

# **SYRIA IN A TORMENT: KEY ACTORS AND GEOPOLITICAL INTRIGUES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Defined as the “worst humanitarian disaster since the end of the cold war,” the Syrian civil war has to date claimed heavy casualties, including over 8,000 documented killings of children under eighteen years of age. In a country of approximately 22 million people, the bloody and prolonged conflict has resulted in 7.6 million internally displaced persons and an additional 3.2 million refugees, as well as approximately 12.2 million people (more than 1 in 2 Syrians) in need of humanitarian aid to survive. This essay is an analysis of the Syrian conflict. Its aim is to depict and underline the various aspects of the conflict in Syria. The internal and external actors alongside the geopolitical intrigues and interests involved in this conflict shall be scrutinized. This essay thrives to rectify subsequent analytical mistakes of scholars who limit the conflict in Syria to one about a confrontation between Russia and the USA, or try to predict the conflict through that lens alone, simply because the most demonstrated rivalry about Syria as a geostrategic epiphenomena relies on the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Above and beyond the internal power struggle, the conflict has acquired the character of a proxy war in which international, regional and sub-national conflicts are fought out. The actors here treat the conflict as a zero-sum game, where success for one is automatically a defeat for the other. One bone of contention is the interpretation and enforcement of international norms, with the United States and other Western states backing the Syrian opposition while Russia, Iran and China support the Assad regime with trade and protection in the UN Security Council and, in the case of Russia, arms deliveries.*

**KEY WORDS:** AMMUNITIONS, AL-QAEDA, CONFLICT, CIVIL WAR, COLD WAR, ISIS, NUCLEAR WEAPONS, REFUGEES, SHIITES, SUNNITES, SYRIA.

# INTRODUCTION

The Higher Commissioner of the United Nations for Refugees (HCUNR) estimated that at the end of 2014, the number of registered Syrian refugees was to attain 4.1 million. This number represents more than half the number of Palestinians who obtained the status of refugee during the 66 years of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – having in mind that the Syrian conflict debuted in 2011. Moreover, it is evaluated that 4.5 million persons are internally displaced in Syria<sup>1</sup>. This, thus, signifies that more than one-third of the Syrian population are refugees or displaced. In the measure of its internationalisation, the Syrian conflict has fast become the bloodiest and the most difficult to resolve. Most of the Syrian refugees are found in neighbouring countries and only some tens of thousands are welcomed by the western European countries that support the Syrian opposition groups.

Political and socio-economic pressures which existed in frontier countries of Syria such as Iraq and Lebanon have been absorbed by the influx of Syrian refugees of all political and religious affiliations. What appeared in its early stages as a local revolt against violence and corruption, has turned out to become a battle line for both regional and international powers; which has given room for a rivalry generally qualified in recent times as “Cold War” between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the one hand, Russia and The United States of America (USA) on the other hand. The probabilities of a military intervention to out-power the conflict were rendered banal - even with the vigorous enthusiasm of the French president, Francois Hollande, to join forces with the USA. - At first, the British Parliament refused that Britain participate in air strikes (a measure briefly envisaged by Obama to sanction the use of chemical weapons in Syria). Secondly, Washington revised the idea of airstrikes in the profit of the dismantling of the Syrian chemical arsenal negotiated by Russia, under the supervision of the United Nations (UN).

This essay is an analysis of the Syrian conflict. Its aim is to, primo, depict and underline the various aspects of the conflicts or wars in Syria. Secondo, it shall explore the contentions and intrigues characterised by the various key actors of the wars in Syria; this shall involve, but not limited to, the various groups and factions spearheading the revolutionary ideas of the conflict, the fight for both the ousting and the preservation of the Syrian regime, the fight against terrorism. In a nut-shell, the internal and external actors alongside the geopolitical intrigues and interests involved shall be scrutinized.

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<sup>1</sup> Before the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement traced out a mortified assortment of nation-states in the Middle East, the name Syria was used by merchants, politicians and warriors alike to describe a stretch of land enclosed by the Taurus Mountains to the North, the Mediterranean to the west, the Sinai Peninsula to the south and the desert to the east. This region known as the Levant – its Latin root “levare” meaning “to rise” – from where the sun would rise from the East, is also an epicentre of Islam’s holy sites on the Arabian peninsula – territory referred in Arabic as Bilad al-Sham or the “land of the left”. However it viewed, Syria will always find itself in an uncomfortable position surrounded by much stronger powers.

This research will be of interest to persons specialised in strategic studies. It is an add-up to the vast and immense existing literature on intra-state conflicts in general and the Syrian conflict in particular. The ambition of this essay is to trigger the debate on either a perceived post-communist cold war or on a degeneration of the existing cold war between the USA, its allies and Russia; on a position considered to be within Russia's sphere of influence. This research will be of great importance to International relations scholars. However, historians, political economists and socio-political scientists shall also benefit from our analysis, conclusions and recommendations.

