



Why Syria?

A Concise, Broad Brush Analysis of the Overall Situation In and Around Syria – Or, More Accurately, Bilad al-Sham

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Executive Summary

- * The June 22nd Syrian shooting down of a Turkish RF-4E demonstrates just how explosive the situation in and around Syria is. Moscow now hopes that both Ankara and Washington realize that attacking Syria will be significantly different than attacking Libya.
- * Although a growing number of Syrians on all sides are dying and injured in the escalating multi-faceted fratricidal war – Syrians have simultaneously lost control over the dominant trends of the war in their own country. The war in Syria increasingly aims to further the grand-strategic interests of aspirant regional powers at the expense of all Syrians.
- * The crux of the profound transformations in the Greater Middle East is the demise of the modern Arab State and Arab nationalism. The interrelations between the four Muslim regional powers now follow the historic patterns of the interactions between the Persian Empire, the Ottoman Caliphate, Bilad al-Sham [historic Greater Syria] and Bilad al-Kanana [historic Greater Egypt] even though these historic blocs are now constrained within the boundaries of the states of Iran, Turkey, Syria and Egypt respectively.
- * In the aftermath of the Islamists' electoral victory in Egypt, there emerges a tripartite axis of Egypt-Iran-Turkey aimed to take care of "all Muslim and Arab states" – jointly suppressing the ascent of traditional Arabism while setting aside their Sunni-Shiite disputes. Turkey, Iran and Egypt must first bring down the strongest elements of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. Only then, will the Islamist tripartite alliance be able to take over the Sunni parts of Bilad al-Sham, and then converge on al-Jazeera [historic Arabian Peninsula] with Iran exploiting the Shiite population and Egypt and Turkey inciting an "Arab Spring" among the Sunni population.
- * Obama favors a web of centralized-autocratic Islamist regimes in the existing Arab states as the key to instant gratification. Russia and its European partners dread such Islamist power will come at the expense of grass-roots trends – threatening long-term socio-political and economic stability. The political dispute between the United States and the European powers is open and bitter. Both sides are pushing their local allies and proxies in and around Syria to the point of explosion that will set the whole region aflame and bring Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel into active war.
- * The sole alternative is the consolidation, through negotiations, of a viable Syria strong and stable. The challenge is to define the delicate balance of the distinct identities of Syria's diverse minorities – who play a crucial role in the Fertile Crescent of Minorities – and the imperative of a viable central government in Damascus – who implements the role of Bilad al-Sham.
- * Otherwise, we all have to wait for the explosion...



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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State. He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports. Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



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ANALYSIS

On June 22, 2012, Syrian air defense shot down a Turkish Air Force RF-4E while inside Syrian airspace over Syrian territorial waters. Both Ankara and its Obama White House patrons are still pressing NATO to capitalize on the incident in order to escalate the foreign military intervention against the beleaguered Assad administration even though such an intervention would inevitably spark a regional war and draw both Israel and Iran into the conflict. Thus, the June 22nd incident demonstrates just how explosive the situation in and around Syria is.

The key to the incident lies in the changes to the Turkish aerial operations near the Syrian coast since late-May. Prior to these changes, Turkish reconnaissance flights used to cruise along Syria's territorial waters in a roughly north-south pattern. Turkish aircraft had strayed into Syrian airspace in the past, but quickly corrected their course. Syria did not react to these intrusions.

In the last few weeks, a growing number of Turkish sorties aimed to provoke and test the Syrian air defense system in order to map the latest batteries provided by Russia and their state of readiness. Hence, the Turkish fighters fly very low and fast on a west-east pattern as if planning to cross into Syria. This approach elicits the activation of the air defense system along the Mediterranean coast. The Turkish aircraft usually veer at the last minute. According to Syrian and Russian sources, US EW reconnaissance aircraft and naval vessels are always in the area at the time of such coast-skirting flights by Turkish fighters in order to record the Syrian reaction to the Turkish provocations. (There's nothing new or original in these tactics for the US and British air forces routinely conducted similar provocations along the Soviet Union's and Warsaw Pact's coastlines throughout the Cold War.) Not without reason, both Damascus and Moscow have interpreted these sorties as testing of the Syrian air defense in preparation for possible US/NATO air strikes against Syria.

