

## Syria's Global War and Beyond: Will the Balance of Power in the Middle East be Restored?

Dostal, Jörg Michael

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Dostal, J. M. (2018). Syria's Global War and Beyond: Will the Balance of Power in the Middle East be Restored? *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 18(3), 351-392. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-60028-5>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/1.0/deed.de>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Comercial-NoDerivatives). For more Information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/1.0>

# **Syria's Global War and Beyond: Will the Balance of Power in the Middle East be Restored?**

**JÖRG MICHAEL DOSTAL\***  
(Seoul National University)

## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the Syrian conflict since 2011 in the context of the larger Middle East, focusing on local, regional and global actors. The first section highlights some geopolitical and historical factors regarding Syria. The second part outlines post-Cold War US and Israeli strategic debates on Syria and the Middle East. It is argued that US policy in the Syrian conflict since 2011 underlines the continuing significance of US-led regime change agendas as initially associated with the so-called “neoconservatives” and near unconditional US backing of Israel’s regional strategic objectives. The third section examines how local conflicts in Syria, since mid-March 2011, became transformed into a lengthy global war over world order during which the US challenged Russia’s long-standing geopolitical patronage of Syria’s political leadership. The interaction between military and political factors and the manner in which the “crisis narrative” was managed in the Western media system is also sketched. Finally, the fourth section focuses on the theory of “peripheral realism” and offers a discussion of this theory’s concept of state hierarchy applied to the Middle Eastern context. It is suggested that the war in Syria serves to destroy the existing regional state hierarchy and regional states’ potential capacity for upward mobility in the global state system.

**Keywords:** Geopolitics, Middle East, peripheral realism theory, Syria, US foreign policy.

## **Introduction**

In politics, actors’ intentions are usually invisible. They are hardly ever revealed before the event. Only the event reveals. Revealed intentions allow to suggest hypothesis about previous plans. In this sense, the Syrian war has been an exercise in revealed intentions, and more is still to come. This paper will not speculate about the “real” intentions of actors, but will instead look back at what *has* been revealed to everyone who carefully observed the country of Syria since mid-March 2011 when the current conflict started off.

The paper will thus provide a geopolitical analysis of the Syrian crisis. While Western discourse has for a long time used the highly misleading term “civil war”, the current paper suggests that from the very beginning it has

amounted to a conflict over world order with high degrees of foreign interference. For reasons of space, the paper focuses on the role of the US as the major external coordinator of the Syrian insurgency.<sup>1</sup> The role of Israel as the leading military power in the Middle East and major factor in explaining regional US conduct is also highlighted. The other actors' intentions are sketched more briefly.

The argument will proceed as follows: the first section presents long-, medium- and short-term geopolitical factors influencing the behaviour of the US on a global scale and with regard to the Middle East; the second section highlights US strategic debates on the Middle East and Syria since the end of the Cold War and puts forward a brief description of the strategic interests of some other state actors; the third section provides a year-by-year analysis of the Syrian war focusing on main events and their political significance; finally, the fourth section analyses the nature and characteristics of state hierarchy in the Middle East with particular reference to peripheral realism theory. Overall, the paper's purpose is to encourage debate about the nature and degree of (Arab) state sovereignty under current geopolitical conditions.

## US Geopolitics And The Middle East: Long-, Medium- And Short-Term Factors

Geopolitics concerns the study of the impact of geographical factors on human history and policy-making. Many classical geopolitical authors focused in their writings on conflicts between sea and land powers. From the British maritime perspective, Halford J. Mackinder argued that the "heartland" or "pivot area", located geographically at some point in central Asia, constituted the main centre of (land-) power in world politics. In fact, the heartland amounted to a natural fortress, since it was difficult or impossible to invade by

---

\* Jörg Michael Dostal is Diplom-Politologe (FU Berlin), D.Phil. in Politics (St. Antony's College, Oxford, 2005). Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Public Administration, Seoul National University, Republic of Korea, Senior Fellow, Centre for Syrian Studies, University of St. Andrews, Scotland. His major research interests concern geopolitics and international political economy. He has published on Syria before and since the 2011 conflict in journals such as *Syria Studies* and has lectured on Syria and the Middle East in Europe and Asia. He is an editorial board member of the *Korean Journal of Policy Studies* and the *Korean-German Journal for Social Sciences* (jmdostal@snu.ac.kr).

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey Sachs, "Ending America's disastrous role in Syria", *Asia Times*, 19 February 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/ending-americas-disastrous-role-syria/>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

sea powers.<sup>2</sup> From Mackinder's perspective, world history unfolded based on conflict between "robbers of the steppe" invading from Asia into Europe and the Middle East, and "pirates from the sea" entering and dominating the coastal zones of the "world island" (a second term introduced by Mackinder to define the landmass of Asia, Europe and Africa connecting in the Middle East gateway zone).

This long-standing geopolitical conflict between land-based and maritime powers was "solved" by the Dutch (since 1928 US-American) author Nicholas J. Spykman. Writing during World War 2, Spykman argued that geopolitical hegemony was neither to be found in naval power, via control of trade routes and maritime choke points, nor, as argued by Mackinder, in the centre of Asia, which in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century mostly contained less populated and economically backward territories. Instead, he suggested that political and economic power was first and foremost concentrated in the "global rimlands" (Spykman's term), namely the coastal zones of the world where most of the world's population and economic activity was and still is concentrated.<sup>3</sup>

In adopting the point of view of the US as a major combined land and sea power, Spykman suggested that US "defence" could no longer be based on control of a single geopolitical region, such as the Western Hemisphere as stated in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which had demanded the European powers to abandon their territorial claims on the American continent. Instead, Spykman wanted the US to adopt a new perspective of global sovereignty in which all regions of the world would be placed under various degrees of direct US control. In this context, Spykman advocated for creating a global network of US permanent military bases with a particular focus on the rimlands (the coastal regions of Europe, the Middle East, South East and East Asia). His ideas were in fact realised after World War 2 and the entire world was divided into a number of regional US Military Commands. However, this global US approach did not change the fact that two of the Eurasian land powers, the Soviet Union and China (since 1949), remained outside of the direct reach of US power projections.

After the conclusion of World War 2, the major US policy in the Middle East was the Eisenhower Doctrine announced on January 5, 1957. This policy was based on the assertion that US military assistance would be offered to regional regimes against "the menace of International Communism", since "[t]he free nations of the Mid East need, and for the most part want, added

---

<sup>2</sup> Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1904, pp. 421-437. *Idem, Democratic Ideas and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, Constable and Company, London, 1919.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*. Edited by H. R. Nichol, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1944.

strength to assure their independence".<sup>4</sup> In fact, the principal goal of the US during the early Cold War was to replace British and French influence in the Middle East – as agreed upon by the European powers in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 – with American influence. First, the US formed an informal coalition with Britain against France at the end of World War 2, which ultimately resulted in the latter's departure from Lebanon and Syria. A decade later, in October 1956, the US refused to back the trilateral attack of Britain, France and Israel on Egypt that had been triggered by Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez channel. The refusal to back the European powers and Israel at this point underlined US aspirations to become the only veto power in the Middle East and to control all state units directly or by means of the backing of local actors.

During the 1950s, post-colonial Arab states became increasingly divided due to contestation over regional hegemony, such as the conflict between British-backed Hashemite regimes in Jordan and Iraq on the one hand and Saudi Arabia on the other. These intra-Arab conflicts in the Levant region frequently destabilised Syrian politics since the country was held to be a potential take-over candidate for "unification" with neighbouring Arab countries. The creation of the United Arab Republic in 1958 (the merger with Nasser's Egypt, an out-of-area state) was an effort by Syrian politicians to avoid take-over of Syria by Western-backed local Arab regimes.<sup>5</sup> The union with Egypt decisively shifted Syria away from the Western pole and into the Soviet-backed Arab camp.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, this intra-Arab conflict expanded during the so-called "Arab Cold War", which set US and Soviet-backed Arab states against each other and allowed for further territorial expansion of the Zionist state on the territory of the former British Mandate of Palestine.

The major events during the Arab Cold War concerned first the 1958 Iraqi revolution (the collapse of the British-backed Hashemite regime and the subsequent rise of nationalist and Baathist leaderships originating from the Iraqi military) and second the 1967 and 1973 wars between Israel and some Arab states, namely Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Jordan. In the 1967 war, Israel destroyed the Egyptian air force on the ground in a surprise attack and subsequently captured the Egyptian Sinai peninsula and the Syrian Golan. During the 1973 war, the Arab states demonstrated a higher degree of intra-Arab military and

<sup>4</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East", January 5, 1957, emphasis added, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=11007&st=&st1>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> Jörg Michael Dostal, "Syria and the Great Powers (1946-1958): How Western Power Politics Pushed the Country Toward the Soviet Union", *Syria Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2015, pp. 7-52, <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/1284>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

political solidarity performing much better against Israel, which in turn received large-scale economic and military support of the US. The Soviet Union reacted to both wars by restoring the Arab military capabilities after the wars had ended. Overall, the Soviet Union did not encourage the Arab states to engage in offensive actions out of fear that this could trigger a Third World War between the two major external powers in the Middle East.

The main concern of all actors during this period was the strategic balance between Israel and the Arab states, which became backed up by the US and the Soviet Union. The decisive event that destroyed the previously existing regional balance was the decision of Egypt's President Anwar Sadat to leave the Arab line-up by signing a unilateral agreement with Israel in 1979. This agreement traded the withdrawal of Egypt from the Arab nationalist cause against the return of the Sinai to Egypt. This decision must count as the greatest success of US policy-making in the region since it permanently weakened Arab nationalist regimes. One can assume that the idea of "turning" Arab nationalist states away from the Soviet-backed camp and toward the US-backed camp has informed US geopolitical thinking ever since.

In terms of countermoves, Syria as the remaining Arab nationalist state bordering Israel – or rather bordering on Syrian territory which has been under Israeli occupation since 1967 – maintained its commitment to "strategic parity" with the Zionist opponent. During the Hafiz al-Assad presidency (1971-2000), efforts were made to achieve such parity, by concentrating Syria's economic resources on the build-up and maintenance of a national security state, by improving relations with some conservative Arab states such as Saudi Arabia in order to gain additional economic resources from outside, by engaging in efforts to end the long-term conflict with Saddam Hussein's Baath regime in Iraq and, finally, by signing a mutual defence agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran after Saddam's attack on Iran in 1980.<sup>7</sup>

The end of the Cold War, dissolution of the Soviet Union and First Gulf War after the Iraqi takeover of Kuwait (1990-1991) all underlined that Syria was in fact not able to sustain strategic parity with Israel due to the latter's vastly superior external funding and military sponsorship by the US. In reaction to this steady deterioration of the Syrian position, new efforts were made to create an asymmetric defence axis consisting of Syria, Iran and the Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah militia. The hope was that this "Axis of Resistance" would produce a new strategic balance that would avoid overstretching Syria's limited resources and would still maintain pressure on Israel in terms of pushing for the return of the occupied Syrian Golan and providing deterrence against Israeli

---

<sup>7</sup> Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'ath Versus Ba'ath: The Conflict between Syria and Iraq 1968-1989*, I. B. Tauris, London, 1991; P. Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East*, revised edn, Berkeley, Cal., University of California Press, 1995.

attacks.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, more recent events, such as the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the pressure being put on Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon in 2005 all further weakened Syria's regional position. They prepared the ground for US efforts at regime change in Syria that were officially announced in 2003 and were subsequently carefully followed up on.<sup>9</sup>

Summing up long-, medium- and short-term geopolitical factors, the focus of US policy-makers on the global rimlands and in particular on the oil and gas-rich Arab peninsula produced the US aspiration to place permanent US military bases in each Arab state unit in the region and/or to maintain high degrees of economic, military and political dependency of all Arab state executives on US backing. In this context, the Cold War period did not deliver on US aspirations, however. Instead, an asymmetric balance of power was maintained due to the Soviet Union's sponsorship of some Arab nationalist regimes and efforts of some other Arab states, such as North Yemen, to maintain an unaligned posture.

After the end of the Cold War and again following the September 11, 2001 events, the medium-term strategy of the US was to remove all remnants of the old order in the region, by firmly acquiring the position of only external balancer in the Middle East, by removing all remaining Arab nationalist regimes, and by resisting efforts of old and new out-of-area countries such as Russia, China and Iran to enter the region. This can also be described as the transition from a war of position in a bipolar regional system with relatively fixed rules – namely that the Soviet Union would not encourage offensive action of its clients in the region but would defend them against attack – to a war of movement in which there are no longer any shared rules.

