

# THE REGIONAL STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA

edited by

**Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy**



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© ECFR July 2013.

ISBN: 978-1-906538-86-6

Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 35 Old Queen Street, London, SW1H 9JA, United Kingdom

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*Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy*  
**Hegemony and sectarianism  
after Iraq**

Two years after the outbreak of a largely peaceful uprising, Syria has fallen into a deep civil war that is increasingly drawing in regional actors. While the battle on the ground continues to be predominantly fought by Syrians, neighbouring powers have a growing stake in the conflict, providing important patronage to the warring parties as part of a broader regional struggle. This confrontation has drawn in Iran, Iraq, and the Lebanese Hezbollah movement in support of the Assad regime, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey behind the rebels. Other players, including Jordan, the Kurds, and Israel, are active in pursuit of narrower interests. Violent tensions are now spreading out beyond Syria's porous borders and the risk of a regional conflagration is growing.

While regional players have been active in Syria since the early months of the conflict in 2011, the intensity of their involvement has clearly escalated in recent months. In June, Hezbollah fighters played a key role in helping President Bashar al-Assad seize the strategic town of Qusair and, together with Iranian advisors, have now assumed a greater role in facilitating regime efforts. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey remain the key sponsors of the rebel movement, providing it with arms and finance. There is also a growing cohort of foreign militants – from across the region and beyond (including from the Central Asian–Caucasus region, the AfPak theatre, and Europe) – fighting on behalf of the rebels. According to one credible estimate, the number of these fighters now stands at five thousand.<sup>1</sup> Recent calls by leading regional religious figures, including the influential Qatar-based cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, for a Sunni jihad in Syria will fuel this flow.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hegghammer and Aaron Y. Zelin, "How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade", *Foreign Affairs*, 7 July 2013, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139557/thomas-hegghammer-aaron-y-zelin/how-syrias-civil-war-became-a-holy-crusade>.

At the same time, neighbouring states are feeling the chill winds of violent destabilisation with increasing frequency. Attacks in Iraq killed more than one thousand people in May, the largest figure since the height of the civil war and an upsurge partly attributed to revived Sunni militancy linked to the Syria conflict; in Lebanon, clashes between pro- and anti-Assad groups are now happening on a near daily basis and the country is teetering on the edge of a deep abyss; and in Turkey, two car bombs in May killed 46 people in the town of Reyhanli, which sits along the Syrian border, the country's largest terrorist attack in recent history. Meanwhile, of deepening concern for almost all of Syria's immediate neighbours, the flow of refugees continues, seemingly without end. Lebanon, a country of four million, already hosts up to one million Syrian refugees. Jordan and Turkey host another half a million each, Iraq more than 150,000, and, further afield, Egypt has also received 300,000 Syrians. The associated political and economic strains could, quite simply, prove overwhelming, and although all of the states are trying to limit new arrivals, they keep on coming. No neighbour remains unaffected. Even Israel – not a destination for refugees – faces new threats emanating from its de facto border with Syria on the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

In this context, this series of essays charts the interests of the key regional players and aims to deepen understanding of the forces shaping the regional dimension of the conflict. The battle for Syria has morphed into a regional conflict, drawing in multiple and competing ambitions and sending out increasingly destabilising ripples. There will of course be no end to the fighting in Syria until domestic actors reach some degree of common accord. But, short of a comprehensive understanding of the motivations driving increasingly influential regional actors, efforts aimed at charting a path out of violence are likely to continue to falter.

## Iraq and the regional order

Given the maelstrom of competing ambitions, it is hard to identify one overarching narrative guiding regional involvement in the conflict. The fact that the warring parties and their backers largely break down along communal lines – Assad tied to regional Shia forces and the rebels to Sunni actors – makes it easy to assume that Syria and the region are engaged in a religious war driven primarily by identity politics. And indeed the reality is that the sectarian dimension has developed into the most powerful discourse, assuming a strong imaginative hold over actors, state and non-state, that is directly fuelling

the escalatory dynamic of conflict and sharpening polarisation across the entire region.

However, the picture laid out in these essays is that the regional battle over Syria has emerged out of a more conventional struggle for regional hegemony, driven by geopolitical ambitions of a worldly nature rather than celestial differences over religious beliefs. Sectarian prejudices and ambitions animate most of the actors identified in this series, but regional engagement in Syria is first and foremost a product of strategic ambitions. These dynamics can be traced back to the 2003 Iraq War, which, by upending the existing regional balance, set in motion a new competition for regional hegemony – played out in sectarian guises and now coming to a devastating head in Syria. While many observers ask whether the fall of Saddam Hussein planted a democratic seed that bore fruit in the Arab uprisings of 2011, it is in fact the destructive forces unleashed by the Iraq conflict that are now playing out most powerfully across the region.

Viewed through a regional lens, the Iraq War disrupted the existing order. With Saddam used by regional and Western actors in the 1980s as a bulwark against Iranian post-revolution expansionary influence and, later, cornered alongside Iran as part of a strategy of dual containment, the collapse of the Ba'ath order and its eventual replacement by forces aligned with Tehran helped precipitate a wider shift in regional influence in favour of Iran and its so-called resistance axis – Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas. Following Iran's success in Iraq, these forces cemented their sway in other contested areas, including Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, the occupied Palestinian territories (with Hamas winning Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 2006 and then excluded from a West Bank role but assuming sole control of Gaza), while also establishing broad popular support across the region. In one 2008 poll, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Bashar al-Assad, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad emerged as the three most popular regional leaders among Arab public opinion.<sup>2</sup>

This emerging material and ideological strength came at the expense of traditional regional powers, notably Saudi Arabia, which felt increasingly threatened by Iran's growing influence and pushed back with its support

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<sup>2</sup> See *Arab Public Opinion Surveys*, Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development, available at <http://www.sadat.umd.edu/new%20surveys/surveys.htm>.



of opposition forces in Lebanon and Iraq, cementing an effective regional cold war with Tehran. The regional alternative to the resistance axis was handicapped in several ways, namely by its strong relationship with the deeply unpopular United States, its lack of a mobilising *raison d'être* (described as the region's "moderates", they had no counter-narrative to sell), and by weak political leadership (Egypt under Hosni Mubarak could not assume that role, and neither could the Saudi gerontocracy, while Qatar at that time assumed more of a mediating role between camps).

As part of these changing regional dynamics, identity politics – and specifically the struggle between Sunnis and Shias – assumed growing prominence. In Iraq, the crucible of this confrontation, battle lines for control of the state broke down clearly along sectarian lines – with Sunnis mobilising to defend their dominant state position under Saddam and Shias looking to reverse their longstanding marginalisation. A decade of communal conflict in Iraq fuelled a sectarian framing that gained wider regional sway, particularly as the pivotal animosity between Riyadh and Tehran also allowed for a neat Sunni–Shia divide. Over the past decade Sunni actors, both state and, more importantly, non-state localised actors in places such as Tripoli in northern Lebanon and Fallujah in north-west Iraq, have grown increasingly resentful of the growing ascendancy of Shia forces at their expense. By 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan was already referring to a threat from an emerging "Shia crescent" of power.

## The regional cold war

Ten years on, these forces have now come full circle in Syria with devastating consequences. While Syria's fight remains a struggle largely fought by Syrians focused on their own ambitions, the desire of regional players to inject themselves into the conflict and the willingness of domestic actors to turn to external patronage has paved the way for a broader confrontation. The proxy element of the Syria conflict militates against de-escalation, fatigue, and deal-making; it has become the epicentre of the regional cold war, assuming a more deadly form than ever and becoming an arena that each side has defined as a "must not lose". While victory may prove elusive, decisive defeat cannot be accepted.

Ironically, this new regional power play is taking place as the US under President Barack Obama draws down its war efforts in the region, pivots away from the region, and places greater focus on "nation building at home". While

vacuum that has emerged as a result of his less gung-ho approach towards the Syria conflict is encouraging this regional jostling.

This was not the case when the Syrian uprising broke out, in March 2011. Regional players at first viewed it through the lens of the Arab uprisings then sweeping across the region, provoking caution rather than support, particularly among Gulf states fearful that instability might seep into their own kingdoms. These states, as well as Turkey, initially responded by reaching out to Assad, hoping to persuade him to appease the street with limited reforms and thereby maintain domestic stability and his position in power. However, as Hassan demonstrates in his piece on the Gulf, with Assad rapidly embracing a policy of repression – and drawing closer to Tehran – in short order Saudi Arabia and Qatar came to view the conflict through a broader strategic lens and turned their focus towards regime change.

Given the regional power shift generated by the Iraq War, Sunni Gulf powers, rapidly emerging as the main backers of the rebels, came to see the battle for Syria as an opportunity to push back against expanded Iranian influence. Suddenly the prospect loomed of dealing the resistance axis a dramatic setback in Syria and, by virtue of its strategic status at the heart of the Levant and close political and sociological linkages with its neighbours, of opening up similar possibilities in Lebanon and Iraq. Unsurprisingly, Iran and Hezbollah simultaneously shored up their own material support for Assad, intent on preserving their post-Iraq War strategic advantages. In the analysis of Jubin Goodarzi on Iran, there was never much doubt that Tehran would offer Assad full backing despite having supported regional uprisings elsewhere. The response of the Gulf states, together with the hard anti-Assad line taken by the West, confirmed Iran's worst fears that the position of Sunni powers was as much about weakening it as it was Assad.

Of course, the humanitarian imperative, driven by popular pressure, certainly plays a role in shaping policy, particularly for neighbouring states. As Julien Barnes-Dacey explains, both Lebanon and Jordan are struggling under the immense economic – and associated political – pressures imposed by dramatic refugee flows. But, despite the savage brutality of the conflict, the regional states driving the conflict – the Gulf and Iran – quite simply would not have enlisted with such fervour had the strategic ramifications not been so enticing or threatening. Contrast the regional response to Syria with that directed towards Bahrain, where a 2011 (and ongoing) crackdown against popular protests – though this time with a Sunni monarchy facing down a Shia majority

demanding change – enjoyed strong support and for which protesters gained little regional sympathy, let alone material backing.

This being said, it would be wrong to solely attribute regional involvement in Syria to this broader strategic confrontation or to so neatly break the struggle down into two monolithic blocs. While it is clear that those supporting and opposing Assad share certain overarching strategic ambitions, there are also rivalries within the competing camps and the pursuit of narrower interests that are making the conflict even harder to unravel. Most notably, as Hassan makes clear, Gulf states, while waging a battle against Assad and his regional axis, are also engaged in a struggle for influence among themselves – one that is working to the detriment of the anti-Assad cause. Riyadh and Doha, in particular, back different elements of the opposition, seeking to develop proxies that will give them the ascendancy in a potential post-Assad Syria. Qatar, like Turkey, has cultivated the Muslim Brotherhood and shown a willingness to facilitate more radical jihadist groups, while Saudi Arabia, long fearful of the potentially destabilising impact of both groups, backs more politically conservative Salafis and, increasingly, so-called moderates. Clashes on the ground between anti-Assad forces are growing in frequency.

Meanwhile, Turkey, itself looking to see an allied, Islamist alternative to Assad in Syria, is also pursuing more than one agenda. It remains focused on limiting the potential for Syrian Kurds to secure autonomy, concerned that this would offer a new springboard for political and military support to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This would, as Nuh Yilmaz identifies, represent a potentially game-changing challenge to Turkey's national interests, and it has been an important reason behind Ankara's recent decision to advance peace talks with the PKK. It has also, however, been a source of tension between the Turkish-backed Syrian National Council and Free Syrian Army and the Kurdish opposition groups, further weakening the chances for achieving a more inclusive opposition front.

Assad's external backers, by contrast, have undoubtedly shown greater unity and commitment. Iran and Hezbollah, in particular, share a common purpose in restoring the strength of the resistance axis (from which Hamas has gradually backed away). However, the position of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is more conflicted. Up until the start of the uprising in Syria, Maliki viewed Assad as a cause of instability in Iraq and relations between the two countries were frosty at best. Maliki, meanwhile, though in part beholden to Tehran for his premiership, has long been resentful of Iranian influence

in Iraq. Hayder al-Khoei makes clear in his piece on Iraq that there is now no ambiguity regarding Maliki's support for Assad, based on his fears that the Sunni-dominated uprising is feeding resurgent Sunni militancy in Iraq. Al-Khoei explains that this position should not be confused with ideological affinity with Assad or blind loyalty to Iran. It is a pragmatic decision based on Maliki's own reading of his map of security concerns and interests.

This array of actors has forged a combustible mix that risks destabilising the entire region and that is coming together most dangerously in the form of a rampant new sectarianism given the links between Assad and Shia powers and the rebels and Sunni forces. While Assad has clearly manipulated communal dynamics with immensely destructive cynicism, and his backers are now mobilising regional Shia forces, Turkey and the Gulf have also not been shy in exploiting sectarian dynamics to strengthen the anti-Assad camp. And, as in Iraq post-2003, the unleashing of identity politics has assumed an escalatory cycle of its own, setting in motion an unprecedented degree of religious polarisation that is destabilising nearby states with mixed communal populations.

If, at one level, a number of countries are drivers in shaping the regional conflict – namely Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Iran – a second group finds itself being sucked into the conflict. Lebanon and Iraq both have internal dynamics that mirror those of Syria – the two countries are politically divided along sectarian lines with Sunni populations resentful of perceived Shia ascendancy – and fears are growing of similar violent implosions, particularly given that both Iranian and Gulf actors view them as part of the broader strategic battlefield. While both states continue to display resilience – in part because of their recent respective experience of devastating civil wars – the risk of renewed sectarian conflict is growing. At the same time, localised assertions of communal power are increasingly challenging the ability of central governments to exert central control, a scenario that potentially threatens the Levant with widening political fracture over the coming years.

Here it seems that the short-term strategic goals of the main regional sponsors of this descent into the abyss – on both sides – are calculated to outweigh these risks. For the likes of Iran and the Gulf states this partly reflects a perceived safety borne out of geographical distance from the conflict zone. However, it also reflects the strategic importance of the conflict for both sides, which for the Iranian regime in particular may also have assumed an existential tinge. The different authors show that for these actors, as for Turkey, too much has now been invested to easily backtrack and increasingly this may be blinding

them to ongoing miscalculations. Zero-sum ambitions are serving to entrench opposing positions, and great power politics are arguably accentuating the destructive dynamic. On the one hand, Europe and the US have lined up in support of the rebels and the necessity of Assad's demise, feeding dreams of victory while offering them very little in material support to bring it to bear. Russia, on the other hand, has made clear its absolute determination to ensure that the West cannot engineer regime change in Syria, providing Iran with room to continue backing Assad without trepidation.

To this picture a third group of countries should be added – the remaining neighbours who are concerned by more parochial interests, primarily security and stability at home, as in the case of Jordan and Israel, but also, for the Kurds, with securing deeper autonomy given the emerging vacuum of power within Syria. These states are charting independent paths. To the south, Amman is more concerned with its own stability than with the fate of Assad, argues Barnes-Dacey. While they may recently have opened their borders to weapons flows in support of the rebels, this comes out of a desire not only to ensure that jihadist extremists do not gain ground in southern Syria but also to try to stem the refugee flow. It also reflects a desire to gain favour from the Gulf states and especially to benefit from their economic largesse. The Hashemite Kingdom, however, has not set its sights on a strategic reworking of the region; its focus remains more narrowly fixed on supporting any form of transition that would safeguard its own stability.

Israel, meanwhile, fears that Syria, having long been a docile enemy, could emerge as a lawless home to jihadist forces that might target it. However, as Dimi Reider explains, Tel Aviv also sees profit in the conflict through the weakening of Iran and its resistance axis. For the moment, it remains uncertainly caught between these two strategic goals and more focused on ensuring that its immediate security interests are protected (notably when it comes to arms transfers) through an ongoing willingness to tactically intervene in the conflict where it sees fit, including with direct military strikes.