The method used in this article shall be the traditional method of international relations: *interpretivism*. This, in order to understand the social meanings embedded within the conflict in Syria. It shall be of help in the bid of re-examining questions of identities, ideas, norms and culture surrounding Syria in the wake of the conflict. This is mainly because the Syrian conflict cannot be analysed completely and effectively without an accurate survey of the social realities of the given society. This method shall guide us in the demonstration and explanation of the behaviours of both the Syrian regime and the numerous actors engaged in the conflict.

The excellent write-up of GUIORA Amos; "*Intervention in Lybia, Yes; Intervention in Syria, No; Deciphering the Obama administration*" is a minutiae analysis of the Syrian conflict as opposed to the uprising in Lybia and its apprehension by the administration in Washington. The investigation of TROYANSKY Vladimir: "*Russias' support for Al-Assads' Syria: reasons old and new*" depicts that Russia's outspoken support for the Al-Assad's regime elevated its own perceived importance as a great and super power...Moscow stands by Damascus partially because by supporting Syria, Russia matters again. HASLER Stefan's thesis: "Explaining humanitarian intervention in Libya and not in Syria" examines the importance and influence of humanitarian interventions in comparison to national geostrategic interests and the influence of domestic politics. While, TSYGANKOV Andrei in: "*Russia and global governance in post-western world*", demonstrates clearly how Russia has historically strived to bridge principles of multilateral decisions with those of a multi-polar balance of power. BADIE Bertrand in "*La puissance de l'impuissance*" illustrates clearly how the USA is no longer in control of the international system. BADIE obviously demonstrates that the international system is multi-polar.

This composition will utilise qualitative research derived from several case studies, in addition to analytical deduction of collected data. The theoretical component of this article will be based on the classic works on Realism of WALTZ<sup>2</sup>, CARR<sup>3</sup>; the neoclassical realism of ROSE<sup>4</sup>, SCHWELLER<sup>5</sup>, WENDT<sup>6</sup>, and other related theorists, as well the critical papers

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<sup>2</sup> WALTZ Kenneth, "Structural Realism after the Cold War", *International Security*, Vol.25, No.1 (No.84), Summer 2000, pp.5-41.

<sup>3</sup> CARR H.E, *Twenty Years' Crisis 1919-1939*. Harper&Row, Publishers, Inc, NY, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> ROSE Gideon, *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy*, John Hopkins University Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> SCHWELLER Randall L., "The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism", in Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius ELMAN (dir.), *Progress in International Relations theory: Appraising the Field*, Cambridge, MassAS: MIT Press, p. 311-348, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> WENDT Alexander, "Anarchy is what states make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics", *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 1992.

of several International Relations scholars, such as the Institutionalism theory of KEOHANE<sup>7</sup>, the theories of power of KRASNER<sup>8</sup>, and the neo-institutionalism of MERSHAIMER<sup>9</sup>. Thanks to the good fortune of my bilingualism in French and English, the case studies that will be explored in this thesis will be a combination of printed sources in both of these languages. The object of our initiative is to explain and decipher the facts, the dimensions, the key actors, the geopolitical factors and stakes involved in the events which have occurred over the past five years within and around Syria. To this end, we will analyse and scrutinize chronologically and figuratively the major events of the Syrian conflicts. After which we shall enumerate and discuss on the intrigues (especially the geopolitical interests) surrounding the varied actors involved.

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<sup>7</sup> KEOHANE Robert O. & MARTIN Lisa L., "The Promise of Institutional Theory", in *International Security*, 20 (1), p. 39-51, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> KRASNER Stephen, *Power, the State, and Sovereignty: Essays on International Relations*, Routledge, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> MEARSHEIMER John, "The False Promise of international Institutions", *International Security*, 19 (2), p. 5-49, 1994/1995.

## **I. SYRIA: THE STEADY EMERGENCE OF A NEW WAR FRONT?**

The conflict in Syria has expanded and intensified increasingly in the past four years. The evolution and reversals of this multidimensional crisis, accompanied by an escalation of violence and horror are indeed tragic and discouraging. With a population of 23 Million people and a surface of 185 000 square kilometres, Syria's current borders were fixed after the first world war, when the French and the British obtained the dismantling of the Ottoman empire through the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916. The military coup of the Baath Party in 1963 founded the current regime; in 1970, Hafez Al-Assad, the father of Baschard Al-Assad seized power through a putsch. Upon his death in 2000, Hafez was succeeded by his son.

Following the Arab revolution that swept across Tunisia (December 2010), Egypt (January 2011), Libya (February 2011), Bahrain (February 2011) and Yemen (January 2011); Syrians became enthusiastic about the fall of prominent leaders like Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. Therefore the slogans of freedom, justice and dignity became watchwords of the Syrian revolution. In March 2001, some young students wrote in the city of Deraa (South of Syria) the maxim: "the people want the fall of the regime". These young lads were arrested, incarcerated and tortured by the security service of the Syrian regime in place. Manifestations against this act swiftly became the order of the day and were spread through the four cardinal points of Syria. The forces of the Syrian regime responded systematically by firing on the crowds, killing and wounding, while others were simply imprisoned. This continued for months and at the end of 2011, the UN had already announced whooping scores of 5000 victims.