The volatility of this situation is further increased due to the contradiction between US advances in the region – Libya, Yemen and Iraq have all experienced state collapse due to direct or indirect US military action in combination with local forces – while the global US position is in other respects, such as on the economic plane when measured in terms of this country's share of global GDP, deteriorating. These multi-layered contradictions suggest a general increase of volatility in the international system. In this context, Syria became the space in which these contradictions would trigger a long war of attrition that was in the initial phase mostly fought by way of proxy forces and covert action before the great powers started to officially intervene with their own troops since 2015.

---

<sup>8</sup> Susanne Krause, *Strategische Ambivalenz? – Die strategische Kultur Syriens unter Hafiz und Bashar al-Assad*, Münster, Lit-Verlag, 2016, pp. 16, 45.

<sup>9</sup> Wikileaks "INFLUENCING THE SARG IN THE END OF 2006", 13 December [author William V. Roebuck], 06DAMASCUS5399-a, 2006, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAMASCUS5399\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAMASCUS5399_a.html). (Accessed 30 August 2018).

## The Road To The Syrian War: US Strategic Debates On The Middle East Since The End Of The Cold War

During the Cold War, US strategy in the Middle East was relatively static and predictable. In particular, US-backed Arab states enjoyed security guarantees for regime survival, as initially set out in the Eisenhower Doctrine. The US and the Soviet Union jointly provided bilateral stability, exercising a restraining influence on local actors, while the regional role of all other external powers, such as Britain, France and pre- and post-1979 Iran, was very limited by comparison. After the unexpected 1979 collapse of the Shah's US-backed regime in Iran, US security guarantees for regional clients – first and foremost Israel and secondly Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies – were further propped up to ensure that no popular uprising would ever again make a regional state exit from the US security umbrella. Following on the US military success in the First Gulf War in 1991, the strategic situation changed once more fundamentally due to the removal of Soviet constraints on US regional conduct.

In a frequently quoted statement delivered on March 2, 2007, the 2004 Democratic Party presidential primary contender and retired four-star US general Wesley Clark recalled a 1991 conversation with Paul Wolfowitz, the then US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy in which the latter is held to have said the following: “[O]ne thing we did learn [from the First Gulf War] is that we can use our military in the region – in the Middle East – and the Soviets won't stop us. And we've got about five or 10 years to clean up those old Soviet regimes – Syria, Iran [*sic*], Iraq – before the next great superpower comes on to challenge us”.<sup>10</sup> In the same talk, Clark also alleges that he visited the Pentagon

---

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Glenn Greenwald, “Wes Clark and the neocon dream”, *Salon*, November 26, 2011, [https://www.salon.com/2011/11/26/wes\\_clark\\_and\\_the\\_neocon\\_dream/](https://www.salon.com/2011/11/26/wes_clark_and_the_neocon_dream/) (accessed 30 August 2018). The Clark talk delivered on 2 March 2007 is also widely available on YouTube. One might interpret Clark's presentations as an attempt at criticising the so-called “neocons” from a “patriotic” perspective during the second Bush Jr. presidency. In a less-frequently quoted statement, delivered on October 3, 2007, Clark also alleged the following: “They [the neocons] could hardly wait to finish Iraq so that they could move into Syria” [excerpt from minute 1:05]. According to Clark, “this wasn't what the American people voted George Bush into office for.... It wasn't what he campaigned on. He campaigned on a humble foreign policy [but voters instead got] the most arrogant foreign policy in American history”, “Wesley Clark – This Country was Taken Over by a Group of People”, 25 March 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzmW8c66UaI> (accessed 30 August 2018). The same words also apply to the current US President Donald J. Trump, particularly after his decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Iran

some days after September 11, 2001 and was briefed by one his former junior officers as follows: “I just got this memo [from the Secretary of Defense’s office]. This is a memo that describes how we’re going to take out seven countries in five years starting with Iraq, and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and, finishing off, Iran”.<sup>11</sup>

What is most significant about US strategic thinking in the Middle East post-Cold War is the relative continuity of purpose from 1991 until the present. The goal has been under all administrations (Bush Sr., Clinton, Bush Jr., Obama and now Trump) to advance “regime change” in all opponent states in the region.<sup>12</sup> In order to achieve this purpose, different tactical means have been applied. Many analysts tend to underestimate this element of continuity of purpose. Instead, they have focused almost exclusively on the so-called “neoconservatives” (commonly referred to as the “neocons”), a group of defence intellectuals including people such as Paul Wolfowitz, William Kristol, John Bolton and Robert Kagan, that was blamed for the relative failure of the Bush Jr. presidency to pacify Iraq after the 2003 US invasion. Sophisticated observers of the neocons have stressed, however, that their strong influence on US foreign policy was only possible because they were organically embedded with the US foreign policy mainstream, namely those that one might describe as “American nationalists” for lack of a better term.<sup>13</sup>

The leading neocons were all hosted and nurtured within mainstream US institutions such as the American Enterprise Institute and the RAND Corporation. Moreover, long-term neocons such as Wolfowitz had already, since the early 1970s, collaborated with the earlier Cold War generation of US defence intellectuals, including Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze, and began to set the strategic agenda under the Bush Sr. administration with documents such as the “Defence Planning Guidance” of 1992.<sup>14</sup> In addition, official US commitment to regime change in Iraq and the sanctioning of Syria as preparation for regime change was announced in 1998 and 2003 – the “Iraq

nuclear deal and due to his support for moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem against public opinion across the Arab world.

<sup>11</sup> “Plan for Middle East – U.S. Army Gen. Wesley Clark”, 9 November 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rz5fZziMWEE>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Jörg Michael Dostal, “Transnational War in Syria: The Eisenhower Doctrine in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?”, *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2016, pp. 179–218.

<sup>13</sup> One should note that the US foreign policy mainstream does not attract any descriptive label in the way the neocons did. Instead, observers usually stress the existence of presidential Doctrines, which downplays the high degree of continuity in US foreign policy-making since the end of the Cold War, namely to fill post-Soviet spaces with US influence and to tightly contain Russia and China.

<sup>14</sup> Aggie Hirst, *Leo Strauss and the Invasion of Iraq: Encountering the Abyss*, Routledge, London, 2013, pp. 57–61, pp. 83–89.

Liberation Act” and the “Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act” – and was carried over and applied under the subsequent administrations.

Briefly, the reason for the influence of the neocons on the US foreign policy agenda in the Middle East and elsewhere is that all three major approaches in US foreign policy, namely neoclassical realism, liberal internationalism and neoconservatism share the concern with US primacy in the international system. Neoclassical realists reject multilateralism and multipolarity and want to maintain US regional hegemony in Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Their “hybrid discourse of hegemonic restraint” concerns means rather than ends.<sup>15</sup> Thus, their commitment to exercising hegemonic control of what Spykman termed the global rimlands is beyond doubt.

In turn, liberal internationalists favour “deep engagement” with regional allies in the context of “cooperative security partnerships (...) clearly executed under American hegemony (...) rather than as an alternative to it”.<sup>16</sup> This particular form of US leadership “predominantly served to realize the established hegemony of the United States in a more cost-effective and cooperative fashion, not to fundamentally redefine America’s role in world politics”.<sup>17</sup> Thus, it has been pointed out that the neocons “merely represented a particular military power-centric, unilateral, and expansive definition of the mainstream consensus on American hegemony, which, under Obama, continued to dominate in most of the political class and expert circles of US foreign policy in Washington DC”.<sup>18</sup>

When looking at the Obama presidency, therefore, it is not surprising that policy-making always remained within the constraints of the three dominant approaches. Directly after entering office, Obama criticised the high costs of his predecessor’s policies with regard to the military campaigns in Iraq and elsewhere. However, the basic paradigm of US unilateral action remained in place and policy debate became focused on how to achieve similar objectives at a lower cost. This produced the Obama administration’s preference for unconventional warfare activities such as covert warfare, use of proxy forces and drone attacks rather than US military interventions with soldiers on the ground. This new style of power politics brought down the political threshold

---

<sup>15</sup> Georg Löfflmann, *American Grand Strategy under Obama: Competing Discourses*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2017, p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100. A fourth alternative approach in US foreign policy-making would be focusing on collective security based on multipolarity. However, this would indicate the end of US primacy in the international system, which is inconceivable in the context of the three mainstream approaches.

for engaging in armed conflict; namely the number of states affected by US military incursions expanded further when compared to the Bush Jr. administration.

During the Obama years, the new style “limited” warfare translated into a vast increase in the number of conflict points. The drone warfare programme, in particular, was massively expanded starting with an initial focus on the Horn of Africa and subsequently spreading to at least 46 sites across Central Africa and also covering the Arab peninsula by the time when Obama left office. Such policies further destabilised already fragile states whose sovereignty was treated as non-existent from the point of view of US policy-makers.<sup>19</sup>

Another major influence on the post-Cold War US strategy in the Middle East is to be found in national security debates in Israel since the 1980s. The so-called “Yinon Plan” published in a Zionist journal in 1982 described the entire Arab world as a “house of cards” suggesting that “every Arab Moslem state nowadays faces ethnic social destruction from within”.<sup>20</sup> The same article – worth quoting at length due to its closeness to the current situation in 2018 – argued further that:

“Lebanon’s total dissolution [during the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1989] into five provinces serves as a precedent for the entire Arab world including Egypt, Syria, Iraq and the Arabian peninsula (...) Syria will fall apart, in accordance with its ethnic and religious structure, into several states such as in present day Lebanon, so that there will be a Shi’ite Alawi state along its coast, a Sunni state in the Aleppo area, another Sunni state in Damascus hostile to its northern neighbour (...) Iraq, rich in oil on the one hand and internally torn on the other, is guaranteed as a candidate for Israel’s targets. Its dissolution is even more important for us than that of Syria. Iraq is stronger than Syria (...) Every kind of inter-Arab confrontation will assist us [Israel] in the short run and will shorten the way to the more important aim of breaking up Iraq into denominations as in Syria and in Lebanon”.<sup>21</sup>

The article also suggests that “liquidation of Jordan under the present [Hashemite] regime” would allow the Palestinians “[a] nation of their own”.<sup>22</sup> At the time of publication, such expectations for the collapse of the Arab states

<sup>19</sup> Nick Turse, *Tomorrow’s Battlefield: US Proxy Wars and Secret Ops in Africa*, Dispatch Books, Chicago, IL, 2015. *Idem*, “The U.S. Military Moves Deeper into Africa”, *Tomdispatch.com*, 27 April 2017, [http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176272/tomgram%3A\\_nick\\_turse%2C\\_the\\_u.s.\\_military\\_moves\\_deeper\\_into\\_africa](http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/176272/tomgram%3A_nick_turse%2C_the_u.s._military_moves_deeper_into_africa). (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Oded Yinon, “A Strategy for Israel in the Nineteen Eighties”, orig. Hebrew published in *KIVUNIM, A Journal for Judaism and Zionism*, World Zionist Organization, Department of Information, Jerusalem, no. 14, February 1982, no page numbers, transl. by Israel Shahak, <http://www.redressonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/A-Strategy-for-Israel-in-the-Eighties-Oded-Yinon.pdf>. (Accessed 30 August 2018). The author served with a number of Israeli ministries in the 1970s.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

along ethnic and sectarian lines would have been considered conceivable but perhaps not likely.

In a 1996 paper principally written by David Wurmser and signed by Richard Perle and other neocons for the then incoming Likud government of Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel was therefore advised to turn to a more offensive policy. The paper mostly concerned itself with “strategic balance in the Middle East” suggesting “redrawing of the map in the Middle East which would threaten Syria’s territorial integrity”.<sup>23</sup> The same paper also suggested direct military attacks on Syria to push for state collapse. Contrary to the Yonon paper, however, the 1996 account holds that Israel should base its strategy on alliances with Turkey and Jordan. It is argued that Israel “has an interest supporting diplomatically, militarily and operationally Turkey’s and Jordan’s actions against Syria, such as securing tribal alliances with Arab tribes that cross into Syrian territory and are hostile to the Syrian ruling elite”.<sup>24</sup> Observing the Syrian insurgency since 2011 suggests that this scenario has been fully implemented.

Thus, US strategic debates about the Middle East are intimately linked with those conducted in Israel. This is not simply due to the close alliance between the two countries. Rather, the main point of departure after the end of the Cold War was a strategic debate in Washington and Tel Aviv about whether Israel should be integrated into the Middle East by means of “normalization” proceeding along the lines of regional economic integration and in the larger context of “globalisation”. Such policies, if enacted, would have suggested serious negotiations on the part of Israel with the Palestinians and Arab neighbouring states, compromise over land rights and the return of the occupied Syrian Golan. The decisive development was, however, that US and Israeli leaders firmly went for a no-compromise scenario based on further expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories thinly veiled by a so-called “peace process” that essentially obscured US backing of further Israeli expansionism.

