

THE SYRIAN CRISIS IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT

May 2016

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The Middle Eastern strategic landscape is changing profoundly. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent civil war put in motion a transformation of the arguably fragile regional order, and the 2011 Syrian uprising-turned-civil war unleashed further regional instability of an unprecedented magnitude. The frailty of states and borders, bad governance, the rise of violent and assertive non-state actors, the deep fault lines that cross Arab societies, intense regional competition and external catalysts are all to blame for this generational and momentous upheaval. Understanding the drivers and dynamics of strategic change in the Middle East is therefore necessary for an assessment of the long-term consequences of what will be remembered as a pivotal moment in Middle Eastern politics.

There are structural reasons for why the Middle Eastern balance of power is changing in the Levant rather than in the Gulf. Indeed, the internationalization of Gulf security, US military dominance, the cost of direct war and the relative strength and wealth of the various states prevent, at least for the moment, brutal power shifts in the Gulf region. While important for the security of the Arabian Peninsula and in its own right, the fate of Yemen will not shape this equation.

In contrast, the weak states and divided societies of the Levant (including Iraq, the link between Gulf and Levant) serve as battlefields for regional competition. The once strong, centralized, repressive Arab nationalist state is dissolving under the pressure of powerful and unpredictable forces. Iraq since 2003 and more so Syria since 2011 are microcosms of the larger contentions that have characterized the fundamental changes unfolding in the Middle East.

The Iraqi and Syrian civil wars

The first shock to the contemporary Middle East state system was the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. A grand project of social and political engineering, the US venture quickly descended into a costly civil war that rendered a stable, inclusive and democratic Iraq a distant prospect.

Instead, the Iraqi state, already battered by decades of dictatorship, war and sanctions, dissolved further. The new political system was weak and contentious: dominant Shia parties ruled in a divisive and ineffective manner; the Sunni minority felt excluded and fought the new political realities; and the Kurds pursued autonomy in northern Iraq.

Iraq's centrifugal forces were momentarily kept in check at great cost by the US, but the new political order looked fragile in its design and vulnerable to power play among the new Shia

political class. Profiting from this political turmoil, Iran strategically embedded itself into Iraqi politics. The dominance of political parties sympathetic or allied with Tehran and the destruction of Iraqi conventional power meant that Iraq would no longer be Iran's competitor or regional balancer.

The Syrian upheaval carries even more significance because it displayed organically and more acutely the symptoms of the Arab malaise. Indeed, the series of uprisings that shook the Arab world in 2011 revealed much about the failure of Arab governance in the post-colonial era. Underperforming and autocratic governments failed to foster a sense of belonging and purpose among their populations. The Syrian uprising was characterized by the same grievances and hopes common to the other Arab revolutions, but its specific political structures and societal makeup determined its role as an arena for the larger fault lines in the region.

Under the House of Assad, Syria emerged as a significant regional player, more on account of its leadership's shrewd use of its geography and ability to insert itself into key regional crises than on the country's objectively few attributes of power. When the carefully cultivated pretense that Syria under Assad was immune to popular discontent unraveled, the country turned into an arena for the various forces vying to shape the modern Middle East. Syria's complex internal fabric, geographic centrality and proximity to regional powers as well as its place in the pro-Iran axis guaranteed a protracted, multilayered conflict that would shape the entire neighborhood.

Indeed, the five, interconnected key fault lines that cross the Middle East express themselves most powerfully and concomitantly in Syria:

- The first fault line pits Arab governments against their societies and individuals, as a result of bad governance, deepening inequalities, corrupt economic liberalization, repressive systems and the decay of Arab nationalist ideologies. The unsurprising failure of the uprisings to deliver immediate social and political returns has deepened the sense of despair and exacerbated the various fault lines. The consequent weakening of a sense of citizenship has allowed for the development of subnational and transnational loyalties. This was particularly damning for the self-styled Arab nationalist state of Syria, where Baathism proved to be an empty ideology—a repressive tool against political participation—and its promises of social justice illusory.
- The second fault line is the ascent of ethnic nationalism. Centralized, repressive Arab governance had failed to accommodate, tame or crush Kurdish nationalist feelings in Iraq and Syria. Such nationalism, based on genuine political and social grievances, further threatened the already battered cohesion and borders of modern Arab states. The viability and relevance of borders is being questioned, making soft partition and even secession plausible outcomes of the current upheaval.
- The third fault line pitted rising Islamism against a very loosely-defined Arab 'secularism.' Everywhere in the Middle East, the assertiveness of Islamist populist and extremist movements in the wake of the 2011 uprisings alienated traditional Arab elites but also religious minorities. Owing to its organization and longevity, the Muslim Brotherhood in particular saw an opportunity to dominate, in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere. Such ambitions provoked fears of the Islamization of Arab states. In Syria,

