

**ESCOLA DE COMANDO E ESTADO-MAIOR DO EXÉRCITO**  
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**The Syrian conflict and action taken by**  
**The United Nations Security Council**



Rio de Janeiro  
2016

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Final Paper presented to Army Command and  
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Adviser: LTC Túlio Endres da Silva Gomes

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Approved in November, \_\_\_\_\_ 2016.

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## **EPIGRAPH**

“En la pelea, se conoce al soldado; sólo en la victoria, se conoce al caballero.”

"In the fight, the soldier is known; only in victory, it is known the gentleman".

Jacinto Benavente (Spanish dramatists of the 20th century, 1866 – 1954) Nobel Prize in Literature 1922.

“Diplomatie ohne Waffen ist wie Musik ohne Instrumente “ Frederick the Great (24.01.1712-17.08.1786)

“Everyone can rise above their circumstances and achieve success if they are dedicated to and passionate about what they do”

Nelson Mandela (South African anti-apartheid revolutionary, politician, and President of South Africa, 1918 – 2013)

## ABSTRACT

This work aims to analyze, in the context of the crisis in Syria, if the actions contained in UN resolution 2254 and adopted by the United Nations Security Council on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2015, are being sufficient to avoid a possible fragmentation<sup>1</sup> of the country and to pave the way to achieve peace in Syria and the whole region.

For the development of this work we have followed a logical process that allows us to reach some conclusions and recommendations that will enable us to answer the core questions raised.

In this regard in the first part, as an introduction, after establishing the problem under study, we analyse the historic origins and the current conflict situation. We will discuss as well the actions taken by the United Nations so far.

The second part of this work is focused on the analysis, starting first with a broader study of all the actors who are directly or indirectly involved in the conflict. The following detailed study on the actors is directed to determine their specific positions on the posed core questions. In the following step some overarching key factors for the future evolution or resolution of the conflict, which can be derived from the analysis, will be presented.

Following this analysis process and taking into account the effects of the resolutions approved by the United Nations Security Council and by other international bodies, our conclusions will be presented ending this part with selected proposals that would help to resolve the conflict.

In the last part of the work, going back to the question raised, a final assessment is made.

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<sup>1</sup> Fragmentation is assumed to have negative implications on stability and peace in the region and might as well foster endless disputes over territory and control of populace along sectarian and ethnic boundaries in Syria.

## LIST OF PHOTOS AND FIGURES

Photo 1. Syrian war protagonists.....	11
Photo 2. Syrians refugees in neighbouring countries and Europe.....	12
Photo 3. Syrian´s areas controled by different actors .....	13
Photo 4. International Syrian Supporting Group meeting .....	17
Photo 5. Syrian´s war situation update. September 2016.....	21
Photo 6. Kurdish area in Turkey-Syria-Iraq borders .....	32
Photo 7. Actor´s relations in Syria war.....	72

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

AKP:	In Turkish: Adalet Kalkınma Partisi. (Justice and Development Party).
ANF:	Al-Nura Front.
CoH:	Cessation of Hostilities.
FSA:	Free Syrian Army.
GCC:	Gulf Cooperation Council.
IRGG:	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Group.
IS:	Islamic State. Also called: ISIS (Islamic State in Syria) or Daesh.
ISSG:	International Syrian Support Group.
LAF:	Lebanese Armed Forces.
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization.
PKK:	in English: Kurdistan Workers' Party.
PYD:	in English: Democratic Union Party.
SDF:	Syrian Democratic Force.
SRF:	Syrian Revolutionary Front.
UN:	United Nations
UNSC:	United Nations Security Council.
YPG:	In Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Ge. (Popular Protection Units)

## **SUMMARY**

<b>I</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	11
1.	SIRIA CONFLICT.....	11
<b>2</b>	<b>UNITED NATIONS ACTIONS</b> .....	14
2.1	UNITED NATIONS RESOLUTIONS.....	14
2.1	INTERNATIONAL SYRIA SUPPORTING GROUP.....	17
<b>II</b>	<b>ANALYSIS</b> .....	20
1	ACTORS OVERVIEW.....	20
2	ACTORS DETAILED VIEW.....	22
2.1	LOYALIST.....	22
2.1.1	THE ASSAD REGIME.....	22
2.2	FOREIGN POWERS IN SUPPORT OF LOYALIST .....	24
2.2.1	RUSSIA .....	24
2.2.2	IRAN.....	26
2.2.3	IRAQ.....	28
2.3	THE REBELS IN OPPOSITION.....	31
2.3.1	KURDS AND SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCE.....	31
2.3.2	FREE SYRIAN ARMY AND AFFILIATED REBEL GROUPS.....	33
2.4	FOREIGN POWERS IN SUPPORT REBELS/OPPOSITION.....	40
2.4.1	USA AND US- LED COALITION.....	40
2.4.2	TURKEY.....	43
2.4.3	SAUDI ARABIA AND GULF STATES.....	48
2.5	OTHER ACTORS.....	51
2.5.1	CHINA.....	51
2.5.2	ISRAEL.....	54
2.5.3	JORDAN.....	56
2.5.4	LEBANON.....	58
3	ACTORS POSITION SUMMARY.....	60

4.	CRITICAL FACTORS TO PREVENT A FRAGMENTATION AND FOR PEACE.....	62
5	. OUTCOMES OF THE UN ACTIONS.....	64
6.	CONCLUSIONS .....	68
<b>III</b>	<b>SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>71</b>
	<b>ANNEX I.....</b>	<b>73</b>
	<b>REFERENCES</b>	

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## The Syrian conflict and actions taken by the United Nations Security Council

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### 1. SYRIAN CONFLICT

Syria's conflict has devolved from peaceful protests against the government in 2011 to a violent insurgency that has drawn in numerous other countries. It's partly a civil war of government against people; partly a religious war pitting Assad's minority Alawite sect, aligned with Shiite fighters from Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, against Sunni rebel groups; and increasingly a proxy war featuring Russia and Iran against the United States and its allies. Whatever it is, it has so far killed 450,000<sup>1</sup> people, displaced more than half of the country's population, and facilitated the rise of ISIS.

While a de-facto an international coalition—one that makes informal allies of Assad, the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Kurds, and others—is focused on defeating ISIS in Syria, the battlefield features numerous other overlapping conflicts. The Syrian war looks different depending on which protagonists you focus on.

Here are just a few ways to look at it:

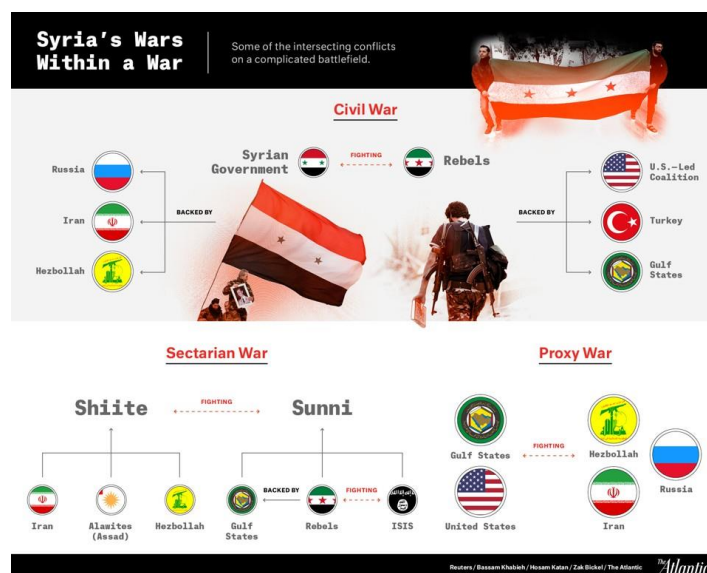


Photo 1: Syrian war protagonists  
Source: The Atlantic. Bassam Khabieh, Hosam Katan, Zakbickel

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iamsyria.org/death-tolls.html>

What started in Syria has spread to multiple countries—to Iraq, where ISIS has effectively erased part of the border with Syria and taken over a chunk of the northwest; to Turkey and Lebanon, which together have taken in more than 3 million of the 4 million registered Syrian refugees; to Europe, which has received more than 500,000 asylum applications from Syrians since 2011; and to the United States, which as of this writing has resettled fewer than 2,000 Syrian refugees since 2011 but has pledged to take in 10,000 more over the next year.

### Syrians in neighbouring countries and Europe

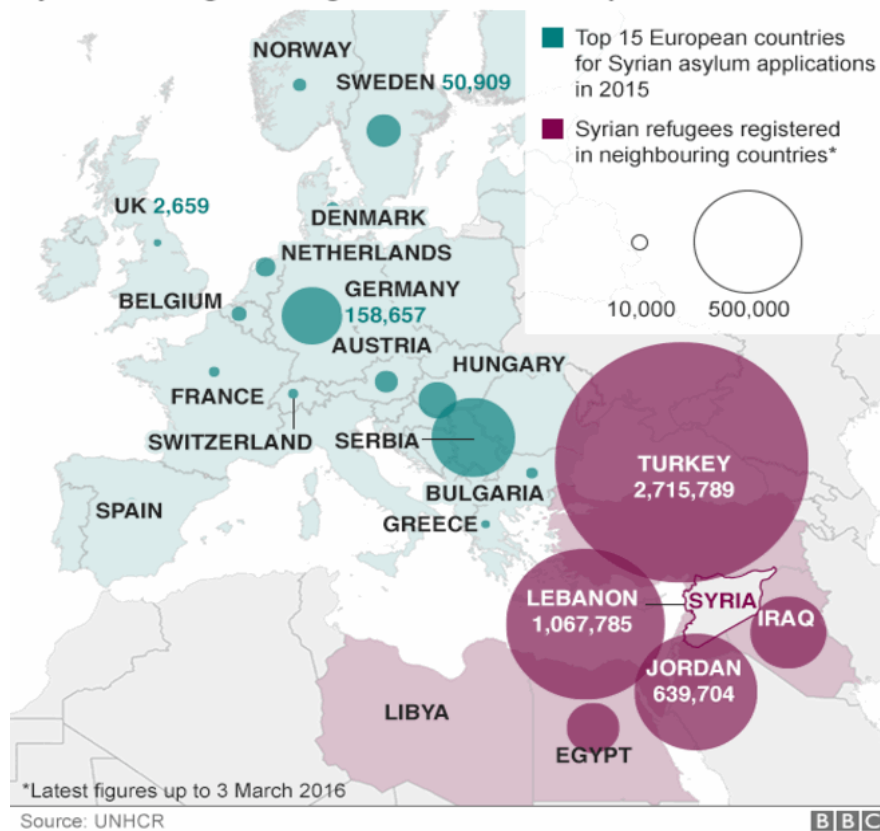


Photo 2. Syrians refugees in neighbouring countries and Europe

Source: BBC newsbeat. What the middle East is doing about the refugee.  
February 2016

Why did Syria's protests of 2011, which began in part as a response to the arrest and mistreatment of a group of young people accused of writing anti-Assad graffiti in the southern city of Deraa, morph into today's chaos? What are they fighting about? The protests started after two Arab dictators, in Tunisia and Egypt, had already stepped down amid pro-democracy demonstrations in their countries. Syria's war is unique among the Arab Spring uprisings, but it is not unique among civil wars generally. Stanford's James Fearon has argued that "civil wars often start due to

shocks to the relative power of political groups that have strong, pre-existing policy disagreements. ... War then follows as an effort to lock in ... or forestall the other side's temporary advantage." The Syrian uprising presented just such a shock, and the opposition to Assad may have seen a short-term opportunity to press for more gains by taking up arms before their Arab Spring advantage disappeared. An International Crisis Group report from 2011 noted that Assad at first responded to protests by releasing some political prisoners and instructing officials "to pay greater attention to citizen complaints," but that "the regime acted as if each ... disturbance was an isolated case requiring a pin-point reaction rather than part of a national crisis that would only deepen short of radical change."

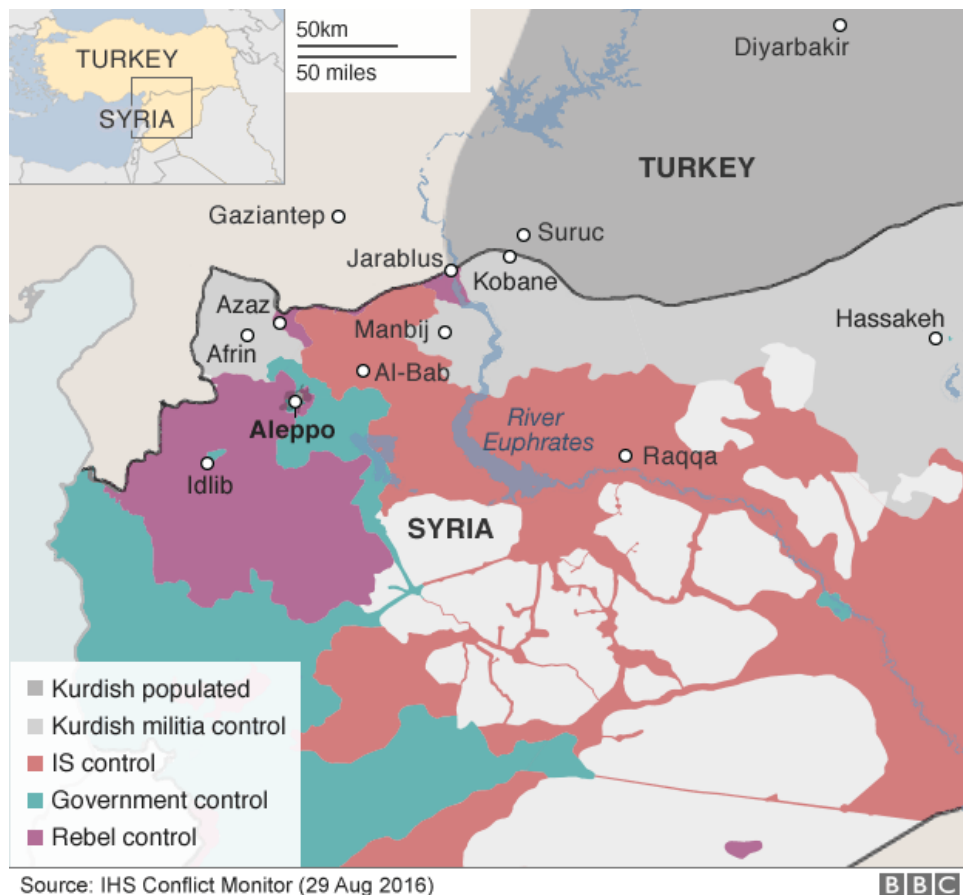


Photo 3. Syrian's areas controlled by different actors  
Source: BBC.news, from IHS Syria conflict monitor. Aug. 2016

## 2. UNITED NATIONS ACTIONS

### 2.1. United Nation Resolution

On 18 December 2015 the Security Council unanimously adopted UN Resolution 2254, which included a roadmap to a peace process in Syria, establishing a route for talks between the parties. This resolution granted de facto legal status to the declaration of the International Support Group Syria (ISSG), which met in Vienna on November 14, 2015.

