

SURİYE’NİN ATEŞ FIRTINASI: NEREDEN, NEREYE?

ÖZ

Mevcut Suriye krizi ve savaşına ilişkin analizlerin büyük bir kısmı, siyasi çözümler, istikrarsızlığın yapısal kaynakları, Irak’tan taşma etkisi ve dış aktörlerin sorumluluğunu vurgulamaktadır. Bu yöndeki analizler Suriye iç politikasını ve yerel liderlik aktörlerini değersizleştirmektedir ki bu Suriye rejimi için kullanışlı bir değersizleştirmedir. Bu makale, nihai bir askeri sonucu siyasi kozmetiği içerecek şekilde dikkate almaktadır. Bu makale mezhepsel tutuşma da dahil olmak üzere Suriye’deki gelişmelerin yönetici hizip aktörleri ile yakından alakalı olduğunu ve Irak’ın aksine Suriye’nin 2011’den itibaren krizin ana arenası olduğunu savunmaktadır. Makale ayrıca Suriye çerçevesinde ‘vekaleten savaş’ ve nihai hedefi dikte edemeseler de dış güçlerin Suriye’deki gidişat üzerindeki etkilerini sorgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Suriye, yapı ve aktör, mezhepçilik, vekaleten savaş, cihatçılık, rejim değişikliği

العاصفة الملتهبة في سوريا: من أين؟ الى أين؟

وليام هاريس

خلاصة

ان القسم الأكبر من التحليلات المتعلقة بالأزمة السورية الراهنة والحرب الجارية فيها، يركّز على الحلول السياسية، والمصادر البنيوية لعدم الاستقرار، والتأثيرات القادمة من العراق، ومسؤولية اللاعبين الخارجيين. ان التحليلات التي تتجه الى هذا المنحى تعمل على التقليل من أهمية السياسة الداخلية لسوريا واللعبين المحليين في معركة الزعامة، والذي يعتبر بدوره تقليدا من الأهمية يمكن ان يستفيد النظام السوري منه. ان هذا المقال يأخذ بنظر الاعتبار النهاية العسكرية القاطعة ممزوجة بها المداخلات السياسية. ويدافع هذا المقال عن فكرة وجود علاقة وطيدة بين التطورات في سوريا وبين اللاعبين الاداريين والحزبيين، بما في ذلك الانحياز المذهبي، مثلما يؤكد على ان سوريا، بعكس ما عليه الحال في العراق، هي الميدان الرئيسي للأزمة منذ عام 2011. كما يناقش المقال تأثير القوى الخارجية على سير الأحداث في سوريا وان لم تتمكن هذه القوى من الأخذ بنظر الاعتبار عملي ” الحرب بالوكالة ” والهدف النهائي من ذلك.

الكلمات الدالة : سوريا، البنية واللعبون، الطائفية، الحرب بالوكالة، الجهاد، تغيير النظام.

SYRIA'S FIRESTORM: WHERE FROM? WHERE TO?

ABSTRACT

Much analysis of the present Syrian crisis and war emphasizes political solutions, structural sources of instability, spill over from Iraq, and the responsibility of external actors. Such analysis devalues both Syrian domestic affairs and local leadership agency, devaluation convenient to the Syrian regime. This article considers an eventual military outcome, involving political cosmetics. It suggests that developments in Syria, including sectarian inflammation, have had a lot to do with ruling clique agency, and that Syria -not Iraq- has been the core crisis arena since 2011. The article also questions the idea of “proxy war” in the Syrian case; outside powers influence the trajectory in Syria, but they may not dictate the destination.

Keywords: Syria, structure and agency, Sectarianism, proxy war, Jihadism, regime change

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Prattle about there being only “a political solution” for the ongoing Syrian war notwithstanding, most conflicts resembling it have had winners and losers established by force, whether or not with diplomatic decoration. This applied to the civil war following the Russian revolution of 1917, the French revolutionary decade of 1789-1799, the crushing of Hungary by the Habsburg monarchy backed by Tsarist Russia in 1849, and the American revolutionary war of 1776-1781. The Lebanese assert “no victor and no vanquished” as the end product of their fifteen years of turmoil in 1990. Nonetheless, the outcome was imposition of a Syrian Ba’thist reading of the 1989 Ta’if agreement after Maronite Christian militaries tore each other apart and a Syrian assault winkled General Michel Aoun out of the Lebanese presidential palace. Similarly, the 1995 Dayton agreement among the sides in the 1992-1995 Bosnian war followed decisive NATO military intervention against the Bosnian Serbs. Twenty-five years of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka ended in 2009 with the crushing of the Tamils, no political frills attached.

In cases of anti-regime uprisings morphing into military contests, which include Syria since 2011, the pattern has been for multi-phase fighting leading into overthrow of the established order, smashing of the rebels, or extended stalemate. The Hungarian repudiation of Habsburg despotism in 1848-1849 was a relatively brief episode of eighteen months, with the balance swinging back and forth and Budapest changing hands three times.¹ The parties were unbending in their basic requirements, precluding negotiation, and the old regime triumphed with foreign assistance and manipulation of ethnic groups -Slavs and Rumanians- against Hungarian supremacy. The parallels with external intrusion and sectarian breakdown in present-day Syria are obvious, though the Syrian autocracy is relatively weaker and has less mobilization capacity than its Habsburg counterpart. Almost twenty years later, after the 1866 defeat of Austria by Prussia, the Hungarian elite was able to turn the tables in the “compromise” of the “dual monarchy.” Similarly, triumphant despotism in Syria at the expense of the bulk of the Sunni Arab majority would guarantee a new explosion, probably within months rather than years.