On June 22, around 07:30 GMT, two Turkish Phantoms – an RF-4E and an escorting F-4E – took off from their regular Erhac Air Base in Malatya. However they flew in southwest direction and vanished "behind" Cyprus. Syrian radars in Ras-al-Baseet and Latakia picked up the two Phantoms as they emerged from behind the Cypriot pan-handle. The two Phantoms first raced toward Turkish territory and reemerged skirting the Syrian airspace near Ras-al-Baseet. The two Phantoms then made a couple of runs toward Ras-al-Baseet – the last being a low-altitude (about 300 - 350 ft) straight approach in which the RF-4E penetrated Syrian airspace and was shot down around 09:00 GMT.

The air defense dispositions just south of Ras-al-Baseet are brand new. They include the latest model Buk-M2 SAMs, radars and command vehicles delivered and installed only in late-May. Syrian crews are still learning the system with the aid of Russian "civilian experts". Little wonder that the Turkish Air Force has indeed been provoking and sizing up the recently supplied Buk-M2 batteries between Ras-al-Baseet and Latakia since early June.

As in all the previous engagements with the Buk-M2 batteries, the Syrians only activated the target acquisition radars but not the fire control radars. Hence, the Phantoms knew they were discovered by the Syrian air defense but were not under threat of being shot down by the battery they were provoking or harassing. What the Turkish Air Force did not know on June 22nd is that the Syrians laid an ambush using the Pantsyr-1 air defense vehicles (combining 57E6-E shorter-range SAMs and 30mm guns). Significantly, the Pantsyr-1 relies on optical target-tracking and radio-command guidance. In other words, the Pantsyr-1 can operate on the basis of



warning data acquired by others – such as the Buk-M2 batteries’ target acquisition radar – and launch without any of the forewarning associated with homing by fire-control radar. Indeed, the RF-4E was brought down by a Pantsyr-1 SAM while the Turkish aircrews were certain the Buk-M2 battery they were provoking was not homing on them.

The Turkish RF-4E was thus the victim of a well-planned ambush that was waiting for Turkish fighters to violate Syrian airspace. Such an ambush reflects a high-level decision to shoot down Turkish intruders – that is, air force aircraft of a NATO member country. Since the Pantsyr-1 system, like the Buk-M2, was supplied only in late-May and the Syrian crews are still learning the system with the aid of Russian “civilian experts” – the Russians must have known about a Syrian decision to ambush the Turkish Air Force.

The Syrian unit responsible for the ambush was the 73rd Brigade of the 26th Air Defense Division. The 26th Air Defense Division is deployed between Ras-al-Baseet and Latakia, and is known to be cooperating with the Russian naval air defense units protecting the Russian installations in Latakia and the various Russian naval vessels off the Syrian coast. This means that it is virtually inconceivable that the Russian military – and thus the Kremlin – did not have a forewarning from its own sources (assuming that Damascus had chosen to withhold such important decision from its guardians in Moscow). Hence, at the very least, the Kremlin did not do anything to prevent the shooting down of a NATO fighter aircraft.

That same afternoon, two Turkish Air Force F-16s were sent to investigate the RF-4E’s downing. The F-16s flew low and in a threatening pattern over the Syrian air defense batteries south of Ras-al-Baseet – that is, over Syrian land. The Syrians opened fire on the F-16s but did not launch any missiles. One of the F-16s was damaged – having been hit by 30mm gun-fire from a Pantsyr-1 system. After that, the Turkish Air Force stopped penetrating Syrian airspace in the coastal area.

