Syria

The Syria Conflict and the Geopolitics of the Region

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The Syrian civil war had forced 2.7 million Syrians to register as refugees outside the country between 2011 and May 2014. This is equivalent to more than half the number of Palestinians registered as refugees as a result of the 66-year Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, the situation has continued to worsen: the UN High Commissioner on Refugees estimated the number of registered Syrian refugees would rise by more than one third, to 4.1 million, by the end of the year, on top of an estimated 4.5 million displaced people inside the country. Altogether, this means a third of Syria's population is displaced.

Most of the refugees remain within neighbouring countries, with only a few tens of thousands given homes in the European countries that have supported the Syrian opposition. The pre-existing political, social and economic pressures troubling Syria's neighbours, especially Iraq and Lebanon, are being exacerbated by the influx of Syrian refugees from different political sides and sectarian groupings.

As it has become more internationalised, the conflict has become bloodier and harder to resolve. What started as a local revolt against corruption and brutality has increasingly become a theatre for regional and international power struggles, especially a rivalry that has been described as a 'cold war' between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The failure of international efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis, along with ongoing failures to stabilise Iraq or achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace, has led the West's allies in the region to question the willingness and ability of the US to offer the kind of security they would like. Direct military intervention by Western countries appeared less likely than ever, given the UK parliament's refusal to authorise British participation in airstrikes that were briefly mooted by the US as punishment for the use of chemical weapons in Syria, and the US's subsequent decision to avoid airstrikes in favour of a UN-supervised dismantling of the Syrian government's chemical weapons stocks. The US and Europe have subsequently focused their efforts more on diplomacy and humanitarian assistance, but UN-brokered talks have made scant progress, and the Syrian government has escalated its violence against opposition-held areas. The crisis has also cast a shadow over the wider Arab uprisings, as the preeminent example of how an uprising initially concerned with social justice and an end to police brutality has been derailed by ethnic and sectarian identity politics.

The International Geopolitics of the Syrian Crisis: Troubles among Allies

The second half of 2013 saw tensions grow among the backers of the opposition, as the opposition forces made losses on the ground, and as it became evident that no Western powers had the appetite for direct military intervention, contrary to the expectations of the Gulf States and Turkey. Initially, Western states were the first governments to support the Syrian opposition when the uprising began in 2011, and were joined by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in the latter half of the year. Meanwhile Syria's traditional allies, Iran and Russia, have remained strong supporters of the regime throughout the crisis.

However, while Saudi Arabia sees the Syria conflict partly through the prism of its regional rivalry with Iran, the US has explicitly sought a rapprochement with

Iran since the election of a new Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, in June 2013. This has raised questions over the extent to which the regional interests of the US may be beginning to diverge with its longstanding Gulf Arab allies, especially since the US is no longer directly dependent on energy supplies from the Gulf (though it retains an interest in the stability of global energy markets). The US and the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, have also generally taken different attitudes to the Arab uprisings, as the Gulf countries do not look kindly on the US administration's rhetoric of supporting democracy. They were nonetheless agreed that there should be political transitions in Syria, Yemen and Libya. The Gulf countries, the US and most European powers have all said that President Bashar al-Assad has lost legitimacy and should step down. But the Gulf and Western countries take different views over the level of priority they accord to this goal, and the means to achieve it (see below).

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A rivalry between the main regional backers of the opposition, Saudi Arabia and Jordan on one hand and Qatar and Turkey on the other, have further complicated the picture. These countries, which officially support the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), have backed different elements of the opposition in practice. Competition between different backers of the opposition has exacerbated the existing fissures between different opposition groups. Syria's opposition is naturally fragmented, being a loose decentralised movement that has sprung up in different locales to rise up against a highly centralised state, and encompassing a wide range of ideological, political and economic motivations. Given the highly localised and diverse nature of the opposition, international efforts to unify it, often from afar, have had little success. This fragmentation places the opposition at a disadvantage when it comes to participating in international negotiations, such as the talks that took place in Geneva in 2014, brokered by the UN envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi. These were boycotted by several (mainly Islamist) opposition groups and excluded all armed groups other than the Free Syrian Army (FSA); these more Islamist armed groups are unpalatable to the West but wield significant power in practice. At the talks, which made little progress, the SNC delegation was confronted with representatives of a government that may have lost control of huge swathes of its former territory, but which has managed to maintain relative cohesion among its senior ranks.
The chronic difficulty of effectively representing the opposition raises the possibility that the best objective for the international talks could be to secure an agreement among the external players to work to end the conflict. (While the US insisted that Brahimi withdraw an invitation to Iran to attend the talks, there are channels of communication with Iran through Iranians who are not formally part of the regime.) To be effective, this would need to come in parallel with an agreement or agreements among the local players, including local ceasefires. However, at the time of writing, the Syrian regime appeared to be betting on the likelihood that it could win the civil war militarily; its willingness to come to the negotiating table reflected a perception that it was winning on the ground and could thus negotiate a deal that would reduce international pressure upon it, rather than any sense that political compromise was necessary to avoid military defeat or stalemate. At the talks, government representatives tended towards offering improvements in humanitarian access as bargaining chips, rather than political concessions. As of May 2014, formal talks had given way to track-two contacts. Meanwhile, violence on the ground escalated.