Conflict resolution logic that presupposes a conflict “ripening” toward a settlement by mutual exhaustion of the parties² is callous, dangerous, and probably inapplicable in a case like the Syrian conflict. It is callous because 200,000 deaths and nine million refugees and displaced people have evidently not been enough for the “ripening.” Does it require half a million dead and complete destruction? The logic is dangerous because two major parties,

1 For good summaries, see Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (London: Abacus, 2008), and Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

2 The concept of the “ripe moment” in conflicts is elaborated in I. William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments,” *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 2001), pp. 8-18.

the regime and the Islamic State (ISIS³) jihadists, have relentlessly made it plain that they only contemplate extermination or subjugation for people not in their camp. The regime, for example, would only negotiate with its hold on security machinery undisturbed, and would, on its track record, use that machinery to subvert and destroy its partners in any “transition government.” The Obama administration’s expressed preference for preserving Syrian regime institutions indicates that it is not sensitive to the risk; opposition personalities going into any joint government might well be entering a death trap. For practical illustration, Syrian opposition politicians need only contemplate the procession of political murders in Lebanon between 2005 and 2008, for which the Syrian regime and its Hezbollah ally are the leading suspects.

The three-sided face-off of a mafia style dictatorship, Sunni Muslim jihadists, and fractious non-jihadist fighters who only agree not to accept anything short of uprooting the ruling clique is hardly conducive to “mutual exhaustion” therapy. Certainly either the regime or the main jihadist force -ISIS- has to suffer a conclusive decline on the battlefield to make political resolution possible. Collapse of the non-jihadist opposition would leave only the absolutists, rendering conflict resolution logic redundant.

This article considers selected internal and external dimensions of Syria’s breakdown, in the hope of contributing to debate about the sources, characteristics, and trajectory of the Syrian crisis. It examines the balance of structures and personal agency in the crisis. It discusses Russian, US, Iranian, and Turkish roles in the development of the crisis. It attempts to integrate internal and external dynamics in assessing the future trajectory.

Structure and agency in the Syrian crisis

Multi-sectarian, multi-ethnic states bequeathed by British and French intervention in the 1920s predisposed the eastern Arab world to ethnic-sectarian sensitivity and authoritarian rule, both preordained to disasters. Frankly, the larger united Arab entity desired by the Hashemite prince Faysal and the bourgeois Arab nationalists would also have incubated these tendencies, and would have been even more vulnerable to breakdown. More recently, the incompetent US management of Iraq after the 2003 invasion and occupation emphasized sectarian identities and preeminence of Shi’ite Arabs over Sunni Arabs, inflaming sectarian conflict and Sunni jihadist extremism, the latter likely to embroil Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. It is false, however, to conceive the US impact in isolation; Saddam Husayn had already destabilized Iraq with his repression of Shi’ites through the 1990s and his persecution of the Kurds from the 1970s on, not to mention his ruinous adventurism against

3 ISIS is short for “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria,” Syria here referring to greater or geographical Syria, in Arabic termed *Bilad al-Sham* and in English the Levant.

Iran and Kuwait. After 2003, Iraqi Shi'ite politicians and militias, encouraged by the Shi'ite theocratic regime in Iran, pursued sectarian supremacy and vengeful hounding of Sunni Arabs. Also, the Syrian regime's fostering of Sunni jihadism in western Iraq against the new US supported order in Baghdad inflated "al-Qaeda in Iraq."

In short, blame for structural instability in the Arab Levant states and Iraq in the early 2000s can be spread around, encompassing European colonial powers, chauvinist Arab nationalists, the United States, Iranian theocrats, and the Ba'thist Arab masters of Iraq and Syria. Whatever the case, Middle Eastern volatility and vulnerability do not tell us much about the specific developments that occurred in Syria in 2011. It is difficult to understand the crony capitalist policies that marginalized provincial and suburban Sunni Arab Syria in the early 2000s, or the Syrian regime's manipulative interactions with Sunni jihadists at home and abroad, without considering the predilections of the ruling clique and the leader. The structural instability that characterized the new Arab states of the twentieth century made violent upheavals unsurprising and provided a fertile environment for despotism and paranoia, but it does not account for the actual Syrian crisis of 2011, or explain why the crisis became a catastrophe.

Particularities of the Syrian domestic arena are key to interpreting the evolution from discontent to the street challenge to the regime, and then from protests to warfare. Leo Tolstoy might not approve, but personal agency is part of the picture.⁴ This applies to the backdrop of state policies and behavior in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the handling of the street protests against the regime in 2011, and the steady escalation of state recourse to all varieties of violence. Direction of the state under President Bashar al-Asad after June 2000 had serious implications. Neo-liberal economic policies tailored to bourgeois interests close to the regime involved running down state support for the mass of the population in the urban and rural peripheries, penalizing those whom Bashar's father Hafiz had taken care to placate. Repression of secular dissent after a brief relaxation dashed the hopes of much of urban society. Pandering to Sunni Islamism at home and double-dealings with jihadists in Iraq and Lebanon stirred dangerous forces. At the same time, the regime's partnership with revolutionary Shi'ite Iran increasingly aroused Syrian Sunni Arab suspicion. Drought on the desert fringes after 2008 exacerbated misery and alienation, but even without it there was plenty of combustible material for sparks from the successful early 2011 street revolts in Tunisia