The post-Cold War point of departure of US debates on the Middle East was the “Defense Planning Guidance” of 1992, authored by Wolfowitz and others. It suggested in line with Spykman’s views and the Eisenhower Doctrine that the US “overall objective is to remain the predominant outside power in the region and preserve U.S. and Western access to the region’s oil. (...) [I]t

<sup>23</sup> Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm”, 1996, no page numbers, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140125123844/http://www.iasps.org/strat1.htm>. (Accessed 30 August 2018). The Institute was an Israel-based think tank funded by private foundations with an office in Washington, D.C. that closed around 2005. The authors associated with the report were at the same time employed in other more mainstream think tanks and some of them later obtained posts during the Bush Jr. presidency.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem.*

remains fundamentally important to prevent a hegemon [other than the US] or alignment of powers from dominating the region. This pertains especially to the Arabian peninsula".<sup>25</sup>

The founding of the "Project for a New American Century" (PNAC) by Kristol and Kagan in 1997 and the 1998 open letter signed by Wolfowitz, Kristol and others and send by a "Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf", an outfit that overlapped with PNAC, asking President Clinton to bring down Saddam Hussein and his regime set the new agenda for US conduct in the Middle East. Complementary ideas were advanced in a PNAC report titled "Rebuilding America's Defenses", which supported forward defence, namely "forward-based Army units can become 'change-agents' (...) opening opportunities for transformational concepts, even as they perform vital stability operations in their regions".<sup>26</sup> A specific demand regarding the Middle East concerned efforts "to get the Saudis, Kuwaitis and other Gulf states to assume a greater share of the costs" and to make them accept US troops on their territories as "a *de facto* permanent presence, even as it seeks ways to lessen Saudi, Kuwaiti and regional concerns about U.S. presence".<sup>27</sup>

After September 11, 2001, the US strategic debate on the Middle East focused on re-defining the enemy (who was to blame?), on US military operations in Afghanistan, and on the preparation for attacking and occupying Iraq. During this period, the neocons started to reshape public opinion by means of politicised intelligence production, which bypassed "traditionalists" in the US intelligence community who continued to insist on "positivism", namely the rejection of intelligence lacking reasonable proof backing it up.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the new approach of "strategic denial and deception relate[s] to the withholding and fabrication of information at the highest levels of government and the political establishment (...) influencing a target through the withholding of information and the creation of substitute information in order to direct the target's view of a given state of affairs".<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Principal Deputy Under Secretary Of Defense, "Memorandum" [FY 94-99 Defense Planning Guidance], 18 February 1992, [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb245/doc03\\_extract\\_nyedit.pdf](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb245/doc03_extract_nyedit.pdf). (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Project for the New American Century, "Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources For a New Century", September 2000, p. 28, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130501130739/http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>. (Accessed 30 August 2018). The insertion of US Special Forces in North Syria, operating alongside Kurdish militias since 2015, could be considered a practical demonstration of the concept.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>28</sup> W. Patrick Lang, "Drinking the Kool-Aid", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2004, pp. 39-60.

<sup>29</sup> Hirst, *Leo Strauss...cit.*, p. 92.

This politicisation of intelligence production was referred to as “stovepiping”, namely the “direct feed of unsubstantiated information straight to the highest levels of the political establishment”.<sup>30</sup> In this context, Wolfowitz suggested that “we must also accelerate the speed with which information is passed to policymakers and operators. We cannot wait for critical intelligence to be processed, coordinated, edited and approved – we must accept the risks inherent in posting critical information before it is processed”.<sup>31</sup>

Following on the US/UK occupation of Iraq in 2003, a second wave of US strategic debate occurred. One account now suggested that the future US global strategy had to address the “gap” between a “functioning core” of states, namely the US and other OECD societies together with China, Russia and India, on the one hand, and a so-called “non-integrating gap” consisting of the rest of the world, including all Middle Eastern states, Turkey and Central Asia, on the other. This concept was presented as the “Pentagon’s New Map” and gained global attention due to its open advocacy for pre-emptive US warfare to police the non-integrating gap on a permanent basis. According to the author, “we are talking about America playing Gap Leviathan” and “[t]here is no exiting the Gap (...) we’d better stop kidding ourselves about ‘exit strategies’. *No exit means no exit strategy*”.<sup>32</sup> The same account recommended the further expansion of US military bases “dotting the Gap” to deliver “connectivity” between the functioning core and the Gap states.<sup>33</sup> Thus, this political vision focused on permanence of conflict in US efforts to “shrink the Gap” and, in the context of the Middle East, to pressure Iraq, Iran and Syria in the context of “rule-set export” that clarifies that “we [the US] hold Damascus responsible for what goes on in Lebanon vis-à-vis Israel”.<sup>34</sup>

Another account put forward ideas for a US-led full-scale reordering of the Middle East based on “Blood borders”. This was meant to indicate the redrawing of regional borders along ethnic and sectarian lines based on the partial dismantling of Syria and Iraq in favour of a new Kurdish state. In addition, the radical downsizing of the territories of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran in favour of newly created more homogeneous statelets – in line with the ideas voiced by Yinon back in 1982 – was suggested.<sup>35</sup> One could possibly conceive such

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> Wolfowitz, quoted in Gordon R. Mitchell, “Team B Intelligence Coups”, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 92, no. 2, 2006, p. 158.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas P.M. Barnett, *The Pentagon’s New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-first Century*, Berkley Books, New York, 2004, pp. 175, 179, emphasis in the original. For a critical evaluation, see Justin Logan, “Are Great-Power Politics Extinct?”, *Orbis*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2006, pp. 380-390.

<sup>33</sup> Barnett, *New Map...cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 289.

<sup>35</sup> Ralph Peters, “Blood borders”, *Armed Forces Journal*, June 1, 2006,

project in two ways, namely as a *de facto* redrawing of borders, by weakening Arab central state authorities to an extent that results in the quasi collapse of the central government's ability to control its own territory or, more radically, by *de jure* redrawing of borders, namely by creating new states in places where they do not exist today.

Yet one must wonder whether the US really has any strategic interest in redrawing Middle Eastern state borders. In fact, most of the Arab states are already highly dependent on the US for their "security". They are hosting permanent US military bases and their political autonomy is very limited. Perhaps the interests of the US and Israel are best served in combining the strategy of Barnett's "Gap Leviathan" with a more limited *de facto* weakening of those Arab states that do not accept US regional leadership, namely Syria, Iran and probably also Iraq. In this context, Israeli policy-makers might face some tactical disagreements with the US regarding the potential creation of a Kurdish state.<sup>36</sup> While the former would welcome this development, the latter must balance between Israel and Turkey in this matter and, in addition, must also consider whether *de jure* change of regional borders is going to cast doubt on international norms against conquest and annexation that have generally been strengthened in the world since 1945.<sup>37</sup>

Between 2003 and 2011, a number of political and economic events changed the relationship between the Syrian leadership and the US and other Western powers. First, the 2005 assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a close regional ally of Saudi Arabia and France, was blamed on Syria, although without any conclusive evidence. Subsequently, Western powers increased their pressure on Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon where they had been stationed since the end of the 1982 Lebanese Civil War. Withdrawing troops under pressure deteriorated the Syrian regional position, although the subsequent inconclusive 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon suggested that the "Axis of Resistance" might be able to continue to balance Israel in the region in a more indirect manner.

Around the same time, the Western powers experimented with policies regarding engagement, sanctioning or confrontation of the Syrian leadership. First, efforts were made to make Syria join a Free Trade Agreement with the European Union (EU). In this context, the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was briefly courted by the then French President Sarkozy, although the EU

---

<sup>36</sup> <http://armedforcesjournal.com/blood-borders/> (accessed 30 August 2018). For the map, see "The Empire's New Middle East Map", 2014, <http://www.oilempire.us/new-map.html>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Lahav Harkov, "MK Pushes Israel to Recognize Kurdistan as an Independent State", *Jerusalem Post*, 21 May 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 2007, pp. 169-228.

ultimately did not ratify the resulting Agreement.<sup>38</sup> A second project concerned the construction of a gas pipeline to connect the largest currently known gas field in the world, North Dome/South Pars, shared between Qatar and Iran, with European markets. The projected gas pipeline would have connected Qatar via Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria with Turkey and the European Union. However, the Syrian President rejected this project in favour of a so-called “Islamic pipeline” that would instead connect the same gas field from the Iranian side with Iraq and Syria.<sup>39</sup> Crucially, a forced change of government in Damascus would potentially allow Qatar to capture some of the Russian market share of gas exports to the EU<sup>40</sup>.

Since March 18, 2011, the Syrian conflict has created a new strategic challenge for the US. Why did the Syrian conflict come about? What major political and economic factors need to be considered to explain the current situation? To be sure, there exists no single answer, but rather multiple overlapping answers.

The best starting point is to acknowledge that the struggle is first and foremost political, namely the major factor is the longstanding clash between US regional hegemonic demands and the Syrian state class centred around the Syrian President Assad and the relevant institutions of the Syrian state, namely the army and security services, the Baath Party and other Syrian state institutions, such as ministries and public sector bureaucracies. This conflict goes back at least to the mid-1950s, thereby predating the Baath leadership of Syria. It also relates to the larger question of degrees of political autonomy of developing countries in a US-dominated global system.<sup>41</sup> It needs to be clearly stated that the conflict between the US and the Syrian state is a US war of choice for regime change similar to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Obama and Trump presidencies have fuelled the conflict in Syria because they believe/d that covert warfare, mostly conducted by proxies and regional allies and led “from behind” by the US, will impose high costs on US opponents, make allies more dependent on US guidance and will inflict only limited costs on the US.

---

<sup>38</sup> Jörg Michael Dostal, “The European Union and Economic Reform in Syria”, in Jörg Michael Dostal, Anja Zorob, *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean Relationship*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Col., 2008, pp. 5-35.

<sup>39</sup> Dmitry Minin, “The Geopolitics of Gas and the Syrian Crisis”, *Strategic Culture Foundation*, 31 May 2013, <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2013/05/31/the-geopolitics-of-gas-and-the-syrian-crisis.html>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Nafeez Ahmed, “Western firms primed to cash in on Syria’s oil and gas ‘frontier’”, 1 December 2015, <https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/western-firms-plan-to-cash-in-on-syria-s-oil-and-gas-frontier-6c5fa4a72a92>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Alan Freeman, Boris Kagarlitsky, “Introduction: World Empire – or a World of Empires?”, in Alan Freeman, Boris Kagarlitsky (eds), *The Politics of Empire: Globalization in Crisis*, Pluto Press, London, 2004, pp. 13, 26.

In this broader context, one might identify the following main political reasons for the US behaviour vis-à-vis Syria: (1) the US desire for “imperial prestige”, namely the control of all state units in the Middle East by means of construction of permanent US military bases in line with the aspirations first announced in the Eisenhower Doctrine. In this context, the removal of the Syrian anomaly, namely of an Arab nationalist state with a substantial degree of sovereignty outside of the US security umbrella, appears as an effort to finally settle a long-standing geopolitical disagreement; (2) the US policy regarding Syria aims to deliver a clear message to all regional actors, namely that the US has the means and political willpower to deny dissenting Arab state leaders access to their own territory, thereby making what remains of Arab sovereignty conditional on good behaviour as judged by the US; (3) the US aims to break the “Axis of Resistance”, namely the mutual defence alliance of Syria and Iran going back to the early 1980s and the shared support of both states for the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon; (4) the US do not want to see any integration of Iraq into this Axis; (5) the US aspires to force Russia to leave the Middle East and to limit China’s future access to the region as far as possible; (6) the US are not committed to the territorial integrity of Syria as long as the Damascus government does not accept client status. Thus, the US invaded Syrian territories in 2015 stationing troops east of the Euphrates River – embedded with the Kurdish YPG militia – in order to control a large share of Syria’s oil and water resources and to shield Israel from any regional combination of Arab forces, such as an alliance of Syria, Iraq and Iran.

In terms of economic motivations, one might point out the following main factors: (1) the US has a preference for weak regional clients, namely making Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey enter a long-standing war of attrition in Syria (and in the Saudi case also in Yemen) allows to increase the structural dependence of these states on US patronage in terms of selling weapons and maintaining a dollar-denominated trading system for oil and gas; (2) the US might accommodate aspirations of regional states to construct new oil and gas pipelines that would depend on US military backing and would also help to limit Russia’s future access to the European energy market; (3) the US has an interest to keep competing states, such as Russia, China and EU members, from building close bilateral economic relationships with Arab states. In this context, US acceptance of the (re-) entry of former colonial powers – France and the UK – into the Arab region as military actors under US guidance also helps to further divide the European powers.

In order to very briefly summarize the political interests of the other most relevant actors in the Syrian conflict, the Table 1 sums up the revealed intentions of major regional states and Russia which in turn helps to explain US regional behaviour.