The main points adopted are the following:

1. *Reconfirms* its endorsement of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012, *endorses* the “Vienna Statements” in pursuit of the full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué, as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition in order to end the conflict in Syria, and *stresses* that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria;
2. *Requests* the Secretary-General, through his good offices and the efforts of his Special Envoy for Syria, to convene representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition to engage in formal negotiations on a political transition process on an urgent basis, with a target of early January 2016 for the initiation of talks, pursuant to the Geneva Communiqué, consistent with the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement, with a view to a lasting political settlement of the crisis;
3. *Acknowledges* the role of the ISSG as the central platform to facilitate the United Nations’ efforts to achieve a lasting political settlement in Syria;
4. *Expresses its support*, in this regard, for a Syrian-led political process that is facilitated by the United Nations and, within a target of six months, establishes credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance and sets a schedule and process for drafting a new constitution, and *further expresses its support* for free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months and administered under supervision of the United Nations, to the satisfaction of the governance and to the highest international standards of transparency and accountability, with all Syrians, including members of the diaspora, eligible to participate, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement;
5. *Acknowledges* the close linkage between a ceasefire and a parallel political process, pursuant to the 2012 Geneva Communiqué, and that both initiatives should

move ahead expeditiously, and in this regard *expresses its support* for a nationwide ceasefire in Syria, which the ISSG has committed to support and assist in implementing, to come into effect as soon as the representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition have begun initial steps towards a political transition under UN auspices, on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement, and to do so on an urgent basis;

6. *Requests* the Secretary-General to lead the effort, through the office of his Special Envoy and in consultation with relevant parties, to determine the modalities and requirements of a ceasefire as well as continue planning for the support of ceasefire implementation, and *urges* Member States, in particular members of the ISSG, to support and accelerate all efforts to achieve a ceasefire, including through pressing all relevant parties to agree and adhere to such a ceasefire;

7. *Emphasizes* the need for a ceasefire monitoring, verification and reporting mechanism, *requests* the Secretary-General to report to the Security Council on options for such a mechanism that it can support, as soon as possible and no later than one month after the adoption of this resolution, and *encourages* Member States, including members of the Security Council, to provide assistance, including through expertise and in-kind contributions, to support such a mechanism;

8. *Reiterates* its call in resolution 2249 (2015) for Member States to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da'esh), Al-Nusra Front (ANF), and all other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with Al Qaeda or ISIL, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the Security Council, and as may further be agreed by the ISSG and determined by the Security Council, pursuant to the Statement of the ISSG of 14 November 2015, and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Syria, and *notes* that the aforementioned ceasefire will not apply to offensive or defensive actions against these individuals, groups, undertakings and entities, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement;

9. *Welcomes* the effort that was conducted by the government of Jordan to help develop a common understanding within the ISSG of individuals and groups for possible determination as terrorists and will consider expeditiously the recommendation of the ISSG for the purpose of determining terrorist groups;

10. *Emphasizes* the need for all parties in Syria to take confidence building measures to contribute to the viability of a political process and a lasting ceasefire, and *calls on*

all states to use their influence with the government of Syria and the Syrian opposition to advance the peace process, confidence building measures and steps towards a ceasefire;

11. *Requests* the Secretary-General to report to the Council, as soon as possible and no later than one month after the adoption of this resolution, on options for further confidence building measures;

12. *Calls on* the parties to immediately allow humanitarian agencies rapid, safe and unhindered access throughout Syria by most direct routes, allow immediate, humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need, in particular in all besieged and hard-to-reach areas, release any arbitrarily detained persons, particularly women and children, *calls on* ISSG states to use their influence immediately to these ends, and *demands* the full implementation of resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014) and any other applicable resolutions;

13. *Demands* that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such, including attacks against medical facilities and personnel, and any indiscriminate use of weapons, including through shelling and aerial bombardment, *welcomes* the commitment by the ISSG to press the parties in this regard, and *further demands* that all parties immediately comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law as applicable;

14. *Underscores* the critical need to build conditions for the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their home areas and the rehabilitation of affected areas, in accordance with international law, including applicable provisions of the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and taking into account the interests of those countries hosting refugees, *urges* Member States to provide assistance in this regard, *looks forward* to the London Conference on Syria in February 2016, hosted by the United Kingdom, Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the United Nations, as an important contribution to this endeavour, and *further expresses* its support to the post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation of Syria;

15. *Requests* that the Secretary-General report back to the Security Council on the implementation of this resolution, including on progress of the UN-facilitated political process, within 60 days;

16. *Decides* to remain actively seized of the matter.

## 2.2. International Syria Supporting Group (ISSG) <sup>2</sup>

The international Syria Support Group (ISSG) is a working group formed to find a diplomatic solution to the Syria crisis. The ISSG is co-chaired by the US and Russia, and was established during the “Vienna Talks” in the fall of 2015 and became the most important working muscle for the UN in order to pursue the spirit of the UN resolutions directed to the Syrian Crisis. The 19 founding members were China, Egypt, EU, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Australia, Turkey, UAE, UK, UN and the US. Membership has since expanded to include the Arab League, Australia, Canada, Japan, Netherlands, Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Spain.



Photo 4. International Syrian Supporting Group meeting  
 Source: Supporting Syrian and the Region. Post-London Conference Financial  
 Tracking Report: Co-hosts' statement. 3 November 2016

The ISSG’s initial efforts produced a set of common principles in line with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué. They also established a timeline beginning in January 2016 for diplomatic negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition, the start of a political transition within six month and elections within 18 month. The UN Security Council (UNSC) endorsed this strategy in December 2015 with the adoption of the before mentioned Resolution 2254.

<sup>2</sup> <http://syriainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ISSG-Cheat-Sheet-Secure.pdf>

After a rushed effort to get the parties to the negotiating table in Geneva in January 2016, which quickly fell apart, the ISSG reconvened in Munich to focus on improving the situation inside of Syria before trying again. On February 11, the ISSG announced that its members would exercise their influence with all parties on the ground to facilitate humanitarian access and to start a nationwide Cessation of Hostilities (CoH). By placing unprecedented pressure on both parties, the US and Russia managed to achieve limited progress on getting aid delivered to besieged areas and a marked reduction of violence. The Syrian Government and 97 armed Syrian opposition groups agreed to the CoH, which came into effect on February 27, 2016 at 00:00 Damascus time. Violence abruptly stopped across most of Syria for 24 hours. Following the initial period, violence resumed in some areas but at a much lower rate. The CoH excluded UNSC-designated terrorist groups ISIS and Jabhat-al-Nusra.

With the improved conditions inside Syria, the Intra-Syrian Talks restarted in Geneva in March 2016. The ISSG created a Ceasefire Task Force and a Humanitarian Task Force to maintain conditions on the ground that would allow the negotiating parties to focus on political transition. Following the March negotiating round, the number of CoH violations escalated and aid convoy approvals slowed. Conditions continued to worsen during the second round of talks in April. On the final day, a government air strike targeted a MSF<sup>3</sup>-supported hospital in Aleppo killing approximately 55 people. UN Special Envoy, Steffamn de Mistura, admitted that the negotiations had been overshadowed by violence, and called on the ISSG to hold a ministerial-level meeting to re-launch the CoH before a third round of Geneva negotiations reconvened.

Since the April round of Geneva talks, the ISSG initiated half-hearted measures such as local temporary ceasefires, a UN deadline for emergency airdrops to besieged areas, and creation of a Russian-US Coordination Cell in Geneva to improve CoH violations monitoring. These initiatives were not enforced and little improved on the ground. At the same time, Russia significantly increased its bombing campaign and tensions between the ISSG co-chairs continued to rise.

The next meeting in Vienna occurred on May 17, 2016, as the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), the Arab League, Australia, Canada, China, Egypt, the European Union, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, The

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<sup>3</sup> MSF – medecins sans frontieres



Netherlands, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United Nations, and the United States reaffirmed the ISSG's determination to strengthen the Cessation of Hostilities, to ensure full and sustained humanitarian access in Syria, and to ensure progress toward a peaceful political transition.<sup>4</sup>

Finally on Friday 9<sup>th</sup> of September 2016 the US and Russia brokered a pact to pause the violence after months of back and forth talks.<sup>5</sup> US Secretary of State John Kerry, who negotiated the ceasefire along with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov, said: "the deal would stop Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's air force from flying combat missions anywhere the opposition is present. The ceasefire would also allow for much-needed humanitarian access to besieged cities like Aleppo. If the accords hold for seven days, Russia and the US will begin to discuss military options for targeting one-time al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham, previously known as the al Nusra Front, and ISIS."

In a next step, on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2016 in New York City, members of the ISSG met to take measure of the situation in Syria<sup>6</sup>. They agreed that, despite continued violence, there was still an imperative to pursue a nationwide cessation of hostilities based on the arrangement reached the week before in Geneva between the United States and Russia. Secretary Kerry condemned the airstrikes conducted on 19<sup>th</sup> September, which killed aid workers attempting to deliver food, water and medicine to besieged areas of Aleppo. He and the other ministers expressed their condolences for the loss of innocent life and reaffirmed the absolute necessity of establishing immediately the unimpeded, safe and sustained flow of access for humanitarian supplies. The members also discussed the importance of continuing to put pressure on the terrorist groups ISIS (Da'esh) and Al Nusra, while recognizing the difficulties of separating Al Nusra from the moderate opposition in some areas of the country. They emphasized, in this context, the imperative of ending indiscriminate aerial bombardment of civilians, which is exploited by terrorist groups. And they stressed the absolute criticality of creating the conditions necessary to resume UN-led political talks in coming weeks and month.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/05/257295.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/12/middleeast/syria-ceasefire-explained/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/09/262183.htm>

## II. ANALYSIS

### 1. ACTORS OVERVIEW<sup>7</sup>

“Who are the various groups fighting in Syria? What countries are involved?” By one count from 2013, 13 “major” rebel groups were operating in Syria; counting smaller ones, the US Defense Intelligence Agency puts the number of groups at 1,200. Meanwhile, the number of other countries involved to various degrees has grown; including the United States, nine countries have participated in US-led airstrikes against ISIS in Syria (though Canada’s newly elected prime minister has vowed to end his country’s involvement in the military campaign); Russia is conducting its own bombing against ISIS and other rebel groups, in coordination with ground operations by Iranian and Hezbollah fighters. This is before you tally the dozens of countries whose citizens have traveled to join ISIS and other armed groups in Syria.

Thomas van Linge<sup>8</sup>, known for his detailed maps of the Syrian conflict, groups the combatants into four broad categories:

- Rebels (from “moderate” to “islamist” including ISIS);
- Loyalists (regime forces and their supporters);
- Kurdish groups (who aren’t currently seeking to overthrow Assad, but have won autonomy in northeastern Syria, which they have fought ISIS to protect); and finally,
- Foreign powers.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syrian-civil-war-guide-isis/410746/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/how-thomas-van-linge-mapped-islamic-state-a-1048665.html>

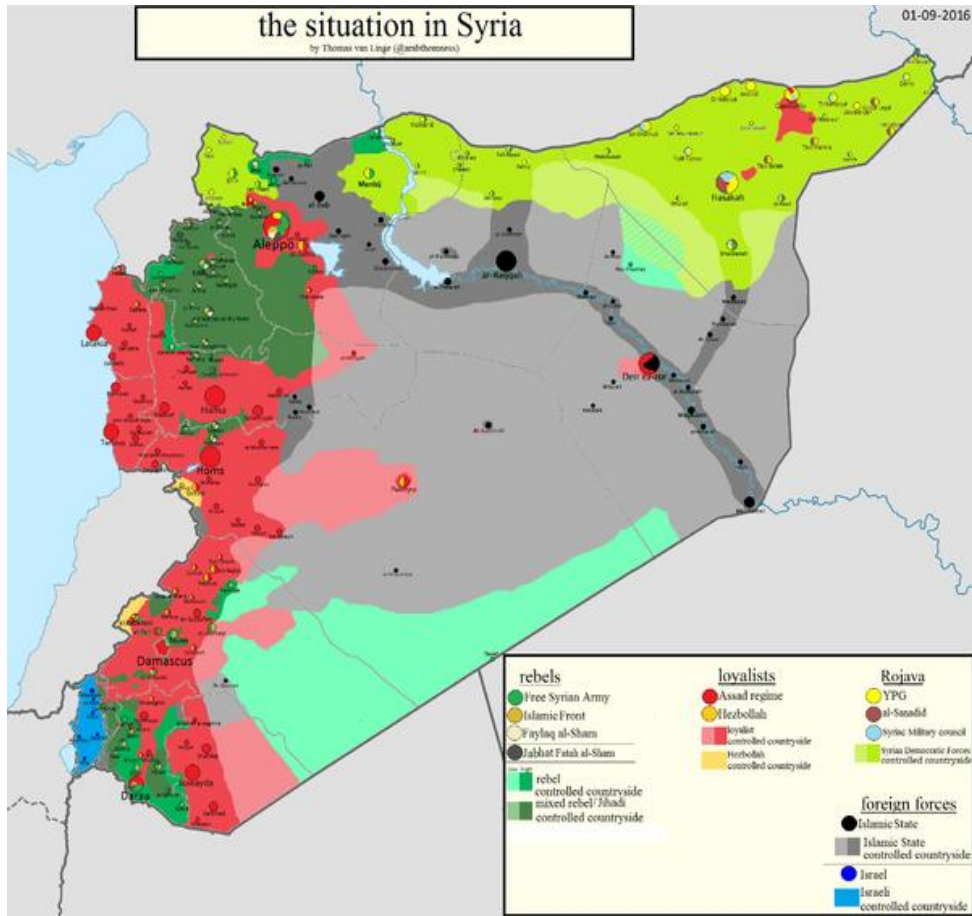


Photo 5. Syrian's war situation update.  
Source: Pietevanostaeyen. Syria Map Update. Sep 2016

Many of the parties in this last category (foreign powers) are fighting or claiming to fight ISIS. The divide among them is whether to explicitly aim to keep Assad in power (Russia and Iran), or to maintain that he must go eventually while focusing on the Islamic State at the moment (the US-led coalition).

In that sense, broadly speaking, Russia has intervened on behalf of the loyalists and the United States has intervened on behalf of the rebels, though the US has tried to only help certain rebels, providing arms and training to “vetted” groups. It’s this contradiction in US goals—America wants Assad to go but is also fighting ISIS, one of the strongest anti-Assad forces in Syria, in defiance of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” principle. Russia’s approach is less sensitive to the differences among rebel groups: It opposes all of them. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov summed it up at the United Nations in October 2015: “If it looks like a terrorist, acts like a terrorist, and fights like a terrorist, it’s a terrorist, right?”

Only the September 2016 development, a ceasefire-deal between USA and RUS, indicated a change. The deal from 10<sup>th</sup> September 2016 was intended to put Syria's peace process back on track, including a nationwide ceasefire. The deal, aimed at halting fighting in Syria and moving towards a political transition after over five years of combat between President Bashar al-Assad's forces and opposition<sup>9</sup>, has mostly collapsed in the meantime due to continued attacks of the Russian backed Syrian Government specifically against targets in the city of Aleppo.