the bloody history of the Brotherhood and the presence of significant and powerful minority groups guaranteed early and intense opposition to Islamism. The jihadi ascendancy starting 2013 further hardened resistance and reinforced the well-rehearsed binary of authoritarianism-versus-Islamism. It would however be a mistake to equate Syria's self-proclaimed secularists with liberals or progressives.

- The uprisings' aftermath also displayed the vast array of Islamist movements and schools of thought. Some Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood engaged in participatory politics to gradually Islamize state and society. Others at the extreme end of the spectrum had a more revolutionary outlook: jihadi groups not only upheld puritanical and exclusionary values but they also challenged states and borders. The weakening of the Arab security state and the growing attraction of extremist ideologies created ideational and security challenges across the region. The Syrian conflict proved particularly favorable for Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (see below).
- In this context, existing geopolitical rivalries increased in tempo, sharpness and potency. Seeing unprecedented opportunity, Qatar and Turkey sponsored Islamist movements, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE, seeing Islamism as a transnational anti-monarchical populist force, supported efforts to counter and even reverse Islamist advances. But the most significant rivalry opposed Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two regional powerhouses at odds since 1979 (see below).
- These dynamics have exacerbated the Sunni-Shia divide. It is important to contextualize contemporary Middle Eastern sectarianism: it is the result rather than the cause of societal malaise and geopolitical competition. Once instrumentalized or embraced for communal protection, sectarianism produces social damage and realities nearly impossible to reverse.

The unfolding of the Syrian uprising

The Syrian revolution can be characterized in part as the uprising of the periphery against the cities. In the early days of Hafez Al-Assad's rule, the Baath sought to mobilize peasants, workers, soldiers and others around a socialist agenda and Arab nationalism and to tame urban elites that espoused conservative, capitalist or Islamist outlooks. Bashar Al-Assad reversed that strategy: his plans for economic liberalization and shrinking budget resources made him prioritize cities over rural areas and court the business elite. This shift in constituency explains in part why the uprising ignited in rural areas as well as in suburbs and poor neighborhoods of main cities where conservative rural dwellers settled. In contrast, much of the middle and upper classes remained loyal to the Assad regime. Importantly, the geography of the uprising also overlapped with the country's sectarian map. There is considerable convergence and causation between confessional belonging and political orientation, which explains why Sunnis are over-represented in the opposition. In contrast, the regime appeals to a more diverse constituency, although its positive appeal is limited.

Indeed, the organizing logic of the Assad regime was one of *asabiyyah* (kinship or group solidarity) rather than straightforward sectarianism. Since its early days, the regime devised

strategies to coopt, control, ostracize and punish specific constituencies. Accordingly, the Sunni upper and middle class were courted and rewarded provided they demonstrate absolute loyalty, as were most minority groups, providing a solid base of support. The intelligence services and military were organized and staffed for the purpose of regime security, primarily by empowering Alawite officers and prioritizing Alawite access to security jobs.

Given these structural factors, it is no surprise that the regime proved resilient and cohesive, and consequently managed to survive 5 years of civil war. From the ignition of the revolution, the Assad regime introduced cosmetic reforms to uphold the illusion of state continuity and responsiveness. To mobilize his constituency and justify the cost of regime survival, Assad sought to portray the uprising as extremist and externally directed in nature, calculating that the rise of jihadis would eventually create a choice between him and the latter. Indeed, the regime has retained significant support, some of it organic, some of it due to fears of the unknown or survival calculations.

