The history of ISIS in Syria is complex. In late 2011, as the civil conflict began to intensify, ISIS associates started an affiliated organization, Jabhat Al-Nusra, in Syria (SJ, 51). (For simplicity, I will use the name ISIS, although the group itself changed names as its ambitions developed over this time period.) Jabhat Al-Nusra took a pragmatic approach of working with local Islamist and non-Islamist opposition groups without insisting on promoting strict ISIS ideology. Over time, this became less acceptable to ISIS leadership in Iraq, and in April 2013 they attempted to reassert control over the organization. Up to this point ISIS and Al Qaeda had been relatively closely aligned, and Jabhat Al-Nusra had close ties to both. So when Jabhat Al-Nusra objected to tighter ISIS control, it turned to Al Qaeda leadership for support. Al Qaeda insisted that ISIS relinquish its control over Jabhat Al-Nusra and confine its operations to Iraq. ISIS refused, precipitating a global breakdown in relations between ISIS and Al Qaeda that continues to this day. Subsequently, in mid-2013, ISIS proper extended its operations into Syria (SJ, 119). It quickly became a major player due to its financial resources, military successes that secured territory and equipment, and its ability to recruit foreign jihadists (SJ, 174).

Local Syrian opposition groups, both Islamist and not, including Jabhat Al-Nusra, objected to ISIS’s aggressive efforts to insinuate itself into the Syria conflict and take control of territory already held by other groups. Starting in early 2014, all-out warfare erupted between ISIS and virtually every other opposition militant group in Syria. In effect, the war in Syria essentially became a three-way contest, with ISIS, Syrian militants, and the Syrian government all in conflict with one another (SJ, 185). This led to increased tension, complexity, and emphasis on extremist ideology across the Syrian militant opposition, although it also sparked some consolidation of groups into broad coalitions (SJ, 258).

This period in 2014 coincides with the beginning of a gradual increase in overall imbalance, and a very sharp increase in normalized imbalance in our analysis of the Syrian theater. We believe this may reflect the increased level of discord introduced into the Syrian conflict by the conflict between ISIS and Syrian militant groups. On way of interpreting this is that, before ISIS itself began its involvement in Syria, the conflict essentially had two poles, one aligned around the Syrian government, and another a loose coalition of opposition militant groups. There was relatively little conflict within either of these groups. As we have previously discussed, a social network that includes two factions, with positive ties within each faction, and negative ties between factions, is consistent with structural balance. Adding a third faction inherently leads to imbalance. In effect, if we aggregate all the major actors that had emerged by early 2014 into three factions – ISIS, opposition, and government – they form a triad with negative links between all factions. As discussed above, such a triad has an odd number of negative ties, and is therefore by definition imbalanced. (“The enemy of my enemy is my enemy.”)