In order to identify possible courses of action which will ultimately lead out of this crisis, it is now required to analyze the actors involved in order to better understand their roles and respective position in this conflict.

## **2. ACTORS DETAILED VIEW**

### **2.1 Loyalist**

#### **2.1.1 The Assad Regime<sup>10</sup>**

The tragedy that is the Syrian civil war, which by some reports has led to the deaths of at least 470,000 people and spawned an unprecedented refugee crisis, has torn asunder a society once renowned for being a mosaic of different religious and ethnic groups. Before the unrest in Syria started in 2011, Syria maintained a delicate ethno-religious balance through institutionalized tolerance and respect for minority rights. It also had a health care system that was “the envy” of many regional countries, a “healthy record” on public education and significant economic growth in the decade leading up to the civil war despite international embargoes imposed on it by the United States. Syria was also a critical factor in there being a stable regional balance of power. It strongly opposed Saddam Hussein’s invasions of Iran and Kuwait and was a supporter of the Palestinian cause. Simultaneously, though, it maintained strong partnerships with the Sunni power centers, especially Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/10/world/middleeast/syria-john-kerry-ceasefire-deal-russia.html>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/seyed-hosseini-mousavian/syria-crisis-isis-solutions\\_b\\_9558732.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/seyed-hosseini-mousavian/syria-crisis-isis-solutions_b_9558732.html)

It goes without saying that Syria's political system before the outbreak of hostilities in 2011 was in need of serious reforms. These reforms, however, should have been pursued through diligent peaceful means, such as regional and international incentives, to avoid a total breakdown of political institutions. Unfortunately, this was not done, leading to the massive disaster we are witnessing.

The Assad regime wants to remain in power by all means. The Regime does not see itself immediately obliged to return to the negotiating table especially after the recent successes in recapturing territory backed by Russian air strikes. In the Regimes view the Opposition is too weak to pressure for results at the negotiating table. The Regime is therefore not under pressure and is now setting out for a full military victory enabling the Regime to maintain as much power as possible before returning to the negotiating table.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Position to Fragmentation:**

The Assad Regime wants to preserve national integrity. It is and was already accepting an autonomous Kurdish Zone in the North-East though. This could be a blue print for an after-war reform looking at other ethnic groups in the country. The centralistic Regime certainly does not want to transform by itself into a federalist system.

#### **Position to Peace:**

The Assad Regime has to be active part of the peace process. There will be no stable peace and no peaceful transition to peace if the regime is not part of the negotiations. Recent polls show that there is even today still a substantial support for Assad amongst the refugees with up to 40%.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.swpberlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/sonstiges/Hintergrund\\_Syrien\\_20160818.pdf](https://www.swpberlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/sonstiges/Hintergrund_Syrien_20160818.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/system/files/pdf/issues/2016/95500.pdf>

## 2.2 Foreign Powers in support of Loyalists

### 2.2.1. Russia<sup>13</sup>

Russia which is having in Syria its only geopolitical important naval base throughout the Mediterranean (Tartus), is a close ally of the regime of Bashar al Assad.

On September 30<sup>th</sup> 2015, Russian planes began a bombing campaign in Syria in order to support Bashar Al-Assad's regime and to hit supposed ISIS stronghold areas. However, analysts from the United States have determined that Russia is also attacking rebels that are supported by the United States – a claim that Russia is denying. According to US analysts, the purpose of these attacks is to maintain al-Assad's power in Syria as a long term Russian ally. However, these attacks are having a complex effect on Russia's relationships with the United States and the Middle East as a whole.

Russia's escalation of force in Syria has pushed it forward into a position of greater prominence in a region often occupied by the United States. Russia's attack of Islamic State-related forces in Syria has received strong support from American allies in the Middle East. The Iraqi government has allowed Russian planes to use their airbases to bomb targets in Syria. Russia, along with Iraq, Iran, and the Assad government, have begun sharing intelligence about the Islamic State. In addition, the Iraqi government has given Russia permission to bomb IS targets within Iraq's borders. President Putin's latest talks with Bashar al-Assad are clear evidence that Russia is looking to expand its political influence in the Middle East. The re-strengthening of Russian and Syrian relations has given the Russian government authority to call for new elections in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

By pursuing a policy of disengagement in the Middle East with the drawdown of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States provides an opportunity for Russia to exercise increasing influence in the region. Military coordination with Syria, Iraq, and Iran gives Russia opportunities to strengthen ties with them. At the same time,

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<sup>13</sup> <http://publish.illinois.edu/studentsecuritygroup/academic/russias-middle-east-ambitions-in-syria>

<sup>14</sup> The results from April 2016 elections, which confirmed the Assad government with 80%, are not recognized by the UN and the syrian opposition. Source: <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-04/syrien-parlamentswahl-baath-partei-sieg-boycott-un>

this coordination allows Russia not only to deny Western influence and military action in a geopolitically important area but also to regain global power by doing so.

Russia's role in Syria plays an important influence on al-Assad's control in the region. The bilateral relationship between Russia and the al-Assad family began in the Cold War era (1970) when the Soviets were in desperate need of an ally to help contain Western-democratic influence in the region. The Soviets opened up a naval base in Syria in 1971. In return, Syria received a vast amount of arms and financial support from the Soviets.<sup>15</sup> However, it was at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2012 when the relationship between Russia and Syria began to strengthen again. Russia voted against the UN Security Council resolution condemning al-Assad's regime for attacking civilians. The veto against the UN Security Council measures stopped the UN from imposing sanctions and having intervening militarily against the al-Assad regime. This political support is in addition to the US \$19.4 billion that Russia has invested into the Syrian government and economy. It seems that Russia's goal with Syria is maintaining the current government to hold their economic relationships in the Middle East. Although Russia's recent military intervention helps strengthen the al-Assad regime, it also creates an increased demand for small arms and vehicles imported from Russia, bolstering Russia's flagging economy. Syria also provides a strategic location in the center of the Middle East. Syria's port city Tartus allows for Russia to supply goods to the Middle East through the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, avoiding the nations of Georgia and Turkey.

Relations between the United States and Russia have also been affected negatively by the Russian Intervention in Syria. Tensions between the United States and Russia have steadily been increasing since Russia's invasion of the Ukraine in 2014; however, Russia's bombing campaign in Syria on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2015 led to the most tension between the two world powers. During talks at the beginning of Russia's military intervention Obama refused to accept Putin's offer to join Russia in supporting al-Assad's regime, criticizing Russia's use of force in Ukraine. Russia and the United States have begun a series of peace talks in Vienna to find a political solution in Syria. However after deploying military force and realizing its effectiveness, analysts stated that Russia realized that it no longer needs Obama's

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.christianpost.com/news/islamic-state-russia-syria-alliance-five-facts-150940/>

support in Syria in order to maintain al-Assad's control. Russia's newly realized independence combined with the United States' difficulty to train and arm Syrian rebels has placed Russia in better light among Middle East nations when compared to the United States. Russia's actions also force the United States into a rough situation by attacking rebels supported by the Central Intelligence Agency. If the United States decides to stay separate from Russia and al-Assad, the chances of a full proxy war developing increases as the United States loses influence in the Middle East to Russia.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

Russia wants to maintain the integrity of Syria. A fragmentation of Syria is not in the Russian interest because it would endanger Russia's new won influence, its economic opportunities and investments as well as its chance to "rein in" the USA on a global scale.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

Russia has the strongest influence on the Assad Regime and therefore can be seen as one of the **key actors** to pave the way for peace. It is of utmost importance for Russia to maintain its only naval base in the Mediterranean Sea to guarantee its global interests and its interest in the region. Peace will be only reachable if Russia has guarantees for the usage of its naval base.

2.2.2. Iran<sup>16</sup>

Iran has been portrayed as a regional threat for decades. Such portraits have at times been fabricated, exaggerated or convenient. However, Tehran's recent actions and statements leave no doubt about its regional ambitions.

In March 2015, Ali Younisi, an adviser to President Hassan Rouhani, said Iran is now an Empire, and Iraq "has become part of this Empire." Also in March 2015, Iran's top general, Mohammad Ali Jafari, praised "the ever-increasing export" of his country's "1979-Islamic revolution," which "has entered a new chapter." In February 2015, Qassem Suleimani, head of the Quds Force - the foreign wing of the powerful

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/03/iran-regional-ambitions-clear-worrying.html>



Revolutionary Guards Corps - said: "Today we see signs of the Islamic revolution being exported throughout the region, from Bahrain to Iraq and from Syria to Yemen and North Africa." In September 2015, a former member of the Parliament of Iran, Ali Reza Zakani, who is reportedly close to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, said his country now controls four Arab capitals - Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sanaa - which "belong to the Islamic Iranian revolution."

These are not nuanced statements that are open to interpretation and context. They show Tehran's clear intent to project its power regionally, and its allies are serving - unwittingly or otherwise - as tools in this grand project. This can no longer be discounted as the ramblings of conspiracy theorists or the propaganda of its sworn enemies.

Tehran has troops actively engaged in two Arab countries - Iraq and Syria - and has proxy forces in two others - Lebanon and Yemen. Such direct Iranian involvement in Arab states is unprecedented, and ironic given Tehran's denunciations of foreign meddling in countries' internal affairs. Furthermore, its involvement is in support of sectarian governments and militias that have committed countless atrocities. This reveals the hypocrisy of a regime that highlights its enemies' human rights abuses.

Arabs have very real, legitimate worries about Iran's increased muscle-flexing. If Tehran cares for its regional standing - which is in its national interests - it should sincerely address and allay those concerns rather than deny, belittle or denounce them. Tehran should also realize that just as it would not tolerate foreign troops or support for armed groups on its own soil, neither should it expect Arabs to do so.

Arab-Iranian rapprochement is necessary and would be beneficial for both nations who share so much in common. However, due to Tehran's regional policies - among other factors - the two actors are heading in the opposite direction.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

Iran has no interest in a fragmentation of Syria. It would lose an important ally and influence in the region.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

Iran is a **decisive** driver of this conflict in its fight against the wrong belief of the Arabs (Sunni) and the Non-believers from the West. Iran has a broad role in the solution of this crisis. There will be no solution to the crisis without its participation.

**2.2.3. Iraq<sup>17</sup>**

Almost 14 years after the fall of Saddam Hussein and 5 years after the withdrawal of American forces, Iraq is still struggling to build political stability and bolster its national security. Differences over federalism, the management of oil and gas resources, and control of the armed forces are strong, and tensions along Kurdish-Arab and Sunni-Shiite lines are high. Furthermore, the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime has made the Iraqi crisis worse.

The Iraqi government has no love for the Assad regime, but it fears that the rise of a Sunni-dominated government in Damascus will strengthen the Sunnis in Iraq's western provinces, which could lead to a renewed struggle for control of Baghdad. The government has not been as publicly supportive of Assad as Iran and Hezbollah have been. The Prime Minister has met with members of the Syrian opposition and has accepted the need for constitutional change in Syria; but Iraq abstained from the Arab League vote in 2011 to suspend Syria's membership and has opposed overthrowing the Syrian regime by force.

More importantly, Baghdad has been an important source of material support for the Assad regime. Iraq has opened its airspace for use by Iranian planes ferrying support to the Assad regime, and has granted trucks bound for Syria carrying supplies from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards passage through Iraqi territory. Moreover, the Iraqi government has signed a deal to provide Syria with much needed diesel fuel.

These policies have been a source of tension between Baghdad and Washington, as well as between Baghdad and both Ankara and the Gulf Cooperation Council. They

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<sup>17</sup> <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/11/29/iraq-s-tensions-heightened-by-syria-conflict-pub-50189>

have also driven Baghdad closer to Iran. Tehran will intensify its efforts to dominate Iraq.

Baghdad has signed military deals with the United States and is exploring buying military equipment from Russia, and the Prime Minister now dominates an army of more than 350,000 soldiers. The prime minister has, furthermore, become politically dominant within state ministries and institutions. He has, however, failed to build a national political coalition that would include Iraq's Arab Sunnis and Kurds—and the Syrian crisis is further increasing tension with these communities.

Public opinion in the western Sunni-majority provinces of Iraq has been greatly supportive of the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime. Fighters and supplies have been crossing from Anbar province into Syria, and armed groups inside Iraq have declared the establishment of a Free Iraqi Army in emulation of the Free Syrian Army. Many Arab Sunnis feel marginalized by the Iraqi government and resent what they see as a Shiite monopolization of power in Baghdad. They wager that the fall of the Assad regime and the empowerment of a new Sunni-led government in Syria will greatly strengthen their hand in Iraq and allow them to make a renewed bid for a much greater share of power in the years to come.

The Syrian crisis has also increased the ambitions of Iraq's Kurds. As the Assad regime weakens, the Kurds in Syria have established control over their own regions, which are now effectively autonomous. This has been achieved partly with help from the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party as well as with support from the Kurdistan Regional Government in Irbil, under President Massoud Barzani. For the first time, Iraqi Kurds now have another autonomous Kurdish region to look to. This strengthens their hand because it means that the model of Kurdish regional autonomy is not specific to Iraq but can be replicated in Syria, and maybe one day in Turkey and Iran as well. It certainly fuels the ambitions of those who still consider full Kurdish national independence as their long-term goal.

The Syrian Kurdish enclave could be particularly important for Irbil, because Syrian Kurds—in cooperation with Turkmen groups in northern Syria—have been fighting westward to secure an outlet to the Mediterranean Sea in a corridor that passes between the northern part of the Alawi region and the Syrian border with Turkey.

Access to the sea is considered strategically important for Irbil and any future Kurdish entity.

These rising Kurdish ambitions cause great concern in Ankara. This concern has led to Turkey's recent military plunges into Syria starting mid of August 2016, enabling rebels to capture the ISIS stronghold of Jarabulus.<sup>18</sup> The offensive had two immediate goals: To clear Islamic State militants from their remaining border stronghold, and roll back recent advances by Syrian Kurdish militias that Turkey considers an equal or greater threat because of their links to its own domestic Kurdish insurgents.

The overall situation is not made easier by the return to Iraq of tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees who had fled to Syria in previous years or by the influx of over 50,000 Syrian refugees. The Iraqi government has organized flights to help Iraqis return home but has tried to close the border to further Syrian refugee flows, fearing that most of them would be Sunni supporters of the rebels and potentially hostile to the Baghdad government.

Indeed the conflict in Syria has made the resolution of Iraq's internal disputes even more unlikely in the near future. The level of trust between the various parties was already at a minimum; and the conflict in Syria has only hardened positions. The Iraqi government is responding to worries about Syria by towing a harder line. Meanwhile, most Sunni and Kurdish leaders feel that their hand will be strengthened by the outcome of the conflict in Syria. They prefer to await that outcome before returning to the negotiating table with Baghdad—or more ominously, the battlefield.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

Iraq is partnering with Iran, the Assad regime and Russia and does not want fragmentation and its potential product of a Sunni led central state.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

Iraq's role in the peace process is **indirectly decisive** due to the fact that it is allowing Russian airplanes to use IRQ airspace, its support to IRN and its role in direct logistic support to the Assad regime.

