

## Civil war in Syria: external actors and interests as drivers of conflict

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## Civil War in Syria

### External Actors and Interests as Drivers of Conflict

*Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen*

The armed conflict in Syria has accelerated in recent months. Both regime and rebels see themselves in a fight for survival that leaves no room for compromise. External supporters of both sides treat the conflict as a zero-sum game with far-reaching and, for some actors existential, consequences for their own strategic positions, and are therefore determined to prevent any outcome they would regard as disadvantageous. Their diplomatic, financial and in some cases military support fans the flames of conflict and strengthens the hand of hardliners on both sides. For the foreseeable future, there is good reason to expect that the conflict will be neither resolved politically nor won militarily. The priority for Europeans should be to stem the violence and support inclusive civilian structures; the latter could contribute to improving living conditions at the local level and counteracting radical and centrifugal tendencies.

During recent months armed clashes between regime and rebels in Syria have escalated to a point where the two sides now see themselves fighting for physical survival. Both parties believe they can prevail militarily, and therefore reject any compromise. In November and December 2012 the rebels made significant military gains. The regime has withdrawn from parts of its territory, and by late autumn 2012 various rebel groups controlled villages, small towns, rural areas and strategic junctions in the south-west, the south-east and along the Lebanese and Turkish borders. Certain Kurdish areas in northern and north-eastern Syria are controlled by various parties working together in the Supreme Kurdish Council, among which

the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, PYD), which emerged from the PKK in 2003, occupies a dominant position. The PYD is working systematically to establish local structures of self-administration and law and order, and for the moment rejects armed struggle against the Syrian regime. The PYD and the rebels of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) also control individual crossings along the Turkish border. (A regularly updated map showing armed clashes and control of cities and border posts can be found at [www.polgeonow.com/search/label/syria](http://www.polgeonow.com/search/label/syria).)

But the rebels have not yet succeeded in seizing complete and lasting control of larger swathes of territory or of any of the major cities. Damascus, Aleppo, Homs,

Hama and Deir al-Zor remain largely under the control of the regime. Nor are they able to protect the civilian population in the “liberated areas” against attacks by the regular army, and in particular the air force. Assad changed his tactics after the rebels launched offensives on Damascus and Aleppo in summer 2012. With the exception of the capital, the regime no longer attempts to recapture “liberated” quarters, instead causing large-scale destruction through heavy bombardment with artillery, rockets and warplanes.

The impact on the civilian population is massive. In early December 2012 the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights put the number of deaths since the beginning of the uprising at more than 42,000, with tens of thousands more imprisoned or missed. By that time nearly half a million refugees had been registered or were awaiting registration by the UN in the four neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. That means that the number of registered refugees has more than tripled since August 2012. The real figures are very likely a good deal higher. The UNHCR expects that more than 700,000 people will have fled Syria by the end of the year, in addition to internal refugees estimated to number between 1.2 and 2 million. According to press reports, about 600,000 buildings had been destroyed by September 2012, including many hospitals and other public institutions. Moreover, the regime has turned numerous hospitals and schools into prisons and torture centres. Industrial and agricultural production have almost completely collapsed as a result of sanctions and fighting.

In contested areas the state has largely stopped paying salaries and virtually ceased providing public services: medical treatment, schooling, public transport and waste collection. Some public functions have been taken over by local coordinating committees, revolutionary councils, charities and informal networks, with a remarkable degree of self-organisation at the local level. Civilians and armed forces work to-

gether to maintain public order, supply the population with food and medicines, and organise protests. Access to these regions is heavily restricted, even for humanitarian organisations. The Syrian Red Crescent does not supply areas controlled by the rebels, leaving food, heating fuel and medicines in short supply there.

At the same time there is a lack of interlocutors and clearly defined responsibilities on the rebel side. While they are organised in local military councils and increasingly also in regional brigades, until recently they had no central command structure to speak of. It remains to be seen whether the formation of a “Unified Supreme Military Council” composed mostly of field commanders with no formal military background and excluding some of the more prominent FSA leaders, announced in the Turkish city of Antalya in early December 2012, will lead to better coordination or to more fragmentation. Moreover, a significant proportion of the more radical Islamist brigades (such as Jabhat al-Nusra or Kata’ib Ahrar al-Sham) refuse to recognise the authority of the councils and instead conduct operations on their own account, sometimes directly defying explicit instructions from the FSA leadership.