Syrian Kurds, on the other hand, are faced with hostility from multiple sides. Neither Turkey nor any other prominent actor in the Syrian conflict wishes to see greater autonomy for the Kurds in Syria. While the retraction of the Syrian state in Kurdish areas has provided the Kurds with an opportunity to assert greater control there, it has also left these areas more vulnerable to contestation from other groups. For this reason, as Dimitar Bechev argues in his essay on the Kurdish position, Syrian Kurds face a crucial question: which

power centre – the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq or the PKK – should take the lead in helping to secure their long-sought interests of greater autonomy in Syria?

## No peace without regional accord

In this context, hope for a regional push towards ending the conflict remains elusive. Left to their own devices, the driving parties, notably Iran, the Gulf, and Turkey, but also the likes of Hezbollah and Iraq, show little short-term propensity towards encouraging de-escalation. Instead, regional parties continue to invest ever more deeply in the conflict, even as the cost to Syria and the region rises exponentially – fuelling intensifying violence within Syria and widening destabilisation across the region.

Despite the current trajectory, however, some form of regional understanding, a “grand bargain” of sorts, remains an almost certain pre-requisite of any successful attempt to move towards a dampening of the violence, a preservation of the Syrian state, and regional containment. Unless foreign parties decide to press their allies within Syria towards the negotiating table – a hard sell even were there to be a regional move in that direction – there is little hope of progress in stemming levels of violence. Given the strength of regional support on both sides of the fight, driven by the strategic and even existential concerns outlined in these essays, an absolute victory for either side remains a highly unlikely alternative means of ending the conflict. Hardening attempts to secure total victory will only provoke an intensified counter-response. Prolonged warfare, division, and the de facto break-up of Syria are more likely.

The interests outlined in these essays make clear that a regional deal would require a recalibration of the ambitions and cost-benefit assessment motivating the key regional actors in the conflict. For any chance of success, regional actors will need to accept that there is unlikely to be an absolute regional winner in Syria and that a compromise deal offers the best way to protect their own most vital interests – themselves potentially more threatened by how far an unpredictable cycle of violence could go. Such an agreement would probably see Syria initially emerge as a shared sphere of influence, through, for instance, a domestic power-sharing agreement that draws in all sides, a step that would represent a significant climb-down for both domestic and regional actors.

It is also clear that all regional players will have to be part of the solution. There is little prospect of finding a deal if key actors with substantial interests are sidelined. Attempts to exclude Iran from any proposed talks, as desired by Saudi Arabia and some Western actors, are therefore a sure way of dooming any political process to failure. It is precisely because of Iran's deep interests in Syria, and its key material backing for Assad, that it must have a place at the table. While including Iran will not in itself deliver co-operation or compromise, its exclusion will result in a continued willingness to play a substantial spoiler role.

Meanwhile, the risk of regional contagion calls out for sustained regional and international focus. While Lebanon and Iraq are the states most immediately at risk of spillover violence, deepening sectarian polarisation threatens to contaminate the entire region and cement long-term destabilisation. Unless regional states act to contain the Syria crisis by providing greater support to neighbouring states and look to isolate them from, rather than draw them into, the strategic battlefield, while also working to stem the flow of sectarian incitement, the conflict will surely seep out across the region.

To date, more than anyone else, it has been the two joint United Nations–Arab League envoys for Syria, Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi, who have best recognised the importance of this form of regional accord. Their efforts, particularly Geneva I and II, have been built around the need to draw in the key regional actors in support of a political process, both as a critical means of securing the necessary buy-in to give diplomacy a chance in Syria, but also as a means of preventing wider implosion. However, these efforts have been continually frustrated, even undercut, by the unwillingness of regional and global actors to meaningfully support such an approach. Instead, outside states have continued to pursue a maximalism that translates into supporting their allies with political, financial, and military cover, thereby contributing to the intensification and prolongation of violence.

It is precisely for this reason that diplomatic efforts aimed at de-escalation should be encouraged as the least bad option for all regional actors at this stage and pursued with renewed vigour. While the odds of near-term success remain slim, recent regional leadership changes perhaps offer the beginnings of an opportunity for a shift in trajectory. In Iran, the election of Hassan Rouhani as president offers a momentary possibility to change the regional optics driving the Syria conflict, even if the Syria file does not sit within his hands. As made clear in these essays, the strategic rivalry between Iran and

its Gulf neighbours has been a key reason for the apparent intractability of the conflict, and Rouhani's election could represent an opening to dampen these tensions. Rouhani has at least stated that a priority will be mending fences with the Gulf and, if pursued, this could play a significant role in softening the zero-sum ambitions driving regional escalation. Meanwhile, the coming to power of a new emir in Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, may herald a recognition of over-reach in foreign policy, which could in turn soften Doha's maximalist ambitions in Syria. Doha was caught off-guard in Egypt when a military coup removed its ally, President Mohammed Morsi, and its favoured sons recently lost the leadership of the Syrian opposition; a Qatari rethink would provide a much-needed building block of any diplomatic efforts, given its central role in support of the opposition.

With the stakes so high, these diplomatic openings, small as they are, and the Geneva II initiative raised by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in May, should be energetically probed and supported by European states. For too long, the regional players, encouraged by their global allies, have sought to use Syria as a playground for the pursuit of their own perceived interests to the detriment of the Syrian people and regional well-being. If there is to be any hope for Syria and wider stability, this dynamic must urgently be reversed.



*Hassan Hassan*

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# The Gulf states: United against Iran, divided over Islamists

The interests and policies of the Arab Gulf states towards the Syrian uprising are often seen exclusively through the prism of their desire to dislodge Syria from the Iranian orbit, an effort thought to have been punctuated by a series of miscalculations. But, while a key aim of Gulf policy in the region is to weaken Iran, this does not account for the full complexity of Gulf interests and ambitions in Syria. It both ignores variations between the approaches of each Gulf state, which are in part informed by sectarian biases and intra-Gulf rivalries, and glosses over tensions between short-term priorities and long-term geopolitical interests.

The Gulf states' attempts to steer Damascus away from Tehran to bolster their regional standing is central to their approach in Syria. This derives from their long-term interest in countering Iranian power in the region, exerted over recent years through the so-called resistance axis, which, uniting Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas, has played an important role in weakening Gulf regional influence. Gulf leaders believe that a new – Sunni – regime in Damascus will naturally ally itself with the Gulf states at Iran's expense, particularly if they have helped establish the new order through financial and military support.

The potential demise of the pro-Iranian regime in Damascus offers the Gulf states the possibility of extending their regional influence. Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular believe that a friendly regime in Syria will give them influence over Shia-dominated Baghdad, over which they have had little sway, but which is seen as a critical player in the regional balance of power. Iraq's post-2003 alliance with Iran is perceived as one of the key reasons for Tehran's growing regional influence over the past decade. A Sunni state in Syria could serve to strengthen currently marginalised Iraqi Sunni forces, giving them – and their Gulf backers – greater influence in Baghdad. At the same time,

regime change in Damascus would help the Gulf states bolster their standing in Lebanon, already economically dependent on the Gulf, by strengthening pro-Sunni Gulf actors at the expense of the dominant pro-Assad Hezbollah movement. For the Gulf states, the Syria conflict is thus a critical battle for control of a key pivot state in the region. Drawing Damascus away from the Iranian camp is seen as a way of cementing broader regional influence in the Levant, and of re-establishing the more favourable regional balance of power that they lost following the United States' occupation of Iraq in 2003.

Cementing the long-established tribal links that span the region from the Gulf to Iraq, Syria, and Jordan is a further instrument and end of Gulf policy, often neglected by outside observers. Despite national borders, migrant tribes maintain strong relations with their regional relatives. Inter-marriage involving Syrian tribal leaders and Gulf royals is not uncommon, nor is the practice of calling upon prominent figures from the Gulf to solve tribal disputes. Syrian tribal members regularly travel to the Gulf for work, with some becoming naturalised citizens (especially in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia). These deep-rooted tribal bonds are often overlooked in analyses of the Gulf's response to the Syrian uprising, but have emerged as important sources of political and financial influence that the Gulf has effectively tapped into. If these links were harnessed, this would represent an important tool of Gulf regional influence extending from Syria through to western Iraq and Jordan, in the form of a "tribal crescent".

While these factors reflect the Gulf's long-term interests in the region, more immediate short-term interests that stem from recent regional developments are also important in explaining the Gulf's approach to the conflict in Syria. The Gulf states generally maintained a cautious tone during the first four months of the mass protests in Syria in 2011. Public statements were limited to calls for dialogue and an end to the violence, with mutual high-level visits between key Gulf and Syrian officials.<sup>3</sup> During this early stage Gulf leaders hoped that engagement with the regime would facilitate a peaceful solution, and, fearful of cementing a regional trend, were not set on seeing Bashar al-Assad ousted from power. As such, they were not yet prepared to take a public position on the conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> In April 2011, for example, the foreign ministers of both Qatar and the United Arab Emirates visited Damascus and expressed support for a peaceful solution to the crisis. In the same month, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem visited the UAE. In May, the Bahraini foreign minister visited Damascus, and the Omani foreign minister visited the Syrian capital in June, relaying a message on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

But, as the Syrian regime escalated its military campaign and the number of casualties significantly increased – by July 2011 more than 1,400 people had been killed in successive government crackdowns – the tone changed. Qatar closed its embassy in Syria on 18 July, and the Saudi king, Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, gave a speech in August condemning the regime’s violence against Syrian citizens, and promptly recalled the Saudi ambassador (a move emulated by Bahrain and Kuwait).<sup>4</sup> In November, the Arab League, under strong Gulf pressure, placed sanctions on Syria.

Such a change in tack can be explained in part by the pressure mounting on the Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Bahraini governments at home, where citizens gathered in support of the Syrian uprising. The decisions by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait to withdraw their ambassadors from Syria were certainly a reaction to this show of public outrage and a bid to contain popular energy. But this also reflected their diplomatic failure to persuade Assad to appease the demonstrators. Even so, their diplomatic overtures did not yet mark a distinctive shift in support for the Syrian uprising.

Continued Gulf hesitation was in fact a reflection of a growing Gulf rapprochement with Damascus that had been taking place in the years immediately prior to the uprising. The rapprochement was unprecedented, considering Ba’athist Syria’s close ties to Iran, which had developed in the years following the 1979 revolution at the expense of Syria’s relationship with the Gulf. This was especially true given that over the last decade relations soured over Lebanon in particular, culminating in Assad being accused of the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri (a Saudi national and ally), which laid bare a long-simmering split in Lebanese politics between the Gulf (and the West) on the one hand, and the Syria/Iran/Hezbollah alliance on the other. Relations then worsened, with a confident Assad seen as a survivor of the US-led invasion of Iraq, and the clout of the resistance axis has increased at the expense of the Saudi-led pro-Western Arab states. (During the Israel/Lebanon conflict of 2006, Assad called Gulf leaders “half men” for their criticism of Hezbollah.)

Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia began to try to entice Syria away from Iran using diplomacy. As such, relations warmed considerably between 2009 and 2010,

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<sup>4</sup> “‘No justification’ for Syrian clampdown, Saudi king says”, *CNN*, 7 August 2011, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/08/07/syria.saudi.arabia/index.html>.

with Assad visiting Riyadh three times and the Saudi king visiting Damascus. Gulf investments in Syria reached record highs.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Assad drew very close to Qatar, developing a strong personal and political relationship with the emir and working very closely together on a number of regional issues. It was these pre-uprising dynamics that helped to shape the Gulf's early, constrained approach to the uprising.

In this context, when the uprising first began, Gulf leaders felt that the time was ripe to finally pull Syria into their orbit. Saudi Arabia in particular took measures to draw Damascus away from the Iranian camp, while ensuring that the Syrian uprising did not spread across the region. However, the Gulf–Syria rapprochement was not yet sufficiently entrenched: Assad rejected their overtures in favour of continuing to trust in Iran, given their longstanding alliance. As violence escalated and the Assad regime showed no sign of compromise, Gulf leaders decisively changed tack and began to support the uprising openly. Saudi Arabia and Qatar began to work with others, including Turkey and France, to support the opposition with the direct goal of toppling the Assad regime.

However, instead of helping to build a real alternative to the Assad regime, Gulf support quickly revealed the vastly divergent approaches and interests of the Gulf states in the region. In particular, it served to intensify the rivalry between Riyadh and Doha, with each country supporting different groups within the opposition. This has led to a deepening fragmentation of the opposition's political and military forces. Most recently, in May 2013, a critical opposition gathering in Istanbul aimed at rejuvenating the opposition council collapsed into discord as a result of a battle for control between Qatari and Saudi-backed factions.

It is no secret that Qatar has been a strong financial and political backer of the Muslim Brotherhood, pitting itself against its Gulf neighbours (mainly the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, which have long distrusted the movement). Qatar's alliance with the Brotherhood is part of its wider ambition to become a key regional actor. With roots in almost every country, the Muslim Brotherhood offers Doha access to an unrivalled regional network.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Al Jazeera, the UAE was the top investor in Syria (over \$10 billion), followed by Kuwait (around \$6 billion), and Qatar (\$5 billion). Saudi investment was projected to increase as the two sides were still negotiating economic co-operation, although Saudi–Syrian trade exchange was estimated to be already at \$2 billion by the end of 2009.

In Syria, Qatar intends to use the influence of the Brotherhood to steer the transitional period, which is why it has consistently opposed any compromise or dialogue with the regime that might sideline Islamist forces and sought to ensure continued Brotherhood domination of opposition bodies. For Qatar, the optimal outcome is the complete downfall of the regime, with Brotherhood-dominated political and military bodies taking its place. However, they have also actively supported more radical, jihadist militants that have been the most effective groups in taking the fight to the Assad regime.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia and its allies have been more cautious, fearful that the complete collapse of the Assad state apparatus will open the door to a takeover by these jihadist extremists, whose ideology commits them to the active establishment of an Islamic caliphate and who are therefore, in turn, likely to promote wider political agitation. Thus, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries have together focused on broader strategic ends, such as countering Iran's influence, with an eye to checking the rising influence of radical Islamists and ensuring that non-threatening groups steer any transition. To do this, Riyadh has placed its bets on two types of Syrian rebels: Western-allied non-Islamists (or "moderates"); and Salafi-leaning forces, not seen as politically radical because their teachings call for loyalty to Muslim rulers. The Free Syrian Army (FSA), under the Military Supreme Command led by General Salim Idris, falls into the first category, and non-FSA Salafi groups such as Ahrar al-Sham fall into the second.

The Saudis and other Gulf states are also deeply suspicious of the Qatari-backed Muslim Brotherhood, and have worked to counter their influence. Saudi suspicion of the Brotherhood reflects historical antagonism based on a deep apprehension of the radical political change advocated by Brotherhood-like Islamists. In 2002, the late Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz said: "Without any hesitation I say it, that our problems, all of them, came from the direction of the Muslim Brotherhood."<sup>6</sup> This has been exacerbated by the growth in the Brotherhood's regional power in recent years, notably in post-Mubarak Egypt.

Today, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Western powers active in Syria want a gradual and orderly regime change that preserves the state's structure and

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<sup>6</sup> Sultan Souad Al Qassemi, "Qatar's Brotherhood Ties Alienate Fellow Gulf States", *Al-Monitor*, 23 January 2013, available at [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/qatar-muslim-brotherhood.html#ixzz2ZlArZe29](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/01/qatar-muslim-brotherhood.html#ixzz2ZlArZe29).

agencies. This, however, was not always Riyadh's desire. After its initial reluctance to support the uprising, Riyadh changed its position and advocated complete regime change through military means. As such, Riyadh never supported the mission of the first UN–Arab League envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan, and withdrew from the Arab League observer mission after it was extended (a move followed by the other Gulf countries). By mid-2012, Saudi Arabia started to shift its policy, as it became clear that Western powers were not interested in a Libya-style military intervention, and that hostile extremist forces were assuming a leading role in the battle against the regime.