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-isis.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-isis.html?_r=0)

## 2.3. The Rebels in Opposition

### 2.3.1. Kurds and Syrian Democratic Force (SDF)<sup>19</sup>

When the Syrian protest movement started in 2011, it was young Kurds in the north of the Syria, in Amouda, who took to the streets, calling for freedom and democracy. President Bashar al-Assad soon announced he would recognize some of the rights demanded by the Kurds and allowed them to register as citizens and hold an identify card, a right they have been deprived of since 1962.

But the Kurds rejected the concessions, saying they would wait to get their rights once all Syrians achieved freedom and democracy. Five years on, the scene is different. As the war has dragged on in Syria, Kurdish groups have taken the opportunity to gain more power.

The PYD (the Democratic Union Party) declared self-administration in the Kurdish region of Syria in November 2013. Other Kurdish parties formed the Kurdish National Council, which is part of the main anti-Assad opposition group, the Syrian National Coalition.

The PYD is close to the Kurdistan Workers' Party - the PKK - which is banned in Turkey and regarded by many Western governments as a terrorist organization. "The PYD had popularity on the ground as they were addressing the Kurdish population's concerns. They are pragmatic and organized, unlike other Kurdish parties who failed to deliver," says Farooq Haji Mustafa, a Syrian Kurd journalist and founder of the Barchav Centre for Media and Freedom, in Gaziantep, southern Turkey.

"The Kurds were attacked by some Islamist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, therefore they felt they were not part of the Syrian revolution. They thought they should seize the opportunity and protect Kurdish interests. The PYD delivered and were supported by regional and international agreements since they were the only force that is reliable in the fight against Islamic State," he added.

But Mr Haji Mustafa says also that the PYD is a totalitarian party, doesn't like opposition to its rule and has acted violently against some in their community.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36773195>

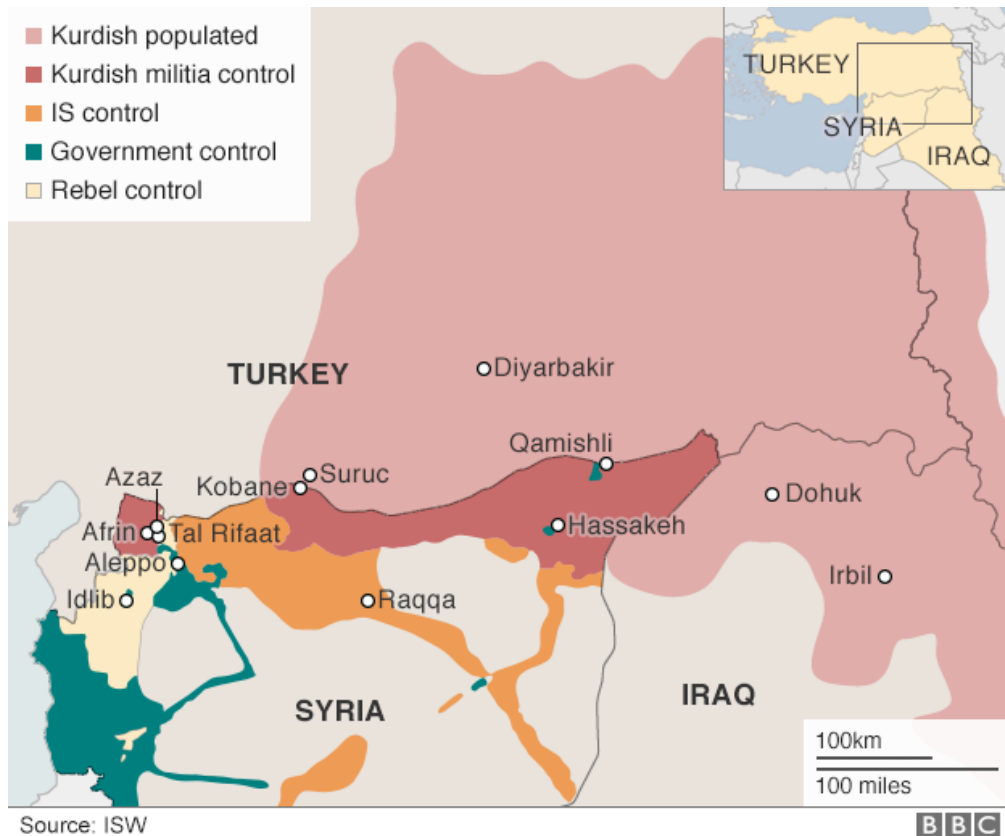


Photo 6. Kurdish area in Turkey-Syria-Iraq borders  
 Source: BBC.news. Kurd leader attacks Turkey's "safe zona" plan for Syria.  
 Syria needs analysis project ISW. July 2015

The PYD later came to form the Syrian Democratic Forces, along with some Arab tribes, and it's the SDF which has become one of the main powers inside Syria fighting so-called Islamic State (IS) - with support from Western coalition forces.

The PYD has made calculations in its own long-term interest. It seized with its military arm the YPG<sup>20</sup> control over most territories with a Kurdish population in Syria and now considers them as a federal region. It has presented itself as a partner for the international community in fighting terrorism and just recently announced a constitution that would govern what it calls "Rojava" - Western-Kurdistan or the Kurdish areas of Syria - as well as other parts of northern Syria in partnership with some Arab tribes there. This territorial expansion and new power for the PYD has been supported by the US, who are partners in the fight against ISIS, but also with some Russian support.

<sup>20</sup> YPG in english People's Protection Units

But it alarms Damascus and as well the Turkish government, a foe of President Assad. Turkey does not want a Kurdish state on its own border and the PYD is linked to the PKK - which Ankara blames for many attacks in Turkey.

While the Kurds have proven to be reliable in the fight against ISIS in the north of the country, there is some unease about their ambition to separate entirely from the rest of Syria.

According to Ismail Sharif, a Kurdish journalist from Amouda who wants a democratic and united Syria: "It is hard for them to create a Kurdish state and to split the country. Unfortunately now there is a proxy war and there are many dictators in Syria. I don't think there will be a division of Syria. The PYD cannot rule one area from Kobani to Idrin with many Arab towns and villages in the middle. They cannot continue ruling across this area without an agreement between all Syrians in a free and democratic country that ensures equal and full rights for all its citizens." he said.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

The Kurds, historically a folk without a national state, wish to create an independent state of Western-Kurdistan ("Rojave") and linking North Syria with Northern Iraq. They were already given in 2011 by the Assad regime some autonomy over their territory in order to remain calm. The Kurds are striving to link all Kurdish enclaves along the Syrian-Turkish border and are fighting ISIS to protect their territories from occupation. They favor fragmentation as basis for an own national state.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

The Kurds are willing to fight hard for their vision of creating an own national state. Nevertheless they know about the potential difficulties to achieve this goal. They only favor a peaceful solution if that is linked with the greatest amount of autonomy for themselves.

**2.3.2. Free Syrian Army and affiliated Rebel Groups**

There are believed to be as many as 1,000 armed opposition groups in Syria, commanding an estimated 100,000 fighters.

Many of the groups are small and operate on a local level, but a number have emerged as powerful forces with affiliates across the country or formed alliances with other groups that share a similar agenda. Here we present the most prominent:

➤ FREE SYRIAN ARMY



**Commander:** Various, officially Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir. Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF)- Jamal Ma'aruf <sup>21</sup>

**What:** Umbrella of broadly secularist rebel forces formed mainly from Syrian army deserters

**Goal:** End of the Assad regime, democratic state

**Side:** Rebels

**Ideology:** Broadly secularist, some Islamist elements/sympathies

**Component Groups:** Supreme Military Council, Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF), Euphrates Islamic Liberation Front, others

**Estimated Strength:** Reliable estimate unavailable

**Strengths / Tactics:** Western backed official opposition, comparatively poor funding (under National Coalition of Syria).<sup>22</sup>

The oldest of the Syrian rebel factions, formed in the early days of the war primarily out of defectors from the Syrian army. They do not operate as a unified army rather they are a loose group of battalions and coalitions that fight under the broad banner of the FSA. They have suffered heavy losses both to regime forces and ISIS, whom they have been fighting but still remain a central component of the rebel forces. Their exact numbers are unknown. Fresh defections from the Syrian army have bolstered their ranks over the course of the war. Defections are estimated in the “tens of thousands.” Some FSA brigades swear loyalty to the Supreme Military Council. They have so far received limited aid from the west. Another element of the FSA is the Syrian Revolutionary Front, a loosely western aligned coalition commanded by Jamal Ma'aruf, which was formed in response to the merger of the Islamic Front (see below). The Euphrates Islamic Liberation Front is another FSA banner coalition. On

<sup>21</sup> <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53910>

<sup>22</sup> <http://en.etilaf.org/>



occasion these groups have fought the Islamic Front and Jabhat al-Nusra and have joined both against ISIS and the Assad-regime.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

The FSA consist mostly of defectors from the Syrian Regular Army and of local fighting groups. FSA is primarily fighting against the Assad regime, wants regime change and democracy and is not in favor of fragmentation.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

Even though there are a lot of local fighting groups active under the banner of the FSA, e.g. Turkmen groups, the non-sectarian FSA is set out to achieve regime change but within the national borders. FSA fights also in support of the population and democracy and has a high interest into peace and the ending of the humanitarian crisis. FSA is an important actor, has political influence and needs to be integrated into the peace process.

➤ ISLAMIC FRONT



**Commander:** Ahmed Issa al-Sheik

**What:** A coalition of Islamist brigades

**Goal:** The removal of Assad and later creation of an Islamic State, Jihad

**Side:** Rebels, Islamists. Cooperates with Jabhat Al-Nusra

**Ideology:** Sunni Islamism

**Component Groups:** Ahrar as-Sham, Suqor al-Sham Brigades, The Tawhid Brigade, The Haq Brigade, The Ansar al-Sham Battalions, The Islam Army

**Estimated Strength:** 40,000 to 70,000 (March 5th)<sup>23</sup>

**Strengths / Tactics:** Syria's most powerful insurgent bloc, slightly more moderate Salafi Islamism than Nusra or ISIS

"Syria's most powerful insurgent bloc"<sup>24</sup> was formed as a merger between various Islamist factions that share the goal of establishing an Islamic State. It is a coalition of Islamist brigades that has a semi-unified command. Tensions have existed between

<sup>23</sup> <http://en.shiapost.com/2014/03/05/the-most-powerful-rebel-alliance-in-syria-the-islamic-front-is-on-the-verge-of-collapse/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54183>

the Islamic Front and ISIS Groups and were rankled by ISIS's brutal application of Islamist principles and extreme violence. In particular, a series of high profile murders, especially the murder of a commander from Ahrar as-Sham and seizures of weapons depots by ISIS fighters provoked fellow jihadis. The coalition fights variously against ISIS, Assad's force and factions of the Free Syria Army (FSA). On and off it has cooperated with FSA banner coalitions such as the Syrian Revolutionary Front<sup>25</sup> (SRF). Frequently, however, battalions have refused to fight their fellow jihadis in ISIS, and have allowed FSA banner brigades such as those in the SRF to bear the brunt of the fighting.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

The Islamic Front is fighting against the Assad regime but also against ISIS. Prime motivation is to achieve regime change and the foundation of a new Syria as an Islamic Sunni State. Islamic Front strives to implement sharia law and religious supremacy which organizes the affairs of the individual, the society and the state. In parallel Islamic Front also rejects the idea that Syrians could be allowed to vote on whether to have sharia law or not. According to their Salafi-inspired reading of the Quran, letting the people decide would involve placing human desires above God's political sovereignty—and that's heresy.<sup>26</sup> Fragmentation would be accepted (Kurds) but is no goal.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

The Islamic Front is propagating a slightly more moderate Salafi Islamism than Al Nusra or ISISis, is influenced by the ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood and rejects secularism and democracy and its parliamentary rule. It seeks to build instead a regime on consultation (shura) and the participation of the nation (umma) in many ways comparable with Iran: a republican theocracy supervised by religious scholars where there is some degree of political competition within sharia-compliant but otherwise modern institutions and where the role of politicians is to administer a strict application of sharia rather than to make laws of their own. Islamic Front as well as most Islamist followers are fighting for local control of their territories in order to unify

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<sup>25</sup>**Syria Revolutionaries Front (SRF)**, also translated **Syrian Rebel Front** is, according to Lebanon's Daily Star, an alliance of 14 more secular rebel brigades fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, formed in December 2013, thus according to Arutz Sheva further sidelining the FSA and its leadership Supreme Military Council. It was established as a response to the merger of Islamist Syrian rebels into the Islamic Front

<sup>26</sup> <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54233?lang=en>

their gains later with other banners of Islamist fighters to a new state. They also fight ISIS for reasons of differences in ideology but only when necessary. They are important actors which are difficult to control. They have an important influence on the peace process as a whole and have to be integrated.

➤ JABHAT AL-NUSRA



**Commander:** Abu Mohammed al-Joulani<sup>27</sup>

**What:** Al Qaeda's official affiliate in the Syrian conflict

**Goal:** Global Islamic caliphate, Jihad

**Side:** Rebels, Islamists.

**Ideology:** Sunni Islamism

**Component Groups:** None

**Estimated Strength:** 15,000<sup>28</sup>-20,000

**Strengths / Tactics:** Suicide bombings

Al-Qaeda's official affiliate<sup>29</sup> in the Syrian War, Al-Nusra is one of the most effective and feared fighting forces in the war. They swear loyalty personally to al-Qaeda leader Sheik Zawahiri. They have (officially) prioritized defeating the regime over creating an Islamic state, leading to disagreements with ISIS, which does the opposite. It still maintains the long term Islamist goal of establishing in Islamic Caliphate in the Levant. Their fighters are a combination of guerilla fighters from Iraq with experiences fighting American soldiers and local Jihadists. Better funding and resources allowed Nusra to gain recruits at the expense of the cash-strapped Free Syria Army. ISIS and Nusra split in mid-2013 when Zawahiri called on ISIS to disband and they refused. Al-Nusra is allied with the Islamic Front and works together occasionally with FSA units such as the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF).

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

Al-Nusra is fighting for an Islamic State in the Levant stretching from Syria across Iraq. The group is therefore attacking the Assad regime. Because of internal differences of its leaders with ISIS and Islamic Front and differences about the desired end state of the fight - ISIS is striving to create an even bigger Islamic

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/12/al-qaeda-leader-syria-speaks-al-jazeera-20131218155917935989.html>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.channel4.com/news/syria-files-interactive-rebels-weapons-money-ideology-assad>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/493>

Caliphate reaching from Europe over Northern Africa to the Middle East – they are fighting ISIS as well. Prime motivation is regime change in all of Syria and the foundation of an Islamic State overarching linking Syria and Iraq. Fragmentation would be accepted (Kurds) but is no goal.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

Al-Nusra is fighting against Assad and its regime for reasons stated before at the same time it is a listed terrorist group. Al-Nusra is targeted by the US lead coalition.<sup>30</sup> They fight ISIS for reasons of differences in ideology but only when necessary. They are important actors which are difficult to control. They have an important influence on the peace process as a whole and have to be integrated. Al Nusra is a difiliate of Al Queda and must differentiate itself from the officially listed terror group in order to be integrated in the peace process.