*Table 1: Revealed intentions of state actors in the Syrian conflict*

Country	Revealed Intentions	Possible Evolutions
Israel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regular air attacks on Syrian and Iranian military positions in Syria to demonstrate Israel's willingness to ignore Syrian sovereignty</li> <li>- Financial, logistical and military support for Islamist groups fighting the Syrian army</li> <li>- Support for the creation of a Kurdish state made up of Syrian and Iraqi territory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Effort to engage in multilateral alliance building to overcome sole dependency on US (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Russia)</li> <li>- Continuing one-sided air war on Syria due to Syria's lack of advanced air defence systems</li> <li>- Avoid closer relations between Iraq and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance</li> </ul>
Saudi Arabia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Funding and arming of Islamist groups fighting in Syria</li> <li>- Effort to construct oil/gas pipeline from Qatar via Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria toward the EU</li> <li>- Avoid US blame for proliferation of Islamist groups by sharing responsibility with the US</li> <li>- Compete with Iran for regional influence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Further deepening of structural dependency on US (e.g. increasing arms purchases and growing state debt)</li> <li>- Costly war of attrition in Yemen</li> <li>- Structural pressure to retrench state spending and reform socio-economic system</li> </ul>
Qatar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Funding and arming of Islamist groups fighting in Syria (esp. Muslim Brotherhood)</li> <li>- Effort to construct oil/gas pipeline from Qatar via Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria toward the EU</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Swing diplomacy" between Saudi Arabia and Iran to avoid diplomatic isolation</li> <li>- Continuing reliance on US military base to guarantee statehood</li> </ul>
Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Funding and arming of Islamist groups fighting in Syria (esp. Muslim Brotherhood)</li> <li>- Direct and indirect occupation of 'zones of influence' in Syria</li> <li>- Effort to stop the US arming of Kurdish militias in north Syria</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Swing diplomacy" to avoid outside interference in support of Kurdish nationalism</li> <li>- Avoid diplomatic isolation</li> <li>- Complete joint gas pipeline project "Turkish Stream" with Russia</li> </ul>
Iran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strengthening of alliance with Syria and Hezbollah</li> <li>- Funding of Syrian statehood</li> <li>- Increasing collaboration with Russia</li> <li>- Avoid diplomatic isolation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on deepening of multilateral relations with Russia, Turkey and China</li> <li>- Maintenance of domestic stability</li> <li>- Avoid isolation with regard to the Iranian nuclear deal</li> </ul>
Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Defense of Syrian statehood</li> <li>- Fight Islamist groups outside of Russia</li> <li>- Exercise diplomatic leadership in the Middle East by advancing multilateralism against US unilateralism</li> <li>- Gain "referee status" in policing local Syrian ceasefires and regional de-escalation zones</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Maintain Russian military bases in Syria</li> <li>- Strengthen regional diplomatic influence</li> <li>- Complete joint gas pipeline project "Turkish Stream" with Turkey</li> <li>- Advance concept of multipolar world order</li> </ul>

Source: Jörg Michael Dostal, "Transnational War...", cit.; Dimitry Minin, "The Geopolitics...", cit.; Amos Harel, "To Push Iran Back, Israel Ramps Up Support for Syrian Rebels, 'Arming 7 Different Groups'", *Haaretz*, 21 February 2018; Anna Ahronheim, "IDF Confirms: Israel Provided Light-weapons to Syrian Rebels", *Jerusalem Post*, 5 September 2018; and national news media coverage.

## Syria Since 2011: From Local Conflict To Global World Order War

This section provides a brief analysis of the conflict in Syria between 18 March 2011 and August 2018. In order to deal with the large body of highly contested information and the permanent shift in public discourses around the world about why the Syrian conflict emerged and why it has persisted for so long, two guiding questions are applied. First, how has the battle for global public opinion been conducted, namely who is to blame for the war in Syria? This question concerns the “crisis narrative” and its permanent mutation since 2011. Second, how did the military escalation from limited localized conflicts to a near-global confrontation fought on multiple levels within Syria and with repercussions across the world occur? These two related questions will be briefly discussed on a year-by-year basis.

The Syrian conflict began in the southern border town of Daraa on 18 March 2011. The exact nature of the Daraa events remains contested, but there were some civilian and state official casualties on the first day and more casualties in the days to follow. In subsequent weeks, minor rallies against the Syrian government took place in numerous locations. These occurred after Friday prayers and mostly included the shouting of religious and anti-government slogans. The Syrian government responded to the protests with efforts to mobilize public opinion in favour of government-led political reforms. There were at least three major mobilization waves in March and November 2011 and in February and March 2012 in favour of government-led reforms. In 2012, a popular referendum about amendments to Syria’s Constitution was held and approved, namely the leading role of the Baath Party was removed from the Constitution and a multi-party system was introduced.

When comparing the size of pro- and anti-government popular mobilisations in 2011 and 2012, the government-organised rallies were the largest ever political mobilizations in the history of the country while the opposition rallies were very small by comparison. This dramatic difference in mobilisation levels was “explained” by opposition activists as mostly due to government repression. A significant opinion-shaping factor during 2011 and early in 2012 was the effort on the part of US-funded NGOs, the US Embassy and the Qatar-based Al Jazeera TV to document Syrian events by distributing smart phones and cameras to produce “online coverage” of “government violence” in order to contribute to a “Facebook revolution”.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> The current author would like to acknowledge that full coverage of disinformation in the context of the Syrian conflict is beyond the scope of this article and requires at least a book-length treatment. Briefly focusing on the issue of Al Jazeera’s disinformation on Syria during the early stage of the conflict, one might highlight the following exemplary sources: Investigative Project on Terrorism, “Al-Jazeera Director Resigns in Protest of Coverage”, 25 April 2011, <https://www.investigativeproject.org/2789/al-jazeera-director-resigns-in-protest-of-coverage/>.

Previously, since 2006, the US had already provided covert funding for anti-Syrian government media outlets.<sup>43</sup> In the early period of the conflict, the term “Shabiha”, which had been in use in Syria since the 1980s and initially described pretty criminals and smugglers of Alevite origin (the sect to which the Assad family belongs), was excessively used by anti-Syrian government media – namely outlets funded by Qatar and Saudi Arabia – to “brand” the Syrian government as illegitimate and criminal. The proliferation of media claims that the Syrian state attacked peaceful demonstrators demanding freedom was a major public relations success for those pushing for regime change in Syria. On the other hand, the Syrian government’s insistence that the situation was “normal” or “returning to normal” was counterproductive. In fact, it was challenged by a never-ending stream of online news coverage amounting to an “open-ended media campaign against the Syrian government”.<sup>44</sup>

Long-term observers of Syrian affairs questioned media claims about one-sided violence originating with the Syrian government against “peaceful” demonstrators. One prominent observer, the Belgian-born Father Frans van der Lugt, who had lived in Syria since the mid-1960s and observed the events in his residential city of Homs before he was murdered by Islamist insurgents in the same city in 2014, stated in 2012: “From the start the protest movements were not purely peaceful. From the start I saw demonstrators marching along in the

resigns-in-protest-of-coverage. (Accessed 30 August 2018). The resignation of Tunisian journalist Ghassan Bin Jeddou, former Al Jazeera Beirut bureau chief, who called the network after his resignation “an operations room for incitement and mobilization”, was also covered by a number of websites with opposing political views, suggesting that the media system was in the early stages of the Syrian conflict still willing to acknowledge different points of view. At later stages, any kind of “cognitive dissonance” in Syria coverage has been dealt with by accusing opponents of one’s own views of acting in bad faith – and by maintaining heavily biased coverage for many years. For a second wave of resignations at Al Jazeera, see also Anne Sewell, “No independent journalism any more’ says ex-Al Jazeera reporter”, *Digital Journal*, 14 March 2012, <http://www.digitaljournal.com/article/321163>. (Accessed 30 August 2018). For “Russian” versus “Western” coverage of the same story, namely the resignation of journalist Ali Hashim and two others from Al Jazeera in Lebanon in March 2012, see Russia Today, “Ex-employee: Al Jazeera provided Syrian rebels with satphones”, 4 April 2012, <https://www.rt.com/news/al-jazeera-rebels-phones-lebanon-281/>. (Accessed 30 August 2018), and Ali Hashem [alternative spelling of the same name], “The Arab spring has shaken Arab TV’s credibility”, *Guardian* [UK], 3 April 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/03/arab-spring-arab-tv-credibility>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>43</sup> Craig Whitlock, “U.S. secretly backed Syrian opposition groups, cables released by WikiLeaks show”, *Washington Post*, 17 April 2011.

<sup>44</sup> James Harkin, “Good media, bad politics? New media and the Syrian conflict”, *Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper*, University of Oxford, Michaelmas Term 2013, p. 12, <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/research/files/Good%2520media%252C%2520bad%2520politics%2520New%2520media%2520and%2520the%2520Syrian%2520conflict.pdf>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

protests, who began to shoot at the police first. Very often the violence of the security forces has been a reaction to the brutal violence of the armed rebels".<sup>45</sup>

During 2011 and until mid-2012, the situation was still far below the level of a full-scale war. The attacks on the army and the police force were mostly "hit-and-run" events and no Syrian localities other than parts of the city of Homs were under the control of insurgents. During this period, the US and other Western powers started to argue that the Assad government had lost all legitimacy and had to leave office. Throughout 2012, the Western media engaged in sustained efforts to write Assad out of office. It was argued that the Syrian army was breaking up along sectarian lines due to mass desertions of Sunni conscripts to the so-called "Free Syrian Army", which was presented as being made up of deserters from the official army. It was also claimed that the Syrian government was about to collapse, due to the individual desertion of high profile individuals from the ranks of the Syrian leadership. (Altogether only three prominent individuals, namely a newly appointed Sunni Prime Minister, a government spokesman, and a one-star Syrian general who had once appeared in a photograph standing next to the Syrian President could be identified as regime deserters.) In July 2012, the front cover of the "Economist" weekly carried the announcement "Syria: Toward the endgame". There were also efforts to find information to personally discredit the Syrian President and his wife. These efforts did not, however, produce convincing results.

During 2012, the security situation rapidly deteriorated. The fundamental reason for the escalation of the conflict was the delivery of weapons and the provision of monetary and logistical support for Syrian insurgents by outside state actors, namely the US, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel. From today's point of view, one can state with confidence that the pattern of the arming of the insurgency was a primarily US-led operation funded by the Arab monarchies and logically controlled from US-led operations rooms in Turkey and Jordan. In this context, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) covert action in Syria was code-named "Timber Sycamore", referring to a tree plant that is mentioned in the Christian Bible.<sup>46</sup> While exact figures about spending volumes and full details about arms deliveries are not

---

<sup>45</sup> John Rosenthal, "An Eyewitness to the Syrian Rebellion: Father Frans in His Own Words", *The BRICS Post*, 19 April 2014, <http://thebricspost.com/an-eyewitness-to-the-syrian-rebellion-father-frans-in-his-own-words/#.WwuU9qSFNhG>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>46</sup> In the context of the CIA operation, the following appears topical: "He destroyed their vines with hail and their sycamores with frost" (Psalm 78(47)), see <https://www.bibleserver.com/text/ESV/Psalm78>. The "Sycamore" (*Ficus sycomorus*) is commonly found in Egypt, Israel, Syria, Central and Eastern Africa and the southern part of the Arab peninsula, including Yemen, that all overlap with high levels of covert action by the CIA.

available, one must stress that the operation has been one of the largest ever conducted in the history of the CIA with a multi-billion dollar budget.<sup>47</sup>

The arming of the Syrian insurgency proceeded as follows: a major early push was the delivery by the CIA of weapons from Libyan depots after the fall of the Gadhafi regime in 2011 to Jordan and Turkey from where they were distributed to insurgents entering Syria or otherwise smuggled into the country.<sup>48</sup> The general pattern of the delivery of weapons was that they were procured from third countries, namely a high share of weapons consisted of aged and sometime still Soviet-made weapons stocks from Eastern European

---

<sup>47</sup> Even a casual online search of US mainstream media outlets suggests that fragmented CIA, Pentagon and various US agencies' spending for "train-and-equip" missions and parallel arms deliveries to Syrian insurgents amounted to multi-billion dollar spending, cf. Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, Michael S. Schmidt, "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria", *New York Times*, 2 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-traintrump.html>. (Accessed 30 August 2018). The same paper had earlier acknowledged Saudi funding of CIA operations "with no strings attached", Mark Mazzetti, Matt Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels", *New York Times*, 23 January 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html?_r=0). (Accessed 30 August 2018). Other US sources suggest that the CIA's Syria budget was "approaching \$1 billion a year", Greg Miller, Karen DeYoung, "Secret CIA effort in Syria faces large funding cut", *Washington Post*, 12 June 2015. It adds to the Orwellian feel of the US media landscape that figures on spending are reported in the context of proclaimed "cuts" rather than during initial appropriations. Moreover, reporting of the "papers of record" was only conducted with a delay of three to five years and in reaction to alternative media reporting at the time of the initial CIA intervention into the Syrian war – from at least the beginning of 2012, but likely earlier, with large-scale arms deliveries to the insurgents. The reason for the US papers' reporting on the CIA's covert action in Syria was at least partially due to the clumsy manner in which the US government's Federal Business Opportunities (FBO) website had solicited private shipping companies to deliver weapons and ammunition – subsequently "updated with a detailed packing list" – from Romania's harbour of Constanta to the Jordanian harbour of Aqaba, see Jeremy Binnie, Neil Gibson, "Details of US arms shipment to Syrian rebels revealed", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 8 April 2016. In addition, the former US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford – himself a leading advocate of armed intervention in Syria – suggested that between 3 and 4 billion dollars were spent on US military operations in Syria between 2014 and 2017. Other spending concerned around one billion dollars for the last two years supporting "local security forces" and 875 million dollars since 2012 for "non-lethal and stabilization aid to opposition-controlled areas" under the jurisdiction of USAID, see "Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee by Ambassador (Ret) Robert S. Ford", February 6, 2018, [https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20180206106832/HHR\\_G-115-FA13-WstateFor\\_dR-20180206.pdf](https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20180206106832/HHR_G-115-FA13-WstateFor_dR-20180206.pdf). (Accessed 30 August 2018). Needless to say that these revelations still just cover the tip of the iceberg.