The Syrian government conceived the revolution as an act of war. Hence, it opted for a military solution. Baschar Al-Assad considered the battle as a question of life and death. In the 1st two years, the repression had a very high cost in terms of displaced persons. In order to stop the advancement of the rebels, the regime did not hesitate to use heavy ammunitions; bombing from ground and air strikes befell villages and cities. However, in spite of its land sliding military superiority, the regime did not stop loosing grounds and fast fell into the defensive. Thus, the Syrian crisis progressively evolved and escalated into ambiguous aspects. What was at its beginning a revolt against a regime in place, transformed to a choc of defence forces between two or numerous opposing factions. The crisis has metamorphosed through a conflict, a civil war, a proxy war towards a zone of interest and war front actively implicating Turkey, Iran, The United States of America, Great Britain, France, Russia, the Gulf States, Al Qaeda, ISIS, etc.

### **The ambiguity of the Syrian conflict**

The Syrian conflict is divided between four different sides on the ground<sup>10</sup>. Each side have different foreign backers<sup>11</sup> who do not agree with one another about who they are

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<sup>10</sup> The Syrian Government and its military, ISIS, The Kurds and other Rebel factions of the Syrian National Coalition.

<sup>11</sup> Russia, Iran and Hezbollah for Bashar Al Assad ; The USA partly for the Kurds and the Syrian National Coalition ; The Gulf States, Turkey and Jordan backs directly the Syrian National Coalition and its factions.

fighting for and who they are fighting against. In August 2011, some Syrian troops defected from the Syrian army to join the wave of protesters who were defending themselves against the Syrian army. They called themselves “the free Syrian army”<sup>12</sup> and the uprising degenerated into a civil war. However, *“fragmentation and disorganization have plagued Syria’s armed opposition since peaceful protesters took up arms in December 2011 and began forming rebel groups under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army. A lack of unity has made coordination and cooperation difficult on the battlefield and has limited the effectiveness of rebel operations”*<sup>13</sup> In January 2012 Al Qaeda forms its new branch in Syria called Jaba al Nusra. Subsequently, Syrian Kurdish groups, who have a long-time quest for autonomy, took up arms in order to cease from Baschard Al-Assads’ rule in the North and to protect themselves. Thus, the situation evolves from a civil war to a proxy war.

At this juncture, Iran, Assad’s closest ally intervenes on his behalf and sends daily cargo flights with hundreds of officers on the ground. During this period, the oil rich Gulf States began sending money and weapons to the rebels mainly through Turkey. Iran steps up its influence in turn when Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia group backed by Iran, decided to fight for Assad. The Gulf States responds by sending more money to the rebels but this time through Jordan, who also opposes Assad. By 2013, the Middle East is divided between generally Sunni powers on the one side supporting the rebels and Shias on the other side supporting the Syrian regime of Baschard Al-Assad. Subsequently to the use of chemical weapons in Ein Tarma (the Ghouta agricultural belt) about 6km East of the centre of Damascus, the USA secretly authorises the CIA to train and equip the Syrian rebels. The USA even planned a military intervention but, Russia steps in and acts, at first, as a negotiator and later on as a huge defender of the Syrian regime. Here, Syria clearly becomes a new war front zone of power oppositions and power demonstrations.

However, the face of the war changes with a major event: an Al Qaeda affiliate mostly based in Irak breaks away from the Syrian armed opposition over internal disagreements and the new faction names itself the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) and becomes Al Qaeda’s enemy; carving out a mini-state in Syria that it calls its Caliphate. In August 2013, Turkey began bombing Kurdish groups in Syria and Turkey, but Turkey never bombs ISIS in Syria.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Baschard Al-Assad has been losing grounds to ISIS and to the Rebels and in September 2015, Russia decided to intervene on his behalf. According to Russia, its role is to fight ISIS. However, majority of Russia’s’ strikes are geared towards the rebels. The Russian military operation in Syria has clearly transformed the conflict into a geopolitical confrontation. It would be a mistake to limit an analysis of the conflict in Syria to one about a confrontation between Russia and the USA, or try to predict the conflict through that lens alone, simply because the most demonstrated rivalry about Syria as geostrategic epiphenomena relies on the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>12</sup> Known as the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army: it was formed by army deserters based in Turkey led, by Col Riad al-Assad.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth O’Bagy, « The Free Syrian Army » in Middle East Security Report 9 (2013), Insitute for the Study of War, pg. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Greg Botelho, Russia, Turkey trade accusations over who bought oil from ISIS in CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/02/europe/syria-turkey-russia-warplane-tensions/>