➤ THE ISLAMIC STATE (AKA: ISIS, ISIL, DAASH)



**Commander:** Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi<sup>31</sup>

**What:** Terrorist group establishing state, formed from Islamic State of Iraq

**Goal:** An Islamic state in parts of Iraq and Syria, Global Islamic caliphate

**Side:** Rebels, Islamists

**Ideology:** Sunni Islamism

**Component Groups:** None

**Estimated Strength:** Reliable estimate unavailable

**Strengths / Tactics:** Brutality, implementation of sharia

The most notorious of Syria's many factions, this Sunni Islamist group<sup>32</sup> seeks to establish an independent state in western Syria and northern Iraq, and has declared itself as such.<sup>33</sup> Formed out of al-Qaeda in Iraq<sup>34</sup>, called the Islamic State of Iraq,

<sup>30</sup> Al Nusra and ISIS are supposed to have received up to a certain point of time direct or indirect support from Turkey

<sup>31</sup> <http://pietervanostaeyen.wordpress.com/2013/07/15/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-a-short-biography-of-the-isis-sheikh/>

<sup>32</sup> <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17291>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/isis-iraq-expands-activities-baghdad.html>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/al-qaeda-iraq-k-islamic-state-iraq-greater-syria/p14811>

they initially entered the Syrian Civil War to support the Islamist cause there. Extreme violence and brutality in enforcing Sharia law<sup>35</sup> have been the hallmarks of its presence. For example, in one incident they displayed the crucified bodies of their enemies in Raqqa.<sup>36</sup>

Its Emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had a personal dispute with the leader of Jabhat al-Nusra and with al-Qaeda head Sheik Zawahiri which resulted in the group being expelled from al-Qaeda. ISIS then stopped providing Iraqi oil revenues to Nusra. It has also engaged in fighting<sup>37</sup> Kurdish militias, Nusra and other brigades flying FSA banners. ISIS is comprised mostly of foreigners and very few ethnic Syrians. It has been accused of betraying the revolution to further its own ends and of collaborating with the regime. They are propped up by a local 'ansar' network (helpers) that provides logistical and local support.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

ISISI is comprised of mostly foreign fighters not linked to Syria and its people and is exploiting the civil war in Syria. The group aims at fragmentation for the creation of a Caliphate initially across Syria and Iraq then from Europe over Northern Africa to the Middle East and later across the globe.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

For its extreme violence and brutality in enforcing Sharia law ISISI and its disregard for the interests of the Syrian opposition fighters, it is fought also by other Islamist Groups like Al-Nusra and Islamic Front. ISIS needs to be neutralized in order to create a basis for peace in Syria and to prevent further spread of terror into the world.

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-03-08/life-under-isis-the-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-syria/5307788>

<sup>36</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/01/world/meast/syria-bodies-crucifixions/>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/syria-rebel-recounts-his-time-an-isis-jail-20143911113109123.html>

## **2.4. Foreign Powers in support Rebels/ Opposition**

### **2.4.1. USA and US-led coalition**

The US air force has carried out the majority of air strikes against IS targets since forming a coalition of Western and regional powers in August 2014. The primary objective is to drive back IS and neutralize IS as a predominate threat to humanity, peace and stability in the region. President Barack Obama is extremely reluctant to send ground troops to fight IS after protracted and unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the US does have about 3,500 troops in Iraq to train the country's armed forces. The US has also provided weapons and training to "moderate" Syrian rebel groups, and unconfirmed reports suggest US special forces have been fighting alongside anti-IS forces in both Iraq and Syria. In October 2015 US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter signaled a possible shift in the US campaign against IS, telling reporters that US forces were prepared to engage in "direct action on the ground".

It was hoped by the US strategists that the Syrian government could be pushed from Damascus and sent fleeing to Syria's western provinces of Latakia and Tartus. From there, the US hoped to create a Saudi-Qatari-Turkish dominated central state with a Kurdish territory linked up with US-backed Kurds in northern Iraq. Forever divided against itself, Syria would never again function as a powerful ally of nearby Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah or Russia nor as a facilitator of threats to Israel.

Russia's intervention in Syria has all but prevented Damascus from falling. And while the Western media has attempted to claim the Russian intervention has made little difference, so successful has it actually been, that attempts by Turkey to establish its long-sought after "safe zone" in northern Syria have also all but evaporated.

Syrian troops backed by Russian airpower have moved from Latakia along Syria's border with Turkey toward the now much reported-on A'zaz-Jarabulus corridor while another force pushes north from eastern Aleppo toward the Turkish border. Elsewhere, Syrian forces are securing Damascus, pushing Western-backed militants over their southernmost border with Jordan and pushing east toward Raqqa itself.

What has been left as an option for the US and its regional allies is a possible attempt to invade and occupy Syria's northeast. The US has already been allegedly carrying out ground operations in this region supposedly in support of "Kurdish" and "Arab" forces that make up what it calls the "Syrian Democratic Forces."

The US has even allegedly begun constructing or rather restoring an airstrip within Syrian territory.<sup>38</sup> A spokesman for the US Department of Defense said its small team in Syria needed "occasional logistical support".

Meanwhile it is reported by the U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights that Russian experts had arrived to explore the "Qamishli" airport's readiness and to check what is needed to develop and use it near the Turkish border. The report added that Russian warplanes could use the airport in the "coming days and weeks." Qamishli is located south of the Turkish border town of Nusaybin.

The US inviting itself into sovereign Syrian territory and creating a military base to supply its ground forces operating there without UN Security Council approval or invitation by the Syrian government sets a dangerous precedent. But assuming the United States has no interest in actually upholding the very international law it attempts to justify its numerous extraterritorial adventures with, what options does Syria have to head off what is a well-documented conspiracy to strip it of its own sovereign territory and expand from there toward Damascus itself? The answer can be found in Qamishli, Syria, teetering near the Syrian border with Turkey and only 50 miles west of the US' alleged airstrip in Rmeilan. Qamishli is the site of what is alleged to be a growing Russian presence, including a burgeoning airbase.<sup>39</sup>

It would be the check to America's latest, and perhaps final move in an overarching game the West has been sorely losing in Syria. Russian forces, if they are indeed setting up in Qamishli, will establish a permanent bastion in Syria's northeast. When

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<sup>38</sup> The BBC in its report Syria conflict: 'US expanding air strip' in Kurdish north claimed: Satellite imagery appearing to show the US expanding a formerly disused air strip in Kurdish-controlled northern Syria has been seen by the BBC. The images, from the security analysts Stratfor, show a runway near the town of Rmeilan being extended from 700m (half a mile) to 1.3km. That would make it more suitable for a larger aircraft such as a Hercules.

<sup>39</sup> The International Business Times reported in their article US Forces Setting Up Base In Northern Syria Near Russian Forces In Qamishli Airfield: Report that: ...Russian experts had "arrived to explore" the Qamishli airport's "readiness and to check what is needed to develop and use it" near the Turkish border. The report added that Russian warplanes were expected to use the airport in the "coming days and weeks." Qamishli is located south of the Turkish border town of Nusaybin

inevitably Syrian forces cut off terrorists from their foreign supply routes and reestablish control over Syria's largest cities back west, they will be able to reenter the northeast of their nation in force with Russian backing up to and including onto the doorstep of any illegal US occupation. There would be little the US could do to stop this, and no strategic or tactical means of "holding" territory already under the control of Syrian-Russian forces. The US in this scenario is reduced to a trespasser coming up to an occupied house, unable to do anything else but leer through the window. While the US would surely be trampling the flowerbed outside the home, it would be unable to access anything of value within it.

Syria and Russia are displacing US ambitions to occupy Syria with physical forces that once in place will be difficult to remove. The US will come to the bargaining table with its "Syrian Democratic Forces" operating at the fringe of Syrian territory, with a Russian airbase standing between it and Syria's interior. Meanwhile, the lion's share of military victories against both Al Qaeda forces masquerading as the West's "moderate fighters" and the "Islamic State" (IS) itself goes to Russia and Syria, not the US.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

The USA and the US coalition could actually benefit from a fragmentation of Syria. Divided against itself, Syria would never again function as a powerful ally of nearby Iran, Lebanon's Hezbollah or Russia or distant China nor as a facilitator of threats to Israel.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

Along with Russia, the **USA** is the **dominant actor** in the region. Primarily fighting to neutralize the threat from ISIS in the region the USA have – despite the supporters of fragmentation - an immanent interest in stabilizing the region by peace. Fragmentation would also almost certainly result in an independent Kurdish state, which would not be tolerated by Turkey. The USA would lose its important ally Turkey over the support of a fragmentation solution and therefore this will not be allowed to happen. US hegemony in this region is now contested by Russia as a "returning" player. Therefore it will also depend on the USA willingness to allow for Russian influence in the region.



#### 2.4.2. Turkey<sup>40</sup>

In the wake of the House of Commons voting in favour of carrying out British airstrikes against ISIS in Syria in December 2015, the issue of a strategy to combat the Islamic State has come to the fore. Within the debate a number of important facts about Turkey surfaced. In the whole of the debate on Syrian air strikes there was little to no mention of the people supporting ISIS in the region. Some Members of Parliament made small remarks about the Saudis and vaguely criticised groups who supported the Islamic State, but next to none cited Turkey's role in the conflict.

In no part of the British governments plan are there steps to tackle the support that ISIS and similar groups enjoy from the Saudis, the other Gulf States and Turks. Because of this, jihadist recruits and funding will therefore not dry up no matter how many US, French or British bombs are dropped.

The reason Turkey can get away with supporting jihadists is because it's a member of NATO. The USA and the rest of the West are careful of criticising their most powerful Muslim ally which also has one of the alliance's largest armies. Similarly they wouldn't want to lose influence in Turkey as its geographical position gives NATO a prime base in the region for negating the threat of Russia and fighting terrorist groups in the Middle East. Turkey has always been extremely important to the organisation and it is now seemingly untouchable. Their continued involvement with jihadist groups will not be publicly condemned by NATO states as they do not want to lose a key ally in an important staging ground for combat in the Middle East.

This has enabled Turkey to act of its own accord in the war between ISIS, the Syrian rebels and the Assad regime. Its main aim is to remove Assad from power and ISIS is not top of Turkey's hit list. Even groups of Kurdish fighters (often backed by the US) come before Turkey's fight against jihadists. They also have links to Al-Qaeda groups, with the most notorious perhaps being the Al-Nusra front, which in 2012 rose to power in Syria and have been listed as a terrorist group by the US government. Turkey has constantly been linked with its funding but the most troubling aspect of their relationship is the constant sharing of information between the two parties.

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.wessexscene.co.uk/international/2015/12/08/turkey>

According to Syrian Rebels, Turkish intelligence alerted Al-Nusra to the presence of US-trained Syrian rebels entering Syria which led to them being kidnapped.

Turkey was afraid that while these Syrians would fight Assad, they would also fight their extremist allies like al-Nusra. From this evidence, it is clear that Turkey's priority is fighting the Assad regime and the autonomy the Assad regime has given to the Syrian kurds along the north eastern border with Turkey. They don't want anybody to jeopardise that.

This has led to accusations in and out of Turkey that they have backed these forces solely to fight Assad but under the guise that they are fighting ISIS, with Turkey also been accused of buying oil from ISIS. Ali Ediboglu, a Turkish opposition MP, claimed that ISIS was smuggling oil worth \$800m a year through Turkey and more recently the Russian Ministry of Defence estimated that selling their oil to countries like Turkey generates \$2 billion of revenue annually for the Islamic State. Turkey also knowingly allows thousands of jihadists to gain access to Syria to fight Assad and the borders are not as tightly controlled as they would have the West believe.

These Russian political attacks came as a result of Turkey shooting down a Russian plane on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2015 for allegedly violating its airspace.<sup>41</sup> This incident has made the situation in the region even more complex but to assume Turkey carried out this act solely for this violation is naïve – their role in the conflict has largely been formed by its religious beliefs and its desire to oust Assad from power.

There are conflicting reports over if the plane was in Turkish airspace with one of the surviving pilots claiming he didn't fly into Turkey and did not receive any warning. The Turks have insisted they warned the aircraft ten times before shooting it down and its main ally, the USA, have backed up this claim. Yet it is suspicious that Turkey would be so quick to act in this way when it is unimaginable that the UK could have reacted similarly when Russia was close to violating its airspace in September 2015.

It seems a fitting coincidence that within a week of Putin condemning members of the G20 for funding ISIS and similar militias that Turkey shot down a Russian plane. To

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>

the Turks, the Russians have been their enemies for centuries, whether it be fighting over the Ottoman treatment of Slavic Christians or supporting Communism in the countries that border Turkey. Russian involvement in Syria is just another engagement where they will be fighting their old foe and the Turks see it as such – its eagerness to shoot down a Russian jet shows their priorities are not in the right place and they simply see Russia as an accomplice of Assad.

The whole conflict has an underlying religious current, with the Shi'ite government of Syria being backed up by Iran while Sunni rebels have the support of Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Turkey's overwhelming desire to remove Assad from power, no matter the cost, is troubling but can be explained by seeing the conflict through a religious spectrum. Nevertheless, as a NATO country it should be doing a lot more to combat Islamic State. Their backing of Islamist and Jihadist groups, as well as their links to ISIS - ISIS and Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) are ideologically aligned and are both "branches" of the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>42</sup> - is against the conflict the US and her allies are fighting.

In fairness to Turkey, the recent conflicts in the Middle East are a massive threat to their security and they feel they are doing what they can to protect its borders. Yet, when countries like the US give others like Saudi Arabia and Turkey its unwavering support they will not stop funding Sunni Islamic Jihadist groups. If Turkey is continually allowed to have a free hand in conducting its war against Assad, funds for groups like ISIS will not dry up by simply bombing their oil refineries, and they will survive as long as they enjoy support, openly or secretly, from other Sunni Islamic nations.

Turkey's recent plunge into Syria end of August 2016 in direction of Jarablus in its "Operation Euphrates Shield" complicates even further the situation.

While US Vice President Joe Biden went to Ankara on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2016 on a mission to repair US-Turkey relations after Turkey's wholesale crackdown on oppositionists after the failed coup d'état of 15<sup>th</sup> July 2016, Biden learned that Turkish Special Forces, tanks, and fighters with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) were invading Syria, targeting Jarablus near the Turkish border. The USA endorsed Turkey's "Operation

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<sup>42</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/erdogans-waterloo-turkey\\_b\\_11767934.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/erdogans-waterloo-turkey_b_11767934.html)

Euphrates Shield” and provided air power. Nevertheless the Turkish Operation Euphrates Shield still violates Syria’s sovereignty and International Law.<sup>43</sup>

According to Erdogan, “Operation Euphrates Shield” was aimed at the Kurdish YPG and “terror groups (including ISIS) that threaten Turkish country.” Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu pledged that Turkey would “do what is necessary” to keep Kurdish fighters east of the Euphrates River. Turkey announced plans for a safe zone 90 kilometers long and 40 kilometers wide, stretching from Jarablus to Marea, deep into Kurdish controlled territory. In fact, Turkey is trying to prevent the YPG from establishing a contiguous Kurdish territory that would make “Rojava” a reality. Erdogan fears that Rojava’s existence will inspire Kurds in Turkey to intensify their demands for greater autonomy. Erdogan’s hostility towards the Kurds is no secret. He insists that the YPG and PKK are the same, even though the US Government says they are distinct.