The US Decides against Military Intervention

In August 2013, following reports that chemical weapons had been used in Syria, the US administration considered launching limited airstrikes against Syrian regime targets, on the basis that this would be a punishment for crossing what President Barack Obama had previously deemed to be a "red line," and that it would deter similar breaches of international law in the future. The UK and French leaders expressed their readiness to join the US. At

the same time, despite the nominal US stance that "Assad must go," US military leaders were briefing against intervening militarily to overthrow him; the head of the joint chiefs-of-staff, General Martin Dempsey, said he did not believe Syrian opposition forces would support US interests if they won. President Obama insisted any strikes would be strictly limited, and would not be aimed at changing the regime, speaking of "a shot across the bows." On several occasions it has been reported that Israel has carried out targeted airstrikes in Syria to deter possible arms transfers to Hezbollah, but neither Syria nor Israel have acknowledged this publicly, nor has Syria retaliated against Israel. However, high-profile strikes by the US would likely be a different scenario.

The President was also expected to seek Congressional approval for any military action, and it was unclear whether Congress would give this, given the unpopularity of becoming involved in another conflict in the Middle East and the fact that Mr Obama had been elected on a platform of withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan. While the world waited for Congressmen to return from their summer break, the UK parliament refused to give the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, approval for the UK to participate alongside the US in military strikes on Syria. The parliamentary debate on this repeatedly referred to the experience of the 2003 Iraq war and, tellingly, more than one MP made the Freudian slip of referring to "Saddam" when they meant "Assad."

Meanwhile, Russia gave the US the opportunity to address the chemical weapons issue, and to avoid military action without entirely losing face, by offering to broker a deal whereby Mr Assad would agree to have Syria's chemical weapons stocks dismantled under UN supervision. The US seized on this opportunity. Not only did it drop the idea of military intervention, it in effect accepted the Syrian regime's continuation in power at least in the short term, as the main agency that would oversee the dismantling of the chemical weapons. From September 2013 onwards, the leading Western powers that supported the Syrian opposition – namely the US, UK and France – became focused on seeking a diplomatic solution and stepping up the humanitarian response to the crisis, while continuing to provide aid to the SNC and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The US provides the FSA with limited amounts of weapons, whereas the UK government was prevented by parliament from providing anything other than non-lethal aid.

Ironically, after being roundly criticised by its allies for intervening militarily in Iraq, the US is now in the unusual position of being criticised by the Gulf countries for not intervening militarily in Syria. The Saudi leadership in particular felt betrayed, especially after their Foreign Minister, Prince Saud Al Faisal bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud, had taken the rare step of publicly endorsing the putative US airstrikes, a stance that was always likely to be controversial in the region. In October, in an apparent fit of pique at the highest level, Saudi Arabia turned down the opportunity to take up a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council, citing the UN's failure to resolve the conflict in Syria as one of the reasons. In the same month, the then head of intelligence, Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud, who had previously spent close to twenty years as the Kingdom's ambassador to Washington, said this rejection had been a message for the US, not the UN, and that Saudi Arabia would be moving away from the US and towards other allies. It was not clear who those other allies could be. None of the world's major rising powers has shown any appetite to intervene militarily in Syria either, and countries such as China, India and Brazil generally prefer to be non-aligned when it comes to the Saudi-Iranian cold war, rather than offering Saudi Arabia a stronger ally against Iran. The Kingdom said it would work more closely with France and Jordan. It underlined its appreciation for France's stance in support of military action by using arms-sales diplomacy: purchasing 142 French helicopters and by providing Lebanon with US$3bn to spend on military equipment from France. However, France's support for airstrikes was purely theoretical as the country would only have carried them out in concert with the US, and in the event the issue was never brought to the French Parliament.

