



# Syria's Uprising: sectarianism, regionalisation, and state order in the Levant

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➤ *‘Syria is the 35th province and a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and seeks to take over Syria or [Iran’s] Khuzestan, the priority lies in maintaining Syria because if we maintain Syria, we can take back Khuzestan. However, if we lose Syria, we won’t be able to hold Tehran.’*

Deputy Commander, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp, **Hossein Taeb**, 15 February 2013.

➤ *‘Neither the opposition nor the regime can finish each other off. . . The most dangerous thing in this process is that if the opposition is victorious, there will be a civil war in Lebanon, divisions in Jordan, and a sectarian war in Iraq.’*

Iraqi Prime Minister, **Nouri al-Malaki**, 27 February 2013.

➤ *‘Sectarianism is evil, and the wind of sectarianism does not need a license to cross from a country to another, because if it begins in a place, it will move to another place . . . Strife is knocking on the doors of everyone, and no one will survive if it enters, because there is a wind behind it, and money, and plans.’*

Iraqi Prime Minister, **Nouri al-Malaki**, 26 April 2013.

➤ *‘We fundamentally and ideologically reject any form of partition or division of any Arab or Islamic country and call for them to preserve their unity . . . From Yemen to Iraq to Syria, the region is threatened more than ever by partition, even in Egypt and Libya and Saudi Arabia.’*

Hezbollah leader, **Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah**, 3 January 2012.

➤ *‘I am inviting D-8 group members to take a more effective stance against issues that threaten peace and prosperity of all countries in our region. No single country can maintain stability and economic development on its own in a region of wars, conflicts, terrorism, and disputes.’*

Turkish Prime Minister, **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**, 22 November 2012.

➤ *‘Syria lies at the fault line geographically, politically, socially and ideologically . . . So playing with this fault line will have serious repercussions all over the Middle East. Any intervention will not make things better. It will only make them worse. Europe and the United States and others are going to pay the price sooner or later with the instability in this region. They do not foresee it.’*

Syrian President, **Bashar al-Assad**, 3 March 2013.

»» As the Syrian revolution enters its third year, the risks to regional stability are escalating. Violence has spilled over all of Syria's borders. The conflict has elevated sectarian tensions in Lebanon, threatening the 1990 Taif settlement that ended 15 years of civil war. It has sharpened ethnic and sectarian frictions in Iraq and engulfed southern Turkey. It has heightened tensions across the Syrian-Israeli border. Violence has also spilled into Syria from across the region. Regional involvement in the conflict is deepening. Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and Iranian Basej forces actively participate in combat operations against the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and in attacks on civilians. Militant Islamists have joined their Syrian counterparts in the armed opposition. Kurdish Peshmerga units have supported operations by Syrian Kurdish fighters to seize control of border crossings between Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. Weapons and fighters, often funded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and wealthy patrons from throughout the Gulf, are flowing to the opposition through Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan. Syrian refugees, now numbering more than a million, flow in the opposite direction, straining the economies and the social fabric of receiving countries.

This paper first assesses the challenges posed by regionalisation to the stability of the post-Ottoman state order in the Levant and how it is shaping the likely contours of a post-Assad Syria. It then reviews the factors that are shaping regionalisation, highlighting the ways in which shifts in regional politics over the past two decades have led to new and troubling patterns of regional intervention in the Syrian conflict. The paper then examines factors that have the potential to mitigate the negative effects of regionalisation. In a final section, it explores options for addressing regionalisation. The paper intentionally focuses on the roles of *regional* actors. It therefore only addresses the broader set of international actors engaged in the Syrian conflict, including Russia, the United States (US), and the Friends of Syria Group countries, to the extent that their intervention in the Syrian revolution is relevant to processes of regionalisation and its effects.

## 1. The Syrian conflict and the post-Ottoman state order in the Levant

»» Syria has become the epicentre of regional conflicts and competition in the Middle East. Regional balance of power politics, ideological clashes, and unrequited nationalist aspirations have fused, transforming what began as a peaceful uprising for dignity and democracy into an ethno-sectarian conflict that is increasingly difficult to contain within the boundaries of the Syrian state that were set down, with only modest subsequent changes, in the Sykes-Picot Agreement in May 1916. As UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres warned in late April, '[t]he conflict in Syria might for the first time put [the] political geography [created by the Sykes-Picot treaty] into question'.<sup>1</sup>

1. M. Chuluv, 'Half of Syrian Population "Will Need Aid by End of Year"', *The Guardian*, 19 April 2013, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/apr/19/half-syrian-population-aid-year>

As regional actors move into Syria, and as violence spills across the country's borders, more than the future of Syria is at stake. The post-Ottoman Empire state order is being tested. Its ethno-sectarian fault lines, already under increasing strain in Lebanon and Iraq, may yet buckle. Their collapse would likely usher in an extended period of uncertainty, conflict, and volatility as regional actors struggle to consolidate a new political order. The end of the post-Ottoman state order would pose a direct and immediate challenge to the strategic interests of Turkey, Jordan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, as well as to the US and Europe. Should a regional process of state collapse engulf Iraq and disrupt oil production, its effects would be even more widely felt, including among countries such as India and China, which are heavily reliant on Iraqi oil.

What such a process might look like is already visible in minor but telling events over the past several months. Clashes in the north-eastern Syrian town of Ras al-Ayn in November 2012-January 2013 between Kurdish forces of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and Salafist opposition militias loosely aligned with Arab tribal fighters and supported, at least tacitly, by Turkey, offers a disturbing glimpse into what this future could hold on a much larger scale.<sup>2</sup> Divided from its neighbouring Turkish city, Ceylanpinar, by the Syrian boundary set out in the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Ras al-Ayn witnessed violent skirmishes between Kurdish and Arab tribal forces after World War I following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and again in the 1940s at the end of the French mandate. The recent fighting thus merges legacies of unresolved inter-communal conflict at the local level with the polarising presence of Sunni Arab jihadists and Turkey's interest in containing the PYD and forestalling any attempt by Syrian Kurds to go beyond autonomy and create an independent entity.<sup>3</sup>

Similar 'transnational' tensions are evident in other Syrian border zones. Since late February 2013, Hezbollah forces 'guarding Shiite Lebanese citizens living in and around 14 Lebanese villages located in Syrian territory' have engaged in sustained battles with Islamist units loosely associated with the FSA. According to one account, 'the area on both sides of the Syrian-Lebanese border is paying for the mistake made by François Georges-Picot and Sir Mark Sykes at the beginning of the last century', when Shi'a communities were split between Syria and Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> The Syrian revolution has thus reanimated conflicts across an international border that was never fully demarcated when Syria and Lebanon emerged as independent states in the post-Ottoman period.<sup>5</sup>

As violence around Qusayr escalated during spring 2013, Hezbollah officials described their defence of Shi'a in the area as a 'national duty'. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad mocked the Lebanese government's official position of neutrality with respect to the Syrian conflict. '... Can Lebanon remove its own 10,452 square kilometres and move itself to Africa? . . . [T]his policy of self-distancing is a mistake and there must be a strong relationship'. In late April, the interim president of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, George Sabra, described Hezbollah's participation in combat operations in Qusayr as 'a declaration of war against the Syrian people'. Two militant Lebanese Sunni

2. A detailed account of the recent clashes in Ras al-Ayn has been posted online, reflecting a Kurdish perspective on events: 'Assault on Ras al-Ayn', available at: [http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Assault\\_on\\_Ras\\_Al-Ayn](http://acloserlookonsyria.shoutwiki.com/wiki/Assault_on_Ras_Al-Ayn)

3. See comments by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan to the Turkish media, 25 February 2013, available at: <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-308061-turkey-says-wont-allow-separate-entity-in-northern-syria.html>

4. Both quotations are from N. Chararah, 'Hezbollah Defends Shiite Villages In Syria War', *AL Monitor*, 20 February 2013, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/02/hezbollah-shiites-syria.html>

5. [www.nowlebanon.com](http://www.nowlebanon.com), *Lebanon-Syria Border Report 2009*, available at: <https://now.mmedia.me/Library/Files/EnglishDocumentation/Other%20Documents/Border%20Report%20NOW.pdf>



clerics, Sheikh Ahmad Assir from Sidon and Sheikh Salem al-Rifa'i from Tripoli, called for jihad to protect Sunnis around Qusayr and urged the formation of Sunni militias that could be activated in the event that fighting spilled into Lebanon.<sup>6</sup>

The incidents in Qusayr and Ras al-Ayn represent in microcosm the accelerating centrifugal effects of regionalisation that could, if left unchecked, tear the Syrian state apart and cause the spillover of conflict into neighbouring countries, all of which are already struggling under the weight of their own ethno-sectarian tensions.