But Turkey keeps pushing south. It has no intention of relinquishing territory. To justify its presence, Turkey will populate a Syrian enclave for refugees. At the same time Turkey intends to secure the main supply route Turkey uses to supply the Jihadi fighters in the area of Aleppo. The principal corridor to supply the rebels in Syria has always lead through the area of north east Syria around Jarablus<sup>44</sup>.

The world must not be naive about Turkey’s intentions. Erdogan says the primary purpose of Operation Euphrates Shield is to fight ISIS. This is patently false. Turkish-backed Islamists never engaged ISIS in the so-called battle for Jarablus. Before invading, Ankara made a deal with the Islamic State. Rather than resist, ISIS forces simply changed into FSA uniforms. Jarablus was “liberated” from ISIS with barely a shot. Unlike Falluja and other battles where ISIS used civilians as human shields, civilians were evacuated from Jarablus. The Islamic State does not want civilians to identify newly clad FSA members as hard core ISIS fighters.

Given Turkey’s bitter history supporting Islamists, it will now be more difficult to negotiate an end to Syria’s conflict with Turkish’s troops on-the-ground. It also

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<sup>43</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/erdogans-waterloo-turkey\\_b\\_11767934.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/erdogans-waterloo-turkey_b_11767934.html)

<sup>44</sup> <http://thesaker.is/erdogan-calls-putin-as-russia-seethes-at-turkeys-syrian-incursion/>

proves that Turkey wants more influence and a seat at the table of the Geneva peace process. It seeks equal standing with Russia and the United States.

Turkey is on top of that following a political course which could be described as Pan-Turkism or Neo-Ottomanism paired with radical Islamism, which constitute the basis of Turkey's state ideology. Ankara has not been just pursuing the goal of providing protection to the countries that were parts of former Ottoman Empire, it seems that Turkey wants to bring them back under a stronger direct influence. These ambitions enter in direct contradiction with the vital interests of its neighbours and their backing powers, e.g. Russia.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand the Obama administration has been giving weapons and air support to the PYD and its People's Protection Units (YPG). Syrian Kurdish forces are numbering about 40,000. The YPG is America's most reliable ally against ISIS. Washington will continue to support the YPG if it fights ISIS east of the Euphrates. Erdogan abhors US cooperation with the YPG, which he calls a terror group. Erdogan wants the US to make a choice between Turkey and the YPG, but was repeatedly rebuffed. It was predictable that Turkey would drop the pretense of fighting ISIS and focus its operation on the PYD. But the Obama administration knows what's going on. A senior Pentagon official told CNN: "The Turks never cared about Jarablus until the Kurds wanted to get there. Turkey's targeting of the PYD is unacceptable and a source of deep concern".

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

Turkey wants to prevent fragmentation because that could inflict the creation of a Kurdish state along its southern border which Turkey is trying to avoid by all means. Turkey is supporting the fight against Assad and wishes instead to install a Sunni-conservative government which could better curtail the Kurds in the north-east.

"Turkey is determined for Syria to retain its territorial integrity and will take matters into its own hands if required to protect that territorial unity. We have only ever sought to help the people of Syria and have no other intentions." Mr. Erdogan said in a speech in Ankara on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2016. Turkey wants also certainly more influence

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2015/11/30/syrian-crisis-triggers-turkey-neo-ottoman-ambitions.html>

on the Geneva peace process. It seeks equal standing with Russia and the United States.<sup>46</sup>

**Position to facilitate peace:**

Turkey has signaled an even bigger shift in recent days and that it is prepared to take a more aggressive diplomatic role in Syria, working alongside Iran, Russia and the United States to seek an end to the war. Turkey's intervention on the ground into Syria has to be understood in that respect. The intervention marks a preliminary climax in Turkey's adjustment of its foreign policy in direction of Neo-Ottomanism. The move was almost certainly coordinated with the USA and with Russia. To achieve Russia's approval Turkey must have been signalled to give up its quest to oust Assad. In exchange Russia probably has guaranteed to give up its support for the Kurds.<sup>47</sup>

Turkey is an important factor in the peace process and should be integrated. At the same time USA needs to counterbalance Turkey's ambitions (Neo-Ottomanism) and Turkey's fears (Rojave) by offering guarantees for not supporting an independent Kurdish state.

2.4.3. Saudi Arabia and Gulf States<sup>48</sup>

The interest of Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states, on the Syrian crisis, derives from its struggle against the Iranian power in the region, exercised in recent years through the resistance axis linking; Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas.

The possible disappearance of the pro-Iranian regime in Damascus offers to the Gulf States the possibility of extending its regional influence. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in particular, believe that a friendly regime - a Sunni state in Syria - could serve to strengthen the currently marginalized Sunni Iraqi forces, giving them and their sponsors in the Gulf, a major influence in Baghdad. At the same time, the change of regime in Damascus would help Gulf countries to strengthen its position in Lebanon, - with a large economic dependence on them - by strengthening the pro-Sunni actors

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<sup>46</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/erdogans-waterloo-turkey\\_b\\_11767934.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/erdogans-waterloo-turkey_b_11767934.html)

<sup>47</sup> Die WELT, 26.08.2016, S. 6. "Türkei verzichtet erstmals auf Assads Sturz"

<sup>48</sup> (Steven Heydemann FRIDE foundation document N° 119 may 2013) THE GULF STATES (*Hassan Hassan*The Gulf states: United against Iran, divided over Islamists ECFR Foundation)

there against the dominant pro-Assad, Hezbollah. Therefore for the Gulf countries, Syria's conflict is a critical battle for control of a key pivotal state in the region.

Saudi Arabia maintained a cautious tone during the first months of 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>49</sup>.

A peaceful solution was expected and that the regime of Bashar al-Assad had gestures of dialogue and openness towards the opposition. As the Syrian regime intensified its military campaign and the number of victims significantly increased, the tone changed.

The king of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, gave a speech in August 2011 condemning the violence of the regime against Syrian citizens, and immediately the Arab League, under strong pressure from the Gulf, established sanctions against Syria.

Gulf leaders began to openly support the uprising; Saudi Arabia and Qatar began to dialogue with third countries such as Turkey and France, to support direct opposition with the aim of overthrowing the Assad regime.

Unlike neighboring Qatar, which believes that the optimal outcome in Syria is the complete downfall of the regime, with Brotherhood-dominated political and military bodies taking its place, Saudi Arabia and its allies have been more cautious, fearing that the total collapse of the Assad state apparatus will open the door to a takeover by these jihadi extremists, whose ideology is committed to the active creation of an Islamic Caliphate and are therefore, in turn, likely to promote greater political turmoil.

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.

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

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<sup>49</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).

today backs Washington's line and has declared an openness to negotiations, although it insisted long, until November 2015, that Iran cannot be part of the process.

To summarize, 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.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

Saudi Arabia wants to maintain the integrity of Syria aware that a fragmentation of the country would be an excellent platform for the up rise of numerous extremist groups not interested into hegemony of Saudi Arabia but into the foundation of a Caliphate.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

Saudi Arabia backs Washington's line and is open to any kind of support to future negotiations on a transition process in which Iran is a problematic counterpart. The ability of Saudi Arabia to tolerate Iran participating in a political peace process can be decisive. Only the USA can influence the stance of Saudi Arabia on that aspect.



## 2.5. Others Actors

### 2.5.1. China<sup>50</sup>

The Syrian issue has offered China an opportunity and a stage to ponder what kind of a role it should play in the world.

On issues such as Syria, China usually adopts the stance of “non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs.” Such a stance, however, cannot exempt China from the affair. Its persistence in and attempt to protect the “non-interference” principle has involved contradictions, conflict and even confrontation with certain Western countries, especially the United States and some European Union member states, who believe in interventionism. It is this difference in principle that has placed China in contradiction with the West on the Syrian issue.

Unlike Russia or the US and Europe, China’s presence in Syria is of no strategic bearing. It has no military facilities in that country. All it has is a limited volume of trade and other commercial businesses. The Sino-West discord on Syria stems from China’s “non-interference” principle. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China joined Russia to veto six Western resolutions on the Syrian issue during the period from 2011 to 2013. Obviously, China regards the domestic conflicts in Syria as a completely “internal affair.” However, despite its non-interference stance, it is impossible for China to just stay away from Syria’s “internal affairs.”

There is no absolute “non-interference” anywhere in the world. In fact, while keeping contact with the Assad government, China has appealed to all political parties in Syria for a political solution. It also made attempts to contact the anti-Assad parties and even invited them to visit China. China joined in the international effort for the settlement of the Syrian issue, for instance the Vienna conference. All these moves suggest a kind of involvement in the “internal affairs” of Syria.

On the one hand, China will never abandon the “non-interference” principle, as it needs it to handle its relations with non-Western countries in Asia, Africa and Latin-America; as well as to resist the West’s interference in its own internal affairs. On the

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/chinas-role-in-syria/>

other hand, however, following this principle is in contradiction to the West's interventionist diplomacy and thus will project a negative image of China in the West-dominated international community of hindering the West's intervening efforts.

Like most other members of the international community, China also concerns itself with the aftermath of the Syrian civil war, such as the humanitarian crisis and, particularly, the refugee problem.

After having vetoed six resolutions on Syria in the UN Security Council together with Russia, China began to adjust its attitude and stance. The incident of civilians being killed with chemical weapons in Syria in August 2013 may have prompted China to adjust its policy on the Syrian issue. From then on, China no longer simply coordinated its stance with Russia but rather returned to its independent diplomacy. In fact, it was Russia rather than China that constituted the main opposition to the US' ideas on the Syrian issue in the UN Security Council.

After the US and Russia struck a deal for the US to scrap its plan of launching military strikes on Syria on condition of Damascus destroying its chemical weapons, China made its own judgment based on its principle and interests and then emphatically stated that a "political solution (by Syrians themselves) is the only correct solution for the Syrian crisis."

Let's make a comparison of the stances of China, the US and Russia on Syria:

- The US still portrays itself as a "global policeman", as is evidenced by its intervention in Syrian affairs.
- Russia has significant military presence and huge economic interests as well as extensive social connections in Syria.
- China is neither a world policeman like the US, nor has the influence and interests in Syria like Russia.

What is the role that China should play in places like Syria? One can come to believe that China should be an active promoter of multilateralism and should act in coordination and cooperation with all other major powers.

An issue such as the Syrian crisis is far beyond a single country's "domestic affairs" but rather an issue of global concern. Major powers' coordination and cooperation and their success or failure determines whether the world will be an orderly one. If the Syrian issue is dominated by the US and Russia only, it is unfair, and unreasonable, to Syria, the Middle East and the whole world. So, China's role is then particularly important and irreplaceable.

China's role is to prevent the Syrian issue from becoming a deal between the US and Russia only, and to push for more international cooperation. Only in this way can the Syrian issue be "settled politically" as was advocated by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at this year's UN General Assembly.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

China has a definite interest in making sure that Syria conflict does not spill over to affect the broader Middle East. Violence from Syria has already spilled over into Lebanon and Iraq and further escalation could begin to disrupt trade within the region as a whole, a potential disaster for China given that half of its oil imports come from the Middle East. China wants therefore to prevent fragmentation.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

China now supports the UN road map for peace which is in line with its own suggestion from 2014 and its five point proposal for the Syria conflict. Those points are as follows:

- There must be a political settlement to the Syria conflict
- Syria's fate "must be decided by its own people"
- The political transition process must be "inclusive"
- Syria must achieve "national reconciliation and unity"
- The international community should provide humanitarian assistance to Syria and its neighbors.

### 2.5.2. Israel<sup>51</sup>

For decades, Israel has considered Syria as its most important Arab enemy. Border disputes following the 1967 occupation of the Golan Heights, became the most important issue separating the two countries. Eventhough negotiation channels were established between the two countries long time ago, the current Netanyahu government showed no interest in the renewal of talks with Syria. At the same time, the prospect of Israel across the region began to change: it elevated one new enemy - Iran - above all others, and saw the increasingly dangerous Syrian-Iranian relationship.

The outbreak of the Syrian crisis in early 2011, has led Israel to a re-thinking of the relationship with its neighbor. The impact of the Syrian crisis by a huge number of Syrian refugees in Jordan and in Lebanon became a worrying issue for Israel since the stability of these neighbouring countries are directly at risk.

In Lebanon the evolution of the conflict could generate a deep crisis of governance and internal security that would be even worsening the situation for Israel by forming an ideal breeding ground for Hezbollah and other opposition groups, which might turn their potential then against Israel, eventhough Israel's most potent neighbouring militant threat Hezbollah is actually bleeding heavily on the ground in supporting the Assad regime.

In Jordan, Israel is very interested in preserving the pro-Western monarchy of King Abdullah, who has been the guarantor of the peace treaty with Israel and is having for the moment its population - most descendants of Palestinian refugees - under a rigorous control.

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 and could generate a reduction of tension in the camps of Palestinian towards Israel.

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<sup>51</sup> Dimi Reider (Israel: Strategically uncertain, tactically decisive ECFR foundation) (BROOKINGS Agency 26NOV 2012).

The current situation with the continuation of the war in Syria presents for Israel certain advantages, including the fact that the world's attention is focused increasingly on Syria and not in Gaza and the West Bank.

Although at first, Israel would have preferred that the Assad regime remained in power rather than waiting for the policy adopted by a possible successor, this approach based on the "known bad" is no longer valid. Therefore, although it is recognized that Israel has little or no influence on the course of events in Syria, Israel's leaders have reached a largely consensus agreeing that the departure of Assad's power is preferable.

But Israel maintains a strong concern about what kind of government might succeed Bashar al-Assad. The future foreign policy of Israel should build discreet channels to the emerging actors in Syria to prepare for future outcomes. And with several neighbours - such as Turkey, Jordan, and the Gulf states which are sharing some common goals for the outcome of the Syrian crisis - Israel must seek to cooperate with them to advance its interests, which requires building trust with those actors. Thus, to avoid being a bystander in the Syrian crisis, it would serve Israel well to re-engage with Turkey and earn good will in the Arab world by seriously restarting the Palestinian peace process.

In conclusion, the strategic approach of Israel to the Syrian conflict can be described as cautiously. Israel seems to look at the conflict in a more specific way of areas of threats and interests rather than striving for a complete picture. Israel should rather ask itself: "What kind of Syria does Israel want to see after the conflict and what could Israel do to promote stability".

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

Israel is not interested in a fragmentation of Syria due to the possible repercussions in other neighboring countries like Jordan and Lebanon, the possible emergence of new radical groups and the unpredictable reaction of Hezbollah.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

The most important affair among the two countries is the question of the Golan Heights. A new government in Syria with a new balance of force could reopen the negotiation to this unsolved issue. It remains open, if Israel would consider

negotiations or not. On the other hand the Palestinian problem could be discussed between Israel and Syria with the help of other actors such as Turkey, Jordan and the Gulf States. Israel is therefore directly influential in the peace process.