<b>STAKEHOLDER INTERESTS (Major external stakeholders in the Syrian conflict)</b>			
<b>STAKEHOLDERS</b>	<b>TACTICAL</b>	<b>MUTUAL INTEREST</b>	<b>STRATEGIC</b>
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bashar al Assad's ouster</li> </ul>	<b>ISIS</b>	
RUSSIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Keeping Assad in office</li> <li>● Testing new weapons</li> <li>● Reducing the international isolation threats from Russia</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Preserving the integrity of the Syrian State</li> <li>● Maintaining a friendly and peaceful regime in Syria (so as to keep its naval base and supply more arms)</li> <li>● Anchoring its position and projecting Russia as a Super power</li> </ul>
IRAN			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Preserving the integrity of the Syrian state and its regime</li> <li>● Securing Syria in its sphere of influence</li> <li>● Frustrating all efforts of the Gulf States</li> </ul>

## **II. THE KEY ACTORS AND THE GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT**

When the revolt started in 2011, the West was in support of the free Syrian army and was later joined by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Throughout the crisis, the traditional allies of Syria: Teheran and Moscow have always solidly backed the regime in Damascus. However, while Saudi Arabia observes the conflict in Syria partly through the prism of its rivalry with Iran, the USA wishes to solidify a close tie relationship with Iran especially after the election of Hassan Rouhani<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> In such context, specialists question themselves as to which level the interest of Washington in the region could diverge from those of its allies of long date in the Persian Gulf. More so, the USA and in particular, Saudi

Ironically, the rivalry between the main supporters of the Syrian opposition group in the region only complicates the situation with factions such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan on the one side as against Qatar and Turkey on the other<sup>16</sup>. The competition they engage in, already gave room for blocs and divisions within the rebel groups. This was eventually made manifest during the 2014 period of International negotiations led by the United Nations envoy: Lakhdar Brahimi, in Geneva. During these negotiations, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces also known as the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) met at a disadvantage because of their fragmentation, their decentralisation and unstructured organisation. And during this period, violent attacks on grounds were accentuated.

The United States and its allies compete with Iran in a steadily more unsettled and uncertain Levant. The political upheavals in the Middle East, economic and demographic pressures, sectarian struggles and extremism, ethnic and tribal conflicts and tensions all combine to produce complex patterns of competitions. The analysis hereafter shall portray that deep socio-economic, political and sectarian cleavages, the Arab-Israeli conflict and a cycle of popular protests, all combine to make the Levant in general and the Syrian conflict in particular, a growing challenge.

## **The United States and its military intervention rhetoric**

While Syria has been a challenge for US policy-makers for decades, the current round of instability is unprecedented. The situation in Syria is not predictable enough for the US to be able to develop a sustainable strategy in the short term. The US and key regional allies have steadily sought to increase pressure on the Assad regime and provide different levels of support to anti-Assad political and insurgent forces. In August 2013, in the light of reports confirming the use Sarin gas in Syria, the US president considered carrying out air strikes on targets of the Syrian regime. However, senior US army staffs opposed the idea of a military intervention. Indeed, the chief of army staff, General Martin Dempsey, said he did not believe the Syrian opposition forces would support the interests of the United States in the event of victory. The US has long supported the most powerful states in the Levant – Israel and Egypt – and recently sought to straighten up ties with Iran as well as being an ally of Jordan. It has helped them build up powerful conventional forces and anti-terrorism capabilities, and Israel has developed a major arsenal of long-range missile and nuclear weapons. The US has also strongly encouraged Arab-Israeli peace efforts and the peace settlements between Israel and Egypt, and Israel and Jordan.

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Arabia have always been at loggerheads on the exact connotation and rhetoric of the Arab spring. At any case, they are both in unison on the fact that a political transition ought to take place in Syria, Yemen and Libya.

<sup>16</sup> In September 1992, tensions arose between Saudi Arabia and Qatar when Saudi forces allegedly attacked a Qatari border post, resulting the death of two Qatari soldiers and the imprisonment of a third. On March 5 2014, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassadors from Qatar to protest Qatar's support for the extremist organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Despite growing pressure and rhetoric in 2013 and 2014, there was still only very limited support in the US, Europe, and the Arab world for direct intervention in Syria<sup>17</sup>. Syria is not Libya. If a window to strike Assad existed, it was before the consolidation of radical Salafi Jihadi groups in Syria with an eye on Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. Meanwhile, Assad's Syria also enjoys strong political, financial and military support from Iran and Russia. These factors complicate any calculus on military intervention in Syria, whether in terms of the level of potential military opposition, or with regards to the risk of high civilian casualties.

In an ironic way, having been sharply criticised by their allies for their interference in Irak, the United States meets itself in an unusual position, since the Gulf States now reproach them for not interfering militarily in Syria. Saudi Arabia, specifically, felt much more betrayed. In October, the leaders of the Kingdom seemed so much stung at, that, they refused a non-permanent member seat of the United Nations Security Council, invoking, inter alia reasons, the capacity of the Security Council to resolve the Syrian conflict. In the same month, prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdel-Aziz al Saoud, who was chief of information service and for over 20 years, ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Washington, declared that the refusal of the seat at the Security Council was a message sent to the Americans and not to the UN and that his country will move away from the US and turn to other allies.