Given their concerns, Saudi authorities have sought to crack down on ad hoc fundraising activities inside the kingdom while declaring their support for a political solution to the crisis that effectively embraces a more cautious approach. Last year saw a period when Riyadh even declined meetings with the opposition, except during formal conferences. At that time the opposition was reaching out to Saudi leaders, frustrated by Qatar's inability to convince Western powers to arm the rebels, a task they believed Riyadh would be better placed to achieve given its strong ties with the US. This shift from frontline support lasted for over four months, enabling Qatar to build significant influence within the opposition.

Towards the end of 2012, Riyadh actively returned to the scene, stepping up its support to select rebel groups to counter the influence of jihadist groups and establish levers of influence. Riyadh also began to push the US to support the provision of better arms to the rebels as a means of forcing Assad and Russia to accept some form of transition that would safeguard against full collapse and the consolidation of jihadist forces. Riyadh today backs Washington's line and has declared an openness to negotiations, although it insists that Iran cannot be part of the process. This openness stands in contrast to Qatar, which (along with Turkey) maintains a desire to see regime change at any cost and which has shown little support for political initiatives, such as the Geneva II initiative backed by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, or concern with the rise of more radical jihadist forces.

Riyadh is now lined up behind the Supreme Military Council, headed by General Idris. While Idris, after his defection in July 2012, initially leaned towards the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar, he subsequently moved towards Riyadh, and has since emerged as a central leader of the so-called moderate rebels. Riyadh is also working with Jordan and the US, in addition to other Gulf states (minus Qatar and Oman) to provide lethal assistance to

“moderate” rebel fighters in southern Syria. As a result, the Saudis are now reported to have established strong influence in the south, from the Jordanian border across to eastern Syria. Qatar’s influence is strongest in the north, with groups such as the Brotherhood-linked Liwaa al-Tawhid in Aleppo and Ahfad al-Rasoul in Idlib. Meanwhile, Riyadh has also built influence with moderate forces within the political opposition and has successfully pushed to expand the Syrian National Coalition’s representation to include more secular and minority figures, thereby diluting the influence of the Qatari-backed Brotherhood. For its part, Doha is coming under growing fire from some Syrian opposition forces, along with neighbouring and Western governments, to tighten its control over the flow of arms to extremist forces and to weaken the Brotherhood’s influence in the coalition.

Meanwhile, Gulf efforts to forge an effective Syria policy have also been complicated by the activities of private donors, particularly those in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. Private donors, instrumental in supporting autonomous (often more hardline and sectarian) rebel groups, have largely been motivated by sectarian ambitions in the context of Sunni–Shia dynamics within the Gulf and by tribal links between the Gulf and Syria. These Gulf Shia–Sunni tensions are most pronounced in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, where early popular calls for action against Damascus were strongest.

So long as the conflict continues, these fundraising activities will remain hard to control, and authorities are growing fearful that they will open dangerous channels between Islamic radicals and rich donors across the region. For almost two decades, and particularly since 9/11, the Gulf states have taken steps to monitor financial flows from and into the Gulf in an attempt to prevent the emergence of radical networks. A protracted war in Syria now clearly poses a significant challenge on this front. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been more careful than other countries (such as Kuwait and Qatar) in trying to restrain these flows by requiring that humanitarian and military aid be delivered through official or semi-official channels. However, it remains a concern for authorities across the region, with significant domestic security implications.

The Gulf states’ interests and priorities in the region must be understood against the backdrop of these different dynamics, which have led to very divergent approaches on Syria. For the key Gulf players active in Syria – Saudi Arabia and Qatar – regime change in Syria represents a potential geopolitical regional game-changer. Renewed influence in Syria, and therefore Lebanon

and Iraq, offers an opportunity to deal a significant blow to Iran's regional standing – and that of the associated “resistance axis” – and to improve their position as regional powerbrokers. The repositioning of the Palestinian Hamas movement away from the resistance axis and towards Qatar and Sunni regional powers, as a result of its recent break with Damascus, is just one sign of the hoped-for regional reconfiguration.

But clearly it is a mistake to reduce Gulf policies to merely being a derivative of an overarching desire to counter Iranian influence. Nor is it correct to perceive their approach in Syria as an extension of that in Libya, where the Gulf states successfully rallied international action to bring down Muammar al-Gaddafi. New realities in the Middle East, particularly the rise of Islamists with radical political agendas, are now playing an important role in shaping different policies towards Syria. Most critically, while Qatar has taken a leading role in supporting the rebels by all means necessary, Saudi Arabia is seeking to balance its desire to bring down Assad with the increasing dangers posed by the rise of radical Islam within the conflict.



## Iran: Syria as the first line of defence

When the wave of popular protests first began in Tunisia, in the winter of 2010–2011, before spreading to neighbouring Arab countries, Tehran declared its support for the demonstrators. The Iranian leadership portrayed the opposition movements – which largely challenged the authority of conservative, pro-Western regimes – as Islamist. It confidently declared that the Arab Awakening would usher in a new pan-Islamic era in the Middle East and North Africa, in which Islamist governments would supplant authoritarian regimes. From Tehran’s perspective, the tide had finally turned against the West and its regional allies; history seemed to favour Iran and its supporters.

All of this changed with the eruption of protests in Syria, which caught Iran off-guard and put it in an extremely awkward position. If it stood by its most valuable and longstanding Arab ally, it would be viewed as hypocritical and opportunistic by the masses in the Arab-Muslim world; likewise, if it refrained from supporting Bashar al-Assad’s regime, there was no guarantee that a new government would be friendly towards Tehran. However, the imperative of securing the Assad regime quickly trumped other concerns.

If the Assad government is toppled, it could represent the most significant loss for the clerical regime since at least 1988, when it was forced to end the war with Iraq and sue for peace. Syria has been the only stalwart Arab supporter of Iran. It has served as a major conduit for Iranian arms shipments and material support to Lebanon’s Hezbollah, which has been built up into a formidable fighting force since the end of the 2006 Lebanon–Israel war. The ability of Hezbollah to strike Israel also serves as an important tripwire for any Israeli military attack against Iran. Syrian support is therefore central to Iran’s ability to project regional influence.

Tehran initially hoped that, by assisting Assad's regime, Damascus would be able to quickly ride out the crisis. Iran provided technical support and expertise to neutralise the opposition; advice and equipment to the Syrian security forces to help them contain and disperse protests; and guidance and technical assistance on how to monitor and curtail the use of the internet and mobile-phone networks by the opposition. (Iran's security forces had learned valuable lessons in these areas during the violent crackdown against the opponents of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that followed the disputed presidential elections of June 2009.) Specialist personnel and units from the Iranian security apparatus (including the elite Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), police, and intelligence agents) were deployed in Syria to assist Assad in his battle against armed opposition fighters from the Free Syrian Army and foreign Sunni Islamist groups. These numbered at most in the hundreds (in the two years that followed) rather than the thousands that opposition sources claimed. Tehran also displayed some caution: in 2011, it hedged its bets by approaching some Syrian opposition groups to assess their stance on various issues relating to Iran, Israel, Lebanon, and the United States. But nothing substantive resulted from these overtures.

However, as the Syrian crisis continued into 2012 it increasingly assumed both a regional and international dimension, firmly cementing Tehran's support for Assad. A proxy war involving both regional and international actors began to emerge. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni Gulf states intent on pushing back against Iran's – and Shia – regional influence started providing material and financial support to the Syrian opposition. As a result, Iran, Hezbollah, and, to some extent, Iraq felt compelled to throw more weight fully behind the Assad regime. Tehran saw the Syrian crisis as providing its regional rivals with a golden opportunity to deny it an important ally and diminish its power and influence in the Middle East. On the international level, meanwhile, the US and European Union closed ranks to exert pressure and isolate Damascus. In the UN Security Council, Russia and China consistently thwarted Western efforts to punish Syria and blocked any move that could lay the groundwork for foreign military intervention in support of the Syrian opposition.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information see David W. Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 128; Ian Black, "Iran confirms it has forces in Syria and will take military action if pushed", the *Guardian*, 16 September 2012, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/16/iran-middleeast>; Con Coughlin, "Iran sends elite troops to aid Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria", the *Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 2012, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9526858/Iran-sends-elite-troops-to-aid-Bashar-al-Assad-regime-in-Syria.html>.

Iran increasingly came to view the situation in Syria as a zero-sum game, fearing that the ouster of the Assad regime could pave the way for the emergence of a new regime and regional order intrinsically hostile towards Tehran. Iran would lose not only an important Arab ally, but also its ability to provide support for Hezbollah, curtailing its influence in Lebanon and over the Arab-Israeli question. Tehran would face the emergence of a pro-Western Sunni crescent, stretching from Turkey to Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In essence, Iran now saw Syria as the first line of defence against a concerted effort by its regional and extra-regional foes not only to bring about regime change in Damascus and the end of its alliance with Tehran, but also to isolate and overthrow the Islamic Republic as part of a longer-term strategy. Recent statements from Gulf Cooperation Council foreign ministers and US Secretary of State John Kerry condemning Hezbollah and Iranian involvement in Syria have reaffirmed Iran's zero-sum view of the conflict. At the same time, the prominent Sunni Egyptian cleric Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi has called upon Sunnis to join the fight in Syria against Shia Iran and Hezbollah, or what he calls "the Party of Satan", exacerbating the sectarian nature of the conflict, which pits Sunni and Shia Muslims vying for power and supremacy against each other. Iran now faces a nightmare scenario: its displacement by a Sunni order that is staunchly anti-Iran and anti-Shia and closely allied with Tehran's regional rival, Saudi Arabia. Any developments in this direction would probably imperil Iran's other key regional ally, Hezbollah: Sunni forces in Lebanon that are keen to push back against the movement's grip on power would find themselves backed by a newly empowered Sunni Syria.

To Tehran, regime change in Syria would also have direct security implications for Iraq, which, since the fall of Saddam Hussein, has arguably become of greater value to Tehran than Damascus. One of the key reasons that the alliance with Syria had utility for Iran was that it served to maintain pressure on Saddam on his western flank. Since his fall, the strategic value of Syria has declined in relative terms, with Iraq no longer perceived as a threat, and bilateral relations with Baghdad improving markedly.

Although the current strategy of trying to prop up the Assad regime is partially aimed at preserving Iran's ability to project its power and influence in the Levant, the strategy also has a defensive component. The Syrian opposition now has the ability to seize control of areas in the east bordering Iraq, and over the past year tensions have heightened between the Shia-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad and Sunni insurgents who

continue to carry out attacks within Iraq. The recent announcement of the alliance between al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Nusra Front (*Jabhat al-Nusra*) in Syria only served to reinforce the view in Tehran that events in Syria and Iraq are becoming inextricably linked.

As a result, there is now a genuine fear in Tehran that if the Assad regime is toppled it may have a knock-on effect in Iraq. This could lead to greater instability and potentially, though unlikely, even the overthrow of the current government in favour of a Sunni-dominated one. Iran sees this possibility as completely unacceptable. An alternative scenario is that the Syria conflict could fuel Sunni secessionist ambitions in Iraq and lead to the break-up of the country into Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish regions. This would have major security implications for Iran and could produce enormous internal problems, especially in the Kurdish and Arab-inhabited regions of the country bordering Iraq.

Internal developments inside Iran and Iran's relations with the West have both heavily influenced Iran's reading of the situation in Syria. Since the protests following the disputed presidential elections of 2009 and the decision of the US and its European allies (starting in 2010) to impose harsh sanctions on Iran, a sense of embattlement and paranoia has increased markedly among Tehran's ruling elites. They interpret any opposition or foreign moves that may directly or indirectly threaten their survival or interests as part of a grand strategy or conspiracy to topple the Islamist regime. The failure to resolve differences over Iran's nuclear programme through diplomacy – most recently during two rounds of negotiations in Almaty, Kazakhstan – and the continuous imposition of Western sanctions have reinforced Iranian perceptions that Washington's real and ultimate aim is regime change in Tehran.

The Iranian leadership has strong suspicions that no matter what it does to allay concerns regarding the nuclear issue, Western sanctions will never again be fully lifted so long as the Islamic Republic continues to exist. Consequently, it increasingly interprets the policies pursued by the US and its European and Middle Eastern allies with regard to the Syrian crisis as part of a broader plan to dismantle “the axis of resistance” in the Middle East and topple the regimes in Damascus and Tehran. Such declarations are of course, in part, propaganda for consumption by the supporters of the Islamic Republic, but they nonetheless reflect a genuine belief that there has been an ongoing, concerted effort to destroy the Syrian–Iranian nexus. Western moves to shun and isolate Iran have therefore reinforced perceptions among policymakers in

Tehran, however, is not naïve about Assad's compromised position and the likelihood that he will never again be able to reassert control over all of Syria. As such, while materially backing the regime, Tehran has also welcomed diplomatic moves led by the joint UN–Arab League envoy, Kofi Annan, and his successor, Lakhdar Brahimi. Tehran is keen to be part of any multilateral initiative aimed at ending the current crisis to have a role in determining the political outcome in Syria. Given the current balance of power on the ground in Syria, which has allowed the regime to consolidate its position (partly as a result of increased assistance from Iran and its regional ally, Hezbollah), Tehran increasingly calculates that the regime, if not Assad himself, is capable of at least maintaining a dominant nationwide position, if not of regaining full authority. Although it might be willing to sacrifice Assad as part of an internationally backed political process, Tehran probably imagines that any negotiated deal will now have to include a strong degree of regime preservation, allowing it to retain ongoing influence. Such a political process would give Tehran a way to cut its losses and ensure that, irrespective of the outcome of developments on the battlefield in Syria, an anti-Iranian government backed by hostile regional and international forces does not come to power in Damascus. Part of its strategy of providing weapons is aimed at strengthening the regime's bargaining position in the event of a substantive political dialogue with its opponents.

Last autumn, Tehran proposed a six-point peace plan to end the crisis. It called for an immediate end to hostilities, the lifting of sanctions, the release of political prisoners, a national dialogue, the formation of a transitional government, and elections (for a parliament, constituent assembly, and the presidency). However, the Syrian opposition rejected the plan outright since it did not fulfil one of their key pre-conditions: the removal of Assad from power. In Munich in February, the Iranian foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, held talks with the head of the Syrian National Coalition, Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib, to discuss a political solution to the Syrian crisis. On the regional level, Ahmadinejad's visit to Saudi Arabia last year, Iran's participation in the quadripartite talks in Cairo last autumn, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and, most recently, Salehi's visit to Jordan are part of a diplomatic effort to prevent Tehran's complete isolation and convey a strong message that any political resolution to the Syrian crisis cannot be attained without Iran's active presence and participation in multilateral talks. While Tehran may not be intent on maintaining Assad in power at any cost, maintaining its regional interests via Syria is paramount. If Syria cannot continue to be an absolute ally of Iran, Tehran will not allow it to become an enemy.

While Iran's confidence that the regime can survive may be growing, it has nonetheless also sought ways to contain the damage of a possible eventual regime collapse. In recent months, Iran has started to build up a militia force in Syria known as the People's Army (*Jaysh al-Sha'bi*), consisting of regime loyalists, Alawites, and other groups. The force's prime aim is to help the regime regain territory, although it also helps to ensure that any new Sunni leadership would not be able to assert control over all of Syria. Reports suggest that Iran wishes to build up a force of at least 50,000, ideally 100,000.<sup>8</sup> In short, Tehran's objective is to ensure that if it cannot use Syria for its own purposes in the Middle East, others should be prevented from using Syria against Iran in the broader regional power struggle. Iran, therefore, has the capacity and will to act as a long-term spoiler in Syria if Assad does eventually fall.