⁴ At several points in *War and Peace*, Tolstoy pauses to denigrate the significance of individuals in history as opposed to broad trends representing the momentum of the multitudes. For example, see Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, translated by Anthony Briggs (London, Penguin Books, 2006), pp. 667-671 and 912-914.

and Egypt. Bashar al-Asad's interview with *The Wall Street Journal* in January 2011 indicated that he was not simply insensitive, but oblivious.⁵

Despite the Syrian regime's endeavors to rewrite the reality of March 2011 as an armed "terrorist" onslaught and a foreign conspiracy against the citadel of "resistance" to Israel and the West, virtually all violence in the initial ten weeks of the street challenge came from the regime. The ruling family and clique were incensed at the impertinence of multitudes of demonstrators daring to assert popular rights, and they were determined not to concede anything real. Bashar al-Asad came into his own as their incendiary front man; his bellicose, patronizing speeches of March and June 2011 threatened war, mocked demands for reform, and dehumanized critics as "outlaws" and agents of "conspiracies" that "multiply like germs."⁶ From June 2011 through 2012, with opposition elements goaded into armed resistance by the regime and then supported in their persistence by Turkey and Arab oil financiers, the regime could proclaim its fight against terrorism and escalate assaults on Syrian cities, towns, and villages, deploying heavy artillery, helicopter gun-ships, air force jets, and ballistic missiles. Provincial and suburban Sunni Arab Syria was increasingly driven to the wall, and into the arms of jihadist absolutists, starting with Jabhat al-Nusra in 2012.

Overall, there is a strong basis for arguing that this descent of Syria into a black hole was substantially the personal work of regime overlord Bashar al-Asad. Through the critical months of slippage toward a fully militarized contest, from armed clashes in Jisr al-Shughur in June 2011 to the regime siege of the Baba Amru suburb of Homs in February 2012, no other engine of destruction existed remotely comparable to the regime. The regime had fully autonomous momentum and its military activities demonstrated that it had no objective except total repression. Without the regime momentum, Arabian Peninsula and Turkish backers of emerging armed opposition factions would not have had the opportunity or the traction to make their own more modest contributions to the course of events. At this critical stage, regional and international actors reacted to developments far more than shaping them.

Through almost four years since March 2011, the Syrian president has both denied and asserted responsibility in a highly disturbing fashion that deserves closer scrutiny than it has received. The cold, clinical, aloof, self-righteous posturing amid mayhem and mass murder indicated a self-absorbed personality disconnected from the fates of ordinary people. In an extraordinary interview with *Paris Match* in November 2014, Bashar dismissed opposition as

5 Jay Solomon and Bill Spindle, "Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad", *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 January 2011.) <https://www.google.co.nz/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=wall%20street%20journal%20interview%20assad>

6 *Al-Safir* (Beirut), 31 March 2011; *al-Hayat* (London), 21 June 2011; *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), 21 June 2011.

“terrorism” and flatly claimed that there had been no regime bombardment of civilians – “it is impossible for a state to target civilians.”⁷ In other words, the indisputable artillery shelling, aerial bombing of hospitals and bakeries, ballistic missile strikes against urban neighborhoods, and indiscriminate dumping of barrels loaded with explosives and shrapnel out of helicopters wasn’t happening and had never happened. In a December 2011 interview with the American ABC network, Bashar even rejected personal accountability for the army and its behavior – “they are not my forces.”⁸ Yet the same Bashar presented a ghoulish medical metaphor for his hands-on responsibility in a June 2012 speech: “When the surgeon enters the operating theatre and ... extracts and amputates, what do we say to him? You fix on his [hands] being blood-stained or do we salute him for saving the patient.”⁹ Bashar would certainly be there for the salutations.

Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, who met Bashar repeatedly as UN Syria envoy between 2012 and 2014, was well placed to assess the outlook of the Syrian leader and his entourage. In October 2014, Brahimi told a gathering at Chatham House that Bashar and his Iranian allies “don’t cease to bet on the military solution,” believing “they will win and recover rule over all of Syria.”¹⁰ According to Brahimi, Bashar and the regime still refused to accept that there was any internal problem in Syria. This unabashed absolutism, un-dented by any serious reflection on the catastrophic trajectory, easily matched that of the Nusra or ISIS jihadists; it had precipitated the wrecking of Syria and it guaranteed more misery to come.

Sunnis, Alawites, and Shi’ites: a sectarian confrontation?

There can be little doubt that in early 2015 domestic support for the Syrian regime derives primarily from Syria’s sectarian minorities, particularly Alawites and Christians, amounting to about one quarter of the population, and that the greater part of the Sunni Arab two-thirds of Syria repudiates the regime. The chief ethnic minority, the Kurdish one-tenth, mostly wants to escape Arab Syria altogether. The picture has gray zones. Segments of the Sunni Arab population – bourgeois elements tied to the regime’s crony capitalism, salaried personnel within the regime apparatus, secularized professionals fearful of ISIS, and some tribal groups – remain within the regime camp. Sunni members of the loyalist combine at the summit of the regime continue to staff important positions – for example, National Security office head Ali

7 “Our Full Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad”, *Paris Match*, 4 December 2014. <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu/International/Our-Interview-with-Syrian-President-Bashar-al-Assad-661984>.