<sup>48</sup> C.J. Chivers, Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.", *New York Times*, 24 March 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

states, including EU member states.<sup>49</sup> These weapons were purchased by intermediaries and delivered in civilian planes, sometimes by countries otherwise not known to be directly involved in the conflict, while other CIA-guided weapons deliveries passed through US military bases in Germany and their final destination was wrongly claimed to be Arab allies of the US rather than the Syrian insurgents, as was really the case<sup>50</sup>.

In addition to obsolete weapons, the insurgents were also increasingly supplied with modern anti-tank weapons, which had a strong impact in terms of increasing the losses of the Syrian Army. Due to the steady stream of arms and funding, such as monthly salaries for fighters, the insurgents started to permanently hold territories in Syria. This development was symbolized by the capturing of the eastern sections of Syria's largest city of Aleppo in the summer of 2012 by armed groups entering from Turkey. Most of the insurgent-captured territory was in the regions bordering Turkey and Jordan, underlining the extent to which the armed groups were supplied from the neighbouring countries.

In addition, the initially Iraq-based Nusra Front (Al Qaida) entered Syria and captured a corridor along the banks of the Euphrates River while Kurdish militias took over many northern areas of Syria. In 2013, the territories east of the Euphrates River increasingly fell under the control of the Nusra Front and the Kurds while the Syrian government presence in this region was reduced to some urban centres. In the first half of 2014 and especially since June 2014, nearly all of the Nusra-held territories were taken over by the so-called Islamic state militias (referred to as ISIS or Daesh) in parallel with their capturing of territories in neighbouring Iraq. During this period, Western observers started to argue that ISIS would constitute a major security threat for many years to come.

In the meantime, the Syrian government increasingly relied on support from the Lebanese Hezbollah, which entered Syria on a larger scale in the summer of 2013. Around the same time, Iran also sent advisors at the invitation of the Syrian government. On the side of the insurgents, the number of Islamist fighters from outside of Syria quickly grew with large numbers originating from countries such as Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, and such regions as Russia's Chechnya province. Thus, the conflict increasingly turned into a transnational war in Syria rather than a "civil war" between Syrians. In September 2014, the

<sup>49</sup> Lawrence Marzouk, Ivan Angelovski, Miranda Patrucic, "Making a Killing: The 1.2 Billion Euro Arms Pipeline to Middle East", *Balkan Arms Trade Investigative Network*, 27 July 2016", <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/making-a-killing-the-1-2-billion-euros-arms-pipeline-to-middle-east-07-26-2016>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Ivan Angelovski, Lawrence Marzouk, "The Pentagon's \$2.2 Billion Soviet Arms Pipeline Flooding Syria", *Balkan Arms Trade Investigative Network*, 12 September 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/the-pentagon-s-2-2-billion-soviet-arms-pipeline-flooding-syria-09-12-2017>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

US started air strikes in Syria that were claimed to exclusively target ISIS. From October 2015, the US acknowledged the presence of US ground troops in north Syria that became embedded with the Kurdish YPG militia. According to the Syrian government, US air strikes against ISIS were mostly symbolical and served to disguise the covert cooperation between local US allies such as Turkey and ISIS militants.

A major development in terms of the struggle for public opinion was the US government's allegation against the Syrian government to be guilty of the repeated usage of chemical weapons. The Syrian government firmly rejected such claims holding that it had decommissioned all its chemical weapons stocks in line with agreements brokered by Russia and agreed with the US in September 2013. This decommissioning of chemical weapons followed US President Obama's remark, in August 2012, that he considered the use of chemical weapons a "red line" that "would change [his] calculus significantly".<sup>51</sup> Since 2013, the Syrian government has nevertheless been accused by Western countries and Syrian insurgents to have hidden chemical weapons stocks and subsequently used them against civilians. The Syrian government has alleged that chemical weapons were in fact used by insurgents who had either produced them locally (chlorine gas is easy to manufacture), or had been supplied to the insurgents by foreign governments and in particular by Saudi and Turkish intelligence agencies. For the general public, it is impossible to evaluate such claims and chemical weapons "experts" have been divided in their evaluation of events.<sup>52</sup>

One should keep in mind, however, that most of these communicative efforts originated with US, UK and other Western state-funded public relations operations, namely the "White Helmets" and the "Syrian Observatory for Human Rights".<sup>53</sup> These two groups (in the latter case, a single person living in

<sup>51</sup> Barack H. Obama, "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps", 20 August 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Dennis J. Bernstein, "Weapons Inspector Refutes U.S. Syria Chemical Claim", *Consortiumnews*, 27 April 2018, <https://consortiumnews.com/2018/04/27/weapons-inspector-refutes-u-s-syria-chemical-claims/>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>53</sup> Scott Ritter, "The 'White Helmets' and the Inherent Contradiction of America's Syria Policy", *truthdig*, 5 October 2016, <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-white-helmets-and-the-inherent-contradiction-of-americas-syria-policy/>. (Accessed 30 August 2018). For UK Foreign Office funding of the "Syrian Observatory for Human Rights", see Peter Hitchens, 13 May 2018, <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2018/05/what-moral-standing-do-we-have-after-this-outrage-and-are-we-about-to-join-another-idiotic-war-like-.html>. As Hitchens sarcastically remarks, the acknowledgement of providing 194,769,60 British Pounds for "communications equipment and cameras" in 2012 shows "precision". One must acknowledge that the amount is rather modest in comparison to other Western funding streams facilitating "strategic communication" on Syria. At the same time, Western (and other) governments have not been able to find sufficient funds

Coventry, UK) have acted as discursive gatekeepers by misleadingly presenting themselves as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) informing the Western publics in a neutral manner. In fact, they are Western government-funded – almost exclusively so in the case of the “White Helmets”, founded in 2013 by a former British army officer and receiving funding from various US, UK, Dutch, German, Danish and Japanese government bodies, according to the relevant Wikipedia entry – in order to produce a “concert of voices” and discursive power, at least within the boundaries of the Western media system.

The main function of the White Helmets has been to supply “video evidence” for “chemical weapons attacks” blamed on the Syrian government. The organisation has exclusively operated in Syrian territories held by the insurgents. It is acknowledged that “volunteers” of the organisation are paid monthly stipends and that some of the “activists” are former fighters. On 23 July 2018, around 400 of the “White Helmets” were evacuated from south-eastern Syria by being allowed to transfer into the Israel-occupied Syrian Golan from where they travelled under the armed guard of Israeli soldiers to Jordan where they are according to Western media reports expected to be offered asylum in Western countries that have sponsored their activities.

Summing up the struggle for public opinion, one might point to a “White Rabbit” effect, namely the attention of the public is managed in the same manner in which magicians distract their audience to pay attention to red herrings. Rather than to ask basic questions about the legality of the US-led arming of the Syrian insurgency, which is in breach of section 2.4 of the U.N. Charter stating that states must “refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state”, global public opinion is subjected to a regular supply of allegations against the Syrian government. These allegations are too complex, too numerous and too frequent to be evaluated in any meaningful manner by the general public.

Such illiberal and misleading communicative practices are in turn required in order to present Syria as a “non-state”, namely as a political entity that has lost all legitimacy in the international system and can be attacked at will. Ultimately, however, *any* kind of public relations effort produces diminishing returns over time. After some time, most people make up their mind about whether or not they trust the Western media claims. The majority will in any case chose the default option of not paying any further attention. In fact, global publics have largely stopped to monitor Syrian events due to the

---

for genuine humanitarian assistance to Syrians. According to Mark Lowcock, the U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, the “UN appeal for Syria this year remains substantially underfunded”, “Briefing to the Security Council (...), New York, 27 July 2018”, p. 4, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/180726\\_Syria\\_USG%20SECCO%20statement-Final-1.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/180726_Syria_USG%20SECCO%20statement-Final-1.pdf). (Accessed 30 August 2018).

long-term oversupply of contesting narratives that failed to deliver genuine insights and instead have put a large question mark behind the role of those maintaining and managing the traditional media system.<sup>54</sup>

Returning to the military conflict, the fighting in 2014 and 2015 was mostly dominated by the military offensive of ISIS and resulted in the large-scale withdrawal of the Syrian army from the countryside to avoid an overextended frontline. As a result of this tactical withdrawal, the territory controlled by the Syrian government became limited to a north-south corridor in the western parts of the country and some urban centres elsewhere; namely government troops defended the ISIS-surrounded cities of Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor for more than three years. Significantly, most major Syrian cities, with the exception of the eastern part of Aleppo, Idlib, Raqqa and some smaller cities in the Kurdish-dominated northern parts of the country, remained under the control of the government. Before the Russian military intervention in September 2015, the battle nevertheless appeared to turn against the Syrian military often relying on obsolete military supplies – before the war, the Syrian defence budget had only been around one per cent of overall Middle Eastern military spending.

Following on the Russian military intervention, amounting to Russian air force attacks against the Islamist groups, provision of military advisors and resupply of the Syrian army, the military situation slowly started to shift in the Syrian government's favour. The most significant element of the Russian intervention was the improved air strike capability which allowed destroying tunnel systems and bunkers that the insurgents had constructed beneath urban spaces and that the Syrian air force had been unable to attack.

In mid-2016, it became known that the French-Swiss company Lafarge had continued to run its cement factory located near the Syrian city of Jalabiya (150 kilometres east of Aleppo in north Syria) when the region was occupied by ISIS and other Islamist insurgents. The cement factory in question, which constituted the largest foreign investment in Syria outside of the oil sector when it was initially acquired in 2007, produced the materials that were used by insurgents to construct fortifications. In fact, the very high production volume of the plant suggested a war-enabling function, since the concrete fortifications increased the ability of the insurgents to withstand bombardments and artillery fire by the Syrian army. The overall effect was in all likelihood the extension of the war. In 2017, the company also acknowledged that it had paid monies to

<sup>54</sup> Wolf Reiser, "Freiwild. Über Zähmung, Verwahrlosung und Niedergang des Journalismus", *Lettre International*, 107, Winter 2014, [http://wolf-reiser.de/leseproben-wolf-reiser-autor/pdfe-wolf-reiser-autor/Lettre\\_Freiwild.pdf](http://wolf-reiser.de/leseproben-wolf-reiser-autor/pdfe-wolf-reiser-autor/Lettre_Freiwild.pdf). (Accessed 30 August 2018); Daniel Falcone, "A Reporter's Reporter: a Conversation with Seymour Hersh", *Counterpunch*, 25 June 2018, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/06/25/a-reporters-reporter-a-conversation-with-seymour-hersh/>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

ISIS, Al Nusra and Kurdish militias and purchased oil from ISIS in order to run its cement factory.<sup>55</sup> In turn, it became known that the French government had earlier asked the US government not to bomb the plant, which from the French point of view amounted to a strategic regional investment.<sup>56</sup>

The major military turning point of the Syrian war was the retaking of the eastern part of Aleppo by the Syrian army in December 2016. Since then, the Syrian army has increasingly gained the upper hand and has restored full control of the surroundings of the national capital of Damascus. In mid-2018, the territories of Syria that are still held by insurgents are visibly depending on supplies from neighbouring countries and are isolated from the rest of the country.