Over the past two years, there have been reports that some elements within the Iranian government have voiced concerns and reservations over Iran's policy in Syria.<sup>9</sup> These include some members of parliament and even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. According to reports, the supreme leader was apparently displeased that assurances from the IRGC leadership that the Syrian crisis would be resolved rapidly with Iranian support proved to be wrong.<sup>10</sup> One senior Iranian official talking about the Arab Awakening in the context of the US–Iranian rivalry in the region commented: “Bahrain tripped up the Americans, while Syria tripped us up.”<sup>11</sup> The decision to back Assad has tarnished not only the Islamic Republic's reputation in the Middle East, but also that of its Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, which is also backing the Syrian government. Furthermore, relations between Tehran and its former ally, Hamas, became strained after the latter eventually declared its support for the Syrian rebels.

Overall, though, Iranian policy continues to be driven firmly by the IRGC, most notably by the elite Quds Force that is headed by General Qassem Soleimani. These forces are now doing all they can to ensure that they will have a role in determining the future outcome in Syria, irrespective of whether the fate of the country is decided on the battlefield or at the negotiating table. To a

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8 Julian Borger, “Iran and Hezbollah ‘have built 50,000-strong force to help Syrian regime’”, the *Guardian*, 14 March 2013, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/14/iran-hezbollah-force-syrian-regime](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/14/iran-hezbollah-force-syrian-regime).

9 Farnaz Fassihi, “In Iran, a Public Debate on Syria”, *Wall Street Journal*, 11 July 2012, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303919504577521271603430022.html>.

10 Hugh Tomlinson, “Tehran Split Over Billions Spent by Spy Chief to Prop Up Assad Regime”, *The Times*, 1 October 2012, available at [www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3554189.ece](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3554189.ece)

11 Author's private conversation with a senior Iranian official, Geneva, March 2012.

certain extent, however, IRGC assistance to the Assad regime, and the foreign ministry's more flexible approach of trying to place Iran in an advantageous position if there are multilateral talks, are not incompatible. These policies are looking to strengthen the Syrian regime militarily and, in parallel, politically. In so doing, Tehran remains optimistic that it can guarantee its own long-term interests and position in Syria.

*Hayder al-Khoei*

## Iraq: Sunni resurgence feeds Maliki's fears

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Although Iraqi–Syrian state relations have been very bumpy over the past decade, the Arab uprisings, particularly the battle now being waged in Syria and the increasingly sectarian nature of regional politics, have provoked a new rapprochement. Today, the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki has positioned itself as a supporter of Bashar al-Assad as he struggles to face down a Sunni-dominated rebellion, largely out of fear that it will empower similar forces in Iraq. Although much is made of Iraq's close ties with Iran, Maliki's positioning reflects his own strategic and political calculations rather than obedience to Iranian diktats.

Following the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syria, wary of a US military presence in a bordering state, particularly given Washington's calls for imposed regime change in Damascus, worked to sabotage the new political process. Syria turned a blind eye to – and even facilitated – the flow of foreign jihadists pouring into Iraq across its border to fight the US occupation forces. Despite the fact that many of Iraq's new political elite, including Maliki, had resided in Syria during Saddam Hussein's rule as Syria sought to strengthen the hand of Iraqi dissidents against its Ba'athist rival in Baghdad, Syrian fears about the US military presence trumped any historic links. Having provided a sanctuary for Shia Islamists seeking to overthrow the Ba'athist regime before the 2003 war, it also hosted Ba'athist officials seeking to undermine the new order. In 2007, Iraq stated that it had evidence that 50 percent of terrorism was entering the country from Syria.<sup>12</sup> The Assad–Maliki relationship reached its political and personal nadir in 2009 when the Iraqi government blamed huge bomb blasts in Baghdad on Syria. For Maliki, Assad was playing a dirty

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<sup>12</sup> "Syria accused over Iraq attacks", BBC News, 4 February 2007, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6329097.stm>.



game in Iraq by conspiring with jihadists to destabilise the country and keep the Americans bogged down there.

Despite this decade of hostility, the revolt in Syria has forced a significant change in the strategic thinking of the Shia Islamists who now dominate in Baghdad under Maliki. Given the Iraqi prime minister's increasingly authoritarian grip on power, forged on the back of a brutal civil war and a sectarian-dominated government formation process in 2010, and the perception of an ongoing threat from both internal militant groups linked to al-Qaeda and hostile regional Sunni powers, namely the Gulf states, Maliki quickly supported Assad once the uprising broke out. Having previously been seen as a threat to Maliki's rule, Assad, now faced with a Sunni-dominated and regionally backed uprising, emerged as a natural ally and bulwark against that same hostile Sunni bloc.

A diplomatic incident in Damascus sheds some light on how events in Syria are being seen by Baghdad. In the summer of 2011, the Qatari ambassador to Syria invited several Arab ambassadors and the Syrian foreign minister to his residence. While sitting around the dinner table the Iraqi ambassador remarked, "The same people who conspired against Iraq are now conspiring against Syria." This enraged the Saudi ambassador, who retorted, "I dare you to name them. I dare you!" The Syrian foreign minister attempted to calm the situation by saying, "The Iraqi ambassador is referring to al-Qaeda and the Salafis, not Saudi Arabia", but the undertone of the message was clear.<sup>13</sup>

The Iraqi government now believes that a victory for the rebels in Syria will mean not just a post-Assad neighbour under the influence of hostile Gulf forces intent on destabilising Maliki's rule, but also a resurgent al-Qaeda at home. One jihadist group, Jabhat al-Nusra, is the most effective opposition fighting force in Syria and has already established strong links with al-Qaeda in Iraq. Although there are some tensions between the leaders of the al-Qaeda franchises, they both admit to supporting each other. Iraqi security officials regularly cite al-Qaeda fighters who have left Iraq for Syria; Iraqi politicians fear their return once they finish their mission in Syria. Iraq is still facing a serious security threat and does not want to see the gains that have been made since 2003 undermined or, worse, entirely reversed. Already in Baghdad there

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<sup>13</sup> "Argument breaks out between Iraqi and Saudi ambassadors to Syria; Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem tries to calm the situation" (translated from Arabic), *Al-Jewar*, 6 June 2011, available at [www.aljewar.org/news-32849.aspx](http://www.aljewar.org/news-32849.aspx).

are growing fears – probably correct in their assessment – that the insurgency in Syria is helping to revitalise, materially and ideologically, Sunni militants in Iraq based in the Sunni-majority province of Anbar that borders Syria. This comes at a moment when Sunni discontent and protests have increased dramatically given Maliki’s intensified marginalisation of Sunni political actors and forces over the past 18 months, providing fertile ground for widening Sunni popular support for armed action against the government. The month of May 2013 witnessed a dramatic upsurge of violent attacks in Iraq – mostly blamed on Sunni militants – with more than 1,000 people killed, the highest number since the height of the civil war in 2006 and 2007.

Maliki believes that the same states that are supporting the rebels in Syria, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, are playing nefarious roles in Iraq by supporting his rivals and even terrorist elements within the country. In a recent interview on state TV, Maliki accused “states” of being behind the recent wave of terror attacks across the country. Though he did not mention specific names, he referred to those who want to intervene in domestic Iraqi affairs on the pretext of protecting the Turkmen and Sunnis, a clear reference to Turkey.<sup>14</sup> Given that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have backed Maliki’s domestic political rivals in the past, their support for the Syrian opposition has served to cement Maliki’s fears that the Syrian uprising is part of a broader advance also directed against him.

As a result of Maliki’s almost existential fears associated with the Syrian uprising, he has maintained a dual-track policy since it began. Publicly, the Iraqi leadership has repeatedly called for dialogue between Assad and the Syrian opposition, because a negotiated political solution offers the most viable way to end the conflict – and, at the same time, is likely to necessitate a power-sharing compromise that will ensure that Syria does not fall completely under the influence of potentially hostile Syrian and regional Sunni forces. Privately, however, Iraq’s government has increasingly acted in ways that indicate it wishes to see Assad prevail, including by permitting Iranian flyovers allegedly delivering weapons and supplies to the Syrian military. It has also hosted and provided medical help to Syrian regime fighters and even engaged the Free Syrian Army from across the border. Baghdad is also alleged to be providing ongoing economic assistance to the Assad regime. This financial support is reported to include traders buying up hard currency auctioned by the Central

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<sup>14</sup> Nouri al-Maliki interview with Iraqiya TV, 7 June 2013, available at <http://t.co/vawrUuzZEC>.

Bank of Iraq and smuggling the cash to sanctions-hit Syria.<sup>15</sup> Maliki has also supplied Syria with crucial fuel oil at a discount of 50 percent under the market price, in a deal not even Iraq's foreign minister was aware of.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, Baghdad has done little to stem an increasing flow of Iraqi Shia fighters travelling to Syria to fight on behalf of the Assad regime. Most of these militias are believed to be affiliated with the Iran-backed Hezbollah Brigades and the League of the Righteous. Motivated by sectarian interests, these Shia militias have mobilised around a call to protect the Sayyida Zainab shrine (one of Shia Islam's holiest), located in southern Damascus. Defending the Sayyida Zainab shrine is seen as a legitimate battleground for many Shia because of its historical religious importance and the growing fears that as the conflict in Syria becomes increasingly sectarian, Sunni actors – specifically al-Qaeda – will target it. Iraqis remember only too well the wave of sectarian violence that followed the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra by al-Qaeda jihadists. Fears of similar attacks in Syria today are mobilising Iraqi Shias behind the Assad regime. Indeed, a victory for the rebels in Syria could weaken Maliki's Dawa-dominated government and provide a boost to domestic Shia opponents. On Syria, Maliki's main Shia rivals – the Sadrists – have publicly stated that Iraqi fighters have “no right” to fight in Syria “on any side”.<sup>17</sup> Though the Sadrist militia – the Mehdi Army – has been deactivated, it could easily be mobilised again if Baghdad loses control of the security situation, thus weakening Maliki vis-à-vis Sadr. This being said, in the event of a new civil war in Iraq, it's likely that Shia rivals would temporarily unite against a common Sunni threat.

Although there are widespread claims that Maliki has taken this pro-Assad position out of deference to Tehran – which is wholeheartedly backing Assad and holds significant political influence in Iraq – it is important to understand Baghdad's strategic mindset. The actions taken by Maliki over the last two years reflect fears of Syrian spillover in the form of a resurgent Iraqi Sunni movement that would directly threaten his grip on power and ability to maintain control over the Sunni provinces neighbouring Syria. If Assad

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<sup>15</sup> Aseel Kami, “Iraq becomes dollar source for sanctions-hit Iran, Syria”, Reuters, 1 February 2012, available at [www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/01/us-iraq-sanctions-idUSTRE81018820120201](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/01/us-iraq-sanctions-idUSTRE81018820120201).

<sup>16</sup> Lina Saigol and Michael Peel, “Iraq sends crucial fuel oil to Syria”, Financial Times, 8 October 2013, available at [www.ft.com/cms/s/0/58b9de0e-1143-11e2-8d5f-00144feabdco.html#axzz2Vf4j742u](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/58b9de0e-1143-11e2-8d5f-00144feabdco.html#axzz2Vf4j742u).

<sup>17</sup> “Free Syrian Army discusses the killing of Abu Draa” (translated from Arabic), Mada Press, 29 May 2013, available at [www.almadapaper.net/ar/news/445503/عرد-وربا-ل-تقوم-ن-ع-ثوحتي-محمروس-ال-رحل-ش-ي-جل](http://www.almadapaper.net/ar/news/445503/عرد-وربا-ل-تقوم-ن-ع-ثوحتي-محمروس-ال-رحل-ش-ي-جل).

were to fall in Syria, some Iraqi politicians believe that Iraq's international border would eventually lie at Abu Ghraib, on the outskirts of Baghdad. They envisage the entire western region of Iraq (currently home to large-scale anti-government protests) being lost to tribal elements, al-Qaeda fighters, and forces sympathetic to the new post-Assad Syrian government. At a recent conference in Qatar, a Sunni cleric, who is a spokesman for the protests in Anbar, pleaded with Sunnis to support their brethren in Iraq to turn the western region into a "shield for Syria". He even suggested that a revolution in Iraq is underway that will "complete what our brothers have started in Syria".<sup>18</sup> As well as playing to sectarian fears among the Shia community, this also highlights the ongoing challenges to central control that have affected Iraq since 2003. While the autonomous Kurdistan Region is the clearest example of this, Maliki fears that growing Sunni contestation will strengthen the voices of those agitating against a strong central state, and possibly even push Iraq towards a breakup.

Although Iraq's interests under Maliki are in many respects aligned with those of Iran, with the two Shia states facing a common perceived hostility from Saudi Arabia in particular, they are not one and the same. Iraq abstained from the Arab League votes in November 2011 to suspend Syria's membership and impose sanctions, but it also voted in favour of the August 2012 UN resolution to end the violence (Iran was one of the 13 nations that voted against it).<sup>19</sup> Iraq's fear of a Sunni-dominated and unstable post-Assad Syria is an entirely different issue to that of Iran, which risks losing a vital regional ally in Assad and a corridor to Lebanon and Hezbollah. The Iraqi government is primarily worried about its own stability. This is not to say that Maliki is independent of Tehran per se. Iran remains one of his most powerful foreign allies – alongside the United States – and has repeatedly given him vital political support in his domestic struggle against his rivals that has kept him in power. However, on Syria, Maliki and Iraq's Shia Islamists need little nudging from Tehran, as sectarian polarisation intensifies across the region.

Not surprisingly, these fears are shared by the US government – at least within the context of concerns about Iraq's fragile stability. The CIA recently ramped up its support for Baghdad's Counter-Terrorism Forces (which report directly

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<sup>18</sup> Speech of Sheikh Said al-Lafi at the Doha conference in support of the Syrian people (in Arabic), 31 May 2013, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6116gSf5wGs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6116gSf5wGs).

<sup>19</sup> "Syria crisis: UN assembly adopts Arab-backed resolution", BBC News, 17 February 2012, available at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17065056](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17065056).

to Maliki's office, bypassing the military chain of command) in their fight against (largely Sunni) insurgents within Iraq.<sup>20</sup> Paradoxically, Washington is simultaneously working to strengthen Syria's rebels, including helping to facilitate the flow of Saudi and Qatari weapons purchases into the country via Turkey, thereby strengthening the very forces in Syria that it is working against in Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

Given Iraq's recent civil war and its increasingly sectarian fragmentation, it is unsurprising, however, that not everyone in Iraq views the Syrian conflict in the same light. Where the Shia-dominated government sees a threat, Iraq's Sunni actors and Kurds see an opportunity. Some high-profile Sunni politicians, including the parliamentary speaker, Osama al-Nujaifi, have demanded that the Iraqi government take "bold and courageous steps" to stop the bloodshed, reflecting genuine humanitarian concerns present across the political divide.<sup>22</sup> But other Sunnis are actively taking part in the conflict on the side of the opposition, both out of religious affinity with Sunni fighters in Syria and because they view it as an opportunity to reverse the balance of power in Iraq, reconstituting the Sunni dominance that was overturned by the US invasion in 2003. With more than 100 Sunni tribes living on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border, it is no surprise that much of this support has come through tribal channels. Many members of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, for example, are battle-hardened after fighting Iraqi and American security forces over the past decade. Arab tribes in Syria are now calling upon their brethren in Iraq to return the favour and aid them in their struggle against Assad. Jabhat al-Nusra has admitted to having Iraqis among its ranks. In March 2013, in Anbar province, Iraqi militants associated with al-Qaeda ambushed and killed 48 Syrian soldiers and nine Iraqi guards who had taken refuge in Iraq.

The president of the Kurdistan Region, Massoud Barzani, has meanwhile publicly revealed that he is providing support, including military training, to Syria's Kurds. Iraqi Kurds see the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to increase

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<sup>20</sup> Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes, and Siobhan Gorman, "CIA Ramps Up Role in Iraq", *Wall Street Journal*, 11 March 2013, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324735304578354561954501502.html>.

<sup>21</sup> C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid from C.I.A.", the *New York Times*, 24 March 2013, available at [www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?pagewanted=all&http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324735304578354561954501502.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?pagewanted=all&http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324735304578354561954501502.html) (hereafter, Chivers and Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands").