Despite its destructive potential, however, the regionalisation of the Syrian conflict is almost certain to accelerate in the months ahead. Both the regime and the opposition confront pressures and constraints that make regionalisation necessary for their survival, if not, in the opposition's case, for any meaningful possibility of military victory. Regional actors also have powerful incentives to intervene. Syria sits at the intersection of every major strategic axis in the Arab East. It is a key member of the strategic alliance linking Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, with support from Iraq's Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad. Although Syria ended its military presence in Lebanon in 2005, following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, it continues to exert significant influence in Lebanese affairs. It has played a central role in the 'resistance front' against Israel. Its relationship with Jordan's Hashemite monarchy prior to the uprising was correct but cool: it has subsequently been strained by Jordan's support for Syria's opposition and by the presence in Jordan of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. Syria is also deeply enmeshed in regional axes of competition and confrontation: between Turkey and Saudi Arabia for influence in the Levant; between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states; and between Turkey and Kurdish groups seeking greater autonomy from both Arab and Turkish governments. Additionally, Syria is a long-term strategic ally of Russia and an equally long-term strategic adversary of the US. Among the four countries that the US government designated as 'state sponsors of terrorism' when it first created this category in December 1979, Syria is the only one that is still on the list.<sup>7</sup>

Syria's strategic position and the sheer density of the ties that link it to broader regional issues give every important (state and non-state) player in the region ample cause to view the Syrian revolution as directly affecting its core interests. The stakes are high. The collapse of the Assad regime would complicate the Iran-Hezbollah alliance, weaken Hezbollah domestically, constrain Iran's capacity to project its power into the Arab East, and potentially lead a post-Assad regime to move Syria out of the resistance front and into strategic partnerships with Turkey, the GCC, and Jordan. For Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar – although their interests are not neatly aligned – the defeat of the Assad regime would constitute a major setback for Iran's regional ambitions and create the possibility, if not the likelihood, of a Islamist-dominated successor government more sympathetic to Turkey and the GCC on regional issues.

For Syria's Kurds and their counterparts across the border in northern Iraq and south-eastern Turkey, the regime's demise would create new opportunities to press demands for Kurdish autonomy and expand the reach of a near-sovereign Kurdish entity. In Israel, initial ambivalence about the Syrian uprising has gradually given way to a pragmatic acceptance of

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6. *The Middle East Times*, 'Lebanese Salafists Call for Jihad in Syria', 22 April 2013, available at: [http://www.mideast-times.com/home\\_news.php?newsid=4996](http://www.mideast-times.com/home_news.php?newsid=4996)

7. The other three 'founding members' of the list of state sponsors of terrorism were Libya, Iraq, and South Yemen.

the regime as a source of regional instability that should be replaced, awareness that any Israeli intervention in support of either the opposition or the regime would be counterproductive, and an understanding that it will have to adjust to whatever future government emerges. Israel has expanded its defensive presence along the UN demarcation line on the Golan, including anti-ballistic missile batteries, and has defined clear red lines that would trigger military intervention – as demonstrated in its two attacks in May on targets around Damascus described by Israel as a chemical weapons research facility and a storage site for sophisticated Iranian surface-to-surface missiles destined for transfer to Hezbollah. These followed an earlier assault in January 2013 that destroyed a convoy reported to be transferring advanced anti-aircraft missiles from Syria to Lebanon. These actions have increased tensions across the Syrian-Israeli and Lebanese-Israeli borders. Nonetheless, Israel is unlikely to become involved in the uprising as long as its core security interests are not threatened directly.

International actors also recognise the strategic implications of the Syrian revolution and have engaged actively, if asymmetrically, to influence the course of events on the ground. The possibility of pulling Syria out of its longstanding alliance with Iran, weakening the resistance front, and shifting the regional balance of power towards the so-called ‘moderate’ Sunni Arab regimes led by Saudi Arabia have all been important considerations in US and European support for the Syrian opposition. Overall, however, and for varying reasons, Western policies have been hesitant, cautious, and limited in their involvement. Western governments have provided ‘non-lethal’ support and humanitarian assistance while resisting pleas to arm opposition forces or establish safe zones or no fly zones. They have ruled out direct military intervention other than to secure Syrian chemical and biological weapons, and then only if it becomes clear that the regime has deployed them.<sup>8</sup> Even this purported ‘red line’ has been tested, however, by the reluctance of the Obama Administration to act when in late April British, French, Israeli and US intelligence agencies all confirmed that small quantities of the nerve gas Sarin had been used against civilians in Khan al-Assal near Aleppo.<sup>9</sup>

Over time, and with the aim of creating conditions conducive to negotiations between regime and opposition, Western governments have gradually expanded their engagement in Syria. By April 2013, the US was providing logistical support for the transfer of weapons purchased by Saudi Arabia and Qatar to opposition units deemed ‘moderate’. Further shifts in policy are likely in the coming months, including potentially the direct provision of arms to some elements of the FSA, and endorsement of some form of no fly zone.<sup>10</sup> Despite the limited nature of Western engagement thus far and the sustained failure of Western policies to achieve their stated objective – a process of negotiation that will bring about a meaningful political transition and the removal of Assad from power –, there remain substantial concerns in Western capitals about the consequences of additional support to Syria’s armed opposition.

8. In mid-April 2013, Britain and France provided the UN with evidence indicating that chemical weapons had been used in Syria. Despite US and European warnings that such use would trigger intervention, Western governments seem to have concluded that there was not sufficient certainty about the matter to justify a military response. As of mid-May 2013, uncertainty persisted about whether chemical weapons were used and if they were, by which side in the conflict.

9. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Background Conference Call by White House Official on Syria’, 25 April 2013, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/25/background-conference-call-white-house-official-syria>.

10. In late April 2013, US Secretary of State John Kerry announced an additional increase in US funding for non-lethal aid to the armed opposition, and indicated that all such aid would be channelled through the Supreme Military Council as a way to bolster its influence among armed units inside of Syria. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/world/middleeast/kerry-says-us-to-double-aid-to-the-opposition-in-syria.html>. His announcement followed testimony in Congress from Director of National Intelligence James Clapper that the US viewed the creation of a no fly zone as a possibility. C. Muñoz, ‘Syria no-fly zone a possibility says Clapper’, *The Hill*, 18 April 2013, available at: <http://thehill.com/blogs/defcon-hill/policy-and-strategy/294831-syria-no-fly-zone-a-possibility-q-says-clapper->.