As for the emerging great powers, none expressed the least desire to intervene militarily in Syria. In the Iran-Arab cold war, countries like China, India and Brazil generally opt for non-alignment, rather than present itself to Saudi authorities as allies vis-a-vis Iran. The Kingdom maintained, however, that she will closely collaborate with Jordan and France<sup>18</sup>. The US cannot ignore the regional spillover effects should Syria destabilize further and it needs to adopt a strategy based on containing Syrian instability. How events do and do not play out in Syria will have deep and unforeseen consequences on the precarious sectarian balance in Lebanon, the security of Israel along its northern and eastern flanks, the stability of Jordan at a time of increased internal unrest, and pressure along Turkey's southern flank as Ankara tries to contain increasingly assertive Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish groups. A collapse in Syria – controlled or otherwise – may hold the promise of breaking Iran's umbilical cord to the Levant, but it also promises to expose both budding and strategic US allies to waves of uncertainty for years to come.

While the US must make efforts to support the democratic and economic development of the states in the region, Washington must also take account of US strategic and hard power interests. These interests include energy security, sustaining strategic partnerships with key regional allies, and supporting stability and evolutionary change at a time when the alternative can often be civil war, years of turmoil, or a series of unpredictable power struggles. The Arab-Israeli peace process remains a core US strategic interest in the region, in no small part

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<sup>17</sup> As members of the Capitol were yet to return from their summer vacations, the British parliament objected to Prime Minister David Cameron's' urge to join the US in conducting military air strikes in Syria. During the debates, Members of Parliament made several allusions to the war in Irak and more than one always committed a slip of tongue by pronouncing the name "Saddam" instead of "Assad".

<sup>18</sup> Saudi Arabia indeed bought 142 French helicopters and donated 3 Billion dollars to Lebanon so that the country equips its army with French materials.

as a result of recent US military involvement in the region and a desire to reshape Arab and Muslim perceptions of the US in the broader Arab and Muslim Middle East. The US must also be increasingly concerned with the role played by armed non-state Islamist movements – including Palestinian Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon – in regional security politics. In short, US interests are predicated on supporting geopolitical forces that favour both long-term stability and the protection of US interests in the Levant.

## **Syria, an important ally of Iran**

Syria has been a key player in US-Iranian competition in the Levant, and has been Iran's most important strategic partner over the past 30 years. Since Syria's 2005 military withdrawal from Lebanon, the regional partnership between Syria and Iran has become increasingly skewed in favour of the latter. However, Syria remains critical to Iran's efforts in shaping a favourable security situation in Lebanon and along Israel's northern frontier. This helps explain why the US has repeatedly sought to reorient or downgrade Syria's long-held role as Iran's gateway to the Levant.

In 2013 and at the first semester of 2014, Iran reinforced its support towards Assad and his regime. The country acknowledged having sent to Syria its Keepers of the Revolution with the intention of forming a new militia pro-regime. The Iranian authorities justified this action by pretending that it was necessary for them to fight Al-Qaida at all costs in Syria so as not to have to struggle later against terrorist network on their own territory. Hezbollah, an ally of Iran, also made a conspicuous entry into the Syrian conflict. The principal interests of Iran in Syria are more of a geopolitical nature than ideological; the ideology of the Islamic Republic is very different from that of the Syrian Secular State, but both countries are linked for a long time, beside Hamas and Hezbollah, by an alleged «axle of resistance» against American and Israeli interests in the region.

For Iran, the risks of not tackling Syrian instability and southern Gulf opposition to Assad could include at least a partial loss of its ability to influence the Arab-Israeli conflict or to provide support via Syria to militant Palestinians and Iran's Shiia allies in Lebanon.<sup>19</sup> As such, Iran – which had already pledged political and economic support to its beleaguered ally – opted to balance against perceived Saudi, Qatari and Gulf policies in Syria. Tehran mobilized Hezbollah in Lebanon and loyal Shiia militias in Iraq to fight alongside Assad forces while the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) took on a commanding supervisory role in Syria.<sup>20</sup>

Their ideological divergences contributes in maintaining their alliance, since they do not fight for the same power, contrary to Iran and Saudi Arabia, who assert both their Islamic

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<sup>19</sup> Aram Nerguizian, "Bracing for an Uncertain Future in Syria," Commentary, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 20, 2012; Aram Nerguizian, "The Difficult Path to Mitigating Risk in Syria," Commentary, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 9, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Bassel F. Salloukh, "Sect Supreme: The End of Realist Politics in the Middle East," Foreign Affairs, July 14, 2014, available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141637/bassel-f-salloukh/sect-supreme>.

leadership and their legitimacy, through radically different manners. Traditionally, the principal interest of Iran in Syria consists in preserving a terrestrial passage towards Lebanon in order to supply Hezbollah with weapons. In the current conflict, Syria equally became an essential stake of competition that opposes Iran against Saudi Arabia. Iran fears indeed that a fall of the Syrian regime might galvanize its opponents to the point that they try to overthrow the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki, ally of Tehran. Consequently, Iran has constantly supported the Syrian government in its violent rebellion repression. The only suspicion of criticism was emitted by President Hassan Rouhani, who condemned the recourse to the use of chemical weapons, without allocating this fact however to the regime in Damascus.