<sup>22</sup> Fadhil al-Nashmi, "End of enmity: why Iraq's PM is suddenly so supportive of Syrian leadership", *Niqash*, 1 September 2011, available at <http://www.niqash.org/articles/print.php?id=2896&lang=en>.

the autonomy of their brethren in Syria and to widen Erbil's regional influence by gaining a stake in any post-Assad settlement. This has served to pit them against both Assad and the Syrian opposition. It has also harmed relations with Baghdad, with Maliki fearing that Iraqi Kurds will use the Syria crisis and their growing influence over Syrian Kurds to strengthen their domestic hand on issues of longstanding dispute with Baghdad, including questions of autonomy and control over disputed territories and oil resources.

Given that the potential fall of Assad would empower Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds, directly playing to Maliki's real and conspiratorial existential fears, Shia forces would be expected to play some form of ongoing spoiler role in Syria should Assad fall, to try to avoid a consolidation of hostile forces on Iraq's border. This in turn would probably see the Iraqi government seeking tighter ties with Tehran to guard against a growing Sunni threat in a region that was becoming more militantly sectarian. Conversely, Iraq would become increasingly important to Tehran if Syria falls out of its influence. This intensification of the already emerging regional map, pitting a Shia Tehran–Baghdad axis against a Sunni Levant and Gulf, would perhaps be the most significant geopolitical regional effect of the Syria crisis.

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**23** Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes, and Siobhan Gorman, "CIA Ramps Up Role in Iraq", *Wall Street Journal*, 11 March 2013, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324735304578354561954501502.html>.

**24** C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid from C.I.A.", the *New York Times*, 24 March 2013, available at [www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?pagewanted=allhttp://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324735304578354561954501502.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?pagewanted=allhttp://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324735304578354561954501502.html) (hereafter, Chivers and Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands").

*Dimi Reider*

4

## Israel: Strategically uncertain, tactically decisive

When coming to analyse Israel's approach to the Syrian civil war, one is likely to encounter one of two narratives. In one, Israel clings to the devil it knows, preferring the Assad family, having for decades proven able to maintain stability and quiet on Israel's northeast border, to the uncertainty likely to be brought by a change of rule, especially considering the jihadist elements in the opposition. In the other, Syria is seen primarily through the prism of Iran, in which the potential weakening of the Islamic Republic (and Hezbollah) via the loss of its Syrian ally is made possible. On closer inspection, however, it appears that Israel, rather than concerning itself with the outcome or trying to push for any kind of speedy resolution, accepts the inevitable continuation of the conflict but maintains a willingness to intervene tactically where and when it sees fit.

As several observers have noted over the past two years, there is much in the status quo to concern Israel. The risk of overspill, particularly into Jordan and, in different ways, into Lebanon, is a worrying prospect. Additionally, with a progressively thinned-out Syrian army that is increasingly focused on the civil war, jihadist groups fighting against Bashar al-Assad might well feel bold enough to open a new frontier, albeit sporadically, against Israel, across the armistice line and into the Golan plateau (the rebels briefly took control of a border crossing in June). Currently, the fighting to the east of the plateau already incurs a heavy Syrian military presence that is closer to Israeli lines than it has been for decades.

But there are many benefits to the status quo as well. Israel's most potent neighbouring militant threat, Hezbollah, is bleeding heavily on the ground and facing greater challenges to its support and legitimacy at home as a consequence (albeit not with its core Shia constituency, many of whom will cling closer to their protector if faced with an increased threat). Iran, too, is paying a price for

its role in Syria, experiencing further regional isolation, a loss of the soft power credibility it had accumulated, the challenges of pumped-up sectarianism, and the direct expenditures it has already incurred. Moreover, with the world's attention increasingly focused on Syria rather than on Gaza and the West Bank, Israel's foot-dragging on negotiations and steady demolition of any chances for a two-state solution continue unabated, and under less international scrutiny.

Israel itself, in the meantime, has focused on the hardware component of the new threats emerging from the Syria crisis – namely weaponry. It is concerned not so much about unconventional weapons as it is about weapons that might change, however slightly, the balance of power in the region – the balance that is heavily skewed in Israel's favour. Currently, Israel enjoys hegemony over all militarily relevant airspace around its borders. Syrian air defences are effective, but Israel has overcome them in the past, even for less urgent missions such as buzzing the presidential palace in Damascus, as it did in 2006. Lebanon's air space, from which Israel reportedly launched its most recent strikes on Syria, is practically Israel's own to roam. It is in these two airspaces that Israel, which often conflates hegemony with survival, is deeply reluctant to see any significant changes taking place, and is ready and willing to take action to prevent them. The threat of a proliferation of anti-aircraft missiles to rebel fighters, or even Assad acquiring more sophisticated anti-aircraft equipment, poses a challenge to this hegemony.

However, even from this point of view, dramatic escalation is unlikely. Israel has demonstrated that it will act if necessary, but there are indications that it is keen not to spark a broader conflict, nor to test Assad's newfound commitment to direct involvement in the old resistance cause and its expansion to the Golan Heights. While Israel has threatened to attack Syria's S-300 missile systems if delivered by Russia, there appears to be elements of bluff here, possibly on both sides. Russia has promised Assad the weapons but it is unclear what exactly has been delivered; Israel, meanwhile, is playing down the possibility of full delivery, thereby blunting expectations of an attack.

Two additional Israeli concerns and potential targets for military strikes remain: weapons that Syria already has but might give to Hezbollah; and weapons obtained by the opposition, whether from overrun military dumps or from foreign benefactors. The fear is that someday some of these newly armed groups might turn these weapons against Israel – although so far no such group appears to have made it a priority. Israel is lobbying its allies to withhold from the opposition any high-grade weapons such as man-portable air-defence



systems (reportedly this explained the Czech delegation's opposition to arming the rebels at the European Foreign Affairs Council in May).

In historical terms, Israel and Syria have been in a state of war since 1948, with much of the following 24 years punctuated by border skirmishes, reciprocal bombardments, and several instances of full-blown military conflict. The main and overlapping areas of contention included the control of the Golan Heights – and, critically, its water resources – and Syrian support for Palestinian paramilitary and terrorist factions engaging in asymmetric conflict with Israel, on the local level, and the two countries' clashing alliances in the Cold War, on the global level. While the “water wars” ground to a halt with Israel's occupation (1967), retention (1973), and the internationally unrecognised annexation (1980) of the Golan plateau, the last direct confrontation between the armies of Israel and Syria took place in 1982. This was part of Israel's decisive intervention into the Lebanese conflict; from this year onwards, the parties contented themselves with operating through allies and proxies. Popularly known as Israel's “quietest border”, the Syrian-Israeli armistice line along the Golan plateau lacked even the black market economy characterising the Israeli-Egyptian one and boasted a buffer zone sustained by a United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF).

As the Cold War thawed and old alliances melted, several attempts were made to establish a negotiated peace between Israel and Syria under the successive governments of Yitzhak Rabin, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Ehud Barak on the Israeli side, and Hafez al-Assad on the Syrian one. But all failed, largely thanks to disagreements on the delineation of the new border and an Israeli reluctance to confirm its willingness to withdraw to the pre-1967 boundary. Under Bashar al-Assad, when Israel had a faint hope that Syria might be next in line for US-led regime change after Iraq, the negotiation channel was largely neglected until 2008. In this year, indirect talks were considered to have made real progress under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Israel and the Turkish mediation led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his then adviser, who is now the foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu. The Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip in 2008 derailed these talks, leading to a rift between Israel and Turkey; Netanyahu's government showed no interest in renewing the talks with Syria. At the same time, Israel's perspective on the entire region began to shift: it elevated one nemesis – Iran – above all others, and saw the longstanding Syrian-Iranian relationship in an ever more sinister light.

The Iranian prism here joins Israel's overall approach to the uprisings that rocked the Middle East from 2011 onwards. Although ostensibly committed to democratic universalism – taking pride in its own democratic institutions – Israel reacted to popular challenges to authoritarian regimes with increasing trepidation as the uprisings rolled closer to home. And, despite Assad's support for Hezbollah and close relationship with Iran, a stable, largely self-contained Syria seemed preferable to either anarchy – especially on Syria's southern borders, affecting both Israel and Jordan – or a populist Islamist government that could take up the anti-Israel banner with greater vigour than the second Assad regime.

As the uprising spread and gained momentum, the more enticing prospect of a weakened post-Assad, pro-Western (or at least anti-Iranian) Syria briefly came into view. This hope was bolstered by the rebels' apparent lack of interest in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the Syrian National Council's attention to Western interests. The initially minor role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Syrian uprising made the ascent of a populist Islamist regime appear less likely, while the strong anti-Iranian sentiment – fanned by Iran's relentless support for Assad and Hezbollah's reported engagement in the regime's crackdown on its opposition – has encouraged Israel to believe that Syria could be the place where the Hezbollah–Iran axis might be severed.

Indeed, in December 2011, then Defence Minister Ehud Barak told the World Policy Conference in Vienna that Assad would fall “within weeks”.<sup>25</sup> The surprising resilience of the regime and changing nature of those gaining prominence in the opposition blighted Israeli optimism. By January 2013, the mood among decision-makers seemed warily pragmatic: probed for Israel's views on the developments in Syria, Israeli officials and analysts would reluctantly outline overall scenarios, but stress repeatedly that they thought the conversations were almost a futile exercise since Israel could do very little to influence the situation and that this was increasingly about damage limitation.

Nevertheless, even this wary pragmatism and focus on more immediate threats, such as the strategic weapons issue, were also put to use in pursuit of larger Israeli goals. Israel's all but overt nudges for the US to intervene (for example, by widely publicising reports on chemical weapons use, confronting the US

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<sup>25</sup> Lahav Harkov, “Barak: Assad will be toppled within weeks”, *Jerusalem Post*, 1 February 2012, available at [www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Barak-Assad-will-be-toppled-within-weeks](http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Barak-Assad-will-be-toppled-within-weeks).

publicly with alleged violations of President Barack Obama's own red lines) can be seen as helping to erode the US administration's general reluctance to do so, which could push the envelope on Iran. At the same time, Israel's strikes within Syrian territory – three since the beginning of the year – convey to observers that, while strongly preferring US leadership, Israel is still capable and willing to act alone when it claims strategic interests are at stake. Again, there is a message here for the Iranian file.

Israel is also watching tensely for signs of overspill into Lebanon and Jordan, albeit for different reasons. While a warring, destabilised Lebanon does not necessarily align with Israeli interests (if only for the prospect of creating yet another ungoverned and unpredictable space on yet another Israeli frontier), it also clearly does not bode well for Hezbollah, with its nearer patron preoccupied with its own survival and its further patron now separated from it by increasingly uncontrolled terrain. In Jordan, by contrast, Israel is highly interested in the preservation of the pro-Western monarchy of King Abdullah, who has guarded the country's peace treaty with Israel, and whom Israel relies on to keep discontent among Jordanians – a majority of whom are descendants of Palestinian refugees – under a tight lid. In a worst-case scenario, even before the fate of the Hashemite monarchy is determined, Israel could face the emergence of a highly volatile region stretched along almost the entire length of Israel's borders, torn apart by civil unrest and, as likely as not, substantial armed non-state actors (Jordan has its own Salafi militants, less easy to keep in check given the political impact of events in Syria and a region awash with arms). To make matters worse, Jordan's strongest opposition is still the Muslim Brotherhood's political wing, the Islamic Action Front. It should not come as a surprise, then, that Netanyahu has been conferring with Abdullah frequently over the past two years, including flying to Amman in person (secretly, and then leaking it) and encouraging further Western backing for the regime in Amman. Abdullah, in turn, has mollified his criticism of Netanyahu's engagement with the Palestinian issue.

On the Palestinian front, the most scrutinised development is the Hamas leadership's abandonment of Syrian patronage and shift towards Qatar, Turkey, and Egypt. This shift pushes Hamas into the orbit of influence of America's allies. Theoretically, this could create a more amenable climate for engagement, but that is not something the US and Israel show signs of pursuing for now, despite the limited negotiations on prisoner exchange and the ceasefire in November 2012 conducted under Egyptian patronage. These green shoots have not thus far translated into something more. The Palestinian

refugee camps in Syria, while the scene of considerable violence that effects support for Assad across the Palestinian diaspora, do not appear to be an area of particular Israeli concern at this point in time.

From the perspective of the Netanyahu-led government, however, the sheer complexity and bloodiness of the Syria debacle pushes the Palestinian issue and the occupation, with its daily violence, further and further down the agenda both at home and abroad – not a development that the increasingly hard-line Israeli cabinet would complain about. Domestically, Netanyahu has been able to relegate Palestinians and the occupation to third place in the national security agenda, after Iran and Syria. And the international community's reaction to Syria, alternating between indecision and unseemly squabbling, makes the very idea of international involvement in the Middle East increasingly distasteful. The Syrian conflict is making Obama look weak and the UN irrelevant – all welcome news to Israel, which would prefer the above to keep quiet about the way it manages the occupied Palestinian territories. The dissolution of UNDOF is a case in point: in the Israeli cabinet meeting on 9 June, Netanyahu used the woes of the Golan peacekeeping force to reiterate his position against the presence of international peacekeeping forces in the West Bank and notably in the Jordan valley, saying that UNDOF's dissolution has proved that Israel can rely only on the Israeli Defence Forces for its security. There is a counterpoint to all this – Israel is not seen to benefit from the effectively unchallenged deployment of hard power by Hezbollah, Iran, and, to a lesser degree, Russia and their demonstrated willingness to stand foursquare behind an ally, which has so far achieved quite impressive results on the ground.

And, while in many cases sympathetic to the Syrian opposition, Israeli public opinion seems largely distant from the events to the north except when something occurs on the actual border with Syria. That distance is helped by the fact that Israel is the only Syrian neighbour not confronted with a massive refugee problem brought on by the conflict, and, despite offering medical treatment to the very occasional wounded combatant, is wont to keep it that way. The absence of such refugees adds to a situation in which there is very little domestic pressure to do anything; at most, there is the occasional gloating from the right over the wisdom of Israel remaining on the Golan, eschewing peace with Assad, and generally feeding the narrative of suspicious isolation. As far as the tactical strikes are concerned, the Israeli public, from right to left, is broadly supportive of whatever the government might think is necessary to stop “balance-breaking” weapons from reaching Hezbollah.

At the time of writing, Israel's strategic approach to Syria can be described as wary, pragmatic, and broken down into specific micro areas of threats and interests rather than comprising a comprehensive picture of what kind of Syria Israel would like to see, and what it would – or could – do to facilitate this outcome. But tactical strikes, propelled by a tendency to equate hegemony with survival, could well result in far-reaching strategic implications – way beyond what Israel may have planned by increasingly drawing it into the conflict. But, so far, Israel appears confident that it can select the very specific points at which it wants to intervene, allow the two sides of the Syrian conflict to bleed each other out, and make the most of it.

*Julien Barnes-Dacey*

## Jordan: Stability at all costs

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Of all Syria's neighbours, Jordan has trod most cautiously since the outbreak of the conflict in March 2011. Deeply concerned by the threat of spillover of instability and violence, Jordan has naturally been more preoccupied with ensuring its own resilience than with the survival or demise of Bashar al-Assad. Given the potentially destabilising impact of a prolonged civil war, Amman has continually sought a political deal to end the conflict even as it has gradually escalated its anti-Assad posture. Despite the sharp challenges posed by Syria, the crisis has also proved of some use to the Royal Palace, serving to cement domestic and international backing just as it was beginning to look slightly vulnerable.

Jordan's response to developments in Syria has primarily been driven by fears about the potential security and political implications of the crisis for the Hashemite Kingdom. In addition to the potentially destabilising impact of at least half a million refugees (a number that could rise significantly, particularly if Damascus witnesses deeper fighting), Jordan's caution reflects fears that overt manoeuvring against Assad could provoke a hostile response. While Assad's days may ultimately be numbered, Amman remains wary of his still-considerable power and his ability to fuel problems for his southern neighbour, whether by directly attacking the country or by covertly provoking unrest. It also knows that if Assad remains in power, Jordan will have nowhere to run. As such, Amman feels significantly more vulnerable than other regional actors and, accordingly, continues to maintain diplomatic ties with Damascus.