That night, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called the top military and intelligence chiefs for “a crisis meeting” to discuss the ramifications of the shoot-down and what to do next in Syria. Erdogan told the chiefs that the Syrian action cannot go without “proper reaction” and that the overall situation in Syria has become “intolerable” for Turkey. Consequently, the Turkish military has been deploying sizeable forces to the border with Syria – particularly in the volatile southwestern areas. As well, Turkish F-16s have been conducting aggressive patrols, including mock-attacks on Syrian helicopters as well as tank and artillery units, up-to 4 -5 kms inside Syrian territory. It is only a question of time before somebody opens fire and sparks a wider incident. Nevertheless, Moscow still hopes that both Ankara and Washington now realize that attacking Syria will be significantly different than attacking Libya.

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Although a growing number of Syrians on all sides are dying and injured in the escalating multi-faceted fratricidal war – Syrians have simultaneously lost control over the dominant trends of the war in their own country. Simply and starkly put – growing numbers of Syrians lose life and limb in a war that increasingly aims to further the grand-strategic interests of aspirant regional powers – Turkey, Iran and Qatar – at the expense of all Syrians. The primary objective of these three powers is to ensure a strong centralized regime in Damascus based on Jihadist elements that, jointly with a comparable regime in Baghdad, will be firmly within their sphere of influence and constitute a springboard against oil-rich conservative Arab governments. The intervention by the Obama Administration in support of Turkey, Iran and Qatar only serves to markedly aggravate an already



explosive situation.

The Islamist-Jihadist strategic posture has markedly improved in the summer of 2012 with the consolidation of Islamist power in Cairo. The victory of the Islamists-Jihadists in the Egyptian elections that culminated in the election of the Muslim Brothers' candidate Muhammad Mursi as president further consolidated the new strategic posture in the Greater Middle East. Back in early December 2011, Tehran proposed in great secrecy to Ankara and Cairo a major grand-strategic proposal – namely, that “a tripartite axis of Egypt-Iran-Turkey” be set up in order to take care of the rest of the Middle East. Tehran argued that the three countries can and should establish hegemony over and guide “all Muslim and Arab states.” In late June 2012, the just elected Mursi reiterated Cairo’s support. “Part of my agenda is the development of ties between Iran and Egypt that will create a [new] strategic balance in the region,” he said. Mursi also called Turkey a “critical Egypt ally” whose ascent can be “an aspiration point for Arab countries.” Mursi and his innermost circle are inclined to think in Islamist regional terms. For example, on May 1st, Egyptian Cleric Safwat Higazi, one of Mursi’s campaign managers, described the ramifications of Mursi’s election. Under Mursi, “the dream of the Islamic Caliphate is being realized” as “the United States of the Arabs,” Higazi declared. “The capital of the Caliphate – the capital of the United States of the Arabs – will be Jerusalem.” Ultimately, Egypt’s aspirations to be a leader of the Mashriq will inevitably lead to a major crisis with Israel.

However, the crux of the profound transformations unfolding in the Greater Middle East is the completion of the demise of the modern Arab State and Arab nationalism. Although the Arab World has never legitimized the Western concept of a Westphalian State – the cataclysmic upheaval since late-2010 proved strong enough to bring the rejection process to completion. Thus, the most tangible and enduring outcome of the Intifada’s or Awakening engulfing the Arab World has been the redefining and redirecting of the regional dynamics in heritage cognition and percept. Thus, the interrelations between the four Muslim regional powers now follow the historic patterns of the interactions between the Persian Empire, the Ottoman Caliphate, Bilad al-Sham [historic Greater Syria] and Bilad al-Kanana [historic Greater Egypt] even though these historic blocs are now constrained within the boundaries of the states of Iran, Turkey, Syria and Egypt respectively. While the drastic realignments between the four “states” in recent months do not make sense in terms of conventional international relations – they make perfect sense in the context of these four powers – even when constrained within the modern states’ boundaries – redefining their regional role and posture in their historic-legacy frameworks.