8 “Transcript: ABC’s Barbara Walters’ Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad”, *ABC News*, 7 December 2011. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/transcript-abcs-barbara-walters-interview-syrian-president-bashar/story?id=15099152>.

9 *Al-Safir*, 4 June 2012.

10 *Al-Hayat*, 15 October 2014.

Mamlouk, Defense Minister Fahd Jasim al-Frej, and political security chief Rustum Ghazale.¹¹ No one, however, should harbor delusions. This is a residual minority vulnerable to the pain and fury of the Sunni masses targeted and displaced by the regime. On the other side, many poorer Alawite Arabs in the coastal hills derived no benefit from being in the community of the ruling family, and severe losses and sacrifices have produced deep discontent among those not well connected with the regime. Nonetheless, fear of liquidation by Sunni jihadists has kept Alawites firmly behind the Asads, regardless of the fact that many view Bashar al-Asad as thoroughly unworthy.

Whatever the gray zones, the regime's determination to brand its opponents as Sunni jihadist terrorists ensured inflammation of sectarian prejudice. The narrative of a Sunni Islamist monster serving America, Zionism, Turkey's Muslim Brotherhood aligned prime minister, and reactionary Arab oil sheikhs helped stiffen Alawite commitment and fed the ferocity of regime militias. It also aimed to demonize Syrian Sunnis in the wider world. The narrative became a self-fulfilling prophecy, because the military firestorm it sought to legitimize provoked and radicalized young Sunni males, who flocked to Islamist and jihadist militias. Further, the regime's deployment from late 2012 onward of mainly Alawite and minority army and National Defense Force units on front lines intensified Sunni Arab anger.

Sunni sectarian assertion ranged from the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda to impose Sunni Islamic law on society to the maniacal bigotry of ISIS. The Brotherhood rejected the Asads in the late 1970s; it oversaw a rebellion in 1979-1982. Hafiz al-Asad crushed it in Hama in March 1982, also razing much of the city. The Brotherhood fine-tuned its rancor in exile and took an arrogant supremacist stance toward the protest movement after March 2011.¹² Turkey's AKP government and Qatar encouraged its pretensions to dominate the opposition, but it found itself sidelined as jihadists and radical Islamists seized the initiative among Sunnis inside Syria by early 2013. The Brotherhood dissimulated in its perspective on religious minorities; certainly it had no enthusiasm for long-term power sharing. The other Islamists, steeled in the regime firestorm, were unambiguous. Their websites referred to Alawite fighting units in such derogatory terms as *awkar al-nusayriyya* (nests of Nusayris), and in September 2013 Islamist militias committed the first major opposition atrocity by massacring Alawite villagers in a raid toward the coast.

For a while Jabhat al-Nusra was the jihadi spearhead, attracting the allegiance of Sunnis desperate about international apathy toward the flood of

11 Fatima Nasrallah, "Man hum A'da' al-Daira al-Dayqa al-Muhita bil-Asad (Who are the Members of the Inner Circle around Asad?)," *al-Hayat*, 16 October 2014 .

12 Ayman Sharrouf, "The destructive ascendancy of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood," *NOW*, 2 December 2014), provides a sharp, well argued commentary. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/564483-the-destructive-ascendancy-of-syrias-muslim-brotherhood>

regime war crimes. However, in April 2013, a split produced ISIS, which abandoned the Nusra focus on destroying the regime in favor of seizing opposition-controlled territory for immediate creation of a fanatic Sunni religious state. For Bashar it was an ideal evolution: ISIS would degrade the whole opposition and turn the international tide to the advantage of the regime and its narrative. The regime took no military initiative against ISIS, and arranged to buy eastern Syrian oil from it.¹³ Until August 2014, regime military camps near al-Raqqa coexisted with ISIS command of the town. The ISIS leadership and military command came from Sunni western and central Iraq and comprised a bizarre mixture of religious militants and Ba'hist army officers bitterly resentful of US occupation and Shi'ite ascendancy. Nonetheless, whatever its Iraqi dimension, the new organization owed its existence, its mobilization capacity, and its core territory in eastern Syria to the Syrian firestorm and the impresario of the firestorm – Bashar al-Asad.

Beyond Sunni/Alawite strain and the inflammation of Sunni jihadism, the Syrian crisis has fueled mutual hostility between Sunnis and Shi'ites within and beyond Syria. Twelver Shi'ites, the predominant branch of Shi'ite Islam, are barely two percent of Syria's population, but the regime's principal Middle Eastern confederates are Shi'ite – Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shi'ites. In July 2012, when lightly armed Sunni Arab rebels took parts of Damascus and Aleppo and the regime appeared to falter, Bashar's Shi'ite allies came to the rescue, under Iranian coordination. Iran dispatched a training and advisory contingent of veteran revolutionary guards whose significance went beyond their numbers of perhaps a couple of hundred. Their primary function was to establish a National Defense Force (NDF) of tens of thousands, drawing overwhelmingly on Alawites and other minorities, to answer the manpower deficit in the regular forces given distrust of Sunnis and substantial Sunni Arab defections.¹⁴ The NDF would buttress offensive activity, for example around largely Sunni Aleppo, and provide defense of core regime territory. The Iranians succeeded in this assignment in less than a year.