To sum up, the arrival of Russia as a direct military actor completed the transformation of the Syrian conflict into a *de facto* global war over world order. Over time, this war has acquired the characteristics of a three-level conflict (local, regional and global), which is fought in different theatres, namely as ground, air and media communications war. Once the US and Russia entered the conflict directly, the regional US proxy powers – Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – started to disagree among themselves about how to proceed. This triggered a decline in numbers and strength of Islamist groups fighting on the ground, since their funding, leadership and logistics became more difficult. By comparison, Iran as the long-standing geopolitical ally of the Syrian state remained willing to extend support to the Syrian government to keep potential opponents busy in a safe distance from its own territory. Moreover, Russia and Iran succeeded to some extent in separating Turkey from its former Sunni Arab allies – by skilfully stressing their joint opposition to a Kurdish state in the region that could potentially question Turkey's territorial integrity.

In August 2018, Syria has been divided up by different forces into zones of interest. Most of the Syrian territory has been retaken by the Syrian army. There are, however, three occupied zones in Syria. These are in order of significance first the territories east of the Euphrates River that are currently under the joint control of Kurdish militias (YPG) and US and French troops. The latter two powers have made continuous efforts to strengthen their military fortifications in this part of the country which contains fertile agricultural land and 90 per cent of Syria's oil production facilities. A second north-western zone around Idlib is the last larger region still controlled by Islamist groups. As part of local ceasefire and de-escalation agreements elsewhere, Islamist fighters

<sup>55</sup> Léonard Faytre, "Lafarge's Cooperation with Terrorist Organizations in Syria: A State Scandal?", *SETA Perspective*, 36, April 2018, [https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2018/04/36\\_Perspective\\_Lafarge.pdf](https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2018/04/36_Perspective_Lafarge.pdf). (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Emmanuel Jarry, "Exclusive: France asked U.S. not to bomb Lafarge factory in Syria in 2014 – emails", *reuters.com*, 26 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lafargeholcim-syria-france-exclusive/exclusive-france-asked-u-s-not-to-bomb-lafarge-factory-in-syria-in-2014-emails-idUSKBN1HW2DE>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

from other parts of the country, most recently from the southern city of Dara, have been transported to Idlib where they now frequently fight each other. In addition, Russia, Iran and Turkey, as sponsoring powers of the Russia-led Astana process that is supposed to bring the Syrian government and opposition to the negotiating table, have each constructed “observation points” in the vicinity of the Idlib zone. These underline their joint effort to police the region and to re-open transport routes that are currently closed due to the presence of the Islamist groups. A third sector further north around the Syrian city of Afrin has been occupied by the Turkish army since February 2018.

Throughout the first half of 2018, it remained unclear whether the war would soon end or, alternatively, would further escalate. Regarding the first scenario, one might argue that the war could end in the sense that all involved parties currently claim victory in one way or another. This rather unusual condition after seven years of fighting derives from the fact that all involved actors have achieved something. The Syrian government has restored its control of most regions of the country. At least five other countries have intervened from outside with ground troops and have not been defeated in military terms, namely Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US and France. Finally, Israel has managed to “normalize” its incursions into Syrian airspace and has attacked targets in Syria with impunity. In this sense, there are only winners, except the Syrian people.

On the other hand, many observers were predicting further escalation arguing that the sunk investment of the countries occupying territory in Syria, namely Turkey, the US and France, suggest unwillingness on their part to hand back what they captured. Moreover, these states are all able to further escalate the conflict. At times, some actors appear desperate to make the conflict flame up again. The suggestion of US President Trump to ask for Saudi troops to replace the US forces east of the Euphrates River certainly appeared highly inappropriate in the sense of offending everybody in the region, while his alternative suggestion for Saudi Arabia to instead fund the US occupation in Syria was difficult to grasp logically.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, such behaviour certainly helped to remind Kurdish militias of the precariousness of their regional position.

After so far considering the revealed preferences of the states involved in the Syrian war, the fourth section now turns to the theoretical approach of “peripheral realism” that was first advanced by the Argentinian political scientist Carlos Escudé. It will be argued that certain components of this theory are helpful in analysing the Syrian case.

---

<sup>57</sup> Hummam Sheikh Ali, “News Analysis: Arab forces to replace Americans in Syria ‘unrealistic’”, *xinhuanet*, 30 April 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/30/c\\_137147495.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/30/c_137147495.htm). (Accessed 30 September 2018).

## Explaining The Syrian Conflict: Peripheral Realism Theory

This section examines the theoretical approach of peripheral realism (subsequently referred to as PR) in order to address the question of whether or not a new balance of power is likely to emerge in the Middle East region. After a brief introduction considering other theoretical approaches, this section highlights how PR can add insights regarding the issue of state hierarchy in the Arab world that are relevant to explain the Syrian case.

Before turning to these theories, one might start by highlighting that some long-standing and promising theoretical approaches with regard to Syria ultimately failed to be applicable to the post-2011 situation. For example, the earlier prominent focus on domestic economic issues and the state executive's management of rent income from oil and gas revenue, namely theories focusing on the "rentier state" and the "state class", placed the focus on issues of domestic political bargaining and social class cleavages.<sup>58</sup> In fact, the condition of war soon began to challenge the very survival of the Syrian state and society. Due to these exceptionally grave circumstances, the political economy dimension turned out to be less significant than had been previously expected. The Syrian state received economic and military assistance from Iran, Russia, and, less prominently, from China and elsewhere. This proved to be sufficient in the sense of maintaining the Syrian state and the army's war effort while also offering some basic subsistence provisions for people in government-held parts of the country. A significant share of the population left the country for neighbouring countries and later for places elsewhere. Crucially, this unprecedented economic decline could not be blamed on Syrian state executives but was directly due to the military conflict.

The costs of war were imposed in a highly asymmetrical manner. The highest costs were carried by Syrian citizens, the Syrian army, the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and, less directly, by Iran. For the supporters of the "Axis of Resistance", the conflict became a matter of (political) survival, while the external supporters of the Islamist insurgents had only limited stakes in the conflict since their own survival was not on the line.<sup>59</sup> In this context, US policy-makers were in a position to "lead from behind" by drip-feeding

---

<sup>58</sup> Hartmut Elsenhans, *Abhängiger Staat oder bürokratische Entwicklungsgesellschaft. Versuch über den Staat in der Dritten Welt*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Campus, Frankfurt/M., 1984; Jörg Michael Dostal, "Analyzing the domestic and international conflict in Syria: Are there lessons from political science?", *Syria Studies*, 6, 1, 2014: pp. 1-80, <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/822/691>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>59</sup> Michael Brenner, "The Great Game: Power Politics or Free Play?", *Counterpunch*, 20 March 2017, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2017/03/20/the-great-game-power-politics-or-free-play/>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

weapons to the insurgents at a much lower political cost in comparison to the earlier direct attack on and occupation of Iraq in 2003. It should be noted that this style of US war-making was similar to the US support for Islamists in Afghanistan before and after the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the assistance for the contras in Nicaragua in the 1980s.<sup>60</sup> However, one crucial difference is that Syria had already, since the mid-1950s, belonged to the Soviet (and later Russian) zone of geopolitical influence in the Middle East. To put it differently, President Obama's declaration of March 2014 calling Russia a "regional power" must be understood as a provocative statement of intent. He thereby signalled that he did not accept the pre-existing alignments in the Middle East.<sup>61</sup>

In the end, state and society in Syria had no choice but to resist against the Islamist insurgents regardless of the costs: there was never any credible political alternative inside the country that could have offered another way out from the current predicament. Moreover, the extremist Islamist groups proved in their own conquered zones of sectarian control that a society under their rule was a place that had nothing in common with the multi-ethnic and multi-religious traditions of Syrian society. From the point of view of the Western powers, the expected outcome of the conflict for Syria is to lose its relative autonomy in the region – by denying the current leadership access to its own resources and territory. In addition, the Syrian population is targeted with sanctions in line with the earlier Iraqi example. This "strategy" is maintained mostly because the costs for the Western powers to do so are rather low.

Turning now to theoretical perspectives on the Syrian conflict since 2011, the approach of peripheral realism appears most topical. The PR approach broadly belongs to realist international relations (IR) theory, but also includes insights from dependency theory and other structuralist approaches to world order. Crucially, PR rejects the mainstream realist concept of "anarchy" in the relationship between states and focuses instead on status hierarchy, which is considered to act as a source of relative stability in the relationships between states. In this context, PR suggests that the global state system falls into three groups: (1) rule makers; (2) rule takers; and (3) rebel states. In accordance with this classification and in line with other versions of realism, it is further suggested that "the interstate order can never be democratic or egalitarian.... [T]he world order is of necessity hierarchical".<sup>62</sup> Contrary to many other realist approaches, however, PR stresses the need to focus on detailed analysis of

<sup>60</sup> Douglas Little, *American Orientalism. The United States and the Middle East since 1945*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 2008, p. 154.

<sup>61</sup> Scott Wilson, "National Security: Obama dismisses Russia as 'regional power' acting out of weakness", *Washington Post*, 25 March 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Carlos Escudé, "Realism in the Periphery", in Jorge I. Dominguez, Ana Covarrubias (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Latin America in the World*, Routledge, London, 2014, pp. 45-57/p. 47.

individual states and of domestic factors to explain their relative position in the hierarchical international system.

Moreover, PR also includes normative elements suggesting that state executives of weaker states should prioritise economic development while avoiding unnecessary confrontations with rule-making states. By advancing economically, a steady gain in (relative) autonomy of weaker states in their relationship with rule makers and an improved position in comparison with their peers is expected. In this context, “the sacrifice of the interests, welfare, and even the lives of multitudes of poor people to the vanity of their elite” is criticized, which is particularly the case when “reason and cost-benefit analysis are replaced by emotions”.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, this normative element in the theory, namely that state executives should not attempt to “reach a level of autonomy that their people cannot bear”,<sup>64</sup> is in turn subjected to three qualifications.

First, the theory is “realist” in the sense that it freely acknowledges that rule-making states will not necessarily follow their own rules, but will ignore the rules or invent new ones when it suits their purposes. This tendency will be most pronounced under conditions of unipolarity, which enables the hegemon to break rules at very low cost. Second, and directly related to the first point, the executives of weaker states are advised to manage state business in a discrete manner. On the one hand, it is suggested that they should signal their acceptance of the hegemon’s authority. On the other hand, it is acknowledged that occasional efforts at political activism in attempts to extract concessions from stronger states – namely efforts to play them against each other – is a legitimate tactic on the part of weaker actors in the international system. Third, the theory also accepts the fact that weaker states’ efforts at “good behaviour” to keep up cordial relations with rule makers will not necessarily guarantee safety from punishment by the hegemon.

In addition, the PR approach suggests a number of behavioural rules for state executives from weaker states to improve their standing. The general advice is to prioritise economic development, and states such as West Germany and Japan during the Cold War are in this regard singled out for praise. According to Escudé, these two countries’ willingness to focus on economic development while following the US rule maker on strategic issues resulted in their upward mobility in the international state hierarchy. However, the PR approach fails to clarify the exact relationship between economic and rule-making power. In particular, it remains unclear whether or not Germany and Japan actually enjoy any significant degrees of strategic autonomy in the international system – both during and after the Cold War. In fact, PR offers

---

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48, p. 50.

<sup>64</sup> Luis Schenoni, Carlos Escudé (2016) “Peripheral Realism Revisited”, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1-18/ p. 8.

rather contradictory observations in this regard. It is acknowledged, for example, that “Europe remains a partially occupied continent.... European states have resigned sovereignty to the US because not doing so would have led to greater citizen costs, straining governability.... These states have not wanted to pay the costs of ‘full sovereignty’...”.<sup>65</sup> One must conclude that these ambivalent remarks are a weak point of the PR approach!

On the other hand, PR is very clear about its main concern regarding weaker states, namely for their state executives to avoid picking unnecessary fights with the hegemon. The “sterile political rebellion against the written and unwritten rules of the world order”<sup>66</sup> is repeatedly singled out for criticism, namely the decision of Argentina’s leaders to fight a war over the Malvinas/Falklands in 1982 is quoted as a bad example in this respect. The reason for this warning is that PR fundamentally accepts that state executives of weaker states *do* have significant degrees of autonomy in determining their own strategy. This applies according to PR at least to “middle-sized states” (Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela are quoted as examples to which one might add Syria, although at the lower end of the scale).