Moreover, the Jihadists interpret their imminent triumph in Afghanistan and Pakistan, coupled with the ascent of Iran, as the beginning of the fateful “End-of-Time Battle” for the Middle East. According to the Sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad, the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Khorasan [which encompasses the Central Asian republics, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and Iran] would create conducive conditions for Islam’s triumph in the “End-of-Time Battle”. According to Prophet’s Sayings, Jihadist forces will then arrive in the Middle East from the East and wage the fateful victorious battle for the liberation of Bilad al-Sham and al-Jazeera [historic Arabian Peninsula], and the establishment of the Mosque of al-Aqsa as the center of a new Caliphate. This is not idle folklore for the Jihadist Shurah has been working on laying the ground for the Islamist-Jihadist onslaught in the context of the Intifada’s or Awakening. Extensive organizational, financial and security support has been provided to the various Islamist-Jihadist entities throughout the Middle East by teams of highly trained Jihadist operatives called “the Son of the Soil/Land” (Ibn ul-Balad) that operate within non-state regional and heritage frames of reference. As well, special and terrorist operations are conducted



jointly by teams of the revitalized “Shadow Army” (Laskhar al-Zil) that were trained in Afghanistan-Pakistan and Chechnya, and elite Jihadist networks of the various localized “Al-Qaeda Jihad” movements throughout the region that are also organized along heritage lines since the middle of the first decade of the 21st Century.

Hence the realignment of Turkish-Iranian grand strategy. Since the original outbreak of the Arab Intifada’s back in late 2010, both Ankara and Tehran have been torn by conflicting vital interests. Both powers have a common end objective – to suppress the possible ascent of traditional Sunni Arabism hailing from Bilad al-Sham and al-Jazeera. However, they differed on the regional posture that would contain this ascent of Arabism. Ankara has been determined to expand its regional hegemony to the detriment of the traditional power system originating from the Arabian Peninsula by establishing a north-south Sunni Wedge. Tehran has been loath to give up on its east-west Shiite Crescent with Lebanon’s HizbAllah and Iraq’s Shiite Government. Thus, the common denominator of both powers remains to quickly dominate the Sunni heartland of Syria and western Iraq. And this Iranian-Turkish competition was the original key to the escalating fratricidal war in Syria.

However, in recent months, both Ankara and Tehran realized that the consolidation of a tripartite alliance with the Ikhwan’s Cairo toward jointly suppressing the ascent of traditional Arabism is far more crucial than resolving their lingering Sunni-Shiite disputes. To do so, Turkey, Iran and Egypt must first bring down the strongest elements of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, and especially their Levant section – the Allawites, Druze, Maronites and Jews – that constitutes the historic buffer between the Arab Middle East and the non-Arab powers, as well as facilitates the West’s access to the Middle East. This way, both Turkey and Iran can also turn with impunity on the other major minority group they both seek to destroy – the Kurds. Ankara, Tehran and Cairo are cognizant that such a regional strategy means provoking a crisis, and perhaps war, with both Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Once the Fertile Crescent of Minorities collapses – the members of the Islamist tripartite alliance can first take over the Sunni parts of Bilad al-Sham, and then converge on al-Jazeera with Iran exploiting the Shiite population and Egypt and Turkey inciting an “Arab Spring” among the Sunni population. Qatar is convinced it would be empowered to “handle” the Arabian Peninsula on behalf of the regional dominant powers. Toward this end, Doha is playing a major role in exacerbating the fratricidal war in Syria. The leaders in Ankara, Tehran, Cairo and Doha are convinced that through a combination of political pressure and sponsored wars-by-proxy (including Jihadist terrorism) they would be able to consolidate their hegemony over the entire region – including the three Holy Shrines of Islam, the vast energy reserves of the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean, and maritime choke-points (the Suez Canal, Bab al-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz). The leaders in Ankara, Tehran, Cairo and Doha are cognizant that should Israel and/or Saudi Arabia put up a fight – the entire region will explode and their chances to realize these objectives will go up in flames. However, they are convinced that the Obama White House will contain both Israel and Saudi Arabia – coercing them to accept the ascent of the Islamist powers at the expense of their own vital interests.