It seems unlikely that the US or other Western countries will return to serious consideration of military action. Such action is generally unpopular at a time when government budgets are under pressure and when there is widespread public scepticism about the potential for military intervention to effect positive change in Syria. Moreover, Western countries are concerned by the increasingly widespread perception that the opposition is increasingly dominated by anti-Western jihadis, an initially exaggerated narrative that

may be becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. This makes them – like General Dempsey – wary of regime change. They have also become increasingly concerned about their own nationals going to fight in Syria and the possible risk that this could lead to blowback. The Syrian regime knows how to exploit such fears; its parliamentary speaker wrote to British MPs before their vote to portray the regime as a supporter of the international war on terror.

Russia's Role

The US and European countries have sought to work with Russia to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Syria. They have hoped to build on the perceived breakthrough of reaching an international deal for Syria to dismantle its stockpiles of chemical weapons, which for years the regime had denied possessing. However this dismantling process is far from complete and cannot yet be decisively labelled a success. The US, EU and Russia have all supported the efforts of the UN envoy, Lakdar Brahimi, to secure both government and (at least partial) opposition participation in several rounds of peace talks in Geneva. But while faltering peace talks have given way to less high-profile track-two negotiations, violence has increased on the ground, with the Syrian government now using aircraft and barrel bombs to bombard opposition-held areas. Sharply heightened tensions between the US and Russia over the political crisis in Ukraine in April 2014 suggest the prospects for co-operation over Syria are dimming. Some Russian political commentators who had initially criticised Putin for backing an international pariah have come to agree with his policy as they perceive the opposition to be dominated by jihadists.

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The frustration of pro-Western Arab states with the US is such that Russia has gained some political ground, after initially drawing the ire of leading Arab states because of its support for Assad. By backing one of the main parties in the conflict, it has come to be seen as a key player in any possible peace deal. Some of the Arab states are also saying to the US they wish the US would stick by them like Russia sticks by Assad, and Egypt pointedly entered discussions with Russia about the possibility of buying Russian fighter jets after some of its usual military aid from the US was suspended as a result of the 2013 coup against Mohammed Morsi. There has also been more talk of the need for greater Arab self-reliance when it comes to regional security.

Syria's Significance for Iran

In 2013 and the first half of 2014, Iran has doubled down on its support for Bashar al-Assad and his regime, acknowledging that it sent its Revolutionary Guards to train a new pro-regime militia force. Iranian officials justified this policy by claiming that they needed to fight al-Qaeda in Syria, or they would end up having to fight it on their own territory. Iran's ally, Hezbollah, also openly entered the conflict in Syria.
Iran's key interests in Syria are geopolitical more than they are ideological; the Islamic Republic's ideology is very different from that of the secular Syrian State, but they have a longstanding alliance as part of a self-styled 'resistance axis' opposed to US and Israeli interests in the region, along with Hamas and Hezbollah. It has been argued1 that their ideological differences have even helped to sustain their alliance, as they are not competing for the same constituency, in contrast to Iran and Saudi Arabia, which both claim Islamic legitimacy and leadership, but interpret this in radically different ways. Iran's primary interest in Syria has traditionally been to maintain its land corridor to supply Hezbollah with arms. In the current conflict, Syria has also become a key theatre for Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia, and Iran has become concerned that if the Syrian regime falls, its opponents will be emboldened enough to try to take down the Iranian-allied government led by Nuri Al-Maliki in Iraq.
Iran has therefore consistently backed the Syrian government in its violent response to the uprising, with the only hint of criticism coming when President Rouhani condemned the use of chemical weapons, without attributing this to the regime. This policy has had costs for Iran, which is in a religious and ethnic

minority in the Middle East and has traditionally sought to use pan-Islamic and anti-imperialist causes, such as the Palestinian issue, to reach a constituency of sympathisers beyond the Shia world. In 2011 it sought to portray the Arab uprisings as Iranian-inspired Islamic revolutions and made overtures towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Instead, Iran's Syria policy has undermined all these efforts and has caused a split with Hamas, while its allies Hezbollah and Assad have become isolated internationally. However, Iran's appeal to its core Shia constituency has been strengthened by their general perception that Assad represents the 'lesser of two evils' compared with Gulf-backed jihadi groups (which have come – however unfairly – to dominate international perceptions of the fighters in Syria).

Turkey and the Gulf

There is a growing tendency to view the Syrian civil war as the latest manifestation of a centuries-old Sunni-Shia struggle, but this is overly simplistic and masks the geopolitical and socioeconomic roots of the uprising. As part of this narrative, many commentators have portrayed Turkey and the Gulf States as having sectarian motivations for opposing an Alawite regime allied with Shia Iran. Identity politics certainly play a part in this conflict and sectarian rhetoric has been used extensively. But the sectarian narrative fails to explain why, prior to 2011, the Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan had worked with Syria to reduce the traditional tensions between the two countries over their borders, creating a free trade zone and providing for visa-free travel; why, several times in the preceding decade, Saudi Arabia reached out to Syria in the hope of using their shared Arab identity – coupled with financial and business incentives – to wean it away from Iran; nor why Qatar had cordial relations with the Assad family, and made significant investments in Syria, prior to 2011. All three countries changed their positions some months into the Syrian uprising – not at the first waves of state violence, but rather when each of their leaders attempted to reach personal understandings with Mr Assad about resolving the crisis, and blamed him for reneging on commitments he made to them.