The regime sought to control major cities and much of western Syria, where most of the population and key infrastructure is concentrated. It also pursued a strategy of gradual escalation, deploying its whole arsenal (including eventually barrel bombs, ballistic missiles and chemical weapons) to combat protesters and later insurgents. The regime benefitted from superior firepower (notably airpower) and command-and-control, and maintained a qualitative edge thanks to massive and sustained Iranian and Russian resupply and eventually manpower. Such assistance proved essential to recover from force depletion (including losses, defections and inability to recruit large numbers of fighters) and battlefield setbacks and overcome international isolation.

The regime sought to pacify or depopulate areas loyal to the rebellion by systemically imposing sieges and starvation. The results of the fighting were debilitating: by mid-2016, almost half a million people were killed; more than half of the country's population left their homes, with more than 5 million seeking refuge abroad; and the economic and infrastructure costs reached several hundred billion dollars.

In comparison, the rebellion – while popular and appealing to many constituencies – also proved fragmented, ill-equipped and vulnerable to Islamist and extremist appeal. The opposition, ranging from secular activists to Islamists, struggled to consolidate, establish local credibility and devise nationwide political and military strategies. Following months of largely peaceful protests, the militarization of the uprising in 2012 owed more to local and communal self-defense than to an integrated, centralized strategy of armed resistance. Lacking cohesion and expertise and pummeled by the Assad forces, the rebellion struggled to govern freed areas and provide services and order to civilians. It also significantly failed to reach out to minority and Kurdish factions, costing the uprising precious cross-ethnic and cross-confessional allure.

The escalation of violence eroded the narrative of revolution and opened the way for the rise of warlordism, extremism and foreign interference, benefitting Assad. The multitude of rebel groups and the risks associated with arming them indeed deterred decisive Western support.

Instead, the rebellion's regional backers (notably Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) pursued distinct and at times contradictory strategies, often exacerbating the rebellion's fragmentation. Moreover, conditional and hesitant regional and international support, whether political or military, paled in comparison with the commitment and expertise of Assad's allies.

Today, the Syrian conflict displays considerable complexity. What started as a mostly local revolution, regionalized in 2012, acquired a transnational dimension with the rise of jihadi movements in 2012 and 2013 and became fully internationalized in 2015, with the Russian intervention.

The result is an unfolding, de facto soft partition of the country. The regime maintains control over the key urban centers and coastal regions in the western part of the country and is attempting to recover the entirety of Aleppo. The rebellion has faced serious setbacks: the small and battered territory it controls lacks infrastructure and contiguity, is under attack by the regime, Russia, the Kurdish PYD and ISIS and is penetrated by Jabhat Al-Nusra, the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda. In comparison, the Kurdish autonomous PYD registered real territorial gains in northern Syria, in part thanks to the Western military support it obtained for fighting ISIS. And finally, the jihadi movement controls much of eastern and central Syria, notably the city of Raqqa.

In contrast with US reluctance, Russia demonstrated that limited military intervention could shape both the battlefield and diplomacy. Its campaign, portrayed as necessary to fend off ISIS advances, was in fact meant to shore up the Assad regime after a series of significant setbacks at the hands of Islamist and nationalist rebel groups, but also Jabhat Al-Nusra. Russian airpower targeted rebel groups aligned with the West, Turkey and Saudi Arabia; within a few months, it had decisively tipped the balance in Assad's favor and imposed new rules of the game for the various regional actors. It focused in a second stage on weakening ISIS, thus burnishing its anti-jihadi credentials.

Syrian and regional players took note of the contrast between Russian decisiveness and American reluctance. Moscow has sought to dictate a political settlement that would leave Assad in power, at least for the foreseeable future. American priorities, having shifted from helping in the ouster of Assad to fighting ISIS, somewhat aligned with Russian ones.

The Saudi-Iranian competition

A direct consequence of the Syrian conflict is the qualitative aggravation of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Latent for decades, it gained potency and prominence, becoming one of the region's key fault-lines. Both countries compete for regional dominance and seek regional and international consent, forced or voluntary, for their ambitions. Both pose as the foremost Islamic champion, instrumentalizing and exacerbating Sunni-Shia sectarianism in the process.

Iran has been on the rise since 2001, though its most important regional gains were not of its own doing: the US removed its two main enemies, the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and

Saddam Hussein in 2003. In both countries, new political elites were sympathetic to Iran. Meanwhile, its Lebanese ally Hezbollah has imposed itself as the country's dominant political and military force.