At the same time, the intensifying jihadist dimension to the Syria conflict poses a direct security threat to Amman. With Jordanian jihadists inspired by an al-Qaeda ideology travelling to fight in Syria, there is deepening fear in Amman that they will eventually turn their focus to Jordan (though there are also quiet hopes in Amman that many of them will die in Syria). Given the close proximity

of northern cities to the battlefield in southern Syria, the threat is seen as far more immediate than during the Iraq War, when Jordan had a buffer zone of hundreds of miles of empty desert (but still faced significant attacks, including the 2005 Amman hotel bombings that killed 60 people). Jordanian officials are particularly perturbed by the risk of state collapse in Syria and the country's potential transformation into an ungovernable space. This could be utilised by non-state actors and act as a breeding ground for jihadist militants to mobilise and plot against the Hashemite regime, with the threat of chemical weapons proliferation.

Given the deepening levels of conflict in Syria, including battles fought near the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights (which also borders Jordan), and widening violence in Iraq, Amman now sits amid an increasingly dangerous regional environment. To guard against violence spilling over into the country, the Jordanian army is being mobilised in greater strength along its borders, with an increase in Western military expertise and assistance. Some small local popular militias have also been formed in Jordan's border towns to defend against any Syrian army incursions.

The kingdom's concerns run deeper, however, reflecting the growing political and economic tensions that have enveloped Jordan since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in early 2011 and a fear that the Syria crisis could provoke an intensification of these forces. Feeding off pressing economic challenges and an increasingly ineffectual political system, the kingdom has over the past two years witnessed unprecedented – though still moderate by regional standards – pro-reform discontent. This has come from traditional opposition forces represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as historically loyalist East Bank Bedouin tribes.

In this context, the conflict could end up solidifying a regional order intrinsically hostile to Hashemite rule, exacerbating the domestic tensions and challenges facing the king. Of central concern for the Royal Palace is the potential for the conflict to empower Sunni Islamist forces. If Syria were to fall under the sway of the Muslim Brotherhood, dominant among the political opposition based in exile, or worse, the more radical forces now dominant among rebel fighters, they could empower similar forces in Jordan, whether in the guise of the country's Muslim Brotherhood or more radical groups. Not only would this pose an intensified threat to royal authority, but also it might provoke an aggressive counter-response by East Bank security forces intent on maintaining control over the state. Even if they do not travel to fight in Syria, there are

concerns that Salafi-minded Jordanians in conservative areas of the country, such as Zarqa and Irbid, could be ideologically hardened by developments in Syria, potentially provoking more fundamental challenges to the state and Hashemite system.

With the Jordanian Brotherhood maintaining wide support among the country's urban-based and largely Palestinian population, Amman has been refusing access to Syrian Palestinian refugees and has tried to keep other Syrian refugees in camps in the north of the country to avoid a demographic shift that could further strengthen the Brotherhood's hand. While Jordan does not suffer from sectarian tensions, the East Bank-Palestinian/urban divide has long polarised the country and the refugee crisis could intensify this fracture line if Syrians do not quickly return home.

The refugee crisis is also likely to strain the country's precarious finances and national infrastructure. While Jordan has significant experience of refugee flows – including Palestinians and Iraqis – the Syria refugee influx comes at a perilous economic moment that is already driving domestic discontent. To date, Amman has been forced to shoulder much of the financial burden singlehandedly, given significant shortfalls in international funding appeals. The Royal Palace knows that increased demands on state finances and infrastructure, including already stretched electricity and water supplies, will directly feed wider popular unrest. Although the refugees are being kept in camps away from Jordanian population centres, popular resentment towards the refugees is growing as they are increasingly blamed for the country's economic woes.

Needless to say, this is more than a one-way street, and fears associated with the Syrian crisis have also been used to strengthen the appeal of the status quo and the monarchy's position. Indeed, the timing has partly been fortuitous for the king given his domestic challenges. As violence and extremism have increased in Syria, the number of protests in Jordan has declined as fears about the threat of violence and instability spilling over have grown. The perception that Brotherhood parties in both Egypt and Syria have displayed political ineptitude has also raised popular anxiety about what the Brotherhood would do in Jordan if they were to come to power. These fears have understandably gained popular traction given deepening regional turmoil, helping to quell demands for deeper reform. Meanwhile, the Syria crisis has also served to sow divisions among opposition groups that had begun to find some common positions. While Jordan's Islamist political forces have lined up in strong



support of the rebels, some leftist figures have expressed ongoing support for Assad. These divisions have become increasingly contentious, diluting efforts at forming a united front.

Nonetheless, Jordan's chosen policy towards Syria has been (and remains) one of caution, wishing neither to provoke Assad into retaliation nor to expose the country to spillover violence and thus the potential for regime collapse that could empower hostile forces. This explains the longstanding desire to remain publicly at arms' length from the conflict, including even the maintenance of diplomatic ties with Syria, despite strong pressure from close allies in the Gulf to more decisively join the anti-Assad cause. While the kingdom has gradually assumed a more forward-leaning position in support of opposition elements since mid-2012, this does not reflect shifting strategic ambitions, but rather a pursuit of wider protective measures against the growing dangers. As radical forces have gained ground in Syria, Amman has slowly assumed a more proactive stance to try to support more moderate forces and avoid the creation of jihadist-controlled zones along its border. Given the growing likelihood of some form of failed state in Syria, Amman wants to ensure that it has established ties with those rebels lining the Jordanian border in Daraa province. Amman has also indicated support for a rebel-controlled safe zone in the south of the country as a means of preventing ongoing refugee outflows, and perhaps even of enabling some Syrians now in Jordan to return to Syria.

Accordingly, Amman embraced former Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab, following his defection in August 2012, as the preferred candidate to lead a transition, given his non-Islamist leanings and a belief that he would be best placed to ensure Syria's institutional continuity and territorial integrity. More importantly – although it continues to deny it publicly – Amman agreed in late 2012 to open its borders to Saudi weapons transfers to some moderate opposition forces in southern Syria and is reported to have assisted in flying in weapons from Croatia.<sup>26</sup> Amman also signed off on US training camps for the rebels on its territory. In May, the core Friends of Syria Group – the London 11 – met in Jordan.

As part of this shift, Jordan has increasingly looked to the protective umbrella provided by its regional and international allies. Given Jordan's close ties to the Gulf monarchies, it may have been expected to fall into line more quickly with

their strategic ambitions; but Amman long resisted pressure to take an assertive stand (to the detriment of financial inflows and its diplomatic relations with Qatar in particular). Now that Amman is slowly upping its role, however, it has sought out wider protective backing. Significantly, it has looked to Riyadh and Washington, not just because of longstanding and deep relations with these two states but also because both are seeking to ensure a softer transition (as favoured by Amman), in contrast to Qatar and Turkey, which have pushed for deeper change and support more radical opposition forces. Relations between Qatar and Jordan remain strained. Amman's recent decision to move forward with facilitating increased material aid to the armed rebels is likely to have come with important assurances from Riyadh and Washington that they are fully committed to providing substantial financial and military assistance to ensure that violent unrest does not spread into Jordan. The US decision in early June to leave Patriot missiles stationed in the kingdom after planned training exercises, in addition to a small deployment of US troops, was a very important sign of this commitment, demonstrating that preventing the spillover of violence into Jordan is now central to US thinking.

However, even as Amman gingerly inches forward with greater support for the armed opposition, it continues to tread very carefully and to press for some form of political transition (including backing Geneva II) that would avoid militarised, root and branch – and, in Amman's eyes, immensely threatening – change. As recently as May, the foreign minister of Iran, Assad's key regional backer, travelled to Amman and the two countries proclaimed an ongoing desire for negotiations between the regime and the opposition. Amman still hopes to foster some form of “inclusive” political settlement, led by secular-leaning figures, to preserve the country's crumbling institutions and national integrity.

Even so, Jordan's fear of a disintegrating Syria providing succour to militant jihadists on its border is now looking increasingly likely. Given the probability of an unstable, fractured, and violent Syria for some years to come, Jordan is bracing itself for stormy winds. But Jordan continues to hold an important strategic card: the confident knowledge that it will not be abandoned by the West, which sees the kingdom as a critical source of regional stability and a key ally of Israel. The Gulf states are also intent on propping up the Hashemite system to ensure that unrest does not seep from the republics into the monarchies. Whatever happens in Syria, Jordan is likely to be increasingly dependent on these allies.

*Dimitar Bechev*

## The Kurds: Between Qandil and Erbil

The civil war and implosion of Syria has offered the region's Kurds an opportunity to assert their shared vision of deepening political emancipation.<sup>27</sup> With the weakening of central government control over Syria, the most pressing question now facing its Kurdish population is which power centre – the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq or the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – will take the lead. The answer will go some way towards shaping the response of regional neighbours who are wary of a strengthened Kurdish region. Turkey is particularly cautious: Ankara's current peace talks with the PKK are a direct result of this concern and the fate of these talks will be vital in determining just how Kurds emerge from the conflict.

Kurdish politics in Syria cannot be understood without looking at the vast shadow cast by the two regional power centres: the KRG and the PKK. The KRG dates back to the Persian Gulf War, when a de facto autonomous region was established in Iraq's north and was subsequently ratified with the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The two primary forces within the KRG, Massoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (of these, Barzani has established himself as the pre-eminent power), both emerged to fight for Kurdish rights in Iraq. In contrast, the PKK emerged as an armed group in 1984 following the violent suppression of the Kurdish left by Turkey's junta. The PKK launched a guerrilla struggle against security forces in Turkey's south-east, which peaked in the 1990s and led to some 30,000 deaths, mass migration, and political polarisation. Operating from northern Iraq, the PKK was also supported by Syria until 1998 and has an offshoot in Iran called the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK).

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<sup>27</sup> Thanks to Galip Dalay and Kerem Öktem for their valuable comments on earlier versions, as well as to Krassimir Yankov for his assistance with research.

Both of these power centres are now jockeying for influence in Syria given the vacuum resulting from Bashar al-Assad's weakening hold over Kurdish-populated areas. In July 2012, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – seen as affiliated with, or at least close to, the PKK – established control over five towns in Syria's north-eastern al-Jazeera region, excluding Qamishly, the area's most significant urban centre. It mobilised its own militia, the Popular Protection Units (YPG). However, although dominant, it faces a rival in the so-called Kurdish National Council (KNC), an umbrella group of 16 Syrian Kurdish political parties whose most prominent members are closely allied with, if not an extension of, Barzani's KDP. The KNC has its own militia, the Special Coordination Committee (SCC). In contrast to the Barzani-backed KNC, the PYD is seen as supported by his KRG opponent, Talabani, reflecting an extension into Syria of their domestic KRG rivalry.

On the back of tensions between the PYD and the KNC, Barzani brokered a tentative settlement in Erbil on 12 July 2012, leading to the creation of the Kurdish Supreme Committee, a governing body for Syrian Kurdistan comprising members of both groups. However, the Erbil Agreement formalised a *modus vivendi* between the PYD and the KNC rather than a full-blown alliance. The threat of intra-Kurdish fighting remains a very real prospect (for example, forces loyal to the Kurdish Freedom (Azadi) Party that withdrew from the KNC clashed with the YPG in Aleppo in early March).<sup>28</sup> Moving forward, the nature of the relationship between the two will depend on which party gains the upper hand – currently the PYD is far more dominant and unlikely to cede power – as well as the fate of Turkish–PKK peace talks.

At present, external threats – both from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Assad's forces – have tempered further intra-Kurdish friction. YPG forces have clashed with the FSA, including fighters from the Nusra Front, on several occasions across the northern and north-eastern fronts. Significantly, Kurdish relations with Syria's Sunni-dominated opposition movement are very bad and Kurdish representative factions have not been drawn into the main opposition body, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), due to their insistence on Kurdish autonomy and opposition to declaring Syria an Arab state. The SNC has refused to take this position and its close ties to Ankara, which, despite current peace talks, wants to contain Turkish ambitions, have increased Kurdish suspicions of the body.

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<sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group, "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle", Middle Eastern Report 136, January 2013, pp. 31–33, available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/136-syrias-kurds-a-struggle-within-a-struggle.aspx>.

But there is also a stigma attached to internecine conflict among Kurds going back to the 1994–1997 civil war in northern Iraq that pitted Barzani against Talabani (who was supported by the PKK and Iran). The Erbil Agreement in Syria is therefore the continuation of a strategy of intra-Kurdish co-existence already attempted in Iraq. By the same token, rising intra-Kurdish tensions in the al-Jazeera region could have a negative knock-on effect on dynamics across the Iraqi border in the KRG, potentially threatening the well-established stability and growing prosperity of that region.

Against this backdrop, two competing visions for resolving the Kurdish issue within Syria have emerged, championed by Barzani and the PKK. Given that Barzani sees himself as a leader of all Kurds, it is no surprise that he would like to be the guarantor of a Kurdish entity in post-Assad Syria, modelled on the KRG. Barzani has acted as mediator between different Syrian Kurdish factions and has also defended the vision of local Kurds who want to establish their own unit within a federated country. Barzani's reaching out to the PYD with the Erbil Agreement was partly aimed at enticing the PYD out of the PKK's grasp. Barzani is also training Syrian Kurdish fighters in Iraq, hoping to establish a force tied to himself that can rival the YPG – and help secure the region's independent security much as the *peshmerga* (armed Kurdish fighters) have done in Iraq. Moving forward, it is not inconceivable that the KRG may have a substantial stake in a new autonomous Kurdish region in Syria.

This expansion of influence in Syria would also give Barzani the opportunity to strengthen the KRG's hand, both regionally and more specifically in relation to the central Iraqi government in Baghdad. (Despite some recent attempts to engage in dialogue, the KRG remains in dispute with Iraq's prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, on several issues: the status of both disputed territories along its border with the rest of Iraq and oil fields located near Kirkuk, as well as the right to control and sell the KRG's oil resources independently of Baghdad.)

Following on from the experience of the KRG, Barzani's model stands for a peaceful and gradual solution to the Kurdish issue: establishing autonomous entities; fostering economic interdependence by developing cross-border trade and investment; and building and strengthening energy links (including with the regional powerhouse, Turkey). Although within Iraq this model is geared towards strengthening the KRG's autonomy from Baghdad, regionally it is viewed favourably, as it does not involve an assertive and destabilising cross-border Kurdish actor bent on full independence. Of greater concern to regional actors is the PKK or "Qandil" model, which is focused on Turkey. The PKK's

strategic goals have changed over time from secession to democratic autonomy (as acknowledged by the organisation's imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan), but the use of violence against Turkey remains in the minds of many in the PKK the surest way for extracting concessions.

Syrian Kurds have long been exposed to the pan-Kurdish nationalist message espoused by the PKK. Until the late 1990s the PKK was abetted by the Ba'athist regime and able to operate out of Syrian territory (at which point Assad expelled Öcalan, curtailed PKK activities, and drew very close to Ankara). One third of PKK guerrillas are said to be of Syrian origin, and the growing autonomy of Syria's Kurds – including the rise to prominence of the PKK-affiliated PYD – suggests that the region could yet follow the PKK rather than the Barzani model. This would threaten Turkey, in particular, through the consolidation of a Kurdish territory under PKK influence.

Both Kurdish factions have aligned with external actors. Most notably, since 2009, Barzani has cultivated close relations with Turkey, a primary trading and investment partner for northern Iraq and a potential conduit of energy exports (a gas pipeline deal was signed in May 2012). Barzani views Ankara as an ally in opposing the centralising schemes of Maliki, who has accused the Turks of pro-Sunni bias. Ankara, in turn, sees Barzani as an extra plank in the effort to pacify the PKK and reach a political solution to its internal Kurdish dynamic. Turkey's AKP government has also backed the Erbil Agreement, which is, indirectly, a confidence-building measure with the PKK.