Russia, on the other hand, has been far less ambivalent in its support for the regime, even while framing its policy not as an expression of Moscow's commitment to al-Assad himself but as a defence of the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Legalistic rhetoric aside, Russia views the possible overthrow of the regime as a major threat to its own regional interests. Such an outcome would weaken its regional allies, bolster the US's position, and expand the influence of Islamist movements that Moscow views as a potential challenge to its position not only in the greater Middle East but also in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It would also weaken the position of Syria's Orthodox Christian population, a matter about which Russia's President Vladimir Putin has publicly expressed concern.<sup>11</sup> In response, Russia has insisted that the only acceptable path out of the conflict must be through negotiations between regime representatives and the opposition, as defined in the Geneva Framework of June 2012. Russia appears to accept the possibility of negotiations leading to Assad's removal from power: nonetheless, it continues to provide his regime with critical military supplies and equipment, energy supplies, and financial support. Russia has also blocked repeated attempts within the UN Security Council to impose sanctions and other punitive measures on the Assad government. Its backing, together with that of Iran and Hezbollah, has become essential to the regime's survival, even as Russia and the US work to establish a framework that would permit a negotiating process to begin.

Western hesitation and Russian determination have contributed to the regionalisation of the Syrian conflict, providing incentives for each to endorse intervention by regional actors. In the case of the US and Europe, the political risks thought to accompany direct engagement with the armed opposition or participation in any form of military action, including the creation of safe zones, has led Western governments to cede leadership and influence to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey in providing financial, political, and military support for the opposition – even though they have done so in ways that directly undermine Western interests in preventing sectarian radicalisation and political fragmentation on the ground. In the Russian case, a convenient division of labour has developed. Iran and Hezbollah provide combat forces, training, intelligence, and critical supplies to the regime. This permits Russia to advance the dubious and hypocritical claim that it is merely acting in defence of international law principles and honouring its existing military contracts with the Syrian government.

## 2. Toward Balkanisation in Syria?

»» Given what is at stake in Syria for regional and international actors, there is little reason to imagine that regionalisation can be checked. This does not mean, however, that the Syrian state is doomed, or that the conflict will necessarily lead to the collapse of the post-Ottoman state order in the Levant. Syria could of course become a failed state. The Syrian conflict could also destabilise surrounding states. Yet, Balkanisation is more likely: the territorial fragmentation

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11. On the protection of Syria's Orthodox Christians as a matter of concern to Russia's President Putin, see E. Barry, 'Russian Church Is a Strong Voice Opposing Intervention in Syria', *New York Times*, 31 May 2012, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/world/europe/russian-church-opposes-syrian-intervention.html?pagewanted=all>.

of Syria along ethno-sectarian lines within existing state boundaries, with the regime controlling some remnants of the country along the main urban corridor from Damascus to Homs and the opposition Syria's northern, eastern, and southern provinces.<sup>12</sup> However unpalatable such an outcome might be, it does leave open possibilities for both a future reconsolidation of national authority and the preservation of the post-Ottoman state order in the Levant.

The view that Balkanisation is a more likely outcome than state collapse – even if regionalisation deepens and the Syrian revolution continues its transformation from a national uprising into a proxy conflict organised along ethno-sectarian lines – is supported by a review of how other civil conflicts have ended. Comparatively, even extreme and long-lasting cases of civil war and state collapse, whether in the Middle East, Europe, South Asia, or Africa, tend to produce the redrawing of internal boundaries, or the transformation of internal into international boundaries, rather than broader processes of regional conflict. This has been the pattern in cases as varied as Ethiopia and Eritrea, Northern and Southern Yemen, Sudan and South Sudan, and the former Yugoslavia. Thus, recent civil wars have rarely erased the earlier borders of colonial states or provoked regional cascades of state collapse. Syria could prove to be the exception to this rule given the fragility of current post-civil war settlements in neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq, the deepening of transnational sectarian identities in both countries, and their growing entanglement in the Syrian conflict. Yet, countervailing pressures suggest that this is unlikely to be the case.

Prominent among these countervailing pressures is the determination of state elites in neighbouring countries – along with their US counterparts – to contain or 'cauterise' the Syrian conflict. Regional actors are prepared to back local clients or allies, and may occasionally participate in the conflict directly, yet every Arab government in the region has a strong interest in preventing spillover from destabilising its internal politics. This shared interest contributes to a collective, if implicit, understanding that the Syrian conflict is best kept within Syrian borders. Spillover will still happen. Governments' capacity to control it is far from perfect. Iran is far less vested in the preservation of the regional order, and may prefer spillover to the loss of the Assad regime and the weakening of Hezbollah. Yet even Iran's leaders are believed to prefer the possibility of Syria's internal fragmentation – if that would include the creation of an Alawite enclave in which it could preserve its influence and protect its ties to Hezbollah – to a region-wide conflict that would engulf its Shi'a allies in both Lebanon and Iraq.<sup>13</sup>

Also significant as a countervailing pressure is the reality that stateness has taken hold in Syria over the past century and is not so easily set aside, even with the rise of ethnic and sectarian polarisation among Syria's diverse population. Despite repeated claims, expressed almost from the moment Mark Sykes and George Picot put pencil to paper, that the Syrian state is inauthentic, lacks legitimacy, and is the contrived product of colonial map-making, it has proven to be exceptionally durable. The Levant, indeed the broader Middle East, has seen fewer boundary adjustments in the past century than most world regions, including Europe. The Arab spring has resurrected questions about the legitimacy and viability of the state. Former US State Department official Aaron Miller has recently recycled the cliché coined by Egyptian diplomat Tahseen Bashir that Arab states are little more than 'tribes with flags'. Even Miller concedes, however, that the 'Arab

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12. Balkanisation is distinguished here from state collapse. Balkanisation involves the emergence of new, and most likely competing, political orders in parts of the former unitary state, with functioning formal institutions of governance. Collapse involves state failure, the absence of formal institutions of governance.

13. Interview with journalist and Hezbollah expert, Nicholas Blanford, Beirut, 8 May 2013.

state system isn't going to completely implode', and that '[s]ince the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, respect for borders in this part of the world has proven pretty resilient'.<sup>14</sup>

More importantly, national identity – unevenly consolidated and often contested – has also proven resilient among many Syrians. Those who view regionalisation and the deepening of ethno-sectarian polarisation as signalling the inevitable collapse of the Syrian state tend to fall back on binary, excessively rigid conceptions of identity and how identity politics work. The overlapping and layered qualities that permit tribal, ethnic, sectarian, or regional identities to coexist with national identities suggests the need for caution in predicting that regionalisation will cause irreversible polarisation, and bring about state collapse. It may do so. It is more likely to produce the Balkanisation of Syria within its current borders. Yet the malleability of identity also leaves open the prospect that once current violence ebbs, Syria could experience the reassertion of national identity and of state-based conceptions of citizenship.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Patterns of regionalisation

»» Whichever path the Syrian conflict takes, the country's future is no longer in Syrian hands alone. To take stock of the implications of regional intervention, however, for the future of Syria and of regional politics more broadly it is not sufficient simply to inventory the activities of regional actors. The way in which intervention is unfolding reflects broader patterns in regional politics. How these patterns manifest themselves in the Syrian case and across the region has given regionalisation a distinctive and troubling character.

Five broad trends in regional politics stand out as particularly important: (1) the rise of Iran and by extension of Hezbollah as regional actors, and the deepening of the strategic alliance between Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah; (2) Turkey's ascendance as a regional power and the rise of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) within Turkey; (3) the continued shift of diplomatic weight in the Arab world toward Gulf Sunni Islamist monarchies, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar; (4) the consolidation of ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq and the soft partition of the country following the 2003 US invasion; and (5) the broader trend toward the sectarianisation of regional balance of power politics.