### **Radicalisation and Confessionalisation**

The escalation of violence has accelerated radicalisation among the rebels, and the proportion of fighters with Salafist or jihadist leanings has risen accordingly. And foreign jihadis 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. The result is an increasingly entrenched perception of a Sunni uprising (supported by the Sunni Gulf monarchies and Turkey) against an Alawite regime, those considered its local support-

ers (Alawites and Christians) and its Shiite allies (Iran, Hezbollah, the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government). Alawites and Christians in particular have come under increasing pressure to take one side or the other and fled their homes in mixed areas fearing rising crime and acts of retribution and revenge – especially as residential areas are increasingly hit by bombings.

### **The Logic of War by Proxy**

The warring parties in Syria have been receiving increasingly open support from external actors. Above and beyond the internal power struggle, the conflict has acquired the character of a proxy war in which international, regional and subnational 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. Not least against the backdrop of their own attitude to pro-democracy movements and minorities, Moscow and Beijing resist the application of the principle of international responsibility to protect. In Russian-American relations there are also signs of rivalry over zones of influence echoing the patterns of the Cold War.

But it is above all the conflict over Iran's regional role that stokes the civil war in Syria. From the perspective of the Gulf States, first and foremost Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the Syria crisis offers an opportunity to reverse Tehran's considerable growth in influence since the 2003 Iraq War and strengthen their own positions. The Syrian civil war has already undermined the strategic alliance between Iran and Hamas, with the latter resisting Iranian pressure to rally behind Assad and instead moving its

headquarters from Damascus to Qatar's capital Doha. This represents a severe setback for Tehran's regional leadership aspirations, in which "Palestine" and the "liberation of Jerusalem" are central rallying cries. At the same time, Iranian hopes of profiting from regime change in Egypt by forging a new alliance remain unfulfilled. Cairo had been one of Tehran's most important regional adversaries since 1979. However, while the Iranian leadership pursued a rapid rapprochement after the fall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, its endeavours have so far brought little change, not least due to incompatible positions in the Syria question.

Israel has shown restraint, principally out of concern over spill-over effects: destabilisation of its border with Syria, the use of chemical weapons or Syria turning into a safe haven for al-Qaeda. But certain U.S. and Israeli strategists also see the Syrian civil war as an opportunity to decisively weaken Iran, hoping that defeat in the Levant could force Tehran to give ground on other issues such as its nuclear programme. They also expect that the Lebanese Hezbollah would be weakened by regime change in Syria, which serves as its most important transit route for arms supplies. Damascus also possesses strong influence over other Lebanese actors, which is a significant reason for Hezbollah's disproportionate strength in the country's power structures. If Assad falls, thus the calculation, the risks associated with an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would also diminish, especially in relation to possible Syrian or Hezbollah retribution against Israel. Regime change in Syria would thus enhance the credibility of military threats towards Tehran.

On the other side, Iran regards the power struggle in Damascus (like the international sanctions against the Islamic Republic) as an element of a U.S.- and Israeli-driven policy of isolation that ultimately seeks regime change in Tehran. The Iranian leadership sees itself at the forefront of a strategic/ideological conflict about

nothing less than liberating the region from U.S. and Israeli hegemony. Iran therefore supports the Syrian regime with military advisers, financial transfers and energy supplies, while the rebels receive political and logistical support from Western actors like France, the United States and Turkey, and financial and military aid from the Gulf States.

In Syria's unstable neighbours Iraq and Lebanon, government and opposition support opposing sides in the Syrian conflict – rhetorically, financially and by sending combatants. While the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi government stand by the Syrian regime, Sunni politicians in Lebanon and Sunni tribes and jihadist groups in Iraq support the rebels. Here again the logic of confessional mobilisation is at work. The fighting has repeatedly spilled over into Iraq and Lebanon. In October 2012 Lebanon was shaken by days of armed clashes after the high-ranking Sunni intelligence officer Wissam al-Hassan was killed in a car bombing, with some Sunni groups even operating under the FSA flag. In mid-November fighting broke out between Sunni Salafist groups and Hezbollah in the southern Lebanese port city of Sidon. In early December, the death of a dozen youths from the northern hub of Tripoli, who were on their way to join the rebels inside Syria, reignited violence between Alawi and Sunni quarters. In Iraq too, the number of bombings has increased considerably in recent months.

As host to the opposition Syrian National Council and operating base of the FSA, Turkey became a party to the conflict at an early stage and today finds itself directly threatened by developments. First, it has repeatedly been directly affected by fighting along the border, with potential of escalation. In early October the Turkish parliament authorised military operations including the possibility of entering Syrian territory. While Turkish politicians have been talking about a no-fly-zone or buffer zone for some time, the Turkish population overwhelmingly rejects any intervention. In early December, NATO approved the

Turkish request to deploy Patriot anti-missile systems at the border. Second, the presence of mostly Sunni refugees and rebels in the border area causes problems with the local Arab Alawite population who feel threatened by the rebels, resentful towards the refugees, and in some cases sympathise with the Assad regime. Third, in light of the unresolved Kurdish question in Turkey, Ankara fears that another autonomous Kurdish region (alongside the one in northern Iraq) could arise immediately across the border and reinvigorate separatist tendencies in its own population, especially as PKK attacks within Turkey have significantly increased in recent months.

