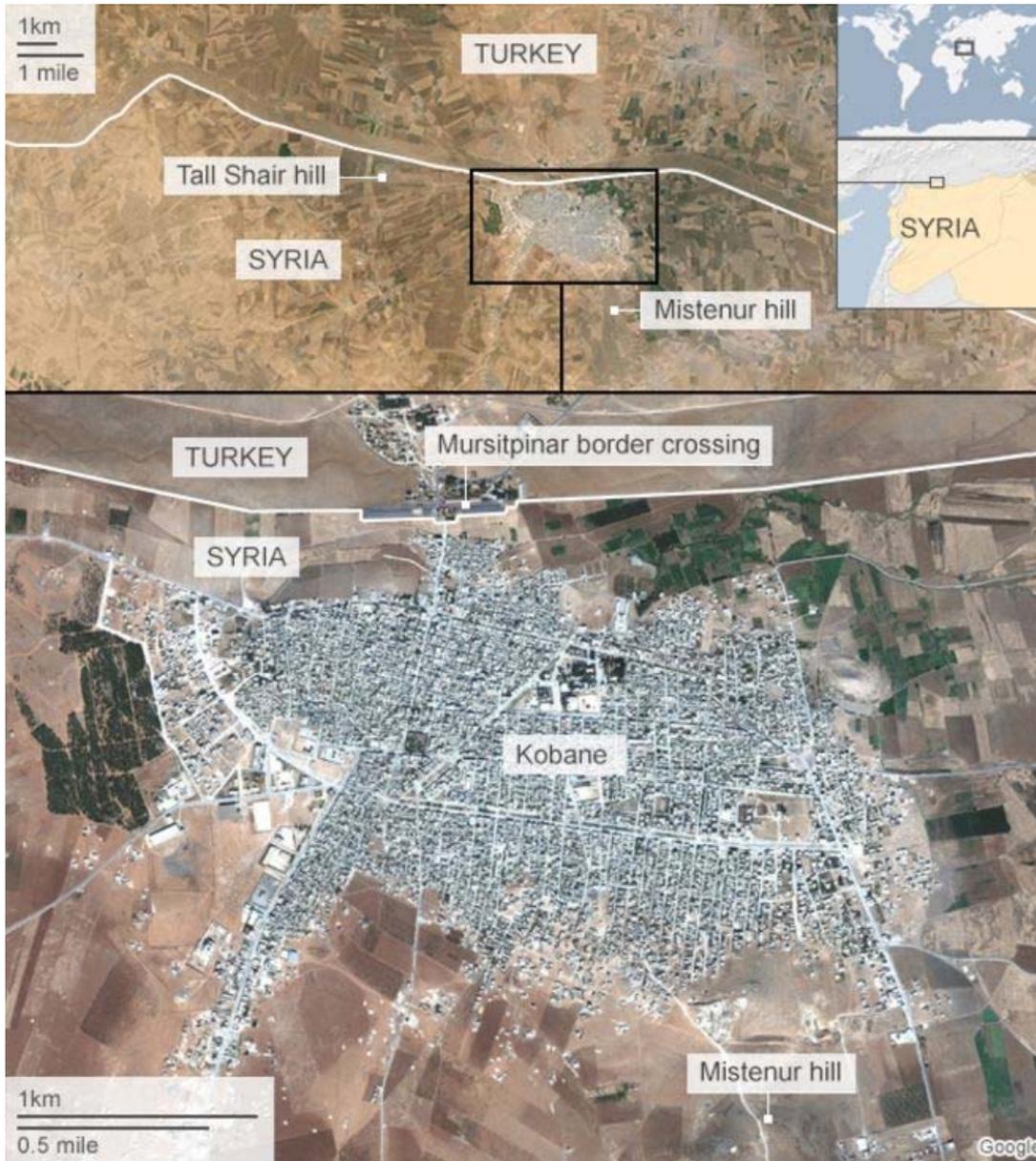
After months of fighting, in which about 1,600 people died, US Central Command announced in January 2015 that Kurdish forces controlled 90% of the town.