Meantime, with firm Iranian backing, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'ite militias, the latter collectively termed the Abu Fadl al-Abbas brigade, sent up to seven thousand fighters into Syria from late 2012, making a critical contribution through 2013-2014 to regime campaigns in Damascus, along the Lebanese border, and around Homs. They linked with local Shi'ites near the Shi'ite Sitt Zeinab shrine in Damascus and in a Shi'ite rural pocket northwest of Aleppo.

13 See Tony Badran, "Minority Report: Is the Link between Assad and the Islamic State a Christian One", *NOW*, 5 September 2014. ("") <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/562681-minority-report>; and Valérie Marcel, "ISIS and the Dangers of Black Market Oil", Chatham House expert comment, 21 July 2014. <http://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/15203>

14 Consult Sam Dagher's detailed analysis in *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad". <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>

They emphasized religious solidarity and, increasingly, their mission against “terrorism,” meaning the whole Syrian opposition. Their presence also highlighted the Twelver Shi’ite origins of Alawites. After the ISIS lunge into Iraq in June 2014 compelled most Iraqi Shi’ites to return home, Iran imported non-Arab Shi’ites from further afield, for example Hazara Afghanis. Sunni Arab Syrians were deeply outraged by the Iranian role and the infusion of foreign Shi’ites, regarding it as a form of colonization. The joint belligerence of Bashar, Iranian clerical politicians, and Lebanese Hezbollah chief Hasan Nasrallah made future Syrian Sunni Arab reconciliation with both Alawites and Twelver Shi’ites an ever more mountainous task. The regime side naturally denied any sectarian bias and did not fail to parade its own Sunnis, including the Grand Mufti, and its organic linkage with Sunni Islam, but its alignments and military targeting indicated another story.

Syria and Iraq: interpreting spillover

Because of US occupation of Iraq after 2003, exacerbation of Sunni/Shi’ite sectarianism in that country from the 1990s, and global focus on Iraqi oil resources, it has been tempting to view the Syrian crisis as subsidiary to preceding destabilization of Iraq. Superficially, Iraqi antecedents of al-Qaeda inspired Sunni jihadist movements such as al-Nusra and ISIS seem to fit this outlook. Certainly any emphasis on reverberations from US intervention in Iraq suits those uncomfortable with the notion that Arabs might have responsibility for Arab predicaments. It also suits the Syrian regime and its apologists, chiefly interested in any self-serving story that might help to obscure regime barbarism.

Blaming the early twenty-first century mess in Iraq for the post 2010 upheavals across the Arab world has two problems when we consider the Syrian crisis. First, the protest movement and uprising in Syria through 2011, and the vicious behavior of the regime, were Syrian domestic phenomena with no discernable link to Iraq. The only credible external triggering for events in Syria was from the overthrow of the Egyptian and Tunisian rulers, which inspired marginalized populations in Syria’s down at heel provincial towns and the depressed countryside of Damascus and Aleppo. Manufacturing causal connections with either the American disaster in Iraq or Israeli-Palestinian affairs can only be nebulous, to say the least.

Second, the main direction of spillover since the behavior of the Syrian regime opened the gates of hell in Syria in 2011 has been from Syria into Iraq – not the reverse. Since 2011, the Syrian crisis has been the engine of upheaval in the eastern Arab world. Courtesy of Bashar al-Asad’s driving of millions of Sunni Arabs to desperation, the crisis has converted Syria into the new global center of jihadism and nihilist fanaticism. In brief, Syria has become primary and Iraq secondary in the new integrated arena. In its current “caliphal” configuration, ISIS has been forged in the Syrian furnace, and it can only be

decisively defeated in its eastern Syrian heartland. There is of course no better illustration of the current direction of spillover than the critical extra energy and capacity given to the June 2014 ISIS offensive in Sunni western Iraq by the organization's entrenchment and build-up in eastern Syria. The ISIS plunder of cash and US weapons from Mosul has been substantially taken away to al-Raqqa in Syria, ISIS oil production and smuggling primarily pivot on Syria, and important new weapons acquisitions have come from takeovers of Syrian regime bases.

No rollback of ISIS in Iraq can be secure without reduction of ISIS in Syria, especially while Shi'ite and Iranian hegemony in Baghdad continues to guarantee Iraqi as well as Syrian Sunni rejection of the prevailing order. In January 2015, after five months of bombing by the US and its partners, ISIS expansion persisted in Syria. Meantime, campaigning alongside the Obama administration's air assault on ISIS with its own intensified indiscriminate unloading of barrel bombs on civilians, the Syrian regime sought to associate the US with its war crimes. The US wanted only to shore up a "federal" Iraq as the legacy of its vast expenditure in that country and did not even want to hear about Syria, but there was no exit from its new military embroilment in Iraq without somehow addressing the anger of Syrian Sunni Arabs.

Is the Syrian war a proxy war?

Syria's crisis is frequently described as a "proxy war," with the implication that the local combatants are little more than puppets of external sponsors, and that some grand bargain among the US, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia would dispose of the problem. Given that the main dynamic of the warfare has been a local fight to the finish over command of the state, the parties are not proxies in this sense. The Syrian regime probably conceives the Iranians and Russians as more dependent on it than vice versa. Virtually the entire armed opposition deeply distrusts the Obama administration. Turkey adopted a policy of removing Bashar that had no practical underpinning, and has faced a credibility gap on that account. The jihadists follow their own path in their own universe. And Syrian Kurds are determined that Syria will cease to be qualified by the word "Arab." In short, there are worldviews and bottom-line demands that will frustrate attempts at imposition, even assuming coordination among the aspirant patrons.