### 2.5.3. Jordan<sup>52</sup>

Of all the neighbours of Syria, Jordan is perhaps the country that has acted with the greatest caution since the outbreak of the conflict. The country has been most concerned about the potential impact of the flux of refugees towards internal destabilization.

The Syrian crisis has also served to show divisions among Jordanian opposition groups that had begun to find some common positions. While Jordanian Islamist political forces have lined up in strong support of the rebels, some left parties have expressed their continued support for Assad.

The refugee crisis in Syria comes at perilous economic times and is already boosting domestic discontent. While refugees remain in camps away from the population centres of Jordan, popular resentment towards refugees is growing. The refugees are increasingly blamed for the economic problems of the country.

The jihadist outbreak in the conflict in Syria poses a direct security threat to Amman. Given the proximity of the cities of the north to the battlefield in southern Syria, the threat is seen as something much more immediate than during the Iraq war, when Jordan had a buffer zone of hundreds of miles of empty desert.

The chosen policy of Jordan to Syria has been (and still is) one of caution, with the desire not to provoke Assad to retaliate or to expose the country to an overflow of violence from Syria. Therefore the country was following a course of silent support to the Assad regime in order to keep it from collapsing since that would empower hostile forces. This explains the behaviour of Amman in recent years of publicly not criticizing the Assad regime and even maintaining diplomatic relations, despite strong pressure from allies in the Gulf to join more decisively the Anti-Assad way. The crisis

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<sup>52</sup> Julien Barnes-Dacey Jordan: Stability at all costs ECFR foundation

has also proven to be beneficial to the Royal Palace since it has served to reduce social tension in the street and consolidate the national and international support that was beginning to deteriorate.

As radical forces have gained ground in Syria, Amman has slowly taken a more proactive stance to try to support the most moderate forces and avoid creating jihadists areas along its border. Consequently, Amman agreed in late 2012 to open its borders to arms transfers from Arabia in support of some forces of moderate opposition in southern Syria, as well as agreements with the United States were signed for the establishment of training camps of rebels on its territory. Significantly, it has looked to Riyadh and Washington, not only due to long-term relationships with these two states, but also because both are trying to ensure a smoother transition (as favoured by Amman), in contrast to Qatar and Turkey, which have pushed for deep change and support more radical opposition forces.

Given the likelihood of an unstable, fractured and violent Syria, Jordan still maintains to be an important strategic actor. It is quite certain that it will not be abandoned by the West countries, which see the kingdom as a major source of regional stability and a key ally of Israel. The Gulf States also back the Jordanian Hashemite system to ensure that the riots are not sneaking in from republics into monarchies.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

Giving the proximity of the conflict on a few kilometers from its border, Jordan is not in favor of a fragmentation of Syria.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

In order to protect the Monarchy and decrease internal tension between the opposition groups, the Amman government has only backed the moderate opposition groups in Syria. Jordan is carrying out an important role as potential mediator in the Syrian conflict.

#### 2.5.4. Lebanon<sup>53</sup>

Lebanon's political fate has always been closely linked to Syria. With its neighbour Syria sinking into an even deeper civil war, Lebanon increasingly fears an eruption of internal violence in the country.

At the beginning of the Syrian conflict in March 2011, the Lebanese government took a clear stance of neutrality and indeed Lebanon was officially refrained from taking punitive measures against its neighbour.

Despite the will to maintain the neutrality of all state institutions, including the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), the internal weakness of the central government became apparent since the two main political forces in Syria have different postures towards the conflict in Syria.

On one side the Shiite-Hezbollah movement has supported from the beginning on the Assad regime, first sending material and finally deploying fighters who were instantly assuming a larger role in the battlefield.

Supporting this policy is leader Nasrallah, arguing that Assad's fall would lead to an immediate offensive against Shiites; "If you do not go there to fight them," he said Sunni militants in reference, "they'll come here."<sup>54</sup> Hezbollah also fears that their supply lines from Syria, essential for military support from Iran, will be cut off if Assad falls endangering their military superiority of the movement which is essential not only to maintain its national power base but also to ensure deterrence capability against Israel.

On the other hand, the movement of "Sunni Future" of Saad Hariri (the coalition of March 14) has supported the rebels in Syria, seeing the potential demise of Assad as an opportunity to weaken the control of Syria in the country and thus the Hezbollah. Hariri and his allies have launched full support for the revolt and played a key role in facilitating the flow of arms supplies from the Gulf to the Syrian rebels, both through

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<sup>53</sup> Julien Barnes-Dacey (ECFR) european council on foreign relations Lebanon: Resilience meets its stiffest test

<sup>54</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>.



Lebanon and Turkey. Lebanese Sunnis have even moved to Syria to fight alongside the rebels.

Regarding this situation, the Lebanese government has expressed concern about the fear that jihadist's extremist groups may find increasing support in Lebanon, especially in the Palestinian refugee camps. Palestinian refugee camps have already been in the past hotspots of support for groups, linked to al-Qaeda like Fatah al-Islam or Nahr al-Bared.

In this complicated political situation, social pressure posed by the influx of refugees from Syria (Sunni majority), already representing approximately 20 percent of the population and established in the poorest areas of the country where social tensions are to the limit, is joined by an already significant slowdown of economy.

In these circumstances, the Syrian crisis is gaining strategic impact on Lebanon. With each passing day, the political and sectarian division of the country is becoming more evident and the future of both Assad and Syria will have a significant impact on the balance of power in Lebanon.

**Position to prevent fragmentation:**

The Lebanese government has a weak impartiality in relation to the conflict because of the strong dependence on its neighbor Syria. The proximity to the war zone, to the fighting factions and the impact the fighting is having on the Palestinian refugee camps leads to a position against fragmentation of Syria which could have unpredictable negative results for the country. Lebanon also sees more chances for the return of thousands of refugees with a non-fragmentated Syria.

**Position to facilitate peace:**

The Lebanese government is trying to maintain stability in its own country while a significant political force, Hisbollah, is fighting on the side of the Assad regime. Lebanon would benefit from a stable government in Syria. A balanced government in Syria, with representation from all parties, would have a similar reflection in Lebanon. In consequence, political formations such as Hezbollah, would lose much of its support, helping to rebalance power in Lebanon. The influence of Lebanon on the peace process is rather limited.

### 3. ACTORS POSITION SUMMARY

To summarize, now we present a table with the position of all actors regarding the main questions of the analysis – fragmentation and peace. In addition the respective position of actors towards the regime of Bashar al Assad is displayed.

	Fragmentation		Peace		Position to al Assad	
	Specific weight		Specific weight		Specific weight	
	Pro	Contra	Pro	Contra	Pro	Contra
<b>SYR</b>		++	++		++++	
<b>RUS</b>		++++	++++		++++	
<b>IRN</b>		++	++		++++	
<b>IRQ</b>		+	+		+++	
<b>CHN</b>		+++	+++		++++	
<b>Rebels</b>	+ (only Kurds)	++	++			++++
<b>USA and coalition</b>	+	++++	++++			++++
<b>Gulf States</b>	+	+++	+++			++++
<b>TUR</b>		+++	+++		++	++++
<b>ISR</b>		++	++		+	++
<b>JOR</b>		++	++		++	++
<b>LEB</b>		+	+		+	+
<b>ISIS</b>	++++			++++		++++

We have given a score from zero as the minimum (-) and a score of four to the maximum (++++) as indicators of specific weight measuring the respective position of the individual actors towards the respective question.

The analysis has made it very clear that Russia, the USA and ISIS have been the biggest role players here. Hence their scores are set to the maximum (++++) on both contra-fragmentation and pro-peace with the exception of ISIS where the scores are at a maximum height in the contrary direction: contra-peace and pro-fragmentation.

China, Turkey and the Gulfstates (also Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)) have been given scores of (+++) on both contra-fragmentation and pro-peace with the exception of USA, GCC and the rebels having received one additional score (+) for being partly pro on fragmentation.

The other parties such as Syria, Iran, Israel, Jordan and the rebels in Syria have been given scores of (++) on both contra-fragmentation and pro-peace and lastly Iraq and Lebanon were given a score of one (+) for both contra-fragmentation and pro-peace.

Given to these results - where there is a majority of actors with a high specific weight on contra-fragmentation and pro-peace - a solution of the crisis appears to be theoretically achievable.

Looking at the position of the actors towards Basher al Assad and using the same principle of applying specific weight to the respective position of each actor, it doesn't come as a surprise that Russia and Iran are the strongest supporters of the Syrian regime. Iraq is part of the Shia-axis and supports Assad but to a somewhat lesser extent because Iraq is trying indirectly to maintain its independence from Iran over balancing its support to Assad. China principally supports Assad as the legitimate government coming from its policy of non-interference.

Looking at the opposing actors it also is not surprising that the rebels, the USA, the Gulfstates and Turkey are the strongest supporters for an ousting of Assad. Also ISIS strives for a total victory against the Assad regime and is therefore fighting into the same direction as the rebels and their supporting powers. At the same time ISIS remains a conflict-accelerating element itself and is therefore under attack of loyalists and some rebels.

Only Turkey has seemingly changed its main effort in direction of a “new front” – the fencing off of the Kurds with its recent “Operation Euphrates Shield” - rather than singularly fighting against the Assad regime by supporting the FSA including the Syrian Turkmen factions. This is displayed in the table by an arrow who indicates a significant change in attitude and could open a new, more positive view on the Assad regime in respect of the peace process by Turkey.

Israel is preferring the Ousting of Assad but at the same time fears the unknown of a new government and could therefore arrange itself with the Assad regime (“known bad”). Jordan is ambivalent in respect of Assad. As a partner of the Gulfstates and a partner of Israel, Jordan has much to lose and is therefore following a balanced policy towards Assad and the Gulfstates. Lebanon is heavily depending on the development in Syria also in respect of the enormous amount of refugees and follows more along the supporter of the Assad regime but as a small power cannot exert a heavy influence.

Nevertheless, in order to calibrate the depicted data and the findings, additional critical factors must be considered when looking for a solution.

#### **4. CRITICAL FACTORS TO PREVENT FRAGMENTATION AND FOR PEACE**

From our above analysis of actors involved in the Syrian conflict there is a clear interest towards peace of the majority of analyzed countries except for ISIS. ISIS will further strive to create a Caliphate State, not caring for national integrity of Syria and Iraq and other national states and is not interested into peace for the sake of the reign of Allah. ISIS will continue to spread violence and terror also across the borders of Syria and needs therefore to be neutralized.

A clear picture can also be derived for the positions of the majority of analyzed countries against a possible fragmentation of Syria with exception of the Kurds. Also from the USA and the Gulfstates side there could be seen an advantage from fragmentation in respect of neutralization of the influence of Iran through Syria on Lebanon (Hezbollah) and consequently protecting Israel. Due to the strong opposition from Turkey towards an independent state of Kurdistan along its southern

border and the importance of Turkey for the USA as an ally against Russia, the USA and the Gulf States favor a Syria in its integral borders.

Generally speaking: Fragmentation would counteract the wish to create peace and would endanger stability in the region. Fragmentation has therefore in the sake of peace to be avoided.

Additionally one has to remind himself what the political-science professor Barbara F. Walter has pointed out that since the end of World War II, civil wars have lasted an average of 10 years, but that the number of factions involved is likely to prolong this one. Ben Connable and Martin Libicki of the Rand Corporation have meanwhile found that insurgencies tend to end when outside state support is withdrawn, and that “inconsistent or partial support to either side generally presages defeat.”<sup>55</sup>

From the above analysis and assessments the following critical factors were identified to play an important role in solving the crisis:

#### FOR ESTABLISHING PEACE

- Main supporters of fighting fractions, namely Russia, Iran, USA, Gulf States and Turkey, disengage, draw away from the conflict and support the political peace process;
- Preservation of national integrity of Syria in its post-war borders;
- Allowance of immediate, humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need;
- Start of a political process, which includes:
  - ⇒ representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition engage in formal negotiations on a political transition process in order to end the conflict in Syria,
  - ⇒ establishment of a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition,
  - ⇒ Syrian people will decide the future of Syria,
  - ⇒ Establishment of a credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance,
  - ⇒ Development of a new constitution,
  - ⇒ free and fair elections, including members of the diaspora,

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/syrian-civil-war-guide-isis/410746/>

- ⇒ determine the modalities and requirements of a ceasefire as well as continue planning for the support of ceasefire implementation, ceasefire monitoring and ceasefire verification,
- ⇒ all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilians and civilian objects as such, including attacks against medical facilities and personnel;
- Results from a political process should be in line with the following principles:
  - ⇒ in conformity with the best interest of the Syrian people,
  - ⇒ based on an unequivocal perception of a just and comprehensive political solution,
  - ⇒ applicable through a rational response to the complex challenges and problems imposed by the transitional phase, especially after five years of conflict,
  - ⇒ accepted by as many Syrians as possible and
  - ⇒ able to attract the support of regional and foreign countries which declare support for the Syrian people;<sup>56</sup>
- Establishment of confidence building measures in response to the need for all parties in Syria, to contribute to the viability of a political process and a lasting ceasefire;

## 5. OUTCOMES OF THE UN ACTIONS

Is political solution within reach?

From the oppositions view<sup>57</sup>, current international understandings, especially between Russia and the USA, is confined to the cessation of hostilities and freezing of major military offensives. The US policy of today seems to be restricted to procrastinating the “Syrian crisis” until the White House receives its new master, watching warring parties finish each other off, bombarding ISIS and supporting YPG in fighting it. This attitude is clearly understood after the US retrocession from playing a leading role in the Middle East. For the past five years, American foreign policy towards Syria was obscure and hesitant on whether Assad should stay or leave

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<sup>56</sup> <http://harmoon.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Syrian-Political-and-legal-vision-en.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> <http://harmoon.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Syrian-Political-and-legal-vision-en.pdf>

during the transitional phase, especially after the unanimous adoption of UNSC Resolution 2254 of 18 December 2015, which yielded different interpretations.

Russia seized the moment and started to impose a new military status quo in Syria and so decided to intervene militarily on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2015. The goal was to safeguard the Syrian regime's control over the coastal area, central Syria and Damascus, and help it regain lost strategic areas. Except for Iran and Israel, the Russian move surprised most of the regional and international parties involved.

The EU also lacks a unified foreign policy on Syria; it was rather busy with confronting the refugee issue at its eastern and southern borders. Besides, in the absence of a clear US policy, Europe has no crucial or decisive role; recent events showed that America is unilaterally negotiating with Russia, but also trying to avoid any political escalation or threaten to exercise pressures on Assad or Russia and Iran for him to step down during the desired transitional phase.

Regional powers are also preoccupied with local priorities, and therefore are less capable of effectively changing anything on the ground.

Turkey is busy with internal state security, the political repercussions of the Kurdish progress in northern Syria and its own Operation Euphrat Shield in and around Jarablus.

Saudi Arabia is deeply involved in the Yemeni war, and is living an acute tension with Iran following the latter's improving relations with the "international community" as a result of the nuclear pact. Despite being the biggest hardliners against Assad, nothing suggests that Saudi Arabia can surpass the US red line between arming opposition factions (to be able to fight the regime forces and their allies) and directly intervening in northern or southern Syria.