In June 2015, the Kurdish fighters known as the People's Protection Units (YPG) announced they had seized control of

Tal Abyad, a border town to the east, from IS. The move is seen as key to securing the main road south to IS's headquarters in Raqqa.

It also extends the gains by the YPG across the north of the country.

Strategic importance of Kobane



IS fighters targeted a number of Iraqi dams during their advance, capturing the facility at Falluja in April 2014. They went on to take Mosul dam in August, before US air strikes helped force them out later that month.

Iraq's key dams



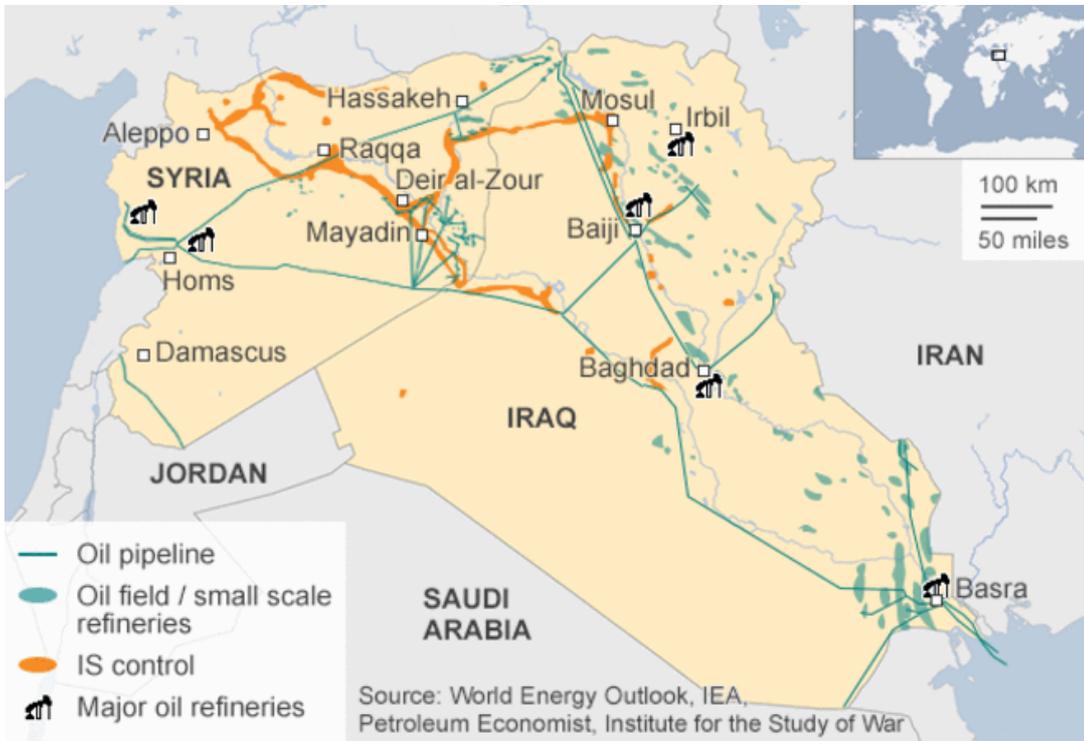
IS fighters also attacked the country's second largest dam at Haditha, but the area was secured by Iraqi forces in September.

In the course of its offensives in Iraq and Syria in June 2014, IS gained control of much of the oil infrastructure.

These refineries and the fields supplying them with oil have played a vital role in fuelling IS military units and in generating revenue for the group.

The coalition has targeted these locations in an attempt to damage IS capabilities.