### War and Diplomacy

External supporters of both regime and opposition thus see the conflict in Syria having far-reaching, in some cases even existential implications for their own strategic positions and long-term political objectives. They are therefore likely to continue expending considerable effort to prevent what they would regard as an undesirable outcome. Accordingly, the adversaries in Syria can for the foreseeable future count on a continuous (and in the case of the opposition: growing) flow of money and arms. Significant military successes for one side are likely to lead almost automatically to an intensification of support for the other. This makes it unlikely that the civil war will be decided *militarily* any time soon. Instead it must be feared that the extent and intensity of the fighting and the numbers of casualties and refugees will increase yet further, at least in the short term.

In recent months the violence has already noticeably worsened, deepening the rifts between the parties and diminishing yet further the chances of achieving a *political* solution by way of negotiations. The increasing involvement of external actors further reduces that prospect. To these actors, the initiation of a process that does not reliably lead their respective clientele

to power – or keep the other side out – is in itself a strategic defeat.

Consequently, prominent Western leaders like U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and French President François Hollande have declared that President Assad must relinquish power as a precondition for any political process. This stands in clear contradiction to the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, nominally also supported by Washington and Paris, which calls amongst other things for a cease-fire and the formation of a transitional government involving regime and opposition, to initiate a political transition. In mid-November France, Turkey and the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council explicitly recognised the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (or: Syrian National Coalition), founded in Doha under massive external pressure, as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and the EU foreign ministers expressed their agreement with this line. On the other side Russia, China and Iran have proposed a “dialogue” involving the present rulers. Such initiatives are clearly designed to shore up the Assad regime’s legitimacy by co-opting individual opposition figures – in essence to preserve the regime’s monopoly of power. With no room for compromise between these opposing stances, diplomatic initiatives presently enjoy practically no prospect of success. That applies for example to the efforts of the joint envoy of the UN and the Arab League, Lakhdar Brahimi, to revive the Geneva agreement. Similar initiatives by Russia serve above all to shift blame for the political impasse to the other camp.

Finally, the confrontational stance of the external actors strengthens the position of the hardliners within both camps. Although opposition figures seeking to start a political process in the country certainly do exist, for example around the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change or the Building the Syrian State movement, they run up against obstacles on all sides. Not only are they confronted

with repression by the regime, but also with the firm rejection of other opposition forces, such as the Syrian National Council, which feel their stance is backed by their external hosts and donors. This also diminishes the incentives for potentially compromise-willing regime loyalists to think about political alternatives. So change initiated from within the regime becomes even more unlikely. The polarisation of society and the violence of the clashes also reduce the likelihood of regime collapse or a coup attempt. Instead the ranks are closing and more moderate actors are driven abroad or sidelined.

### **No End of Conflict in Sight**

There is currently no legal basis for a military intervention, and the UN Security Council is unlikely to pass a corresponding resolution. And anyway, the actors that would be capable of such a complex and highly risky military operation (first and foremost the United States) have to date shown no willingness to do so. Because the logic of war by proxy described above makes a military victory for one side just as unlikely as a negotiated solution, a continuation of the civil war must be expected.

In the short term, resources flowing to the regime’s opponents are likely to remain fragmented, because their external sponsors are pursuing diverging interests. This hampers efforts to unite political opposition and rebels and establish central command structures and civilian oversight. At the same time, Iranian and Russian support notwithstanding, armed struggle and sanctions will further erode the regime’s resources, and the disintegration of state control and institutions is likely to accelerate even in regions the regime nominally holds. As one of the consequences, Damascus can be expected to successively lose control over the Shabiha paramilitaries fighting on its side, especially if it can no longer pay them. In that case the Shabiha are likely to seek substitute resources of their own through looting, kidnapping and

informal taxation, with an increasing risk of infighting.

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.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

No viable conflict resolution will be possible until the parties cease pursuing outright military victory *and* the interest of decisive regional and international actors in this (proxy) war has been exhausted. 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.

In this situation Europeans should seek above all to prevent any further escalation of violence, to improve living conditions at the local level, and to counteract radical and centrifugal tendencies. Additionally humanitarian aid must be urgently expanded.