Turkey has also blamed Mr Assad for fomenting violent unrest among its own Kurds. Meanwhile, Mr Erdogan has sought to reset Turkey's relations with the Kurds of the region, above all by becoming the key economic partner of the regional government in Iraqi Kurdistan, and, more tentatively (since it is more controversial), trying to reach an accommodation with the PKK, a Kurdish armed movement whose imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan, was revealed in 2013 to be negotiating with the Turkish government. Against this backdrop, the Turkish government has tried to manage the impact of the growing autonomy of Syrian Kurdish groups on wider Kurdish aspirations, rather than necessarily seeing them as a major threat to the integrity of Turkey. But Mr Erdogan's domestic opponents argue his policies towards Syria and towards the Kurds are threatening Turkey's national security.

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Of the three, Saudi Arabia has been the most committed to countering the Iranian presence in Syria. Those who know the King say he has been horrified by the brutality in Syria and the Foreign Minister has spoken of "genocide" in a country under "occupation" by Iran. It appears that different centres of power in Saudi Arabia have different views on how to counter this; the Foreign Ministry was among the 'London 11' group of Foreign Ministers that reiterated their support for the SNC in 2013, but there is a perception that Saudi intelligence has supported other, more Islamist militant groups, prioritising the 'great game' against Iran over the risks of blowback that have worried the Saudi Interior Ministry. This could change with the departure of the head of intelligence, Prince Bandar, in 2014.

Qatar had previously been at the forefront of efforts to back the opposition, but took a step back in 2013, given perceptions it was running into difficulties, and given the accession of a new Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who was assumed to be focusing his energies initially on consolidating his domestic

position. It has said it disagrees with Iran over Syria but does not view Iran as an enemy. In late 2013, Qatar and Turkey – increasingly distrustful of Saudi Arabia, owing to its support for the coup against their Egyptian ally, Mohammed Morsi – reached out to the new government of Iran and expressed hope they could work together to reduce sectarian tensions in the region.

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Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan

The conflict in Syria has exacerbated existing political and socio-economic strains on Syria's Arab neighbours. Iraq and Lebanon have been the worst affected, as the increasingly sectarian alignment of different groups in Syria has overlapped with, and exacerbated, their own sectarian fissures. Lebanese and Iraqi fighters are now taking part on both sides of the Syrian conflict, with Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias supporting the Assad government (saying they need to fight al-Qaeda and defend Syria's holy places) while Sunni fighters have gone to support the opposition. The conflict has spilled over into Lebanon, leading to gun battles and bombing, with major incidents in late 2013 including a series of bomb attacks on the Iranian embassy in Beirut and the assassination of a former Finance Minister and adviser to the anti-Syrian Future Movement, Mohammed Chatah, in a car bomb. The leaders of Lebanon's major political factions have nonetheless tried to avoid an all-out civil war returning to their own territory. The country also faces economic strains as the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has reached over one million, or close to one-fifth of the population.

Iraq has seen more severe violence, reaching levels not previously seen since 2007. While Mr Maliki's government previously had little love for Assad, who had allowed Sunni militants to cross into Iraqi territory to fight the US occupation there, it sees the Syrian opposition as a larger threat, and has allowed Shia militants to cross into Syrian territory to fight with the regime. This has proven bitterly divisive in Iraq. However, while support for Assad is the main dividing line in Lebanese politics, it is not so in Iraq, where there is severe rivalry within the majority Shia community, with major Shia factions now opposing Mr Maliki's attempts to build another ruling coalition after the 2014 election.

Jordan has avoided such divisions as it has sought to take a more neutral public stance on Syria, though it is reportedly used as a training ground for opposition fighters, and as it does not have the same sectarian fissures. Jordanian, Iraqi and Israeli officials are agreed on one thing: that they all warned the US Assad would not go easily. However the country's economic resources have been strained by the thousands of refugees coming on top of previous waves of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, and shortages of water and electricity have worsened. At the same time the crisis in Syria has also taken some pressure off the monarchy in terms of domestic social and political unrest, as the conflict has been widely seen (and used) as a warning of the risks of rebellion.