The Gulf states, and notably Saudi Arabia, saw Iran's rise as fundamentally detrimental to the regional status quo. Their concern was sharpened by Iran's nuclear venture and the belligerent presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which suggested that Iran's revolutionary and Khomeinist ethos had not mellowed during the tenures of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami. In turn, Iran saw the Gulf states' international alliances and regional ambitions as a security threat.

The Syrian uprising therefore provided a strategic opportunity for Saudi Arabia. In Riyadh's eyes, 'Victory in Syria' would check Iranian expansionism, compensate for the loss of Iraq to Iran, bring Lebanon and Palestine into the Saudi orbit, punish Assad for his slights, and finally produce a Gulf-aligned government in Damascus.

For Iran, the fall of the Assad regime would have been a massive setback. Syria was Iran's sole Arab state ally: their 3-decade-long alliance had morphed from one of shared interests to a more ambitious one, intended to shape a new regional order. Additionally, Syria was an essential conduit to Hezbollah. The fall of Assad would also have complicated logistical and operational support for the Lebanese Shia militia that served as its tool of deterrence and punishment against Israel.

With such strong strategic rationales, the set was staged for a costly confrontation. Starting 2012, Iran deployed its experience, expertise and eventually manpower in the service of the Assad regime. It also mobilized and organized Shia militiamen from Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite mounting costs and the erosion of its image in the Arab world, Iran maintained support for Assad. The threat of ISIS provided an retrospective justification for its Syrian involvement, portrayed as necessary given ISIS's genocidal objectives.

In comparison, Saudi Arabia lacked know-how, local allies and strategic patience. As the war morphed, it grew frustrated with US reluctance, Turkish and Qatari competition and rebel underperformance. While there is no evidence of Saudi government support for jihadi groups, Riyadh, just like Doha and Ankara, calculated that radical groups would weaken Assad (and in Iraq, Nouri Al-Maliki) in the short term and could be contained and fought later. Eventually, the growth of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra posed a security and ideological threat that Saudi Arabia had to reckon with and address.

The net result has been the worsening of relations between Riyadh and Tehran, who are increasingly locked in a zero-sum competition. Saudi Arabia became increasingly concerned that the nuclear negotiations with Iran would soften US policy, and possibly shift it in favor of Tehran. This spurred talk of a new regional cold war. It exacerbated Lebanon's longtime woes, leading to political paralysis. There were also signs that Iran intensified its destabilizing activities in the Gulf region, notably through support for Shia militants in Kuwait and Bahrain. In 2015,

Yemen became a new arena for this confrontation. Riyadh's inflated if genuine perception of Iranian influence there precipitated a destructive military intervention to destroy the Houthi insurgency.

A new era of Jihadism

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq was the unintended catalyst for Sunni jihadi revival. It provided a cause and a battlefield for a new generation of local, Arab and foreign fighters interested in resisting Western intruders, keen on establishing territorial control and driven by extreme sectarian views. The setbacks of Iraq's jihadis later in the decade owed much to their own zealotry and to tribal and popular mobilization.

Starting 2012, the security vacuum and the sectarianization of the conflict in Syria, as well as Sunni grievances and the divisive governance of the chauvinistic Shia elite in Iraq reinvigorated the surviving remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq. The Islamic State proved an even more ambitious and extreme manifestation of jihadism, which thrived on the failures of Middle Eastern states and societies and the relative weakness and calculations of its foes.

ISIS distinguished itself from its forefather Al Qaeda through its goals and tactics, proposing another model of jihadism. Early on, it focused on creating and administering a Caliphate (announced in July 2014) across the Syrian-Iraqi border. It did so by defeating but also coopting local actors alienated by the Iraqi and Syrian governments. It was also able to recruit and organize a record number of Arab and foreign fighters. ISIS's hegemonic, brutal and puritanical behavior clashed with local Syrian and Iraqi actors.

The quasi-genocidal expansion of ISIS in 2014 and, starting 2015, its global reach through returning Western fighters and local recruits provoked a regional and international military response focused on eroding ISIS's income sources, destroying its military capabilities, sealing off access for foreign fighters and reversing its territorial hold. Despite undeniable successes, such as the liberation of Iraqi and Syrian cities, the counter-terrorism campaign was hampered by the complex calculations of the various local and regional actors. While the US sought to prioritize it, the latter pursued local agendas. Russia's ostensibly anti-ISIS intervention added further complexity as Moscow's target set was considerably different from that of the US-led coalition.