These trends are interconnected and reinforce one another. The Assad regime was a participant in how they evolved prior to the uprising: its role in relation to these trends is a factor in how patterns of intervention in the Syrian conflict have developed since March 2011. What these trends also underscore, moreover, is that patterns of intervention are dynamic. Earlier experiences of regional intervention in civil conflicts, including in the Lebanese civil war a generation ago, may be of limited value in assessing regionalisation and its implications in the Syrian case today.

14. A. D. Miller, 'Tribes With Flags: How the Arab Spring has Exposed the Myth of Arab Statehood', *ForeignPolicy.com*, 27 February 2013, available at: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/27/tribes\\_with\\_flags\\_arab\\_spring\\_states](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/02/27/tribes_with_flags_arab_spring_states)

15. In this as in other areas, the longer the conflict continues, the more national identity will be eroded among Syrians. See P. Harling and S. Birke, 'The Syrian Heartbreak', *MERIP*, 16 April 2013, available at: <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero041613>



These distinctions should not be overdrawn: some of the trends shaping regionalisation in Syria were also present in Lebanon. Overall, however, the region's strategic profile has undergone too much change since 2003 to view regionalisation today simply as a linear extension of the conditions present before the US invaded Iraq. In the aggregate, the effect of these trends has been to reinforce ethno-sectarian polarisation at the regional level; deepen the sense of vulnerability among Syria's non-Muslim minorities; intensify both inter- and intra-sectarian competition for influence among regional actors; and promote fragmentation among Sunni Islamist actors while contributing to the coherence of Shi'a actors. These effects are echoed on the ground in Syria, where they have contributed to disarray and factionalism among the armed opposition; affirmed the hesitancy of minorities to support the opposition; undermined incentives to negotiate between regime and opposition; and heightened the prospects for minority flight and ethno-sectarian Balkanisation as the most likely outcomes of the current phase of the conflict.

### 3.1. The rise of Iran and Hezbollah as regional actors

The form of regionalisation unfolding in the Syrian revolution is a product of its times. The scale of Iran's investment in the survival of the Assad regime and the extraordinary mobilisation by Hezbollah to provide it military and logistical support are a direct result of developments since 2003 that have elevated the preservation of the resistance axis into a critical strategic interest for both. These include: (1) the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent consolidation of Shi'a political power there, giving Iran the opportunity to consolidate a true Shiite axis across the centre of the Arab Levant; (2) Hariri's assassination in February 2005 and the forced departure of Syrian troops from Lebanon, shifting the Syrian-Hezbollah balance of power in Hezbollah's favour and reaffirming for both the importance of their ties to Iran; (3) the June 2006 Lebanese-Israeli war, which brought Hezbollah squarely into the mainstream of Lebanese politics, but also deepened the strategic interdependence of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah; and (4) Iran's ongoing confrontation with the West over its nuclear programme, which elevated the deterrent role of Hezbollah for Iran, as well as Syria's growing importance as Hezbollah's strategic reserve – housing key weapons systems out of Israeli reach, for example. Whether Iran and Hezbollah would have responded differently to the Syrian revolution in the absence of these factors is a counterfactual about which we can only speculate. It does not seem implausible, however, to view the extent to which these two actors have intervened in Syria as a direct causal effect of the deepening strategic interdependence among Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah over the past decade.

To be sure, the leaderships of both Iran and Hezbollah have manoeuvred to protect their interests against the demise of al-Assad, expressing support for reform and stressing their respect for the right of Syrians to select their own leader.<sup>16</sup> However, such statements have been accompanied by increasingly strident expressions of support for al-Assad personally and for the role his regime has played in resistance against Israel. They have also been accompanied throughout 2012 and into 2013 by a significant escalation in the level of direct military support that both Iran and Hezbollah are providing to the Syrian regime. Though accurate figures concerning their combined troop presence inside of Syria are lacking, it is probable

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16. See the account of an interview with Velayati in A. Havens, 'Assad's Overthrow is "Red Line" for Iran', *Reuters*, 20 January 2013, available at: <http://news.yahoo.com/assads-overthrow-red-line-iran-supreme-leaders-aide-132415335.html>. In the interview, Velayati warned that if 'the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is toppled, the line of resistance in the face of Israel will be broken... We believe that there should be reforms emanating from the will of the Syrian people, but without resorting to violence and obtaining assistance from... America'. Asked if Iran sees al-Assad as a red line, Velayati said: 'Yes, it is so. But this does not mean that we ignore the Syrian people's right to choose its own rulers'.

that the total is now well into the thousands. This trend, however, intensifies levels of violence in Syria, extends the likely duration of the conflict, deepens sectarianisation, emboldens the Assad regime, reduces prospects for a negotiated political transition process, and increases the likelihood of Balkanisation based on Iran's and Hezbollah's assurances of support for a breakaway Alawite entity once the regime loses Damascus.

### 3.2. Turkey's emergence as a regional Sunni actor

Turkey's response to the Syrian revolution and its role as a leading front-line supporter of the opposition is not a simple or straightforward expression of AKP foreign policy under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Syria's crisis has forced significant shifts in Ankara's approach to regional affairs. With the 2002 AKP election victory, Turkey modified its foreign policy focus, downgrading efforts to secure European Union (EU) membership and elevating the priority attached to its role as a regional power in the greater Middle East – evoking claims of 'neo-Ottomanism' in the process.<sup>17</sup> The principle of 'no problems with neighbours' emerged as a pillar of the AKP's regional policy (despite the sharp erosion of Turkish-Israeli ties after 2008), enabling it to build diplomatic and trade relations throughout the Arab world, with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, and with Iran. Syria occupied a leading position in Turkey's regional strategy and Erdoğan, together with Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, cultivated close ties to the Assad regime.

In the first months of the Syrian uprising, Ankara attempted to leverage its links with the regime to persuade al-Assad to undertake meaningful reforms. Over time, as Turkish initiatives were snubbed, trust in al-Assad frayed, and escalating violence drove tens of thousands of Syrians across the border, Turkey moved gradually to a policy of full-fledged support for the opposition. It endorsed calls for al-Assad's removal from power, hosted leading Syrian opposition groups – adopting a role as chief patron of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the process –, permitted weapons and other supplies to reach the opposition via Turkey, and reinforced its military presence along the southern border with Syria. In October 2012, following fire exchanges between Turkish and Syrian regime forces, Turkey's Parliament voted in favour of military intervention should conditions warrant such a move.

Through Syria, Turkey has thus become deeply enmeshed in regional politics in direct contravention of its 'no problems' policy. Whether by design or default, it has taken on a sectarian role as defender of Syria's Sunni Muslim community. It has responded aggressively to rising Kurdish irredentism in Syria's northeast and has reportedly been implicated in the support of extremist Salafist armed groups, which it seems to view as a useful counterweight to the PYD and other Kurdish militias. Its relations with both Iraq and Iran have deteriorated. Turkey has also found itself navigating a more competitive relationship with Saudi Arabia, which has long cast itself as the leading Sunni power in the region. One key regional implication of the Syrian uprising, therefore, has been to embed Turkey in the regional balance of power politics as a Sunni Muslim actor, pursuing an agenda that is increasingly read in sectarian terms, and from which it will be increasingly difficult for Turkey to disentangle itself in the future.<sup>18</sup>

17. See O. Taspinar, 'Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism', *Carnegie Papers* 10, September 2008, available at: [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10\\_taspinar\\_final.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf).

18. Syria is not the only policy issue driving Turkey in this direction. Its support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine and Egypt, and for Ennahda in Tunisia, as well as the post-2008 erosion of its relationship with Israel, have also contributed to this shift.