**Involve all external actors:** As long as it remains in Iran’s interests to strengthen the hardliners in Damascus, efforts to seek a negotiated solution are doomed. But Iranian cooperation remains unlikely as long as the signs are pointing to escalation over the nuclear conflict, for example through the tightening of sanctions against Tehran. The EU-3 (Germany, France and the United Kingdom) should encourage the United States and Iran to reach an understanding

in the nuclear question, for example through direct bilateral talks. At the same time European governments should lean on Iran and Israel to refrain from escalatory rhetoric and war preparations. They should also continue to seek constructive approaches that could change Russia’s position. One starting point could be to involve Moscow more closely in decisions about NATO’s missile defence system.

**Contain conflict and reduce violence:** All support for the rebels should be carefully assessed for its impact on escalation or de-escalation. This applies above all to supplying heavy weaponry. The establishment of “safe zones” has been demanded by many, but could actually escalate the violence rather than effectively protecting the Syrian population. Such a step would not only mean direct military involvement of external actors, but would also endanger the resident population if the zones became staging points and refuges for rebel forces. Air power, for example Patriot missiles stationed in Turkey, will hardly suffice to properly secure safe zones. The rebels should also be discouraged as far as possible from conducting operations in populated areas as long as they are unable to effectively protect the civilian population. Turkey should be clearly warned against using the presence of forces close to the PKK as an excuse to intervene militarily in Syria’s Kurdish areas, not least because such an intervention would destabilise a region where the civilian population is still comparatively safe.

A comprehensive cease-fire remains unlikely without a political process supported by all the parties. Priority should therefore be given to mediation efforts working towards partial cease-fires and initiatives to reduce violence at the local level. Europeans should work to modify Brahimi’s mission in this direction.

**Immunise neighbouring states:** The Syrian civil war is already having a destabilising effect on Iraq and Lebanon. Europeans should work with the supporters of opposition and regime to avoid any steps that

would worsen that trend. It would, for example, be counterproductive to urge Iraq and Lebanon to take sides in the civil war, to allow their territory to be used for operating bases or arms transit, or to instrumentalise Syrian refugees in these countries as a pool for rebel recruitment, or to conceal the transfer of arms and combatants.

**Urge inclusiveness of political opposition:** Efforts to overcome divisions within the Syrian opposition should be supported. The founding of the Syrian National Coalition in mid-November in Doha was a step in the right direction.

For any future transitional government, having a composition that exactly reflects the political, confessional and ethnic forces in the country will be less important than communicating and cooperating with the emerging structures of local self-administration in territories “liberated” by rebels or abandoned by the regime. It is also important that a transitional government engage constructively with opposition groups operating in regime-controlled regions that have so far refused to join the Doha Coalition. The documents outlining a vision for Syria drawn up by opposition groups in July 2012 in Cairo could offer a basis for this. A transitional government should also ensure that Syrians who – for whatever reason – do not identify with the uprising nonetheless see a future for themselves in the country.

**Unify the military opposition:** Clear responsibilities, central command structures and civilian oversight of rebel forces are essential to counteract fragmentation and warlordism. At the same time the rebels must be urged to observe international humanitarian law. Those states that supply logistical and military support to the rebels, some of which are close allies of Europeans, will be in the best position to exercise influence; Europeans should seek to influence them accordingly. It is important to ensure that non-state networks supporting the opposition, especially in the Gulf States, also sign up to the goals of such a joint strategy.

**Support local structures:** After the end of the civil war it will be essential to curtail the influence of military actors and mend the fractures torn through society. One important precondition for success in this endeavour is the strengthening of emerging structures of local self-organisation and the restriction of the FSA and other rebel groups to a strictly military role. Even in areas still controlled by the regime, opportunities, albeit often precarious, for political activity have opened up. Here too, the prospects for peaceful coexistence after the end of the regime will improve if alternative and integrative political structures can be established. Europeans should support such local structures to ease the living conditions of the population and create a basis for the post-Assad era. However, care must be taken not to worsen fragmentation by infecting local structures with donor rivalries. From this point of view close coordination is key, for example through a mechanism in the context of the Friends of Syria group.

**Humanitarian aid:** Especially in the regions controlled by the rebels and the PYD there is an urgent need to supply humanitarian aid to the resident population and internally displaced people: food, shelter, heating fuel, medical services, etc. While it will not be possible to avoid cooperating with armed rebels and local strongmen in the delivery of aid, the top priority must be to strengthen the responsibility and authority of emerging local structures of civilian self-administration and self-organisation.

Beyond that, assistance for Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, as the states accepting the largest numbers of Syrian refugees, should be stepped up, as should support for the UNHCR, whose work is already severely underfunded. Otherwise humanitarian crisis threatens, and an escalation of distributive conflicts in the host countries. European countries should also allow victims with complicated injuries to be treated in Europe regardless of ethnicity or religion.

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