Meanwhile, despite very real reservations about regional popular unrest and the stability of the Arab state system, the conservative Gulf monarchies nonetheless pushed ahead with Arab League efforts to further isolate Syria. Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular were keen to support opposition forces politically, financially, and through gradually escalating military aid.

## **Turkey and the Persian Gulf**

There exists an increasing tendency to see in the Syrian civil war a new manifestation of the fight which opposes Sunni and Shiite. This, for us, seems to be an excessively simplistic reading which does not take account of the geopolitical and socio-economic factors at the origin of the uprising. This explanation founded on denominational rivalry encounters several contradictions: before 2011, Syria and the Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan tried to appease tensions on borders of both countries by creating a free trade zone and authorizing displacements without visa; during the preceding decade, Saudi Arabia gave a helping hand to Syria in the hope of diverting it from Iran, by emphasising on their common Arab identity, as well as financial and commercial advantages; before 2011, Qatar had cordial relationship with the Assad family and made important investments in Syria. These three countries changed their policies a few months after the beginning of the uprising, when Assad refused to meet up with the commitments he made towards these leaders who had made singular efforts, respectively, to conclude a personal arrangement in resolving the crisis.

Turkey initially tried to use its good offices with the Assad regime to broker some form of peaceful solution to what was then a more limited Syrian insurgency in 2011. However, when the Erdogan government failed to change the behaviour and policy choices of the Assad regime, Turkey shifted from close relations with Syria to becoming one of al-Assad's most vocal critics. Ankara also sought to leverage its relationship with Islamist political forces, including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, in a bid to shape Syria's emerging opposition forces in 2011. In the two years that followed, Turkey worked closely with other countries – including the US, NATO allies and Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar – to provide political and material support to Syrian opposition forces. In addition to reports about foreign jihadists transiting through Turkey, there were also reports in March 2014 that Turkish personnel may have supported Syrian Salafi Jihadi factions as they pushed into north-

west Syria. These reports – along with conversations with UN representatives in Lebanon and Syria – also pointed to tacit Turkish support for a jihadist incursion into the largely ethnic Armenian town of Kassab near the Mediterranean border.<sup>21</sup>

Time and again, Qatar worked to exercise a degree of foreign policy influence well out of proportion with the country real-world geopolitical size and demographic stature. The wealthy Gulf State accomplished this by leveraging billions of dollars in reserve from energy exports to buy and shape influence across the Middle East and North African region (MENA), especially insofar as sponsoring the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Islamist armed groups in Syria was concerned. There were also reports that other countries had emerged as pioneers in regional proliferation. The New York Times reported in June 2013 that Qatar was using C-17 cargo aircraft to transport Libyan weapons to Syria. The report noted that at least three flights took place to collect arms and then deliver them to Turkey for transit to Syria.<sup>22</sup> Beyond Libya, there was also evidence that Syrian militants were able to procure FN-6 MANPADS from Sudan thanks to Qatar as early as 2012.<sup>23</sup>

However, Qatar's own balancing game often found it at odds with Saudi Arabia and Iran – to say nothing of the US. Once a key ally of Syria and Iran, Doha largely alienated Tehran and ties in 2014 remained broadly transactional. Successive Qatar governments also seemed to have an innate ability to upset or thwart the foreign policy priorities of its larger Gulf neighbours – especially Saudi Arabia, which sought to isolate factions and backed the replacement of leadership across the Levant – especially in Egypt and the Palestinian Territories – and with close ties to Qatar.<sup>24</sup>

Between Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the latter is the most determined in deterring the Iranian presence in Syria. However, at the end of 2013, Qatar and Turkey – more and more distrustful of Saudi Arabia, who supported the coup against their Egyptian ally Mohammed Morsi – opened up to the new Iranian government and demonstrated hopes of cooperation with a view to appease the tensions in the region. The Syrian conflict has in so many ways worsened the political milieu and socio-economical problems weighing already on the Arab neighbours of Syria, of which, Iraq and Lebanon are the most affected.

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<sup>21</sup> Murat Yetkin, "Syria's foreign fighters in Turkey's target, too," *hurriyetdailynews.com*, June 7, 2014; Fehim Tastekin, "Fall of Kassab will be costly for Turkey," *Al-Monitor*, March 31, 2014; Author's interview with United National officials, names withheld, Beirut, Lebanon, April 2, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> C.J. Chivers & Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A." *The New York Times*, March 24, 2013 ; Cameron Scott, "Arms Maneuvers – The Spread of Libyan Weapons," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, October 13, 2013, p. 6; Author's interview with senior Lebanese Armed Forces officer, name withheld, April 30, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> C. J. Chivers & Eric Schmitt, "Arms Shipments Seen From Sudan to Syria Rebels," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Ferry Biedermann, "Widening the Gulf – Saudi Arabia and Qatar vie for influence," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, April 8, 2014.

## Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan

Lebanese and Iraqi fighters find themselves in two camps: Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites militias are in support of the Assad regime (asserting that it is necessary to fight Al-Qaida and to defend the Holy Places in Syria) while the Sunnites joined the opposition. In Iraq, violence has attained a new dimension since 2007. The Maliki government previously had little esteem for Assad, who authorised Sunni militants to penetrate the Iraqi territory in order to fight against the American occupation. Currently the same government regards the Syrian opposition as a considerable threat and allowed the Shiites militants go to Syria to fight beside the regime, this created deep divisions in Iraq. But contrary to Lebanon, however, where the Assad regime is in itself a main source of disagreement, in Iraq, it is the Shiite majority which is in the grip of wild competitions, since the main Shiite factions oppose themselves to an eventual coalition government formed by Maliki after 2014 legislative elections.

After Syria and Iraq, Lebanon is one of the countries most affected by the side-effects of popular unrest, civil war, massive migration, heightened sectarianism and the potential of a further degradation in national sovereignty. In the end, the choices thus far of Lebanon's leading Sunni and Shiia factions attest to the stark reality that Lebanon's opposing political forces cannot escape the negative effects of competing on either side of Syria's civil conflict. Syria and Lebanon are tied together by geography, demographics, unstable regional alignments, and deepening Sunni-Shiia regional tensions. Neither Lebanon's Sunnis nor its Shiias have yet to definitively come to what might be a very bitter lesson in dealing with instability in the Levant: that the Lebanese tail cannot safely and successfully wag the Syrian dog.

Jordan, on its part, managed to maintain unity amongst its population. On the one hand, she does not know the same rifts between her various religious communities; and on the other hand, she tried to adopt a more neutral position in the Syrian conflict. Throughout the Syrian crisis from 2011 to 2014, Jordan strove to maintain a delicate balancing game by trying, on the one hand, to mitigate the worsening effects of the Syria crisis on already precarious Jordanian political, security and socio-demographic pressures. On the other, the Hashemite Kingdom sought an expeditious end to the conflict in an effort to cut short the rise of potentially more radical forces in Damascus – irrespective of whether they were pro or anti-Assad.<sup>25</sup> The Jordanian, Iraqi and Israeli representatives are sure of a thing: they have all informed the US that Assad would not depart easily. However, the presence of thousands of Syrian refugees weighs on the economic resources of Jordan, in as much as they were preceded by a wave of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees.

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<sup>25</sup> Marwan Muasher, "Jordan's Ambiguous Syria Policy," The Global Dynamics of the Syria Conflict, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 9, 2014.

## The role of Russia

On September 9th 2013, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov proposed that Syria's chemical weapons (CW) stockpile be put under international control. The Russian proposal was intended to avert a U.S.-led military strike on Syria in the wake of the reported mass use of CW by the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad on August 21, 2013. While continuing to deny that it used chemical weapons against opposition targets in densely populated areas in and around Damascus, the Assad regime signed on to the plan. The proposal also enjoyed the support of China, the United Nations and Syria's main regional ally Iran.<sup>26</sup>

The political crisis which jolted Ukraine since 2004 strongly sharpened the tensions between Russia and the United States such that it seems to darken the possibility or prospects of a possible cooperation in the Syrian case. Several Russian political commentators, who, initially, had reproached Putin for supporting an international pariah, approve today his politics, having detected in the opposition forces a domination of jihadists. Unrest in Syria prompted much debate and discussion of a military option to end the Assad regime's security crackdown against an increasingly militarized protest movement. Multiple sources report that Russia delivered unspecified numbers of Yakhont ASCMs to Syria in December 2011 to fulfil the \$300 million deal.<sup>27</sup> At the international level, Russia had signalled that intervention in Syria was a foreign policy red line and in December 2011, reports emerged that Russia had provided Syria with its sophisticated and lethal long range SSC-5 Bastion radar guided anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM) coastal defence system based on the SS-N-26 Yakhont supersonic ASCM.<sup>28</sup>

By offering its support to one of the main parties involved in this conflict, Moscow is henceforth perceived as an indispensable actor in the reestablishment of peace in the Syrian crisis. Certain Arab countries even went as far as stating that they would like to see themselves supported by the US as much as Assad is by Russia. Syria's relations with Russia, however, were the key to Syrian progress. Syria used to rely on substantial levels of Soviet assistance during the Cold War, but saw arms deliveries decrease from \$2.6 billion in 1987 to \$52 million in 1994 as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. By 2005 Syria also owed some \$13.4 billion in debt to the Russian Federation, compounding efforts to continue force recapitalization. Russia began carrying out air strikes in Syria in September 2015: "*we do not want Syria to end like Iraq or Libya,*" Putin said. "*Look at Egypt: one has to praise President*

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<sup>26</sup> Critics of the Russian proposal described the move as a stalling tactic by Moscow in a bid to buy breathing room and time for its Syrian allies. Others doubted a plan that would be time and resource intensive in a Syria wracked by civil war with very real risks when it came to the safety of any potential international observers, let alone whether CW accounting and disposal could take place in areas that were in or near an active warzone.