Perhaps most troubling with respect to Syria's future, Turkey's mode of intervention, together with the roles played by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, has amplified and reinforced the sectarian effects of Iranian and Hezbollah's policies, contributed to the radicalisation of the armed opposition, and deepened Kurdish-Arab tensions among the opposition. Moreover, with multiple actors competing for influence over armed groups, an additional effect has been the fragmentation of both the political and the armed opposition, which find themselves with fewer incentives to unify, accept the authority of the Supreme Military Council, or endorse the legitimacy of the Syrian National Coalition. None of these effects offers much basis for optimism about the future trajectory of the Syrian revolution or about the form a post-Assad Syria might take.

### **3.3. The ascent of Saudi Arabia and Qatar in inter-Arab diplomacy**

The rise of Saudi Arabia and Qatar as regional actors has been long in the making, partly a product of Egypt's retreat from the region over the past twenty years and the enormous economic resources both governments command. With the escalation of the Syrian conflict, their roles have taken on added, if occasionally conflicting, weight. Both initially responded to the Arab spring with significant ambivalence. Neither immediately leapt to the support of the Syrian opposition. Resistance to mass politics, and a concern to prevent the spread of mass uprisings into the Arab Gulf, made both governments hesitant to intervene and reluctant to be seen as endorsing popular demands for political change in an Arab state. Within months, however, rising violence, the durability of the uprising, and the possibility of 'tipping' Syria away from Iran and into the Sunni Arab camp persuaded the leaderships of both countries to change course and actively support the opposition.

Since mid-summer 2011, when regime attacks on protesters in Homs galvanised the Saudi leadership, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have become the main financial and military backers of the Syrian opposition, although they have differed sharply over which armed groups and which elements of the political opposition to support. In addition, it is in large measure as a result of Saudi and Qatari pressure that regional and Muslim world organisations have aligned themselves against the Assad regime, including the Arab League – which in March 2013 awarded Syria's seat to the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces –, the Organisation of Islamic Conference, and the GCC, giving a sectarian quality to the roles these institutions have played in the conflict. Most important for the purposes of this paper, however, are the effects of Saudi and Qatari leadership of Arab opposition to the regime in giving regionalisation of the Syrian uprising a sectarian character, linking it to the regional balance of power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, further reinforcing the opposition's segmentation and fragmentation, and creating incentives for it to resist pressure to negotiate with the regime.

### **3.4. The consolidation of ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq**

Iraq has been less prominently involved in the Syrian conflict. It hosts fewer Syrian refugees than any neighbouring state. Officially, it insists that it is a neutral party and is not aligned with either the regime or the opposition. Except for Lebanon, however, the effects of regionalisation are likely to be felt more deeply in Iraq than in any other neighbouring country. Beneath the official rhetoric of non-involvement, Iraqis view Syria almost entirely through the lens of their own ethno-sectarian conflicts. Patterns of Iraqi intervention can be mapped onto the country's internal divisions and the internal impact of the conflict has been to add an additional layer of ethno-sectarian friction on top of Iraq's already long



list of inter-communal grievances. The Shi'a-dominated government of Nuri al-Malaki has quietly supported Iran's intervention in Syria and maintained its economic ties with the Assad regime; Iraq's minority Sunni opposition has permitted weapons and fighters to move into Syria; Iraq's Kurdish leadership, notably Massoud Barzani, have been active in supporting Syrian Kurdish groups and there is evidence of growing cooperation among Kurdish communities across the Syrian border with northern Iraq.

More significant than Iraq's role up until now – which has added additional weight to the sectarianisation and polarisation of the uprising – is the potential for spillover from Syria to reignite open sectarian conflict in Iraq. The potential vectors of such conflict are many. There has already been at least one incident in which Iraqi Sunni militants linked to al-Qaeda have been implicated in the massacre of Syrian regime forces who had fled into Anbar province during fighting along the border.<sup>19</sup> Turkey has issued warnings that its tolerance for Kurdish irredentism is limited. Syria's opposition, in turn, tends to view the Iraqi government as an adversary aligned with Iran. In addition, the opposition's recent offensives in Syria's eastern hinterland, including some areas along the Syrian-Iraqi border such as Ras al-Ayn and further inland in al-Raqqa, have been led by Jabhat al-Nusra and a coalition of Islamist opposition groups closely aligned with and actively supported by their Iraqi counterparts.<sup>20</sup> Preventing spillover will require effective management by Iraq's Kurdish, Shi'a, and Sunnis leaders of a volatile combination of factors that are not entirely under their control. Whether they have the capacity to avoid it is uncertain, and the odds of spillover into Iraq increase the longer the Syrian conflict continues.

### 3.5 Sectarianism and regional balance of power politics

The patterns of intervention discussed here are both an effect and a cause of the deepening sectarianisation of the regional balance of power politics that has been underway in the Levant for decades, but which gained momentum throughout the 2000s from Saudi Arabia's rising prominence as a regional actor, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the growing power of conservative factions in Iran, and Turkey's expanded regional role under the AKP. Over the past decade, and with new intensity since the start of the Arab spring, regional rivalries and alliances have increasingly been framed in sectarian terms.<sup>21</sup> For Syria, the impact of this trend has been profoundly destructive. It consolidated a regional environment in which patterns of intervention are organised along sectarian lines, that defines the channels through which Syrian actors seek regional support in sectarian terms, reinforces strategic cultures among regional actors that elevate sectarian fault lines over others – even, in the case of Saudi Arabia's role in Syria, to the extent that it set aside its deep-seated fear of mass politics in pursuit of its sectarian interests – and in the process reduces the prospects for resolving either regional tensions or the Syrian conflict itself. As sectarianism comes to define regional politics, it encourages polarisation and fragmentation in Syria, and increases the odds of spillover, the possibilities for accommodation and negotiation diminish and Balkanisation becomes more likely. >>>

19. D. Adnan and R. Gladstone, 'Massacre of Syrian Soldiers in Iraq Raises Risk of Widening Conflict', *New York Times*, 4 March 2013, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/05/world/middleeast/fighting-escalates-in-syrian-city-opposition-says.html?pagewanted=all>

20. [www.pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com](http://www.pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com), 'The fall of ar-Raqqa to Jihadism: Jabhat an-Nusra & Harakat Ahrar as-Sham', 7 March 2013, available at: <http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2013/03/07/the-fall-of-ar-raqqa-to-jihadism-jabhat-an-nusra-harakat-ahrar-as-sham/>

21. G. Abdo, 'The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide', *Analysis Paper* 29, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy, April 2013, available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/04/sunni%20shia%20abdo/sunni%20shia%20abdo.pdf>

## 4. Contra regionalisation: can the centre hold?

» Prospects for mitigating regionalisation or tempering the ethno-sectarian polarisation it promotes are limited. The broader political and strategic trends shaping regional engagement in the Syrian conflict are deeply-rooted. The patterns of regional intervention they promote play into and sharpen existing sectarian fault lines within Syrian society. The incentives that shape the strategic choices of most regional actors, and many within Syria as well, suggest that regionalisation and the risks it poses to the stability of the post-Ottoman state order in the Levant will not be easily overcome.