All this coincides with a military downturn of the armed opposition forces. With the Russian air strikes at armed opposition sites, the regime forces regained lost areas in Lattakia Mountains, Aleppo countryside and Daraa, and tightened the siege on opposition skirtings in various areas, especially after Iran dispatched more of its army

units in Syria. At the same time YPG expanded its geographical area in northern Syria thanks to US and Russian warplanes.

Under these conditions, Mr. de Mistoura called for a new round of negotiations in April 2016. During this round, it was evident that the Syrian regime, backed by its Russian and Iranian allies, followed a particular strategy in negotiating:

- Apply stricter limits on the provision of humanitarian aid with every new round of talks, then show some “goodwill” by allowing a UN aid convoy to one besieged area; as such, it applies a siege and starvation policy on some areas to surrender with time, and concurrently exploit international and UN efforts to lift the siege to acquire an “international legitimacy” for its very existence. It must be noted here that granting access to humanitarian aid is rather a provisional and trivial form of siege alleviation.
- Continue military operations while negotiating by deploying regular forces and allied militias in preparation for new battles with a view to biting off significant sites of the armed opposition but overlooking “ISIS,” “al-Nusra Front,” and of course “YPG.” This reflects that the calls for Assad to step down are no longer voiced by powerful military forces, which control large Syrian territories and are internationally acceptable.
- Label all military opposition factions as “terrorist,” and reject any talks about a political transition or departure of Assad and his close circle and consider it a “pure Syrian issue.”

In light of the above, the Opposition does not foresee any political solution in the near future, nor a political transition. The most likely possibility from their view is a flare up of the conflict. Still, the Opposition believes that a political settlement will be reached at a certain stage, which is why Syrian Community Forces have contributed their detailed visions to the ISSG on the political transition aspired for.

This view of the Opposition in Syria reflects the fact, that there has been only little progress throughout the past 5 years while the agony of Syria is going on in even quicker spirals of violence. Any attempt to relief the consequences of the conflict or start a peace building process as a whole have been blocked mostly by Russia in the UN Security Council.



Nevertheless the road map for peace which has been developed under the UN together with the main actors and which was announced in December 2015, has good potential for success if truly supported by the main actors Russia and USA.<sup>58</sup>

The breakthrough on a cease fire agreement from 10<sup>th</sup> September 2016 between Russia and the USA looked then well like a true starting point for the peace process.

The new plan to reduce violence in the Syrian conflict was reached after 10 months of failed attempts to halt the fighting and of suspended efforts to reach a political settlement to an increasingly complex conflict that began more than five years ago. Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Sergey V. Lavrov, announced the agreement in Geneva after weeks of negotiations that were marred, in President Obama's words, by deep "mistrust" between the Russians and Americans, who back opposite sides in Syria, but share an antipathy to the Islamic jihadists flourishing there.

The new arrangement on Syria, was set to begin Monday 12<sup>th</sup> September 2016 and was greeted with skepticism by Syrians on all sides and judged to carry many risks of failure, which the Pentagon and Mr. Kerry acknowledged by stating: "No one is basing this on trust, we are basing it on oversight and compliance".

The plan was supposed to start with a seven-day continuous "genuine reduction of violence and broad, unrestricted humanitarian access to the ravaged northern city of Aleppo and other besieged areas.

If successful, the plan was to establish a Joint Implementation Center between the United States and Russia, where they should have been sharing targeting data, and the begin to coordinate bombing of militants of the Nusra Front and the Islamic State.

The key idea was and still is that Russia must restrain the forces of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria from conducting any air operations over areas held by opposition forces. The United States was hoping that this would end the indiscriminate dropping of barrel bombs — including chlorine gas attacks — that have punctuated the conflict.

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<sup>58</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/united-nations-syria-peace-process\\_us\\_56747c8ce4b06fa6887d7740](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/united-nations-syria-peace-process_us_56747c8ce4b06fa6887d7740).

In return, the United States was and still is to persuade the opposition groups it has been supporting to separate themselves from the Nusra forces. Mr. Assad has attacked many of them on the pretense of attacking Nusra fighters.

American officials have expressed strong reservations about whether this new arrangement would work. Especially skeptical was the Pentagon, long suspicious of Russian intentions in Syria, since the Kremlin first deployed military forces there to help Mr. Assad a year ago. Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter was among Obama administration officials who raised questions over whether either Russia or the Assad government would comply with the terms. The accord was reached after sharp divisions inside the Obama administration over the wisdom of sharing targeting information with Russia and accusations that the Russians have used the negotiating period to help Mr. Assad regain control in Aleppo and strike at American-backed opposition groups.

Now, at the beginning of November 2016 (6 weeks later), it appears that the ceasefire has collapsed and particular the fighting for Aleppo has returned. A new approach – despite the disappointments - of USA and Russia as well the UN and the ISSG is now required to regain the momentum of the ceasefire deal.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

Since Iran was first invited as a participant in the Syria peace talks in November 2015, there has been substantial progress towards a settlement. After 10 month of negotiating, the United States and Russia hailed a breakthrough deal on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2016 to put Syria's peace process back on track, including a nationwide ceasefire, inspiring new hope for further progress. But the deal, agreed upon by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, which was aimed at halting fighting in Syria and moving towards a political transition after over five years of combat between President Bashar al-Assad's forces and

opposition rebels, failed once again due to the continuing attacks of the Assad regime against opposition forces, especially in Aleppo.<sup>59</sup>

Taking up the path of the idea of the latest cease fire agreement and using the distilled data from this analysis there are seven suggestions that may help resolve the civil war in Syria, end the refugee crisis and alleviate the terrorist threat posed by ISIS to Europe and the rest of the world:

1. Full cooperation between the two coalitions fighting ISIS — i.e. the coalition spearheaded by Iran, Syria, Iraq and Russia and the one by the United States and its regional and international allies. This will assure cooperation among the key regional and international powers in the ISIS fight and is the only effective way to neutralize and destroy the group.
2. In Syria, the ground offensive against ISIS led by the Syrian army and Kurdish forces should immediately be supported internationally and be intricately connected to Iraqi military and paramilitary efforts against ISIS. For that to happen, the Saudis, Qataris and Turks must command their proxy rebel forces to adhere to a complete ceasefire and allow them to cooperate with government and Kurdish forces fighting ISIS if possible.
3. In line with that, the Syrian government, opposition, as well as regional and international powers, should move beyond the current “cessation of hostilities” towards a formal and durable ceasefire. Parallel to this, prisoners should be released by both sides and humanitarian assistance should be administered to all areas.
4. International peacekeeping forces, numbering in the thousands, should be sent to guarantee the ceasefire and reopen the contested cities and towns to resettle as many displaced refugees as possible. Investing in the creation of such a force will be far cheaper to do than the billions spent to destroy the country and the cost of settling refugees outside of the country. In light of the proxy nature of the conflict, no Arab or Iranian forces should be a part of this peacekeeping force. A suitable reservoir of forces exists in Asian, Latin American, European and African countries that could be used in this regard.
5. “We will not talk to anyone who talks about the position of the presidency. Bashar al-Assad is a red line,” the Syrian foreign minister, Walid Muallem has said.

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<sup>59</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/seyed-hossein-mousavian/syria-crisis-isis-solutions\\_b\\_9558732.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/seyed-hossein-mousavian/syria-crisis-isis-solutions_b_9558732.html)

However, the fate of Assad and the Syrian presidency should be left to the people of Syria through an election supervised by United Nations. In parallel, the opposition forces must precisely define who would negotiate for a national unity transitional government that would have full executive powers. This process will lead to a new constitution and ultimately to an internationally sponsored election. Terrorist and radical religious groups should be excluded.

6. There is a major need for a strong post-war rebuilding plan; a type of mini-Marshall plan that would foster stability during the fragile recovery period with economic support, enabling the re-inhabiting of destroyed cities and towns and preventing a chaotic and prolonged recovery.

7. The refugee centers in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon should be gradually dismantled to prevent them from becoming a long-term security threat to the region, as refugee camps unfortunately tend to become. Every effort should be made to return refugees to their towns and assist them in reconstruction and participation in the political process.

For all these elements to succeed, there must be unity among the international community, specifically among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. They need to control their regional allies and direct them towards these goals. Moreover, the Security Council should implement plans to stifle the deadly sectarianism spreading in West Asia. If not checked, it will have serious consequences for the entire world.

### III. SUMMARY

On one hand, the Syrian Civil War is arguably the worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, with close to half a million people killed, roughly the same number wounded or missing, and half of Syria's 22 million population displaced from their homes. But more than that, Syria today is the largest battlefield and generator of Sunni-Shia sectarianism the world has ever seen, with deep implications for the future boundaries of the Middle East and the spread of terrorism.

What started as an attempt by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad to shoot Syria's largest uprising into submission has devolved into a regionalized civil war that has partitioned the country into three general areas in which US-designated terrorist organizations are dominant. In Syria's more diverse west, the Alawite and minority-dominated Assad regime, and a mosaic of Shia militias trained and funded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), hold sway. In the center, Sunni moderate, Islamist, and jihadist groups, such as ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, share control. And in the northeast, the Kurdish-based People's Protection Units (YPG) have united two of three cantons in a bid to expand "Rojava"—Western Kurdistan. As the country has hemorrhaged people, neighboring states have carved out spheres of influence often based on sectarian agendas that tear at the fabric of Syrian society, with Iran and Russia propping up the Assad regime; Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the U.A.E. supporting the Sunni-dominated opposition; and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) supporting the YPG. With the latest plunge of Turkey into Syria end of August 2016 in direction of Jarabulus along the river Euphrates with own troops and with support of the Free Syrian Army, Turkey is becoming itself an actor on the ground. Turkey's ambition is threefold in avoiding the expansion of the Kurds into a unified Kurdish controlled zone along the syrian-turkish border, the establishment of a terrorist free zone to be populated with refugees and finally to protect the supply routes to its proxy rebels fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in and around Aleppo.

On the other hand, the UN has taken a respectable effort in solving the crisis since the first resolution in 2011 and has come a long way since then when delivering its roadmap for peace in December 2015 for peace in Syria. The plan itself appears to

be sufficiently composed and detailed enough to initiate a fruitful peace process. The plan just needs a support by all acting entities involved in the conflict.

But as long as there is no agreement of UN veto powers there will be no further action and no real chance for this endeavor. **The UN are only as good as its veto member states want them to be.** Here it is of paramount importance that Russia and the USA solve their dispute about the role of Bashar al Assad in a transition phase towards new elections.

What is needed, is a consensus at the minimum level.

Part of that consensus has to be:

- the person of Bashar al Assad as part of the transition phase, who still enjoys an estimated support of up to 40% of the Syrian population despite the attacks of his regime against own citizens,<sup>60</sup>
- the strict control of the fighting factions as well as their outside logistical support with money, fighters, ammunitions, water, food and medication etc. by their respective supporting outside powers and
- a concentration of all parties on the neutralization of ISIS.

The current rapprochement of the USA and Russia, including their direct talks which initially have lead to the terms of a cease fire and now are resuming, gives - despite the fact that the ceasefire is not holding - at least a little hope for a future realization of the road map and a chance for peace.

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<sup>60</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-09-14/what-syrians-want>

**ANNEX I**

Diagram with actor's relations in Syria's war

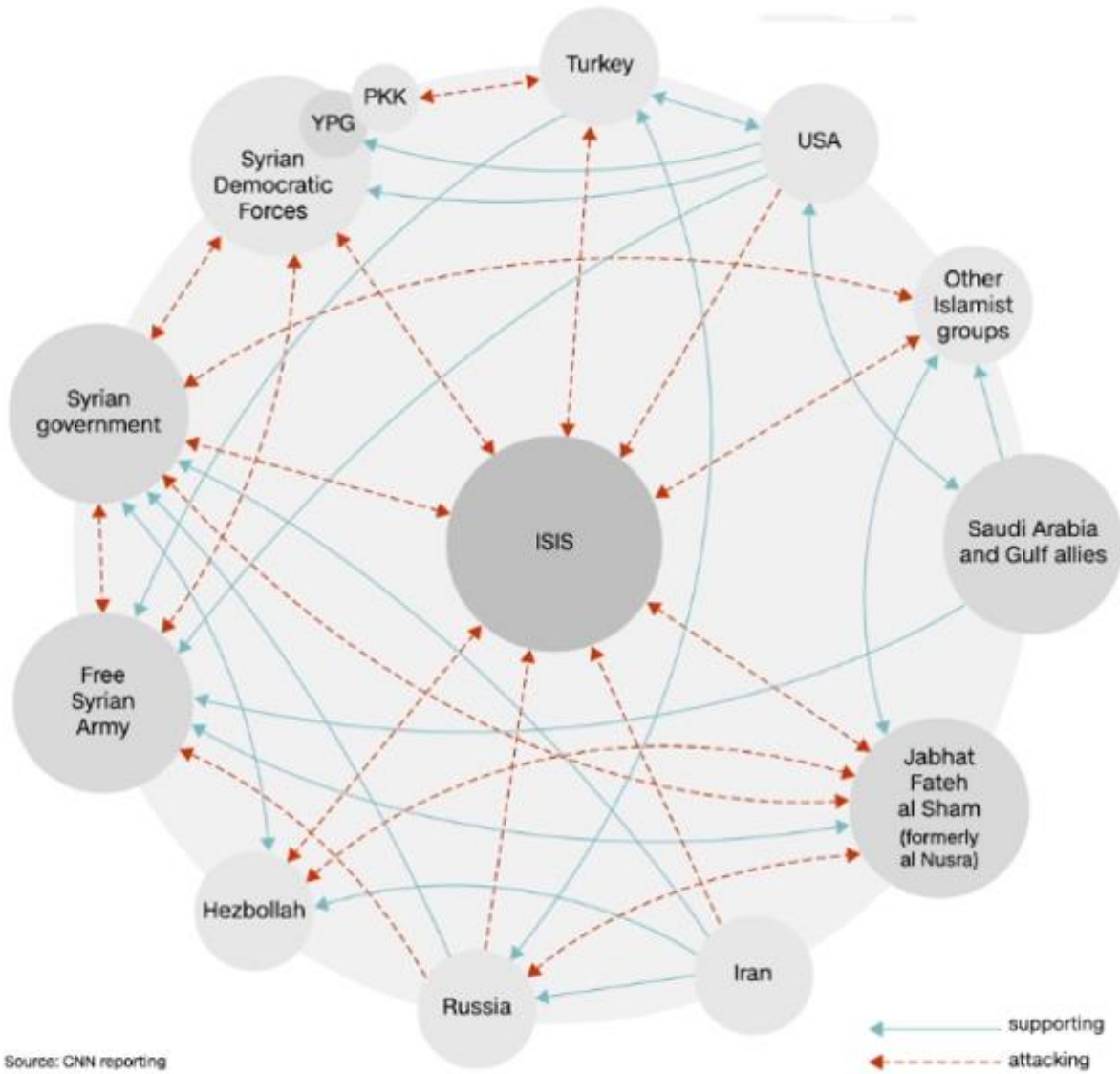


Photo 7. Actor's relations in Syria war

Source: CNN reporting. Map of Syrian Civil war/ Global conflict in Syria - liveuamap.







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