The rise of ISIS fed Western anxiety and became the primary lens through which many external and regional players saw the Syrian crisis. Of significant note, however, is the fact that while ISIS is understandably viewed regionally and internationally as the greatest threat, many Syrians continue to see the Assad regime as the greater one.

A new era of US retrenchment

The Syrian conflict coincided with US retrenchment from the Middle East. A combination of factors explains the unmistakable US shift. First is the lower US reliance of Middle Eastern oil,

made possible by technological advances that increased US domestic oil production. As important is widespread fatigue among the US population and elites with the Middle East's seemingly intractable conflicts. Deep skepticism about the region and the wisdom of adventurism into the Middle Eastern followed George W. Bush's optimistic and forward if unsuccessful engagement. From Washington's perspective, the high cost of the Iraq war in terms of treasure, blood and political standing were incommensurate with its pitiful returns. Instead, US foreign policy elites showed enthusiasm for an understandable if loosely-defined US pivot to Asia.

In particular, US president Barak Obama saw further US involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts as costly entanglement. He stressed the need for a drawdown in Afghanistan and a complete withdrawal from Iraq (which occurred in 2011 just as the Syrian crisis worsened). Instead, he encouraged greater regional ownership and management of the various crises.

This served the US prioritization of diplomacy with Iran over its nuclear program, defined as a global security issue whose resolution would prevent another destabilizing war in the Middle East. From 2013 on, Washington subordinated its traditional role and interests in the Middle East to the conclusion of a nuclear deal with Iran, which was reached in July 2015. Paramount to achieving this was keeping Iran at the negotiating table.

Consequently, US policy on Syria amounted to reluctance, calculated dithering and serious missteps. Early on, Obama announced that "Assad must go," that the US would not allow mass atrocities and that the use of chemical weapons amounted to a red line that would provoke a US response.

However, as the conflict gained complexity, the US toned down its opposition to Assad, seeking a phased if uncertain transition; wavered in its support of the Syrian rebellion; discounted military options to deal with the mounting death toll and humanitarian tragedy; and in September 2013, called off strikes against the Assad regime after a large-scale use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. This affected US credibility with Syrian and regional actors and eroded US leverage as the conflict became regionalized and later internationalized.

Despite Obama's intentions, however, the US military was compelled to return to the Middle East in complex circumstances. ISIS's expansion and its capture of Mosul in June 2014 constituted a blot on Obama's 2011 contention to have left in place a stable and inclusive government in Iraq. A military response was needed to prevent a further expansion of ISIS, a potential collapse of the Iraqi government and more large-scale atrocities.

The US quickly deployed air assets and sent military advisers to help Iraqi security forces and Kurdish fighters. It put together a coalition of western and Arab countries to provide additional muscle as well as political cover. And it consented to an uncomfortable, Iraqi-mediated division of labor with Iran and its local allies.

The Syrian pillar of the US strategy was considerably more complex. There, it lacked government consent and, in part because of its recent history, few allies and credibility. The focus on ISIS further downgraded the objective of ousting Assad. Despite portraying Assad as a magnet for terrorism, Washington feared that his precipitous exit would empower jihadis. While rejecting the idea of cooperating with Assad advocated by Russia and some Western commentators, the US strategy therefore focused on defeating ISIS in western Iraq and eastern Syria by cultivating and supporting local allies, notably Kurdish militias, willing to fight the jihadi group instead of the regime.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict is an unmitigated disaster. The often-underappreciated nature and magnitude of the current transformation are such that mere crisis management is utterly inadequate.

The early, baseless hope that the conflict could be contained has been replaced by a misguided notion that it can be managed by deferring the issue of Assad's fate while focusing on combating ISIS. The upheaval has torn the country in irreversible ways and at great human cost; it has revitalized violent extremism and regional competition, exacerbated sectarianism, communal loyalties and ethnic nationalism. In addition to exporting refugees, it has exported considerable insecurity both within its neighborhood and globally.