Nonetheless, a number of indicators point to a possible alternative, less pessimistic, trajectory for Syria and for the regional state order. These include the countervailing pressures mentioned above, not least the extent to which Syrians continue to define themselves in national as opposed to tribal, ethnic, or sectarian terms. They also include the active efforts by Western governments, including the US, France, the UK, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Italy, and Norway, among others, to invest resources through their national development agencies, foreign ministries, and defence ministries in support of local efforts to provide security and governance in liberated areas of Syria. These efforts take a wide variety of forms, including direct support to local councils, capacity-building activities in the fields of civilian security and rule of law, needs-assessments, funding to support the creation of local media organisations, humanitarian relief and medical support, and support for local media outlets. By spring 2013, such efforts had begun to achieve a significant scale, and Turkish cities along the border with Syria, such as Gaziantep, were emerging as hubs for international assistance. Such efforts are having a positive impact on liberated areas of Syria, especially those adjacent to the Turkish border that are most easily accessible to foreign assistance.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, in late 2012, the newly-established National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces created an Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) to coordinate international humanitarian relief efforts. Although slow to develop, and slow to be trusted by the international community, the ACU has gradually increased its capacity, expanded its staff, and is gradually becoming an effective partner in the management of international assistance.<sup>23</sup> At about the same time, Syria's armed opposition established a Supreme Military Council (SMC), under the leadership of General Salim Idriss, to provide more coherent command and control over deeply fragmented armed groups operating inside of Syria. The SMC has also been slow to develop, lacks resources, and has limited influence over armed

22. Syrian activists engaged in private humanitarian relief activities indicate that relatively little international assistance is reaching beyond areas adjacent to the Turkish border. Interview with Syrian activist, name withheld, Washington DC, April 2013. It remains to be seen, moreover, whether external assistance in the Syrian case will reflect the dysfunctions and pathologies that have undermined its benefits in many prior cases, including Iraq and Afghanistan, where billions of dollars have been spent to very little effect.

23. The initial head of the ACU was Syrian-American activist, Ghassan Hitto. In mid-March 2013, Hitto was elected by the Syrian National Coalition as interim prime minister of a yet-to-be formed transitional government. Suhair Attasi, a vice president of the Syrian National Coalition, replaced Hitto as head of the ACU.

groups on the ground. In mid-April, however, US Secretary of State John Kerry announced in Istanbul that the US would begin to channel all non-lethal aid to the armed opposition through the SMC in the hope that this would provide it with the resources needed to enhance its legitimacy with and authority over opposition fighters.<sup>24</sup>

More importantly, however, are emerging patterns in the local organisation of political life in areas that are no longer under government control, including many in northern and eastern Syria that have been liberated for almost two years.<sup>25</sup> Across these areas, a large-scale experiment in the spontaneous development of local governance, self-regulation, and the formation of civil society institutions has been unfolding, often with far less disarray than might have been expected.

Well before Western aid organisations became active in their support, local administrative and civilian councils were established in dozens if not hundreds of localities in liberated areas, often operating in coordination with or alongside of Local Coordinating Committees and revolutionary councils of various forms. In larger towns and cities, former civil servants who still receive their salaries from the regime have cooperated with FSA commanders and pro-opposition leaders to maintain public services. In March 2013, elections were held in Gaziantep, a Turkish city close to the Syrian border, for a 29-member provincial council to administer liberated areas of Aleppo province. In the eastern provincial capital of Raqqa, liberated by FSA units affiliated with militant Islamist movements, civilian authorities are negotiating local administrative authority with rebel commanders in a process that has thus far been notably free of violence and generally well-received by the local population.<sup>26</sup>

Judges and police who have defected from the regime have organised themselves, creating associations such as the Aleppo Free Lawyers Association and the Revolutionary Security force, also based in Aleppo and consisting of moderate Islamist-leaning officers and fighters associated with the FSA). Over time, judges and lawyers in Aleppo have developed a legal system that is becoming quite sophisticated. According to activists familiar with Aleppo, there are now some 30-40 defected judges who oversee a court divided between civil and criminal divisions, and which has adopted the Arab League Uniform Legal Code as its framework for the administration of justice.<sup>27</sup> In Zabadani, along Syria's western border with Lebanon, civilian council officials have collaborated with defected judges and police to establish functioning courts. In Dayr Khafa, local lawyers took over an abandoned warehouse to create a legal clinic. In the Sheikh Najjar industrial zone outside of Aleppo, where more than 800 small factories are located, local council officials together with FSA fighters and defected police are collaborating to prevent criminal efforts to dismantle abandoned factories and move machinery across the border into Turkey. These examples only hint at the scale of local governance arrangements that are taking shape in liberated



24. US Department of State, 'Secretary Kerry Announces Doubling of U.S. Non-lethal Assistance to the Syrian Opposition and New Humanitarian Aid for the Syrian Crisis', *Fact Sheet*, 20 April 2013, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/04/207810.htm>

25. The designation of territory as 'liberated' does not imply that all of the areas that are no longer under the full control of the regime are entirely free of its influence or even, in some cases, presence. There is significant variation across liberated areas in the degree to which localities are controlled by opposition forces. Around Idlib, where Alawite, Sunni, and Christian villages exist in relatively close proximity, opposition control is interspersed with pockets that are sympathetic to the regime, while the city of Idlib itself remains under regime control. In Aleppo province, however, and in Raqqa, opposition control is more complete.

26. E. O'Bagy, 'Governance in Rebel-Held Syria', Institute for the Study of War, 28 March 2013, available at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/governance-rebel-held-syria>

27. Information about Aleppo and legal arrangements that have evolved in other areas is from interviews conducted in Washington with Syrian activists resident in Syria, in April 2013. Names withheld.

areas, very few of which benefit from international support. Where international donors are active, however, defected judges and police, local council members, and civil society activists have increasing access to training activities in topics such as rule of law, international humanitarian law, and public administration.<sup>28</sup>

Civil society, suppressed for more than 60 years under Ba’thist rule, is also emerging in liberated areas, often with support from Syrian and international counterparts operating outside the country. Civic organisations have been created to assist in the provision of local services, humanitarian and medical relief, and to offer alternative frameworks for dispute resolution. Activists and local officials have helped to launch more than a dozen independent radio stations, together with a smaller number of local newspapers and television stations. Kafr Nabl, a village in northwest Syria near the Turkish border, has become widely known as the ‘conscience of the Syrian revolution’ because of the intensity and creativity of its local activists and their role in the ‘naming’ of protests held across the country every Friday.

The revitalisation of civil society in liberated areas together with the emergence of institutions of local governance that are, in at least some liberated localities, under civilian control, display elements of pluralism, and seek electoral legitimacy have the potential to mitigate sectarian polarisation and temper the effects of regionalisation. Should these institutions be able to consolidate themselves they could become a meaningful counterweight to the centrifugal factors that are deepening fragmentation, driving Syria toward Balkanisation, and testing the stability of the wider post-Ottoman state order in the Levant. The obstacles to their success, however, are daunting.<sup>29</sup>

The armed opposition remains deeply fragmented, despite efforts by the Supreme Military Council to create a unified structure of command and control. Regional actors who cultivate clients among the armed opposition have been a divisive influence, amplifying disunity among armed groups and undermining the Supreme Military Council’s authority. In addition, local administration in many liberated areas is controlled by externally-funded armed groups and is increasingly Islamist in character, a trend evident among the armed opposition more broadly.<sup>30</sup> A number of localities, including cities such as Atareb in the northwest, have fallen under the control of Salafist brigades affiliated with Jabhat al-Nusra, a branch of al-Qaeda which the US has designated as a terrorist organisation. In many such areas, governance is often repressive and arbitrary, consistent with the intent of Jabhat al-Nusra to establish an Islamic state in all of Syria.<sup>31</sup> Many local councils are also controlled by or heavily influenced by local religious authorities.

28. While promising in the potential they represent, these trends too must be seen as tightly linked to external intervention in the Syrian conflict, in particular on the part of Western governments seeking to strengthen civil society, local governance, and the rule of law, improve civilian security, and in the process contain the influence and popular appeal of Islamist movements. Although the levels of funding for these efforts are relatively modest, especially when compared with similar efforts in Iraq or Afghanistan – and are difficult to calculate with any degree of confidence – hundreds of millions of dollars have been allocated for such efforts by mid-2013.