Significantly, these developments, albeit in a shallow way and for instant gratification, serve the overall political inclinations of the Obama White House. Obama’s Washington favors the consolidation of a web of centralized-autocratic Islamist regimes in the existing Arab states throughout the Greater Middle East – even if they are not pro-American – as the key to instant stability, populist welfare administration, and clean governance practices. Moreover, Obama is convinced that Iran will self-restrain its aspirations and moderate its behavior because of the integration into the tripartite alliance or a similar regional arrangement. Therefore, the Obama White



House is encouraging Turkey, Qatar and other states to support with weapons and funds the Islamist-Jihadist forces in Syria, as well as tolerating the Iranian sponsorship of Quds Forces' own Syrian Jihadist forces – all in order to facilitate the establishment of a centralized Islamist regime in Damascus.

However, such a consolidation of centralized Islamist power will inevitably come at the expense and suppression of the grassroots trends in the region and thus threatens the long-term socio-political and economic stability. Consequently, the major European powers directly influenced and affected by the situation in the Greater Middle East – mainly Russia and its European partners – have become increasingly involved in the Syrian crisis. Their main concern is securing long-term stability in the entire region – including the Arab Gulf and the Suez Canal – and containing the ascent of the radical-Jihadist elements. In this context, Russia is trying desperately to convince its West European allies to reexamine the regional dynamics in traditional terms, empower the historic-legacy Arab blocs within existing states' boundaries, sustain a viable Fertile Crescent of Minorities as the key to regional stability, as well as pressure and contain both Turkey and Iran – Russia's historic nemeses in the region – so that they cannot exploit the upheaval in the Arab World in their favor.

Under these circumstances, the immediate threat is the explosiveness of the lingering fratricidal war in Syria. The seemingly uncontrollable escalation and the growing involvement of regional states and Jihadist forces guarantee that any spark will set the entire region aflame with catastrophic consequences for all. Hence, it is imperative to defuse the Syrian crisis before it spreads throughout the region. Therefore, the general approach of the European powers to the Syrian crisis is that the sole way to reducing the violence and ultimately ameliorating the conflict is by helping Syrians on all sides to reassert control over the fratricidal war. Consequently, all Syrians will be able to decide their own destiny through meaningful negotiations and ultimately reconciliation and state-building. Significantly, the European powers are committed to the principle of "transformation of power" rather than "regime change" in Damascus.

The political dispute between the two camps of foreign powers – the United States and the European powers – is becoming open and bitter despite the commonly held commitment to negotiating conflict resolution. Thus, on the one hand, all Western powers are united in their resolve to enforce conflict resolution before a regional escalation becomes uncontrollable. On the other hand, the United States and the European powers compete and quarrel over the modalities for attaining a negotiated settlement. The horrific danger therein is that Western – and particularly the United States' – intervention policies, no matter how well intentioned, are based on the effort to define dynamics and expect outcomes in terms of viable and legitimate modern states that are no longer relevant. This approach is counterproductive and inherently explosive because the "states" in question have been rejected by the grassroots through their various levels authorities – from local governance to national government.

The sole alternative to this horror scenario is the consolidation, through negotiations, of a viable Syria strong and stable enough to perform the regional responsibilities of Bilad al-Sham. Only such a Syria will be able to withstand, and even reverse, the ascent of the Islamist tripartite alliance. The post-war Syria should be built from the bottom up – thus ensuring the communal and individual rights of all Syrians. The primary challenge is in defining the delicate balance between local, regional and centralized governance authorities in order to ensure both the distinct identities of Syria's diverse minorities – who play a crucial role in the Fertile Crescent of Minorities – and the imperative of a viable central government in Damascus – who implements the role of Bilad al-Sham. The post-war Syria would have to be an active participant in the regional stability architecture



envisaged by Russia and its European partners, which means peaceful coexistence with all of Syria's neighbors. The economy of the post-war Syria would have to be Western-inclined to guarantee the close political-economic cooperation of the European powers and eventually the United States. There is an urgent imperative to cease hostilities and begin the negotiations process.

Otherwise, we all have to wait for the explosion...

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.