At least until recently, rivals suspected the PKK and the PYD to have acted as proxies of the Assad regime (and even Iran) to heighten Turkish fears about the potential consequences of Assad's fall and to prevent the full opposition takeover of the north. (Unconfirmed reports of PKK fighters relocating to Syria from their bases in Iraq's Qandil Mountains with Iranian help support this position.) The PYD dismisses such allegations, pointing to its track record of confronting the regime, including in 2004 when it led a local uprising that Assad violently suppressed. The PYD also continues to blame Turkey and its allies in Syria for not providing sufficient concessions to Kurdish demands for autonomy in a post-Assad Syria; for barring it from membership in the opposition coalition; and for orchestrating FSA attacks on it in November 2012.

Given an increase in attacks against military and police forces in Turkey's south-east provinces in the summer of 2012 (which left 700 dead), Turkey itself suspects the PKK – and by extension the PYD – of acting on the orders

of Damascus, as it did in the 1990s. Ankara interpreted this escalation as an attempt to bring the Syrian conflict into its own backyard in retaliation for its support of the opposition (and the FSA in particular). Turkey has repeatedly issued warnings against the PYD and its militia, raising the prospect of a pre-emptive attack against their bases in Syria. Additionally, the conflict in Syria has exacerbated the rivalry between Ankara and Tehran, contributing to a growing fear on the part of the Turkish government that Iran has made peace with PJAK, a local offshoot of the PKK, which could now give them greater room to mount attacks in Turkey.

Despite the two competing visions offered by Barzani and the PKK, the potential success of the recently launched Turkish–Kurdish peace process (the so-called solution process) could serve to dampen intra-Kurdish divisions and lead to a de facto convergence between the Erbil and Qandil models, and in so doing draw in Turkish support. In such a scenario, the two sides would probably compete for leadership rather than substance. A deal resolving Turkish–PKK tensions would directly address Turkey’s fears regarding the emergence of a potentially militant Kurdish region in Syria. At the same time, if talks proceed smoothly, they might have positive implications for any prospective Syrian transition by reducing the chances for confrontation between Kurds and the Turkish-backed opposition and facilitating more substantive Kurdish representation in the opposition coalition.

By contrast, a failure of the current peace effort will result in even greater polarisation between the AKP and the PKK and a likely return to guerrilla warfare. In such a scenario, PYD-held areas in Syria could become a second base for the PKK, though the flat terrain suggests that this would be more difficult than in Iraq’s Qandil Mountains. Turkey could be expected to take a more aggressive position against an autonomous region, potentially even – as it periodically does in Iraq – intervening militarily. Importantly, the failure of talks and hostility with Turkey would also leave Syrian Kurds domestically isolated as the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition would likely follow Ankara’s lead and assume a hostile line. Turkey might even direct its allies in the armed Syrian opposition to target the Kurds.

Short of a unifying deal between Kurdish factions based on the successful conclusion of talks with Turkey, any Kurdish region in Syria would also be likely to be contested by Kurdish factions. This political struggle could provoke intra-regional violence that could draw in outside players such as Turkey and Kurdish factions from neighbouring states, and potentially spread to Iraq.

As the Syrian conflict continues, Syrian Kurds will face stark choices – to side with the regime, with the opposition or elements therein, or increasingly turn to co-ethnics to entrench a more independent existence. However, the more Syria falls apart the more likely the latter scenario is, and the more likely external forces such as the Iraqi *peshmerga* or the PKK will be drawn in – either in co-operation or in competition. In these circumstances, with de facto Kurdish autonomy having been established in northern Iraq and in Syria, the temptation to consolidate these gains and push against re-centralisation will be great. The success of this push will largely be dependent on internal dynamics and the response from Turkey – on both fronts much now depends on how peace talks between Turkey and the PKK evolve.



*Julien Barnes-Dacey*

# Lebanon: Resilience meets its stiffest test

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Tensions in Lebanon, whose political fate has long been intimately tied to Syria, are sharpening rapidly as its neighbour sinks deeper into a sectarian civil war. For two years Lebanese actors have effectively waged a proxy war in Syria through direct support to the warring parties, but mounting tensions and a growing number of clashes within Lebanon are raising fears that a domestic eruption is becoming hard to avoid. The influx of up to one million refugees, equal to almost 20 percent of the Lebanese population, is, meanwhile, placing the state under immense strain just as the economy suffers a significant downturn as a result of the crisis.

At the outset of the Syrian conflict, in March 2011, the Lebanese government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati assumed an official position of disassociation, declaring Lebanon too vulnerable to be partisan. The government sought to walk a neutral path, which, by and large, meant not antagonising Syria – fearful that to do so would invite retaliatory steps from Damascus. Lebanon officially refrained from measures that affiliated it with either the regime or the opposition (such as Arab League sanctions). However, given the central government’s longstanding weak domestic remit, the reality on the ground has been very different. Although Mikati sought to keep some state institutions neutral, such as the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) – long regarded as one of the few non-partisan state bodies – the country’s political actors, seeing their own fates directly tied to the unfolding struggle in Syria, soon became deeply implicated.

The splits within Lebanon over Syria pit the Sunni-dominated March 14 coalition that backs the rebels against the Assad-supporting, Iran-leaning, Shia Hezbollah movement that dominates the March 8 coalition. For both sides, the Syria crisis has assumed strategic importance: given Syria’s longstanding domination of Lebanon and its historic role as upholder of the political order

(which continued up until 2011 despite the Syrian army's forced withdrawal in 2005), the future of both Assad and Syria will have a significant impact on the balance of power in Lebanon.

On the one side, Hezbollah at first maintained a degree of distance from Assad, wary of provoking an eruption of tensions in Lebanon. It offered the Syrian regime firm rhetorical support but less in the form of material backing. Over the course of this year, however, as the conflict has deepened and Assad has grown more reliant on external support, this position has evolved towards overt material backing, culminating most recently in the deployment of fighters alongside regime troops battling in Qusair. Hezbollah fighters are now assuming a wider role in key frontlines, moving beyond the protection of strategic border passes and Shia villages and shrines that framed their initial engagement in the conflict. Having long played down its activities in Syria, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in May openly declared the movement's participation and commitment to ensuring that Assad emerges victorious.<sup>29</sup>

Behind Hezbollah's growing direct involvement in the war are increasingly existential fears, with the movement viewing the uprising's support from regional Sunni and international backers as part of a broader offensive against the Iranian–Syrian–Hezbollah “resistance axis”. In its calculation, the fall of Assad would precede a subsequent offensive against the movement, a fear heightened by claims to this exact effect from some of its domestic opponents. The movement's position reflects more than simple subservience to its patrons, Syria and Iran, but a widening fear that it will be next in line if Assad falls and a desire to pre-emptively move against such a development. “If we do not go there to fight them,” said Nasrallah, referring to Sunni militants, “they will come here.”<sup>30</sup>

As part of these concerns, Hezbollah fears that its supply lines from Syria, critical to maintaining Iranian military backing, will be curtailed if Assad falls. The movement's military superiority is central to maintaining its domestic pre-eminence but also to ensuring a deterrence capability against Israel. While the southern border remains calm, Israel in May launched air attacks on weapons in Syria that it claimed were headed to Hezbollah, raising concerns within

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<sup>29</sup> Loveday Morris, “Hezbollah chief defends group's involvement in Syrian war”, the *Washington Post*, 25 May 2013, available at [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-05-25/world/39515702\\_1\\_hezbollah-chief-sunni-future-movement-mashghara](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-05-25/world/39515702_1_hezbollah-chief-sunni-future-movement-mashghara) (hereafter, Morris, “Hezbollah chief defends group's involvement in Syrian war”).

<sup>30</sup> Morris, “Hezbollah chief defends group's involvement in Syrian war”.

Hezbollah as to its potential vulnerability and fears that Tel Aviv may seek to take advantage of the crisis to militarily weaken it.

On the other side, meanwhile, Saad Hariri's Sunni-dominated Future Movement (part of the March 14 coalition) has strongly allied itself with the uprising, viewing Assad's potential demise as an opportunity to weaken Syria's hold on the country, and therefore that of Hezbollah. Hariri and his allies have thrown full support behind the uprising while, by and large, singularly focusing their domestic political narrative around the Syria crisis. Hariri allies have also played a critical role in facilitating the flow of arms supplies from the Gulf to Syrian rebels, via both Lebanon and Turkey. Key Hariri lieutenants have been deployed within Lebanon and also Turkey to facilitate the flow of weapons, and allegedly Lebanese state resources, to the rebels.<sup>31</sup>

Of equal if not more significance, however, has been the role of increasingly autonomous Sunni actors and groups, which have assumed a far more militant role in support of Syrian rebels than March 14 political figures and bodies. These groups view the struggle as part of a broader opportunity to restore Sunni pride and reverse their loss of influence in the face of Hezbollah's ascendancy. Since the beginning of the armed struggle the north of Lebanon has acted as an important logistical haven for the armed struggle. As with Hezbollah, Lebanese Sunnis have moved into Syria to fight alongside the rebels. In consort with Hariri's waning influence, given his long absence from the country and dwindling ability to deploy financial means to secure support, this development has precipitated a loosening of establishment control over an increasingly aggressive Sunni street. Militant Sunni actors appear increasingly willing to confront Hezbollah directly and bring the fight to Lebanon – even if they are aware that they would currently be no match for Hezbollah's military might, a position they hope to reverse if Assad falls. Linked to this concern are fears that extremist jihadist groups may find growing traction in Lebanon, including within Palestinian refugee camps, which have in the past witnessed the emergence of al-Qaeda-linked groups, notably Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr al-Bared camp.

Just as Syria's struggle has assumed deep sectarian undertones, so in Lebanon it has also served to cement deepening sectarian polarisation, pitting Shias

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<sup>31</sup> See "Future Movement MP Okab Sakr admits arming Syrian rebels", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 3 December 2012, available at [www.aawsat.net/2012/12/article55239659](http://www.aawsat.net/2012/12/article55239659); and Nour Malas and Farnaz Fassihi, "Syria's Escalating War Bleeds Into Lebanon", the *Wall Street Journal*, 9 April 2013, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323361804578388410856381092.html>.

against Sunnis in unprecedented severity. Other communities, namely the Christians, have found themselves pulled into the mix, but, given their pre-existing division between March 8 and March 14, the impact has been less divisive. Political expediency has thrown Christians into opposing corners on Syria, though there is shared concern about the rise of Islamist forces across the region, as well as anxiety over the demographic impact of the largely Sunni refugee inflow into Lebanon, both of which could reinforce Christian demise. Recent Christian support for a proposed election law, which would see each sect elect its own MPs with the country as a single district, thereby cementing sectarian divisions at the expense of broader political coalitions, points to the impact of these mounting fears.

Nonetheless, and despite relative Lebanese avoidance of spillover thus far, the fault line principally falls along the Sunni–Shia axis and the battle is clearly now seeping into the country. Already the country’s political system is spluttering. The collapse of the Mikati government in March 2013 came as a direct result of the intensifying tensions and his chosen successor, Tammam Salam, has been unable to form a replacement, given the entrenched divisions. In May, parliament postponed elections due later this year to November 2014, with MPs citing political deadlock and fears of civil war, highlighting the deepening malaise. In the context of an already weak state system, the capacity of central authorities to exert any meaningful role is being increasingly questioned, creating a vacuum that is being filled by destabilising forces set on advancing narrow sectarian or factional aims at the expense of national interests.

There are now growing fears that the security environment may not be able to withstand these pressures. As tensions mount, key potential hotspots include the Bekaa Valley, which is used by both sides for access into Syria; Beirut, where Sunnis and Shias associated with both sides live cheek by jowl; the southern city of Saida, where the Sunni sheikh, Ahmad al-Assir, has been vocally condemning Hezbollah; and the northern city of Tripoli, where the Syria crisis is heightening longstanding tensions between local pro-Assad Alawites and Sunnis. Fears of domestic implosion are increasing due to developing cracks in the Lebanese Armed Forces, which have long been viewed, particularly by international backers, as the key non-partisan vehicle for preserving stability. Meanwhile, though the relationship between former close allies Hezbollah and Hamas has cooled since Hamas broke with Assad in response to the crisis, a more significant deterioration could potentially result in tensions inside Lebanon given Hamas’s influence in some of the Palestinian camps.

Isolated events already point to the willingness of both sides to bring the conflict to Lebanon. In August 2012, Michel Samaha, a former pro-Assad minister, was arrested for allegedly planning bomb attacks in Lebanon on behalf of the Syrian regime, purportedly aimed at sowing sectarian discord. Two months later, Lebanon's intelligence chief, Wissam al-Hassan, was assassinated in Beirut (though al-Hassan was involved in channelling armed support from the Gulf to the rebels in Syria, making him a more direct actor in the conflict). In response to Hezbollah's recent declaration that it was fighting alongside Assad, Syrian rebels have said that they will launch attacks on Hezbollah within Lebanon – both as an act of retaliation but also as an attempt to draw their resources away from Syria. Recently launched missile attacks on Hezbollah areas in southern Beirut and Hermel, though without significant impact, may be a harbinger of what is to come. Intensified attacks by the Syrian air force on rebel support positions in northern Lebanon are not only bringing the conflict directly into the country but fuelling the antagonisms lying behind the threat of even deeper escalation.

At the same time, the regional environment is doing little to secure Lebanon's peace. Lebanon and its approach to the Syrian crisis cannot be separated from regional forces. Hezbollah is strongly backed by Iran, which is undoubtedly pushing it to strengthen its material support for Assad. Sunni Gulf states (namely Saudi Arabia), meanwhile, actively support March 14 and have channelled some of their very active anti-Assad activities through Lebanon (the north of the country in particular). Qatar is doing the same and is reported to be an active backer of the more autonomous – and radical – Sunni militant groups gaining ground. In this context, the country is part of the strategic battleground, with regional backers looking to secure their interests even as they battle in Syria. For Tehran, maintaining the strength of Hezbollah is integral to ensuring its deterrence capability against Israel, while also projecting wider regional influence particularly as the fate of Assad becomes more uncertain. For the Saudis, this same struggle makes Lebanon a key focus of interest. Having acquiesced to Syrian domination for so long, the shifting regional dynamics offer an opportunity to assert Saudi hegemony as part of a revived Sunni regional order that would weaken Iran's regional hold.

In addition to these political forces, growing structural pressures associated with the dramatic Syrian refugee inflow – now accounting for approximately 20 percent of the population – is throwing up new challenges. This strain on resources is coming at a time when the economy is already suffering a considerable downturn as a result of the crisis. GDP growth has fallen to

approximately 1.5 percent over the past two years, compared to eight percent in the two years before. Gulf states, whose citizens account for 40 percent of the country's tourism revenues, have warned their citizens against travel to the country, while foreign direct investment plunged 68 percent in 2012 compared to the previous year.<sup>32</sup> Given the pre-existing weakness of state infrastructure, the refugee influx represents a significant new challenge, particularly as many of the refugees have congregated in the poorest areas of the country (such as Tripoli), where social tensions are already on edge. Unlike in Turkey and Jordan, where the central state and international aid agencies have taken on the burden of sheltering refugees, in Lebanon local communities have done so, but without meaningful support, feeding growing strains. There are also concerns that many of these refugees may end up staying in Lebanon long term if prolonged violence continues in Syria or if state collapse or wider sectarian displacement makes their return difficult. In these circumstances, Lebanon would be faced with a new refugee problem to rival that of the Palestinians. As the largely Sunni refugee population would be liable to political exploitation, this would be expected to exacerbate sectarian tensions.

In these circumstances, the Syria crisis is clearly hanging very heavily over Lebanon. With each passing day, the country's political and sectarian divide becomes ever more polarised. What is already an effective proxy – and increasingly direct – battle between Lebanese forces within Syria, reflecting not so much a focus on the fate of Assad per se, but a wider preoccupation with exploiting what his fate means for the domestic balance of power, is increasingly trickling over the border. Lebanon has long been fragile, but the Syria crisis is threatening to unravel the threads holding it together.