In conceptual terms, PR assumes that states primarily acquire power due to economic factors. They are then free to engage in “investments of autonomy”, namely further efforts at economic development, or, alternatively, are also free to “exhibit and spent” in efforts to challenge rule makers, which is referred to as the “consumption of autonomy” and might turn out to be very costly indeed.<sup>67</sup> Escudé illustrates this point referencing the experience of his native country of Argentina, which was sanctioned by the US during and after WW2 due to its insistence on neutrality and a “third position” ideology during the Cold War. At a later point, Argentina was again sanctioned because of the decision to engage in the development of missile technology, jointly with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq (the Condor II project), which, according to Escudé, would have changed the strategic equilibrium in the Middle East.<sup>68</sup> In summary, “[w]hat should be avoided are symbolic political confrontations, in order to better negotiate tangible economic interests in which the people’s well-being is at stake”.<sup>69</sup>

So far, so good. Yet the PR approach ultimately suffers from its ambivalent and unclear advice to citizens and leaders of peripheral states. To highlight just the most prominent examples: who is to define “reasonable” behaviour on the part of the executive of peripheral states? When exactly do peripheral states engage in “symbolic political confrontations”? At what point

<sup>65</sup> Escudé, “Realism”...cit. (footnote 62), p. 46.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55.

do they have no other choice but to fight for “essential interests”? What options are available to peripheral states if the rule-making state is not benevolent but tyrannical? In this context, one must certainly question whether the examples of West Germany and Japan during the Cold War are really appropriate role models for today’s peripheral states. Thus, the suggestion that peripheral countries should serve their own best interest in maintaining good relations with regional or global hegemons “*so long as this does not entail sacrificing its own material interests*, which are paramount”<sup>70</sup> fails to clarify how weaker states can arrive at appropriate decision-making.

To turn to the Syrian case, one must certainly discuss whether or not the country’s leadership could or should have behaved differently before or after 2011. Yet throughout the country’s post-colonial history, practically all Syrian leaderships had to face the fact that the global hegemon, the US, and its regional main client, Israel (since the 1960s), have excluded the country from access to economic resources and political recognition. Moreover, Syria has suffered the occupation of some of its national territory by Israel (the Syrian Golan) and frequently had to bear costs due to US and Israeli wars in the region (e.g. Palestinian and Iraqi refugees fleeing to Syria). Did Syrian leaderships pick “unnecessary” fights with the US and its regional clients? The answer to this question of course depends on the attitude of the analyst. From the point of view of the current author, Syria’s leadership generally avoided such actions. In fact, Syria sometimes “bandwagoned” with the US on secondary questions in order to avoid unnecessary conflict escalation.

To begin with, Hafiz al-Assad did aspire to “strategic parity” with Israel. Yet this was an abstract pan-Arab aspiration for which Syria always lacked the necessary material resources. Once Egypt left the Arab line-up in the late 1970s, Syria settled for efforts at asymmetric balancing which turned since the 1980s into the “strategic” alliance with Hezbollah and Iran. Syria repeatedly made efforts to avoid “symbolical political confrontations”. Namely, the Syrian military intervention during the Lebanese civil war was conducted after consultation with the Western powers and their regional clients. During the US war to force Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991, Syria again bandwagoned with the US. After September 11, 2001, Syria again cooperated with the US in the latter’s so-called “war on terror”. During the presidency of Bashar al-Assad and until the beginning of the conflict in 2011, Syria repeatedly tried to negotiate with Israel about the return of the occupied Syrian Golan. The country also suggested regional disarmament, such as the 2003 Syrian initiative to decommission all Middle Eastern chemical weapons. Needless to say that these initiatives were all ignored by Israel, which enjoyed almost unconditional US backing before and after the end of the Cold War.

---

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, emphasis in the original, additional reference omitted.

This still leaves the question whether or not the Syrian state executive could have acted differently in negotiations with other Western and regional powers over oil and gas pipelines, the EU Association Agreement or similar issues in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To be clear, offering Qatar and Saudi Arabia access to Syria to construct a gas pipeline could have conceivably purchased the support of these countries and could also have improved the relationship with the US. However, such change of course would have meant to abandon the previous alliances with Hezbollah, Iran and Russia that were tried and tested over decades. From the point of view of Syrian state executives, this was not an attractive offer – especially as it would have triggered further demands on Syria and would have left the country at the mercy of its new “friends”.

Perhaps some US policy-makers really perceived Syria as a potential second 1970s Egypt and Bashar as another Sadat. Yet the differences are just too dramatic to ignore: Sadat’s switch of allegiance was purchased by Israel’s return of the occupied Sinai and subsequent US economic and military patronage of the Egyptian state and military. Yet Israel was of course never willing to return the occupied Syrian Golan where highly promising oil and gas resources are located. Moreover, the US and Israel conducted a number of regional wars in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. Thus it certainly appeared unsafe from the viewpoint of the Syrian government to voluntarily enter such highly asymmetric relationship. Finally, Russia’s and Iran’s geopolitical interests would also have been negatively affected.

Some might argue that the unconditional surrender to Western demands, namely to hand over the country to US-controlled clients, would have been a preferable alternative to the unprecedented devastation that the global war on Syria has triggered since 2011. However, the answer to this question cannot be found in the PR or any other theoretical approach. This question will be answered by current and future generations of Syrians.

Finally, the strongest single analytical feature of PR theory is how it clarifies the relative standing of states in a hierarchical regional or international system. In this respect, the starting point of PR classification of state power is classical realist and reductionist: states are primarily classified according to their “hard” power potential, which is in turn based on analysis of their strongly correlated economic and military capabilities. According to PR, states divide into four status groups: (1) global hegemon (under unipolarity) or multiple great powers (under multipolarity), primarily defined by their command of world destroying nuclear military capabilities; (2) class A rule-takers, defined as highly industrialised states that are fully integrated into the world economy but lack world destroying military capabilities; (3) class B rule-takers, defined as developing countries that are capable of providing for their own security vis-à-vis other rule-taking neighbouring peripheral states; (4) class C rule-taking states, defined as peripheral states that cannot defend themselves vis-à-vis class

B peripheral neighbouring states and “survive as formally independent because of interstate consensuses to that effect”.<sup>71</sup>

In order to apply this general classification scheme to the Middle East region (defined for the purpose of this article as the Levant/Arab peninsula states, Turkey, Iran and additionally considering the US and Russia as prominent external actors), one must conduct some analytical adjustments. This is explicitly recommended by PR authors holding that “[o]ther case studies will warrant the coinage of other subcategories”.<sup>72</sup> The following analytical adjustments are required: (1) the rule-making hegemon category is subdivided into a global hegemon (the US) and a number of other rule-making states that command world-destroying military potential and have a long-term track record of successfully defending their national territory (at least seven states); (2) the category of class A, B and C rule-takers is extended to also include rebel states, since some Middle East countries have frequently resisted US hegemony in one context and bandwagoned with the US in other contexts; (3) a new analytical category termed “state ruins/state by name only” is added to refer to Yemen as a regional “failed state”. Once these analytical adjustments are made, one can classify the Middle East state system along the lines shown in Table 2 below.

*Table 2: Hierarchy of rule-making and rule-taking states in the global and Middle Eastern state systems*

Characteristics of statehood	Global system	Middle East
Hegemon	USA	USA
Other rule-making and/or rule-defying states with world-destroying capabilities	Russia, China, Israel*, UK, France, Pakistan*, India*	Russia, Israel, UK, France, China
Class A rule-takers (highly industrialized without world-destroying capabilities)	Germany, Japan, most other OECD states	None
Class B rule-takers and rebel states (able to provide for their security vis-à-vis other rule-taking peripheral neighbours)	cf. Brazil	Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, UAE
Class C rule-takers (unable to defend themselves vis-à-vis class B states)	cf. Argentina	Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Oman
State ruins/state by name only	Numerous	Yemen

\* Non-signature states of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

Source: Luis Schenoni, Carlos Escudé, “Peripheral Realism...”, cit., p. 8; Jörg Michael Dostal, “Transnational war...”, cit.

<sup>71</sup> Luis Schenoni, Carlos Escudé (2016) “Peripheral Realism...”, cit., p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem.*

The purpose of this classification exercise is to arrive at a more exact explanation of the political function of the Syrian war for maintaining the US-dominated regional state hierarchy. At the local level, the US goal is to push down Syria's status from a category B state to a category C state or even a "state ruin"; at the regional level, the strategic objective is to keep all other Arab states, Iran and Turkey safely away from reaching category A status by diverting their economic potential toward warfare rather than the construction of additional economic capabilities and, directly related, another major purpose is to maintain Israel's privileged position as the only regional power with world-destroying capabilities; finally, at the global level, the Syrian war is expected to sustain the US regional leadership role as outlined in the Eisenhower Doctrine, thereby also locking in the dollar-denominated trade in oil and expanding US-provided arms sales to the regional client states. The preferential US treatment of Israel as the only permanent – since the 1960s – regional deputy of the global hegemon tightly links the regional and global levels. In addition, the conflict concerns the great power competition, namely US efforts to minimize the regional role of other great powers (Russia, China) and, secondary, aims to split the EU states by offering the UK, France and perhaps some other EU countries minor roles in the US policing of the region.

In order to clarify further how state hierarchy in the Middle East has worked after formal decolonization, one might first highlight Israel's role. The country emerged in 1948 initially under French military and US economic patronage. Already during the 1950s, the country enjoyed privileged military support from France and the UK in comparison to the Arab states and, since the 1960s during the Johnson presidency, became the privileged US client in the region. Ever since, Israel enjoyed economic and military support from the US that is qualitatively/technologically above what any other state in the region can possibly receive from US sources.

This US commitment to privilege Israel can be quantified to some extent by looking at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) annual statistics on arms exports to the Middle East. However, even the SIPRI figures as the best available long-term data set severely underestimate the degree of US economic and military support for reasons such as free provision of weapons for Israel (i.e. not visible in statistics), sharing of technology with Israel (officially and by accepting Israeli "technology transfer" from the US), permission for Israel to sell advanced US and domestically re-engineered weapons outside the Middle East which strengthens Israel's economic status. In addition, Israel has constructed its own military-industrial complex adding to its autonomy. It possesses a full set of weapons of mass destruction (biological, chemical, nuclear) and has not joined the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or any other arms control regime. Its nuclear arsenal is substantial and its missile

technology allows for global delivery of such weapons by means of nuclear-armed submarines.<sup>73</sup>

Crucially, the US guarantees Israel that all other states in the region – independent from their political posture – are denied military supplies that would allow them to compete with Israel. Thus, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have practically no domestic defence industries and no relevant technological capabilities. Instead, these countries are strongly encouraged to purchase US military supplies. However, these deliveries are technology-wise less advanced when compared to the parallel supplies for Israel.<sup>74</sup> Although the US has frequently expanded the volume of military supplies – the US under Obama and Trump vastly expanded arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, as did the UK and France – these have been less advanced technology-wise when compared to the Israeli arsenal which maintains a “qualitative military edge”.<sup>75</sup>

In terms of Middle East state hierarchy, this suggests the existence of three categories of countries among the class B rule-takers outlined in Table 2. The first category consists of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are very likely going to remain locked into the class B rule-taker category. This is due to the following factors: (1) their industrial sector is narrow in scope and mostly focused on resource extraction; (2) their domestic arms manufacturing is negligible; (3) the share of the population employed in technology-rich industrial employment is low; (4) the armed forces of these countries all heavily depend on Western contractors in order to use their imported defence technologies which allows sales countries informal control of the local arsenals;<sup>76</sup> (5) the political leadership structure of tribal and clan-based patrimonialism is dysfunctional due to the numerical size of the ruling families and parallel conflict over access to state funds.<sup>77</sup> The new Saudi leadership has recently announced its aspiration to have “half of Saudi [arms] procurement

---

<sup>73</sup> In addition to the SIPRI data, see for information about Israeli and other Middle Eastern states' military capabilities the relevant entries on national defense industries available at [globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org).

<sup>74</sup> Little, *American Orientalism*...cit., p. 148.

<sup>75</sup> Mark Mazzetti, Helene Cooper, “Sale of U.S. Arms Fuels the Wars of Arab States”, *New York Times*, 18 April 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/world/middleeast/sale-of-us-arms-fuels-the-wars-of-arab-states.html> (accessed 30 August 2018); Pieter D. Wezeman, “II. Arms transfers to the Middle East and North Africa, and the military intervention in Yemen”, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016, Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, pp. 587-94.

<sup>76</sup> Mike Lewis, Katherine Templar, “UK Personnel Supporting the Saudi Armed Forces – Risk, Knowledge and Accountability”, *mikelewisresearch.com*, 2018, <https://www.mikelewisresearch.com/RSAFFinal.pdf>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>77</sup> Wolfgang Kemp, *Der Scheich*, zu Klampen Verlag, Springe am Deister, 2018, pp. 19-26.

done locally by 2030".<sup>78</sup> Yet this ambitious plan is very likely to fail if one looks at the past historical track record – no matter how close the Saudi leaders move toward Israel.