It is worth taking four external players that have become involved in the Syrian arena -Russia, the US, Iran, and Turkey- and comparing their roles and influences with the local parties. Russia and Iran have committed themselves to salvaging Bashar al-Asad and the regime, while the US and Turkey have toyed with selected elements in the fragmented opposition. Through almost four years, Russia and Iran have given Bashar freedom of maneuver to wreak extraordinary havoc, enabling regime survival but not decisive regime recovery. They present an appearance of irrevocable entanglement with the regime

that can only embolden Bashar, feeding a conviction that he can hold out on his own, steering allies who are supplemental rather than critical. As for the armed non-jihadist opposition, practical support from the US and Turkey has always been tightly constrained, contrasting with pompous American and Turkish rhetoric against the regime. Most of the non-jihadist opposition feels that it has endured more than three years on its own, and it is not minded to take much notice of miserly “friends” who will do their own deals at a moment’s notice, particularly the US with Iran.

Russia had a long-standing relationship with the Asads, dating back to Soviet times, and a continuing presence of advisors and interest in arms deals. Above all, however, the Russians feel the West took advantage of their acquiescence in UN approval of “humanitarian” military intervention in Libya to implement regime change, and that this reflected Western contempt for Moscow. They determined that there would be no repetition in Syria, and exerted their veto power in the UN Security Council to paralyze international initiatives against the Syrian regime.

Russia and Iran played complementary roles in defense of Bashar. The Russians provided the international cover and maintenance of major weapons systems that was beyond the Iranians. Iran supplied the financial flows to pay Russia, counteract Western sanctions, and ensure viability for the regime’s war economy. Iran also mobilized foreign Shi’ite fighters to compensate for the regime’s manpower deficit, and upgraded exploitation of the Syrian Alawite demographic base. For Iran, the Syrian regime anchored the Iranian Shi’ite theocracy’s strategic extension into the eastern Mediterranean, principally to Lebanon’s Shi’ite community and Hezbollah. Only thus could Iran pursue its ideological mission against Israel, and preserve Hezbollah’s Iranian and Syrian sourced missile arsenal as a deterrent against an Israeli assault on Iranian nuclear facilities. With reach to the Mediterranean, Iran could also bother the new Egyptian military regime and outflank Turkey, these two plus Saudi Arabia being its rivals for regional power. Without Damascus, Iran would be shrunk back to a defensive position in the Persian Gulf, and even Iraqi Shi’ite Arabs might look elsewhere.

In such a landscape, Bashar al-Asad could readily imagine Russia and Iran as his prisoners. Certainly they happily parroted his regime’s narrative of its war against terrorism, and betrayed little appreciation of their provocation of Sunni Arabs in Syria and beyond. The Syrian regime’s near-certain responsibility for the large-scale poison gas attack on opposition suburbs of Damascus in August 2013, killing more than one thousand civilians, probably represented Bashar taking his allies for granted. Both the Russians and Iranians were undoubtedly embarrassed, and the Russian backing for Syrian chemical disarmament may well have been as much to restrict Bashar as to forestall US military action. In late 2014, the ISIS surge demonstrated the magnitude of the “black hole” created by Bashar, regime manpower difficulties persisted de-

spite Iranian efforts, and US aerial bombing of ISIS in Syria with no recourse to the UN Security Council set a precedent that might at some point extend to bombing the regime.¹⁵ Russia at least had incentives to cash its chips; its promotion in December 2014 of contacts in Moscow between the Syrian regime and opposition personalities possibly reflected this.

Proxy conflict requires patrons with credibility among their supposed clients. Russia and Iran had credibility with the Syrian regime, even if the serenely rigid and self-important Bashar al-Asad made it difficult to discern who exactly was in the driver's seat. In contrast, this basic condition failed to apply to relations between armed opposition factions and both the United States and Turkey, supposedly their patrons. The Syrian uprising coincided with the American recoil from massively expensive and poorly managed ground interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. There was no chance of anything beyond highly circumscribed air strikes and carefully limited arms supplies from any US administration, though these would probably have been enough for the requisite psychological impact on the Syrian regime.

The Obama administration proved belligerently non-interested in Syria, the more so as the Syrian crisis became the world's leading humanitarian and geopolitical nightmare. The US went through the motions of declaring that Bashar had "lost legitimacy" and endorsing exiled opposition coalitions and "moderate" rebels. Yet American refusal of any deterrence against a Syrian air force engaged in constant outrages against civilians, proclamation of fake red lines against use of poison gas, and hints of weapons supplies that only intermittently eventuated confused and infuriated Syrian rebels. Deserted by the West and pressed to the wall by the regime, the armed opposition fragmented, trended toward fierce jihadism, and repudiated the well-heeled politicians in exile that the US favored.

US relations with Sunni Arabs inside Syria became fraught when the US began bombing ISIS in Syria in September 2014, effectively partnering with the Iranians in Iraq while bombing alongside the Syrian regime's continuing air strikes against civilians in Aleppo and elsewhere. The US left the regime untouched while it targeted non-ISIS jihadists such as al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, popular with the Syrian opposition public. President Obama sent a reassuring message to Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei,¹⁶ but ignored the Syrian people. Amid all this, the US drip-fed weapons to selected opposition factions and expected whatever was left of the "moderates" to be its ground force against

15 Ibrahim Hamidi, "Rusiya tabda' Sira'an ma'a Iran – 'ala Suriya" (Russia opens a Rift with Iran – concerning Syria), *al-Hayat*, 4 December 2014), examines Russian and Iranian positions in light of the US campaign against ISIS.