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<sup>32</sup> Elias Sakr, "Lebanon's economy needs a 'major shock' to see growth", *Daily Star*, 31 May 2013, available at [www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Lebanon/2013/May-31/218932-lebanons-economy-needs-a-major-shock-to-see-growth.ashx#axzz2WU5YSdqh](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Lebanon/2013/May-31/218932-lebanons-economy-needs-a-major-shock-to-see-growth.ashx#axzz2WU5YSdqh).

*Nuh Yilmaz*

## Turkey: Goodbye to Zero Problems with Neighbours

The Arab Awakening caught Turkey off-guard, challenging the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's emerging foreign policy. This policy, dubbed Zero Problems with Neighbours (ZPwN) by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, codified Ankara's growing independence from the Western tutelage under which most of Turkey's post-Second World War foreign policy had operated. The new policy aimed to position Turkey as a hub of regional integration. It boosted trade and investment ties across geopolitical boundaries and gave Turkey an activist mediation role in addressing such problems as the Iranian nuclear programme, the Syria–Israel conflict, the Fatah– Hamas power struggle, and Iraq's fractious post-Saddam politics. The goal was a new, post-Pax Americana system of regional stability that favoured Turkish interests.

Before the onset of the rebellion in Syria, the AKP government had managed to shift its relations with Damascus from the brink of war to a close partnership. Syria's expulsion of the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, in 1998, cleared the most significant cause of friction between the two. Thereafter, the relationship grew stronger, especially after Bashar al-Assad's first visit to Turkey, in January 2004. Turkey saw Syria as a gateway to the Arab world, and Ankara and Damascus co-operated through joint cabinet meetings, combined military drills, and a free-trade agreement.

The Syrian rebellion presented a profound challenge to Ankara's new orientation towards Damascus, forcing it to adapt to changing conditions on the ground that confounded the expectations of Turkish policymakers. In response, Turkey's Syria policy has been driven by a domestic political need to merge the values of the AKP government with Turkish national interests, which include ensuring stability, preventing a regional war with sectarian spillover, and (crucially) limiting the impact of a weakening Syrian central state on Turkey's domestic Kurdish conflict.

Turkey's Syria policy has evolved through three distinct phases. In the early days of the Syrian uprising, Turkey had hoped to maintain its growing ties with Damascus while promoting reform and dialogue between the opposition and the Assad regime, rather than clearly taking sides. From March until late September 2011, Turkey tried to convince Assad to undertake reforms and outreach measures that might help to resolve the crisis. As it became clear that Assad had no intention of making meaningful reforms, and was instead determined to resolve the conflict through a harsh security crackdown, Turkey shifted to a policy of regime change. It empowered Syrian opposition elements, allowing them to organise and convene in Turkey, and it hosted defectors from the Syrian military, reportedly allowing the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to set up its headquarters in the south-east of the country.<sup>33</sup> Turkey hoped that these measures might bring the regime to the negotiating table, although Ankara by now believed that the ouster of Assad was essential to resolving the conflict. The emphasis upon regime change, however, did not rule out a transition deal with elements of the old regime deemed to have "clean hands" (such as Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa).

In early 2012, Turkey tried to forge an international "Friends of Syria" coalition to secure regime change. However, it failed to gain the agreement of key players to any form of intervention, including the no-fly zone idea at one stage floated by Ankara. Key NATO partners, most importantly the United States, remained strongly opposed to any form of military intervention. Turkey's more forward-leaning posture at this early stage – including providing headquarters for the leadership of the FSA, combined with the failure of the opposition groups it had backed to make much headway on the ground – left it somewhat isolated. This picture started to change slightly as the US and others took a more active interest in the FSA. At the same time, refugees continued to stream across the border, deepening Turkey's stake in the outcome next door.

As a result, Ankara looked to diplomatic efforts, such as Egypt's September 2012 offer of a Regional Quartet (Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia), or a Russian plan to orchestrate a political settlement, neither of which gained any traction. Turkey had also assumed – incorrectly – that US reluctance to intervene in the Syrian conflict would give way to a more activist position following President Barack Obama's re-election.

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33 Selim Akan, "Main base in Turkey, says rebel Free Syrian Army", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 30 August 2012, available at [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/main-base-in-turkey-says-rebel-free-syrian-army.aspx?pageID=238&nid=28967](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/main-base-in-turkey-says-rebel-free-syrian-army.aspx?pageID=238&nid=28967).



Frustrated with both its erstwhile ally Assad and its Western partners, Turkey began to operate more independently on the ground in support of the rebellion, notably in concert with Qatar. Despite their now active backing for the armed overthrow of the regime in Damascus, Turkey's policy elites insisted that this was consistent with its "Zero Problems" policy on the grounds that no stability was possible in Syria while Assad remained in power. But the Syria crisis is requiring a response from Ankara not easily articulated within the "Zero Problems" rubric. It is having to deal with around 250,000 refugees on Turkish soil; the control of territory between Aleppo and the Syrian border by forces seeking direct support from Turkey; and the fact that PKK-aligned groups have taken control of some key Kurdish towns within Syria.

Ankara's growing involvement in the effort to overthrow Assad has also become a growing source of political discord within Turkey itself. Because, although Turkey has tried to encourage opposition groups to be more inclusive and representative of the full diversity of Syria's communities, it has been unable to prevent the conflict from assuming a more factionalist character. As a result, Ankara's support for the rebellion is perceived by many in Turkey as a sectarian choice, backing Syria's Sunni majority – in the form of the Brotherhood-dominated Syrian National Council (SNC) and tolerating some (predominantly Sunni) armed rebel groups – against the minorities closest to the regime.

Many among Turkey's Alevi community – the country's single largest minority religious group – have been antagonised by Ankara's support for the rebellion and have therefore chosen to back the Assad regime. Turkey's main opposition party, the Republic People's Party (CHP), has used this sentiment to raise pressure on the AKP government, while a number of smaller, more radical Islamist and leftist groups have also criticised Ankara's Syria policy. CHP leaders have visited Damascus on a couple of occasions (most recently in March 2013) to declare support for Assad, although it more typically couches its opposition to the government's Syria policy on the basis of non-intervention and keeping Turkey out of the regional schemes of the US and the Gulf states. The recent Gezi Park protests, sparked by a police crackdown on environmentalist groups who wanted to protect a park from gentrification, spread out very quickly across the country partly because of tensions caused by the government's Syria policy. Yet, despite this opposition, the AKP government can count on the support of more than half of the electorate for its stance on Syria (even if it chooses to intervene more directly), not only from among its own political base, but also among a majority of conservatives, Sunni voters and Islamists, liberal interventionists, and Turkey's Arab minority.

The greatest challenge the Syrian rebellion has posed to Turkey's long-term national interests so far, however, came when Assad ceded control of key towns in northern Syria, such as Afrin, Kobani, and Rasulayn (Serekaniye), to the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD), threatening the potential emergence of a territorial base from which PKK fighters could launch attacks into Turkey. The significance of this development may be muted by Ankara's negotiations with the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, over a political solution to Turkey's own Kurdish conflict (some media reports have suggested that these talks prompted the PYD to agree to a ceasefire with the Arab-Islamist rebel forces). If the negotiations between the PKK and the government fail, however, the PYD challenge is likely to be inflamed to the point of presenting a game-changing risk for Turkey's Syria policy.

Turkey's military has historically wielded a powerful influence over both domestic and foreign policy, although that influence has increasingly lessened (particularly after the 2010 referendum that reaffirmed popular support for the AKP's constitutional vision). The leadership of the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) has remained silent on the government's response to the Syrian rebellion and ongoing court cases of military officials over alleged coup plots is likely to contain any dissent over Ankara's Syria policy. The precedent of Libya, where Turkish forces helped to train rebel fighters, suggests that the military will follow the orders of the civilian government. While the TAF may be reluctant to become embroiled in Syria, it would do so if ordered – although only on a multilateral basis in which its legality had been established, presumably via the United Nations Security Council.

Turkey's Syria policy has also raised new tensions in relations that had been steadily improving, with neighbours such as Iran, Iraq, and Russia (although relations with Moscow have proven more resilient, with both governments willing to maintain ties despite their differences over Syria). Conversely, relations with the Gulf states, which had been clouded by Turkey's attempts to forge a compromise agreement with Western powers over Iran's nuclear programme, have steadily improved as a result of Ankara distancing itself from Assad. Despite their common hostility to Assad, Turkey and Saudi Arabia differ over which opposition forces in Syria to support. By way of contrast, Turkey and Qatar concur on Syria in their support for the FSA and the SNC, just as they do over support for the Muslim Brotherhood-led transition in Egypt.

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34 Güney Yıldız, "Salih Müslim: Türkiye'de PKK ile görüşmeler PYD'nin önünü açıyor", BBC Türkçe, 7 May 2013, available at [www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2013/05/130506\\_salih\\_muslim.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2013/05/130506_salih_muslim.shtml).

Again, this sets them apart from Riyadh, whose hostility to the Brotherhood led it instead to support the old establishment in Cairo. For practical purposes, these differences are reflected in the Saudis' willingness to arm a wider array of rebel forces in Syria, including hard-line Salafi groups, while Turkey prefers to support groups vetted by the FSA for fear of empowering "unruly" elements that could threaten regional security.

Ankara has also been frustrated by Washington's hesitant approach, including its reluctance to impose a no-fly zone inside Syria or to arm rebel groups. Turkey has not shared US concerns over empowering anti-American forces, because Turkish officials feel that potential perils are exaggerated. Turkish officials were irked when, last November, the US moved without Ankara's consent to sideline the Turkish-backed Muslim Brotherhood-leaning SNC, replacing it with what America considered to be a more inclusive political leadership in the form of the Syrian National Coalition. Similarly, Ankara was antagonised by Washington's decision to add the most effective rebel fighting force, Jabhat al-Nusra, to its list of international terror organisations (the group subsequently declared its fealty to the leadership of al-Qaeda). Turkish officials saw this as weakening the opposition and reinforcing the narrative of the Assad regime. Further tensions between Ankara and Washington may lie ahead over the Syrian endgame. The US appears more inclined to accept a role for Assad in negotiations and for his regime in a political transition, whereas Turkey strongly opposes any solution that does not see Assad immediately removed from power. However, towards Geneva II, the two countries share a common position that elements from within the Assad regime can join the transitional government to carry Syria through to presidential elections in 2014.

Despite the unmistakable tensions over Syria, the deployment of Patriot missile batteries in Turkey, providing protection from potential Syrian missile attacks, underscores the fact that US-Turkish relations have not been fundamentally damaged by differences in position. Within the EU, Ankara has welcomed French and British support for lifting the arms embargo. The complex Turkish-Israeli relationship, which has seen a long-term decline under AKP rule, has not been significantly altered by the Syria crisis. Both sides may share hostility to the Assad regime, a concern over its chemical weapons capability, and a desire to avoid a power vacuum emerging in Damascus, but they take very different views over the solution to these problems. Unlike Turkey, Israel is more ambiguous over the question of whether Assad should be brought down and is fearful of the rebellion being "hijacked by Islamists". The US-brokered rapprochement between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his

Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu should not be overplayed. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Turkey's Syria policy has strengthened its ties with Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and Egypt, as well as with civil society activists pressing for democratic changes in other Arab countries (in particular, with the Muslim Brotherhood forces that have been the greatest beneficiary of the opening-up of democratic political space across the region over the past two years).

The evolution of Turkey's Syria policy, from pressing Assad to undertake democratic reforms to aggressively seeking his ouster, has been a gradual and pragmatic one, although it may have also contained moments of strategic miscalculation. Turkey, like a number of other foreign stakeholders, assessed that Assad would fall within a year of the outbreak of open rebellion. It was the assumption that Assad's fall was imminent that persuaded Ankara, after seven months of pressing Assad to undertake reforms, to throw its weight behind the armed rebellion. Turkey did not want to end up "on the wrong side of history", especially after its previous attempts to mediate between Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and his opponents had drawn scorn and derision among Arab publics. But not only had Turkey overestimated the extent of its own leverage over Assad in the early period of the rebellion, it may also have underestimated the strength and resilience of his regime when choosing to back the armed opposition.

The Syria crisis has highlighted the limits of the AKP government's ZPwN policy, prompting Ankara to turn once more to hard-power elements alongside soft power and diplomacy. It has underscored the limits on Turkey's ability to remain aloof from, or simply to act as mediator in, escalating regional power struggles. But the experience has also hardened Turkey's decision-makers, boosting their confidence to mount more muscular cross-border interventions, and laying to rest any naivety over the prospects for resolving all regional conflicts through dialogue. Turkey's frustration with American restraint has prompted it to act independently of Washington, further boosting its confidence as a regional hard- and soft-power centre of influence.

Meanwhile, Ankara's Syria policy has jeopardised substantial economic ties, and has run the risk of Turkey being too closely identified with factionalist regional power games to an extent that undermines its ability to mediate in other conflicts. But, by accepting those risks, Turkey has matured as a regional strategic actor, forging new alliances and even taking a proactive approach to solving its biggest national security challenge: the PKK and Kurdish aspirations. Carefully managed, the new turn towards dialogue with the PKK

enhances the prospects for the long-term stabilisation of Turkey's Kurdish problem. Conversely, a breakdown in that dialogue runs the greater risk of regional conflict given Kurdish gains as a result of the Syrian rebellion.

Turkey hopes to see an inclusive democratic Syria emerge from the conflict, which would naturally be an ally of Ankara given Turkey's role in supporting the rebellion. But if Syria collapses into a failed state, Turkey's security interests will be further endangered. Even if this happens, Turkey's leadership has grown more confident in its ability to manage regional crises and in its central role as a stakeholder in a new Middle East political and security order. Indeed, the Syria crisis may herald an important evolution of thinking within the AKP government, forcing it to embrace the idea that the progressive regional stability it has sought will occasionally require the projection of Turkey's hard-power capabilities alongside its burgeoning soft power.

# Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank Hans Kundnani, Alba Lamberti, Mark Leonard and Dick Oosting, Jacqueline Shoen and Nicholas Walton for their valuable input into this report, as well as the respective authors for their contributions. ECFR would also like to extend its thanks to the governments of Norway and Sweden for their ongoing support of ECFR's Middle East and North Africa programme.

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The regional battle for Syria has emerged out of a conventional struggle for regional hegemony, driven by geo-political ambitions of a worldly nature rather than celestial differences over religious beliefs. Sectarian prejudices and ambitions animate most of the actors identified in this series but regional engagement in Syria is first and foremost a product of strategic ambitions. These dynamics can be traced back to the 2003 Iraq War, which, by upending the existing regional balance, set in motion a new competition for regional hegemony.

"For the Gulf states, the Syria conflict is a critical battle for control of a key pivot state in the region."

**Hassan Hassan**

"Tehran's objective is to ensure that if it cannot use Syria for its own purposes in the Middle East, others should be prevented from using Syria against Iran."

**Jubin Goodarzi**

"If Assad were to fall in Syria, some Iraqi politicians believe that Iraq's international border would eventually lie at Abu Ghraib, on the outskirts of Baghdad."

**Hayder al-Khoei**

"Israel has focused on the hardware component of the new threats emerging from the Syria crisis – namely weaponry."

**Dimi Reider**

"Deeply concerned by the threat of spill-over instability and violence, Jordan has naturally been most preoccupied with ensuring its own resilience."

**Julien Barnes-Dacey**

"Two competing visions for resolving the Kurdish issue within Syria have emerged, championed by Barzani and the PKK."

**Dimitar Bechev**

"Lebanon has long been fragile, but the Syria crisis is threatening to unravel the threads holding it together."

**Julien Barnes-Dacey**

"Turkey overestimated the extent of its own leverage over Assad."

**Nuh Yilmaz**