Oil infrastructure across Syria and Iraq

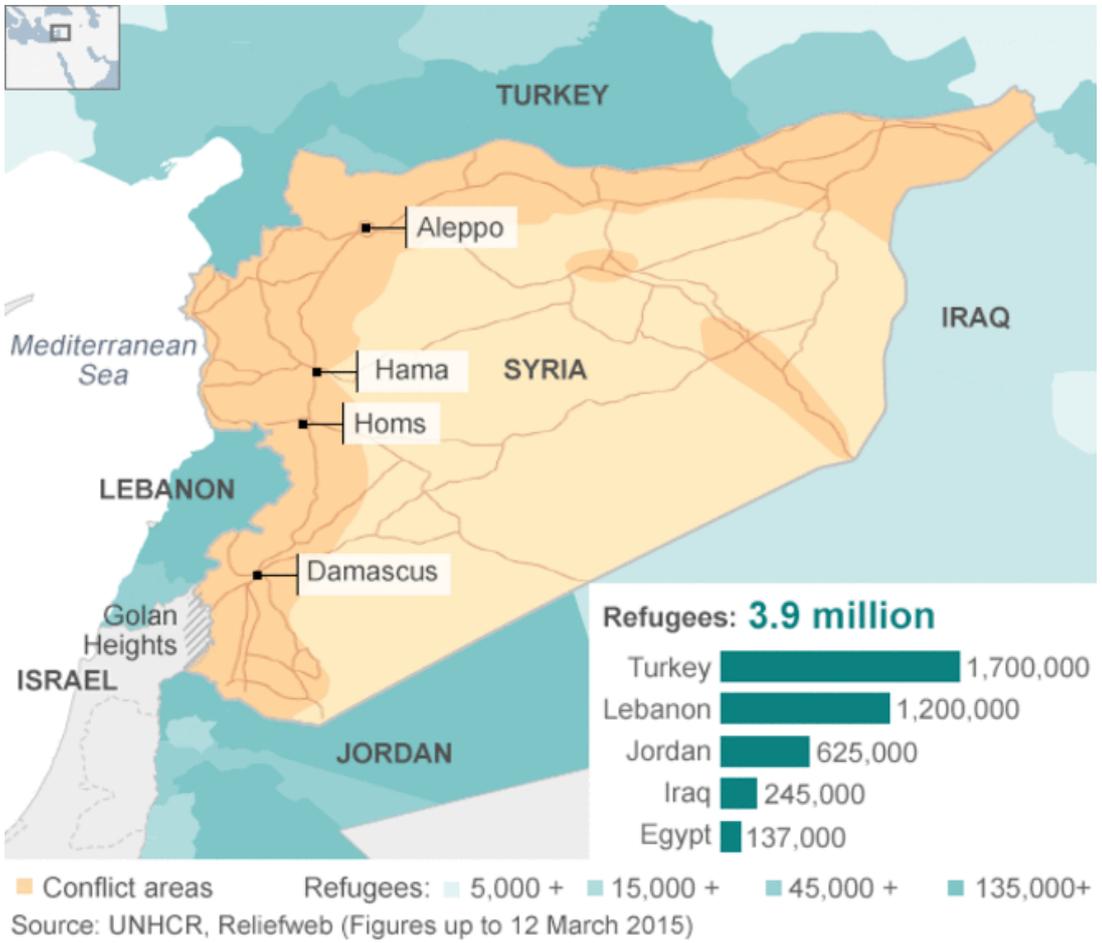


Refugees

Almost four million people have fled abroad to escape the fighting in Syria. Most have gone to Lebanon and Turkey - but a significant number have also gone to Iraq.

Syrian refugees have put pressure on local services and infrastructure in Iraq - which is also having to cope with the return of many Iraqi refugees from Syria.

In addition, the UN estimates there are more than 2m Iraqis who have been forced to leave their homes to escape the conflict and are displaced within the country or elsewhere.





Syria's Electronic Armies

People & Power investigates the sinister impact of a secret cyber war on the Syrian civil war.

18 Jun 2015 11:11 GMT | [Science & Technology](#), [Syria](#), [War & Conflict](#), [Syrian crisis](#), [Middle East](#)

Over the last four years as the Syrian uprising has grown into a full-blown civil war, a sinister parallel conflict has been fought out in cyberspace, with combatants wielding bytes and software rather than guns as they have battled for supremacy on Syria's internet frontline.

But the consequences of this secret cyber war have been real and deadly - particularly for opponents of the Assad regime who have been targeted for arrest and torture as a consequence of personal information gleaned from their email traffic.

In some cases even the military plans of crucial rebel offensives had been hacked. But the opposition has been busy too, leaking President Bashar al-Assad's embarrassing personal correspondence and eavesdropping on government troop deployments amid much else.