29. A. Baczko, G. Dorronsoro, A. Quesnay, ‘Building a Syrian State in a Time of Civil War’, *Carnegie Papers, Middle East*, April 2013, available at: [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian\\_state.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/syrian_state.pdf).

30. A. Lund, ‘Syrian Jihadism’, *UI Brief* 13, 14 September 2012, Swedish Institute for International Affairs, available at: <http://www.ui.se/upl/files/77409.pdf>. See also J. Holliday, ‘Syria’s Armed Opposition’, Institute for the Study of War, March 2012, available at: [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrias\\_Armed\\_Opposition.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrias_Armed_Opposition.pdf), as well as International Crisis Group, ‘Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition’, *Middle East Report* 131, 12 October 2012, available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.pdf>.

31. M. Barber, ‘Islamic State Declared in Syria’, *Syria Comment*, 14 April 2013, available at: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/al-qaida-and-jabhat-al-nusra-declare-islamic-state-in-syria/>

Poorly-trained local clerics assume prominent roles in the impromptu courts and legal institutions that have been created in several liberated areas, practicing forms of Shari'a law that provide few of the protections of a judicial system based on the Arab League's legal code or other accepted models of common or civil law. Conflicts among competing local institutions are frequent. It is not uncommon for one locality to host multiple councils that apply different rules in adjoining neighbourhoods. Violent conflicts have occurred in Aleppo and elsewhere between FSA units and Kurdish opposition forces. On several occasions, violence has also broken out between militant Islamist opposition fighters and more moderate armed groups contesting for control of specific areas.

Moreover, the proliferation of local justice institutions has not been effective in deterring a massive increase in criminal activity. Across liberated areas, criminality has intensified and become increasingly organised. This results, in part, from desperate living conditions in more remote parts of the country that have not benefitted from humanitarian assistance, as well as the massive dislocations that occur when entire communities flee regime violence. It is more closely associated, however, with the general erosion of public order and civil security in liberated areas, the proliferation of armed groups that operate outside of formal command and control structures, and with severe shortages of basic commodities that encourage smuggling, black marketeering, and corruption. In addition, religious minorities in liberated areas are increasingly vulnerable to violence from Islamist militants and report instances of attacks, vandalism against churches, and discrimination.

These conditions underscore the tenuous character of attempts to build coherent, proto-democratic structures in liberated areas and their vulnerability to regionalisation processes that have given the Syrian revolution attributes of a proxy war. Nonetheless, in identifying factors that have the potential to mitigate sectarian polarisation and, potentially, to prevent the Balkanisation of Syria along ethno-sectarian lines, the emergence of local governance institutions in liberated areas that assure that some level of basic services are available, respond to humanitarian needs, offer frameworks for managing inter-communal relations, and provide a modicum of local security and justice, even if far from ideal, represent significant and welcome developments.

## 5. The future of the state order in the Levant

»» Such welcome developments, however, may not be sufficient. In the current regional environment and in light of the conflict's trajectory since the opposition began to militarise in mid-2011, there are few incentives that would lead either the Assad regime or the armed opposition to moderate their reliance on external support. For both, it has become crucial for their survival and for any prospects they might have for military victory, or even for negotiations on favourable terms. Nor do regional or international actors, keenly aware of what is at stake in the Syrian uprising, have incentives to moderate current intervention patterns.



Available indicators suggest that the opposite is the case and that intervention will escalate in the coming months. Since March 2013, Hezbollah and Iran have increased the scale and scope of their involvement in Syria. Russia has continued to serve as a formidable ally of the regime, even in the face of evidence that it has deployed chemical weapons. Nor have there been any signs of any decline in support from the governments backing the opposition. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates remain committed to the regime's defeat, even as they jockey for influence by cultivating proxies within the opposition. Among moderate Islamists, minorities, and the dwindling number of secularists within Syria and in the opposition, a common response to the expanding support that Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah provide to the Assad regime, has been to seek yet further intervention, renewing appeals to Europe and the US to equip the opposition with weapons and establish a no fly zone. As humanitarian conditions in Syria deteriorate at an alarming rate – in late April UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres indicated that by the end of 2013 as many as half of all Syrians will be in need of assistance<sup>32</sup> – these appeals, whether naive or not, reflect the opposition's belief that more direct Western engagement is needed to protect civilians from regime violence, prevent the further empowerment of militant Islamists, and preserve the possibility of a non-sectarian future for Syria.

Western governments certainly embrace the Syrian opposition's aims, if not their preferred means. The US and its allies regularly express their concern about sectarian polarisation, the need to preserve Syria's integrity and prevent regional spillover, and the importance of ensuring that a post-Assad government be pluralistic, inclusive, and democratic. They have repeatedly urged the opposition to assuage the fears of minorities by formalising its commitment to their security.<sup>33</sup> The US and its European allies are also mindful of the implications of Qatari and Saudi support for the armed opposition, and have expressed their concern about the deepening of sectarian polarisation and the threat of regional instability. They have also sought, without success, to reduce Iranian and Russian support for the Assad regime.

Yet current Western policies seem poorly-designed to achieve their intended effects. While continuing to resist pleas for direct intervention, they now recognise that if their aim is to force elements of the Assad regime into negotiations, bring the conflict to a more rapid conclusion, and achieve a political transition it is necessary to increase military pressure on the regime. Sufficient force must be applied to change the strategic calculus of al-Assad and his inner circle and persuade them that they face the likelihood of military defeat. However, as reflected in their current diplomacy, Western governments have apparently concluded, for the time being at least, that the most effective way to do this is not by directly challenging the regime's claims to sovereignty through the creation of a no fly zone, or by directly arming the opposition. Instead, they prefer to assist Qatari

32. Chuluv, op. cit.

33. Most recently, US Secretary of State John Kerry, speaking for a number of Western governments associated with the Friends of Syria Group on 20 April 2013, requested that the Syrian National Coalition commit to protecting minorities, when he announced a large increase in US support to the opposition. The Syrian National Coalition acceded to this request, affirming that it is "aiming at a political solution", rejected extremism, and said that a post-Assad Syria would be pluralistic and based on the rule of law'. M. R. Gordon and S. Arsu, 'Kerry Says U.S. Will Double Aid to Rebels in Syria', *New York Times*, 20 April 2013, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/world/middleeast/kerry-says-us-to-double-aid-to-the-opposition-in-syria.html>. As in the past, however, this request seemed to backfire among ordinary Syrians. Opposition activists named the Friday protests following Kerry's announcement 'protect the majority Friday', to highlight the West's focus on the safety of minorities in a conflict that has killed some 80,000 civilians, of whom the vast majority are Sunni Muslims.

and Saudi efforts – enhancing the influence of governments which are deeply implicated in Syria's sectarian polarisation – and pursue a 'Goldilocks' strategy in which just the right quantity of weapons will be provided to just the right armed groups to create just the right level of threat to compel the regime to enter negotiations, but not enough to overthrow al-Assad outright or empower militant armed groups, and not the kind of weapons that might be directed against Israel in the future.