16 Jay Solomon and Carol Lee, "Obama Wrote Secret Letter to Iran's Khamenei About Fighting Islamic State", *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 November 2014). <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-wrote-secret-letter-to-irans-khamenei-about-fighting-islamic-state-1415295291>

ISIS in Syria. It was a breathtaking array of contradictions that only made sense in terms of President Obama's priority of a US bargain with Iran.

Turkey expressed formal dedication to a new Syria free of the Asads, a bridge too far for the Obama administration. Partly because of the absence of US leadership, the Turkish government otherwise drifted into policies and activity that were unviable and counter-productive. Having effusively patronized Bashar al-Asad before the Syrian uprising, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan turned against the Syrian dictator in August 2011, after Bashar spurned brotherly advice for reforms. There was clear personal animosity in Erdoğan's embracing of regime change in Syria that fitted poorly with a Turkish public unenthusiastic about military intervention and Erdoğan's own impetus to upgrade economic and political interactions with Iran and Russia. Through 2012 and 2013, Erdoğan expected Barack Obama to exert the essential hard power against Bashar, always a fatuous expectation. Turkey was reduced to hosting an inundation of refugees and to taking occasional air actions to keep Syrian warplanes and helicopters a little away from the border fences.

In the search for any instrument to use against Bashar, Turkey's Islamist inclined government adopted a permissive posture toward Syria's expanding Islamist and jihadist organizations. This played into Bashar's narrative of a terrorist opposition inspired from outside. It also enhanced Turkey's vulnerability to spillover from Syria, Turkey being the only one of the four external players featured here to neighbor Syria directly. Foreign jihadists, many from Western Europe, transited through Turkey to Syria, while ISIS built networks in Turkey that by 2014 were a menace to their host.¹⁷ Competing Arabian Peninsula sponsors of jihadists could interact with their competing clients in Syria via Turkey, threatening the "moderates" and less ferocious Islamists that Turkey preferred. Turkey failed to constrict a dangerous jihadist dynamic that handicapped any sort of Syrian opposition that the wider world could endorse. Turkey itself felt the consequences in June 2014 when ISIS seized Mosul and took forty-six Turkish staff of the Turkish consulate hostage.

Dereliction – not proxy management – would seem the better description of US and Turkish approaches to the Syrian crisis. The US abandoned Syrians to desperation and radicalization, while Turkey simply floundered. This, however, did not necessarily mean that Bashar al-Asad, Iran, and Russia would win.

Imagining futures

Looking ahead, three questions arise. First, what seems the most likely path into the future, and what are the implications? Second, given that the likely

17 "Looking for ISIL [ISIS]: How jihadists operate among Turks", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 22 September 2014. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/PrintNews.aspx?PageID=383&NID=7205>

future is appalling, what alternative future might be imagined? Third, given conflicts of interest, entrenched intransigence, and the awesome scale of the mess, can the alternative be achieved?

Both the bottom-line stances of the parties inside Syria and their capabilities and characteristics relative to one another make a long haul on the battlefield with a military outcome the leading scenario. A long haul probably does not favor the regime, because of its restricted demographic reservoir. Nonetheless, the greater commitment of regime allies Iran and Russia compared with backers of the non-jihadist opposition means that the regime's advantage in weaponry and expertise can keep it afloat in its heartland, including the capital, for years yet. Certainly the regime no longer commands the resource base to re-impose itself across Syria unless it acquires a long breathing space in which the opposition loses its Arab and international sympathizers. Through 2014, despite Iran, Russia, and massively superior firepower, the regime fell back south of Damascus and was unable to achieve a siege of rebel-held eastern Aleppo. It also lost a major air-force base to ISIS immediately the latter decided to quit tolerating a regime presence near al-Raqqa. Saudi Arabia and Western powers have an interest in non-jihadist pressure on Damascus from the Syrian/Jordanian border, while Turkey may be infusing advisory and material support to keep Aleppo open to the Syrian/Turkish border. This is far short of real proxy warfare, but even such minimal involvements negate regime advantages.

The qualification to protracted stalemate is potential collapse of two sides in the triangular contest of the regime, the non-jihadist opposition, and the ISIS and al-Nusra jihadists. For the regime, collapse means a breaking-apart of the Alawite community under the stress of First World War level depletion of the adult male population, perhaps expressed in a coup against Bashar al-Asad. There would then be a scramble for Damascus and advantage in a new triangular contest of non-jihadists, ISIS, and al-Nusra. For the already splintered non-jihadists, the prospect of being endlessly squeezed by the regime, ISIS, and al-Nusra with little relief from the Arabs, Turkey, and the West may bring morale collapse, expressed in desertion to the jihadists or flight from Syria. Indeed, it is a wonder that they persevere into 2015. Despite the aerial campaign of the US and others against ISIS in Syria since September 2014, the jihadists are unlikely to fall down in the war environment. Ultimately their fanaticism and nihilism guarantee their unviability, but meantime they have taken hold of Syrian Sunni Arab fury at Bashar al-Asad's firestorm. Only regime change can begin to draw down this poison. Our main problem with assessing the predicaments of the sides is shortage of information. There is only a scattering of impressions from within the Alawite community or the jihadist apparatus. We know more about the non-jihadists, whether Islamists or not, but that merely suggests the incongruity of their persistence.