As a consequence Syria's civil war has become fertile ground for 'hacktivists' from both sides - egged on and in some cases assisted by governments and agencies from outside the region.

In this special investigation for *People & Power*, Juliana Ruhfus has been finding out why some experts believe Syria's electronic armies have been drawing up the blueprints for all wars of the future, conflicts that transcend traditional physical boundaries but which can be just as significant as those fought with tanks and missiles.

FILMMAKER'S VIEW

By Juliana Ruhfus

In February 2015 cyber security company FireEye published an astounding report. "[Behind the Syrian Conflict's Digital Frontlines](#)," analysed a massive data theft: hackers who were close to the Syrian government had stolen 32,000 skype conversations from opposition fighters and activists, spying not only on private conversations, but also on strategic discussions and even battle plans.

It was a demonstration of just how far Syria's cyber war had evolved and in the *People & Power* office we decided that we needed to explore this hidden side of Syria's conflict, a battle in which viruses and hacking techniques had become just as dangerous as guns and bullets.

These were events nobody had foreseen back in early 2011, when the Arab Spring was spreading across the region and Syrian demonstrators were peacefully demanding for President Assad to step down. At the time the internet was seen as a tool of liberation, social media was used to mobilise people for protests, and youtube was a channel through which activists distributed images and narrative to contradict the government's official version of events.

But over the following months as the government crackdown on the protestors began and the violence became more severe, scores of activists were arrested, imprisoned and tortured. Today quite a few of them have taken refuge in Turkey, which is where we began our investigation. Media activists such Rami Jarrah from [Radio ANA](#) and the Free Syrian Army's legal advisor, Osama Abo Zayd, told us markedly similar stories - about being arrested and tortured by security forces who wanted access to their social media accounts in order to identify other opponents of the regime. Once tracked via IP addresses, the secret offices where opposition groups gathered were raided and attendees arrested. Then the social media accounts of those individuals were broken into, leading to yet more arrests and more killing - a burgeoning cycle of violence and repression that was mushrooming out of interrelated internet sources.

It was clear that President Assad was focusing on the web as a key battleground in his fight back against his opponents. And in June 2011 he gave his encouragement to those now wielding cyber weaponry on his behalf, "Young people have an important role to play at this stage, because they have proven themselves to be an active power. There is the electronic army which has been a real army in virtual reality."

[The Syrian Electronic Army \(SEA\)](#), a well-equipped group of pro-government hackers had been born. And before long, it seems it was getting some heavy weight backing. Again and again on location we heard stories - albeit difficult to verify - that Russia and Iran, both supporters of the Assad regime were training and equipping the SEA.

By late summer 2011 the cyber war had moved beyond Syria's borders and the cyber fightback had begun, with the [global hacking group Anonymous](#) declaring war on SEA and targeting the Syrian Ministry of Defence. SEA, too, had started looking abroad and launched a series of spam attacks on US government websites and those of international news organisations such as the BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera. Th3 Pro, a pseudonymous SEA hacker, gave online interviews in which he claimed the attacks were in retaliation for foreign press hostility to the Syrian government.

In April 2013, SEA's even managed to target the Associated Press' twitter account and got it to briefly display a message claiming President Barack Obama had been injured in White House explosions. Within seconds \$136bn had been wiped off the value of international stock markets - even though it was quickly restored once the fake story was corrected.

As this tit-for-tat exchange went on, WikiLeaks started publishing [the Syria Files](#), a two-million-strong cache of hacked emails from Syrian political figures, ministries and companies, leaving them exposed and quite frequently embarrassed. SEA then retaliated by hacking government internet traffic in Qatar and Turkey, two countries seen to be backing the armed anti-Assad opposition. Meanwhile, the US government was helping Syrian activists smuggle communication equipment into the country and groups like [Cyber Arabs](#) and [SalamaTech](#) were getting international funding to train Syrian activists in internet security. Syria's cyber war had truly gone global.

But if we learned one thing during the making of this film it is that real intelligence gathering takes place quietly and often stays undetected. Hackers disguise remote administration tools (RAT's) as harmless links but once they are downloaded a person's computer can be used to spy on them.