<sup>27</sup> "Russia sends ship-killer missiles to Syria" UPI, December 5, 2011; "Russia Delivers Missiles to Syria: Report," Defense News, December 1, 2011; Doug Richardson, "Russia to supply Yakhont anti-ship missiles to Syria," Jane's Missiles & Rockets, October 5, 2010, available at <http://www.janes.com>.

<sup>28</sup> Russia delivers anti-ship missiles to Syria: report," Reuters, December 1, 2011.

*Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi for taking over the responsibility and power in an emergency situation, in order to stabilise the country*”<sup>29</sup>

Syria responded by attempting to cement its relationship with Iran while continuing efforts to obtain Russian assistance at or near Cold War levels. In 2005, Russia agreed to write off 73% of Syria’s debt, opening the prospect of renewed arms sales. Russia has been keen to reassert its influence in the region, committing to provide Syria with some \$300 million in aid over a three year period starting in 2008. The West, led in part by the US, was supportive of further international sanctions against the al-Assad regime. However, the “BRICS”<sup>30</sup> countries, led by Russia and China, have been critical of what they perceive to be the possibility of yet another Libya-style international intervention in the Arab world.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Putin hints that Russia could grant asylum to Assad” the Guardian, 12 January 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/12/putin-russia-assad-asylum-snowden>

<sup>30</sup> Short for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

<sup>31</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “With Rare Double U.N. Veto on Syria, Russia and China Try to Shield Friend,” The New York Times, October 5, 2011

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The escalation of violence has accelerated radicalisation among the rebels, and the proportion of fighters with Salafists or jihadist leanings has risen accordingly. And foreign jihadists are increasingly infiltrating into Syria. While these are more likely to number hundreds than thousands for the moment, the trend gives cause for concern as it goes hand in hand with a growing *confessionalisation* of the conflict spurred both by the regime and by the rebels' external sponsors.

Above and beyond the internal power struggle, the conflict has acquired the character of a proxy war in which international, regional and sub-national conflicts are fought out. The actors here treat the conflict as a zero-sum game, where success for one is automatically a defeat for the other. One bone of contention is the interpretation and enforcement of international norms, with the United States and other Western states backing the Syrian opposition while Russia and China support the Assad regime with trade and protection in the UN Security Council and, in the case of Russia, arms deliveries.

There is currently no legal basis for a military intervention, and the UN Security Council is unlikely to pass a corresponding resolution. Syria is thus heading for a period in which so-called warlords wield power and violence increases further as autonomous paramilitary units fight for influence and territorial control. With the ethnic/confessional dimension simultaneously gaining in importance, there must be concern that systematic killing or displacement of "enemy" population groups could occur, comparable with the "ethnic cleansing" of the Yugoslav civil wars.

However, there is currently no realistic prospect of finding agreement on even just one of the major conflicts playing out in Syria: the struggle over regional leadership and influence, the Iranian nuclear programme, rivalry between the United States and Russia/China, the Kurdish question, etc. Instead it must be feared that an escalation of the Iranian nuclear conflict to military confrontation, for example, would intensify the civil war in Syria.

To respond to the ongoing humanitarian emergency, the international community has relied on an inter-agency Regional Response Plan (RRP) that brings together over 100 stakeholders between UN agencies and NGOs,<sup>32</sup> as well as on bilateral and multi-lateral assistance to the host countries and communities. Yet despite the gravity and urgency of the situation and the clear importance of preventing a further escalation of the crisis, the international assistance efforts are increasingly more cash-stripped, with the RPP having obtained only 54 percent of the needed funds.<sup>33</sup> The lack of funds will clearly have a direct and potentially devastating impact on access to health, education, shelter, water, and sanitation, while also compromising the refugees' food security and putting even more pressure on the already frail host communities. In turn, this can not only push the host governments to the brink, but it can also fuel pre-existing political, sectarian, or political

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<sup>32</sup> "2014 Syria Regional Response Plan : Mid-Year Update – Strategic Overview," <http://www.unhcr.org/syriaip6/midyear/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Syria Regional Refugee Response," <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

tensions between host and refugee communities. In this context, the very first priority of the international community must be to step up its commitment and prevent the cutting of vital assistance programs by fully funding the humanitarian assistance efforts.

In dealing with the Syrian civil war, the international community seems to have split the focus between the “military-security” dimension of the conflict and the “humanitarian” aspect, with the regional refugee crisis largely analyzed through the humanitarian lens. While understandable, this approach has de facto created an artificial separation between regional and human security concerns. Put simply: the economic, political, and social impact of the ongoing refugee crisis should not be seen solely through the humanitarian lens. Successfully tackling the emergency and boosting the long term resilience of both refugee and host communities is also a vital strategic priority to prevent the long term destabilization and implosion of the entire Levant.

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