The possibility that such an approach might work cannot be entirely ruled out. Miracles could happen. Prospects, however, do not seem auspicious. Under the best of circumstances, the degree of calibration such a strategy requires would be difficult to achieve. Under the conditions present in Syria, and in the face of the broader sectarian trends driving regionalisation, the obstacles to its success appear insurmountable. The combination of increased Western and Gulf support for the opposition and the deepening involvement of Hezbollah and Iran in defence of the Assad regime has resulted, thus far, in a hardening of positions on both sides. The opposition continues to make incremental gains in the north and east, and with more aid flowing through Jordan, in the south. It continues to consolidate its authority over areas liberated from the regime, yet continues to struggle to dislodge the regime from its strongholds. In addition, regime forces have responded aggressively to protect major supply lines into Lebanon, disrupt opposition supply lines, secure control over major urban centres, and reinforce its positions along the main urban corridor running from Homs in the north to Damascus in the south. Demographically mixed border areas such as Qusayr, with Sunni and Shi'a villages neighbouring one another, are seen as especially critical to the regime's long-term survival and thus become focal points for conflict, including Hezbollah's assaults on Sunni villages in the Qusayr area throughout early 2013, with troubling implications for the future stability of Lebanon itself.

As of May 2013, the spillover of violence from Syria is increasing. Battle lines are beginning to resemble future partition lines of a fragmented Syrian state. Whether intentionally or not, therefore, by first tolerating and, more recently, endorsing forms of regional intervention that are heavily sectarian in their motivations and intentions, but without providing the means for either civilian protection or a decisive opposition victory, the US and its European allies have embarked on a course that will accelerate the transformation of the Syrian revolution into a proxy war, increase the risk of Balkanisation, encourage the ongoing spillover of violence into neighbouring states, and thus contribute to increasing regional instability and the growing vulnerability of the regional state order.

More than two years into the uprising, the Syrian state's integrity has become increasingly tenuous. The violence unleashed by the Assad regime against peaceful protesters beginning in March 2011 now threatens to tear the country apart. At present, the regional state order seems likely to survive the possible Balkanisation of Syria. Yet the divisions and conflicts that resulted, initially, from the regime's cynical exploitation of sectarianism and were then fuelled by sectarian patterns of regional intervention, have now spread deeply across the Levant, amplifying local frictions and threatening the fragile stability of both Lebanon and Iraq. The longer the Syrian conflict continues, the longer the West avoids taking the risky steps that are needed to end the Assad regime and begin a political transition in Syria; the deeper Syria's humanitarian catastrophe takes hold, the more likely it becomes that Syria will fragment, and that its Balkanisation will be the precursor to an extended period of region-wide violence and turmoil that could overturn the century-old post-Ottoman state order in the Levant.

## 6. The path ahead for Syria: options and constraints

» Pessimism about the path ahead for Syria and its neighbours does not justify inaction by those who hope to avoid the grim fate sketched out here. Recognising the challenges that confront efforts to shift Syria onto a different path, there are nonetheless meaningful opportunities to increase the prospects that Syria will not fragment, and that regionalisation will not drive the country, or the Levant as a whole, over a sectarian abyss.

The most urgent priorities are civilian protection and providing military support to the armed opposition. The former is a humanitarian imperative to which all nations have an obligation to respond, and to respond at a scale commensurate with the depth of Syria's humanitarian crisis. The latter is a difficult, risky, but integral component of a diplomatic strategy intended to change the strategic calculus of the Assad regime and induce it to enter negotiations. As Russia and the US accelerate their joint efforts to establish a mutually-acceptable negotiating framework for Syria, with support from the Arab League and renewed attempts to mobilise UN action on Syria, the credibility of the opposition's military threat to the regime becomes all the more important.<sup>34</sup> Unless the regime perceives that it confronts the possibility of defeat, it has little incentive to enter negotiations over the terms of a meaningful political transition.

The menu of priorities for the West goes well beyond these two core requirements, however. Specifically, it is imperative for the US and Europe to expand significantly the resources provided for the development of local governance in liberated areas, and to expand existing programmes to encompass areas still under regime control. Funding for humanitarian relief is essential and is appropriately seen as the leading priority for Western donors. This support must be matched with comparable levels of funding for Syrian-led efforts to develop local institutions, provide for the security of civilians, address criminality, establish credible legal and judicial frameworks, ensure that basic services such as water, electricity, healthcare, and education, are available, and strengthen effective coordination between local governance institutions and the Syrian National Coalition and, eventually, an interim transitional government.

Strengthening civilian institutions and civic sectors is essential for the gradual transfer of responsibility for local and regional governance from armed groups to civilian authorities, and for the gradual assumption of civilian institutions over functions such as the provision of rule of law, which are now too heavily concentrated in the hands of armed actors, with too little accountability to prevent abuses by opposition forces. Similarly, facilitating conditions in which Syria's private and agricultural sectors can function at some reasonable

34. *Washington Post*, 'Proposed UN resolution backs political transition in Syria, condemns regime; Brahimi to stay'. 9 May 2013, available at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/proposed-un-general-assembly-resolution-backs-political-transition-in-syria-condemns-regime/2013/05/09/1ce0dc2c-b8c1-11e2-b568-6917f6ac6d9d\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/proposed-un-general-assembly-resolution-backs-political-transition-in-syria-condemns-regime/2013/05/09/1ce0dc2c-b8c1-11e2-b568-6917f6ac6d9d_story.html)



level of activity is critical for the consolidation of security and governance in liberated areas. More broadly, the consolidation of state structures that provide a functioning alternative to both the regime and to extremists within the opposition offers perhaps the only possibility of deterring further sectarian polarisation and its attendant consequences. The investment required is large. It is dwarfed, however, by the costs that will result should Syria fragment and the regional state order collapse into violence.

Alongside these local efforts, the Syrian National Coalition should be supported to accelerate efforts to develop new frameworks for national governance where needed; to determine which existing institutions, laws, and regulatory frameworks should be preserved; design programmes for identifying individuals within the regime who will be able to play a constructive role in a post-Assad Syria; and otherwise undertake the complex planning that will be needed to improve the quality of life today in liberated areas and build the foundations for a future democratic state in all of Syria. The Day After project, an effort led by Syrians with the support of the US Institute of Peace and the German Institute for International and Strategic Affairs to develop strategies for managing these and other transition-related challenges, has developed a useful planning document that can inform the work of international donors, the Syrian National Coalition, and the FSA as they undertake these tasks.<sup>35</sup>

Much of this work is already underway, if at far too limited a scale. The Syrian National Coalition, the FSA leadership, Western donors, and many local officials in liberated areas have endorsed and participate in activities designed to advance one or more of these goals. What has not yet been fully appreciated, however, is the urgency of establishing the comprehensive economic, social, and political foundations of a post-Assad Syria throughout liberated areas on a much larger scale than current levels of funding permit. Despite the exposure of liberated areas to regime air power and artillery, the territory controlled by the Syrian opposition should be seen as the starting point for a wholesale process of national reconstruction, guided by principles such as those set out in The Day After report, and funded at a level commensurate with the degree of damage these areas have experienced and by the need to address the destructive effects of the revolutionary period and the equally destructive legacies of five decades of dictatorship.

The forces driving regionalisation and sectarian polarisation in Syria and the broader Levant will not be easily subdued. Without a much more significant commitment from the US and Europe, current patterns of regional intervention will continue, sectarian polarisation and violence will escalate, a process of soft partition within Syria will take hold, and Syria's neighbours will confront the prospect of long-term instability that will amplify existing domestic conflicts and pose an enduring threat to regional order. Regional actors, both those defending the Assad regime and those seeking its defeat, have too much at stake in the outcome of the Syrian uprising to back down. There are no easy pathways out of this dangerous trajectory. A significant investment in Syrian-led efforts to create an alternative future offers the most promising opportunity to avoid the worst-case outcomes that lie ahead. >>>

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35. *The Day After: Supporting a Democratic Transition in Syria*, August 2012, available at: <http://www.tda-sy.org/The-Day-After-EN.pdf>. In the interest of full disclosure, the author directed USIP's role in facilitating The Day After transition planning process, directed by leading figures within the Syrian opposition.

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