FireEye's Laura Galante talked us through the way pro-Assad hackers used images of beautiful young women to befriend opposition fighters on the battlefield and eventually sent photos of themselves containing a hidden RAT called Dark Comet. Before it was detected, the 'trojan' gathered material related to the battle of Khirbet Ghazaleh during which opposition forces lost crucial access to supply routes.

"What we saw stolen around that battle and the discussions around it were very granular details around the planning," says Galante. She showed us images of google maps uploaded into the conversations with drawings on them that outlined the forthcoming battle.

"The intelligence value around this type of information is immense. If you are able to understand everything from the supplies that the other side has, its dependencies on different people, on different contributors to your supplies... then you're really able to get a picture of what the other side looks like and use that to your advantage."

So it was to our surprise when Jean Pierre Leseur, the creator of Dark Comet, agreed to be filmed in Paris. Leseur developed the RAT when he was in his teens and uploaded it for free to internet forums dedicated to surveillance. Since then it has been used not only by pro-Assad hackers but also by criminals and fraudsters.

He tells us that he has removed Dark Comet from his website but that it is still possible to find it online, although quite frequently in a distorted version with additional viruses added. Now, at 21 years old he says is "100 percent retired from that world."

"I decided to distance myself because for me it's a world that became dangerous. We have to be careful what we develop, we can not foresee that people will use it in the way we envisioned it." Leseur said he found out from a newspaper link that pro-Assad hackers had used Dark Comet against activists. Today his company offers solutions to help avoid being the victim of 'malware'.

This year has seen yet new developments that mirror the battlefield changes in Syria on the ground. In February, Anonymous issued a fresh declaration of cyber war - against the self-proclaimed Islamic State

of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); closing down dozens of the group's twitter and facebook accounts to stop them from recruiting new members.

Two months later, TV5 Monde, France's international broadcaster was hacked and screens switched to display messages from a 'cyber caliphate' in retaliation for the French army's involvement in Syria and Iraq. It seemed at first that an ISIL-linked group was targeting the station but in a final twist investigators found that the hacks appeared to originate in Russia and were carried out by a Kremlin-linked group, very possibly in support of the Syrian government.

Thousands of attacks take place around the world each day. For now most are aimed at commercial targets but the Syrian conflict is a likely blueprint for the way future wars will be played out.

Source: Al Jazeera

European Union's counterterrorism chief: ISIS recruiting 'increasingly young' europeans

18 GIUGNO 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



The Islamic State group remains resilient despite suffering military setbacks in Syria, and is recruiting a growing number of young men and women from Europe, according to Gilles de Kerchove, the European Union's counterterrorism chief. Kerchove said in an [interview with the Agence France-Presse](#) (AFP) that thousands of Europeans have joined ISIS in Syria while many residents in Europe have been radicalized on the Internet.

About 4,000 Europeans are estimated to have joined ISIS, which continues to attract young people from European countries to join the jihad in the Middle East, Kerchove said, AFP reported on Thursday.

"There are still young Europeans who are leaving. They are increasingly young and there are many more women," he told AFP. "The European Union is mobilized and the Paris attacks (in January) increased this mobilization, but that didn't change things. We must continue the efforts because the threat remains serious."

Kerchove also said that there was no evidence to show that ISIS is using migrant trafficking networks to slip jihadists into Europe, but the extremist group was profiting from people smuggling "as a source of financing."

According to recent [media](#) reports, ISIS reaps millions of dollars by smuggling people from the Middle East and Africa into Europe.

When asked about the exact cause of the threat to Europe, Kerchove said that unidentified European fighters with a passport pose the greatest challenge. In addition, residents radicalized by ISIS through the Internet can also be used by the group to carry out terror attacks on home soils.

"There remains much to do, especially with the Internet," AFP quoted Kerchove as saying. "The member states expect the European Union to intervene with Internet giants to remove illegal sites, carry out checks and develop a counter-narrative to prevent recruitment."

According to Kerchove, EU needs to reinforce checks on European nationals at the borders to stop the return of European fighters. His statement came two months after Iran's Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan [warned](#) that ISIS may soon send its fighters into Central Asia, India, China and Europe. Dehghan also urged world leaders to work together to create "a front of resistance" against the Islamic group.