From early in the crisis there has been complete political incompatibility of the sides, and no shift in that incompatibility. As regards the “transition administration” proposed in the international community’s 2012 Geneva guidelines, former UN special envoy Brahimi noted in late 2014 that the regime’s “extreme limit” remained assimilation of some mild critics into a government subordinate to Bashar, “without any basic change.”¹⁸ For the Western backed coalition of opposition politicians in exile, this was intolerable: the opposition would take the lead in a transition government with full security powers; Bashar and his inner circle would depart; and no one from the regime side with “blood on their hands” would participate. For the armed opposition within Syria, transition was treason: the Asad regime would be dismantled; a tribunal would try its leaders; and there would be a new Syria directly. For the jihadists, Syria would either be a Sunni Islamist emirate, according to Jabhat al-Nusra, or the nucleus of an inflating terrorist caliphate, according to ISIS. Only the politicians in exile and segments of the non-jihadist armed opposition still contemplate political pluralism and power sharing. Otherwise outcomes mean either continuation of Ba’thist autocracy or location somewhere on a spectrum of Sunni Islamist dictatorship running from Wahhabi style *shar’ia* rule to the most outlandish fanaticism.

In 2015, the death toll from violence of well over 200,000 since March 2011 seems set to rise to 300,000 and beyond. Dangerous spillover both for the neighbors and the West looms: more than three million angry refugees are a ticking time bomb for radicalization, and Syria has become the new top sanctuary for global Sunni Muslim jihadism. Enough of the Sunni Arab majority blames Bashar al-Asad and is sufficiently embittered to make any regime resurgence ephemeral. On the one hand, the regime will look for any device to forestall collapse, even clandestine nuclear collaboration with Iran and North Korea. On the other hand, Syrian Sunni Arabs will fight on in whatever conditions, including US enticements to Iran at their expense.

What new Syria might have a chance of offering a modestly hopeful future? We cannot pretend that ethnic-sectarian sentiment does not exist. It is only one facet of the identity of Syrians, but it has been massively inflated since 2011 by the regime’s firestorm. The country has become divided according to ethnic-sectarian communities: the regime’s core territory and support are heavily Alawite; the Kurds have established autonomy across northern Syria; and the rest is under Sunni Arab warlords, the most dynamic of whom are also the most sectarian. A new Syria would have to reflect both the fact of the Sunni Arab majority and the imperative of ethnic-sectarian power sharing – the latter would be both geographical and built into representative institutions. In parallel, the Syrian state cannot house pluralism or a range of freedoms until it is purged of the existing regime. This is above all the case for the security

18 *Al-Hayat*, 15 October 2014.

institutions, which have been instruments of mass murder. Another necessary condition for reducing the ghastly legacy of the present war is an accounting for the criminality of all parties; Syria will need international aid for the tribunal without which it cannot have social health. These parameters might seem impossible, but without them there is only war or tyranny.

Obviously this new Syria requires removal of Bashar al-Asad and deflation of the jihadists. In January 2015, neither is on the horizon. As a substitute for progress toward a political resolution, for which the prospects are currently zero, there have been proposals for local cessations of hostilities, whether defined as cease-fires or freezing conflict.¹⁹ In the Syrian war these ideas are tainted by association with the regime's imposition of terms on several Damascus suburbs by starvation through 2013-2014. They rest on the pious hope that a period of calm will make it difficult to resume hostilities, but without progress toward a general settlement the natural tendency is for the sides to retool for the next round of hostilities. Here the regime has the advantage of reliable allies, and from the military perspective the non-jihadist opposition would be mad to gift it the breathing space. The suggestion that the international community fund reconstruction in such an environment, with no assurance that hostilities are over, is preposterous, apart from the distasteful implication that Western taxpayers reward Bashar al-Asad for wrecking Syria.

The highway not the byway is the route to resolution in Syria. This means the US and the EU affirming the necessity of regime change in Damascus. Unfortunately, in line with President Obama's fixation on an agreement with Iranian theocrats regulating the latter's nuclear project, rationalized as avoiding war and facilitating understanding, the US and the EU are also heading toward laxity with Iran's Syrian protégé, which will be taken by Bashar as endorsement. The Iranian theocratic regime logically has two imperatives: a nuclear agreement with deficient oversight that can be flouted, and an ending of Western sanctions that will reinvigorate its financial capability, among other things to pursue hegemony over Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, manipulating Alawites and Shi'ites. In early 2015, the Iranian leadership, stung by the Saudi assisted collapse of oil prices, looks to Obama to relieve it of the Saudis. US and EU laxity with Bashar and Iran will darken the outlook in Syria because it will vindicate the regime in its absolutist obduracy. Sunni Arabs will fight on regardless, even more envenomed, including against the West. Only regime change in Damascus can open a road to deflating Syrian Sunni Arab support for jihadists and closing down the new global Sunni jihadist base in Syria.

19 For discussion of the concepts of Nir Rosen and UN envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, see David Kenner, "Rewriting Syria's War," *Foreign Policy*, 18 December 2014. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/18/syria-assad-ceasefires-surrender-nir-rosen-hd-centre-report/>

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