The second category of class B rule-takers is made up of Turkey and Iran. In spite of their much lower GDP per capita in comparison to the Gulf monarchies, these two countries are from a structural perspective – the analytical perspective recommended by PR – significantly more advanced. In particular, they possess: (1) a much more balanced industrial sector which includes capabilities unrelated to resource extraction; (2) a domestic defence-industrial base; (3) the share of the population employed in industry is significantly higher in comparison with the Gulf states; (4) the armed forces are to some extent (Turkey) or to a large extent (Iran) equipped with domestically-made military supplies. Considering the larger picture, Turkey and Iran are clearly the technologically most advanced Muslim countries in the region. They could likely reach the status of class A rule-taking states, namely to become advanced industrial societies with a high degree of integration into the global economy. At present, Turkey is closest to this status while Iran would perhaps reach this position even earlier in the absence of US-imposed economic sanctions.

In turn, Syria and Iraq make up a third group that could be described as struggling class B states. Both countries have for many years been engaged in efforts to resist occupation by regional or global powers. They have partially succeeded in this respect in the sense of the nominal withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011. However, US troops have since returned – officially acknowledged are 5200 soldiers in Iraq and “around 2000” in Syria – to “support the struggle against ISIS”. The US has since, in February 2018, called on other NATO countries to send troops to Iraq to engage in bigger “train-and-advise” missions with the Iraqi military.<sup>79</sup> In the meantime, the large-scale defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq and the prevention of Kurdish separation in the case of Iraq have removed the pretext for the presence of foreign troops – strengthening the hands of Syrian and Iraqi policy-makers. Moreover, the relatively small number of occupying armed forces (US, French and Turkish troops are stationed in Syria and Iraq, mostly in Kurdish majority regions) and their unclear political status suggest that both countries have not accepted their decline into class C states. Their future status remains therefore an open question.

---

<sup>78</sup> Bloomberg, “Saudi Arabia planning to build its own defense industry”, 4 March 2018, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/391412-saudi-arabia-planning-to-build-its-own-defence-industry>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>79</sup> Tuqa Khalid, “U.S. forces to stay in Iraq as long as needed”, *reuters.com*, 19 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-usa/u-s-forces-to-stay-in-iraq-as-long-as-needed-spokesman-idUSKBN1L408A>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

Finally, the smaller regional states Qatar, Oman, Lebanon and Jordan all lack means for their own defence and their survival is due to agreements between stronger regional and global powers to maintain them. In the case of Qatar, for example, the hosting of the largest US military base in the Middle East and state survival are closely related. The concluding section now evaluates the revealed preferences of state actors engaged in the Syrian conflict to answer the question whether a regional balance of power is likely to re-emerge in the Middle East region.

### Conclusion: Will The Balance Of Power In The Middle East Be Restored?

There exists no singular balance of power in the Middle East but multi-level balance; local, regional and global (or extra-regional) levels interact and must be jointly evaluated in the analytical context of state hierarchy. This is the basic insight of peripheral realism theory discussed in the previous section and of some other realist and structuralist approaches in international relations theory. These approaches share the view that “[t]he fundamental ordering principle of international politics is hierarchy, not equality”.<sup>80</sup> Instead of assuming that states are basically equal in their search for security under conditions of anarchy, as argued by most versions of realist IR theory, the PR approach acknowledges that states differ systematically, according to their position in the regional and global hierarchy, and that the degree of autonomy of state executives in the Middle East is determined by their relative position.

In order to restore the local and regional balance in the Middle East, the factor of external intervention is therefore crucial. In fact, coordinating the three levels of hierarchy is difficult due to the absence of consensus on how the Middle East region is supposed to function. On the one hand, the US and Israel aspire to control all regional states directly or by means of local proxy forces. On the other hand, Russia and China aspire to a multipolar world order and selectively support states that reject the US and Israeli plans for the region. Nevertheless, the external actors must also coordinate their behaviour to some extent in order to avoid escalating the local multi-level proxy conflicts into direct clashes between the great powers. Thus, restoring multi-level balance is required to end the Syrian conflict.

During the Cold War period, US and Soviet external intervention in the Middle East helped to establish a reasonably stable bipolar (although US-dominated) regional system. In this context, a number of other powers, such as

---

<sup>80</sup> Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 2017, p. 1.

the UK, France and China, played minor roles in the Middle East without questioning overall regional bipolarity. Under these conditions, wars were fought in short bursts (the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars) and escalation beyond the regional level was avoided by the external actors. As a result, local state stability was usually guaranteed, not least because all regional authoritarian regimes were backed up from outside.

The end of the Cold War removed regional bipolarity and the US and Israel undertook efforts to take advantage of the new situation. The US target was and is to establish full regional hegemony by making all Middle Eastern states accept permanent US military bases.<sup>81</sup> Such bases constitute the material precondition to exercise US veto power over political and economic efforts of other external actors in the region – especially Russia and China – and can potentially be financed out of “contributions” of the states that are serving as hosts. In this context, regional military conflict further increases the dependency of local clients on US protection. This is the major reason why the US is on balance unlikely to permanently change borders in the region – their credibility as external backer of state units depends on maintaining the status quo.

Nevertheless, the US plan to gain control of all state units in the Greater Middle East has so far not been successful. Instead, four states targeted for regime change – Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Somalia – have collapsed, although Iraq has recently re-gained some degree of statehood and autonomy due to the nominal US withdrawal in 2011.<sup>82</sup> The three other regional states mentioned by US politicians as targets, namely Lebanon, Syria and Iran, have so far resisted US-led regime change efforts. Post-Cold War US behaviour in the region has generally followed the pattern established during the lengthy US campaign against Iraq between 1991 and 2003: permanent pressure, economic sanctions targeting the population at large and continuous and escalating “partial” offences against state sovereignty such as aerial bombing.

Under the Bush Jr., Obama and Trump administrations, this “formula” has been supplemented with rising degrees of covert warfare activities, such as special force and drone attacks and the sponsorship and arming of insurgents. These US actions have established “war as a way of life” and have dramatically decreased the future developmental potential of the Arab world. The humanitarian and environmental costs of these US policy choices in the Arab region have produced large-scale refugee and migration waves that have partially affected the EU countries. This has in turn strongly questioned the

---

<sup>81</sup> Mohssen Massarrat, “Demokratisierung des Greater Middle East”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 45, 7 November 2005, pp. 30-37.

<sup>82</sup> It is difficult to evaluate the degree of restoration of Iraqi statehood and sovereignty. It can be safely assumed that the US infrastructure for resumption of occupation is still in place.

internal political stability of the EU as documented by the rise of anti-immigration movements in most EU member states.

At the time of writing, there are two scenarios for the future of Syria. Either the conflict is going to be ended based on a political settlement or, alternatively, new efforts will be made on the part of the US and its regional and local allies to keep the war going – based on introducing new and escalating existing conflict lines and by drip-feeding more weapons into the conflict zones. Both scenarios are conceivable. In this context, President Trump's occasional rhetorical "triangulation" suggesting US withdrawal from Syria is most likely to act as camouflage to distract public attention from the massive concentration of US naval forces in the Mediterranean and the slow but steady build-up of US land forces in the north-eastern parts of Syria, in addition to the large-scale US sponsorship of the Saudi war in Yemen. This regional US policy based on military force is also supported by Israeli politicians and is supposed to contain Iran. In this context, US demands for Iranian withdrawal from Syria are a thinly-veiled effort to break the strategic alliance between the two countries that has been in place since the 1980s and serves as another US excuse to occupy Syrian territory.

In mid-2018, the results of the Syrian conflict are as follows: the "Axis of Resistance" made up of Syria, Iran and Hezbollah has not been broken and the Syrian government has succeeded in taking back around 80 per cent of the national territory. Russia has strengthened its traditional role as a veto power with regard to Syria due to its limited military intervention since 2015 tipping the balance in favour of Damascus. In diplomatic terms, Russia has strongly engaged by negotiating with all local and regional actors. This has clarified that no solution is possible in Syria without Russia's endorsement. The US and the EU countries have refused to join this process, however. Iran has also defended its regional position, although the domestic economic cost for supporting Syria has been increasingly felt by the Iranian people. Crucially, any defeat in Syria would result in a follow-up US and Israeli offensive against Iran.

As a country currently balancing between both sides of the conflict, Turkey has taken advantage of the unclear geopolitical situation in the north of Syria. The country had initially, since at least 2012, served as the principal external platform for the Islamist insurgents to attack the Syrian state under the guidance of Turkey's intelligence agencies. More recently, since 2018, the Erdogan government has started to collect the spoils of war by occupying the north-western corner of Syria. It also aims to realise further gains by linking up with Russia and Iran in order to act as a guaranteeing power for the "de-escalation zone" around the north-western city of Idlib. In parallel, Turkey has complained to the US about the latter's backing of the Kurdish militias (YPG) in the Syrian territories south of the Euphrates River, fearing that these militias could be used against Turkey at some future point. By mid-2018, the US began

accommodating Turkish demands: joint “patrolling” of Turkish and US troops on Syrian territories around the predominantly Kurdish city of Manbij, located in the northeast of Aleppo Governorate, started in June of 2016, signalling a degree of mutual accommodation of Turkish and US regional interests.

This directly relates to the larger US strategy with regard to Syria. Once again, one must stress the continuity of US goals since 2003, namely to enforce either regime change in Damascus or, alternatively, to take over as much territory and resources as possible to ensure that what remains of Syria is economically unviable. By occupying the territories east of the Euphrates River, the US controls a large share (up to 90 per cent) of Syria's oil and gas production and much of the fertile soil necessary to feed Syria.

According to a recently leaked diplomatic report, the US currently focuses on dividing Syria by separating the territory east of the Euphrates River and by reorganizing the local militias in this region in a way that weakens the Kurdish (YPG) element and strengthens other local Arab forces willing to collaborate with the US, to invite Turkey to participate in the occupation of the eastern sectors of Syria and to boycott the Sochi peace conference organised by Russia and any other Russia-led peace process. Instead, the US intend to focus exclusively on the Geneva-based Syria talks under the auspices of the United Nations special envoy Staffan de Mistura in order to transmit US preferences to the other actors.<sup>83</sup> The US also appears to be interested in inviting more and more actors (France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and UAE) to send troops to the Syrian territory east of the Euphrates following the concept of “safety in numbers”. Having France participate in the occupation of Syria also helps to silence any scruples on the part of some EU states holding on to the concept of the EU as a “norm entrepreneur”. Those who directly participate are in no position to complain any more.

As for the Arab monarchies, they have all heavily invested into warring in Syria and Yemen and have in recent years purchased record amounts of US, British and French military supplies. They have also funded and supplied the Islamist groups which, in turn, have largely removed the presence of the Syrian state from the territories east of the Euphrates River – this was referred to in US intelligence reports as the creation of a “Salafist principality in eastern Syria”.<sup>84</sup> Islamist militias such as ISIS have in turn largely been destroyed by

---

<sup>83</sup> Mohamed Ballout, Walid Sharara “Washington to its allies: Let us divide Syria” (in Arabic), *Al Akhbar*, 22 February 2018, <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/245070>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

<sup>84</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, “Information Report 14-L-0552/DIA/ 287”, 12 August 2012, <http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Pg.-291-Pgs.-287-293-JW-v-DO-D-and-State-14-812-DOD-Release-2015-04-10-final-version11.pdf>. (Accessed 30 August 2018).

aerial bombing and the Kurdish YPG fighting them on the ground with US support. In this manner, the territory has been fought over twice and it might now be the turn of the Kurds to be replaced by other US auxiliaries. In any case, the Arab monarchies have lost their geopolitical investment and their dependence on US protection is near absolute. None of the involved states have any realistic prospects for upward mobility in the regional hierarchy of states.

Finally, Israel has made use of the Syrian war to further expand its regional “strategic depth”. While it has offended against Lebanese sovereignty for many years, by violating its airspace on a practically daily basis, it has now also added the Syrian airspace to its zone of operations (with the exception of sectors of Syrian airspace “reserved” for US and Russian forces and backed up by air defence systems). Israel and the US continue to act jointly in the region, but play different tactical roles.

To conclude, the Syrian war has highlighted that hard power – military force – is routinely applied at the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The driving force in this conflict over world order is the US with Israel, a set of Arab client regimes and powers such as France and the UK. New-style US-led “forever wars” have now filled the first two decades of the new century producing a world of rapidly diminishing resources and eradicating the joint cultural heritage of humanity in many parts of the Middle East. In this context, the Syrian population is collectively punished for living in the wrong place at the wrong time. This conflict is a warning call about what could happen in other places in the near future.