

## V. Op-Ed

### **Syria – a Best Case, a Worst Case and two Most Likely Scenarios**

by Philipp Holtmann

A decade after the bad seeds of sectarian conflict and instability have been firmly planted in Iraq, it takes little imagination to see them growing even worse in Syria. The mayhem in Syria defies every description: mass-murders and individual atrocities are committed every day and the domestic conflict is spilling over to most of its neighbors. Let us try to sketch a few scenarios; the worst, the best and the two most likely that may come out of the Syrian conflict.

A few preliminary thoughts: Syria is arguably the key that either opens or closes the gate of hell in the super-strategic Middle East region. Who controls Syria controls or disrupts the Shiite axis from Iran, via Syria to south-Lebanon and Hezbollah's terrestrial supply route. With a democratically elected Shiite-majority government in power and again troubled by fratricide, Iraq is much now closer to this axis. If the U.S. manages to install a pro-American regime in Syria, it will have near-complete strategic control over the Levant and the Gulf (other U.S. full or partial allies in the Levant being Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and further down the map, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states). The Syrian conflict bears – to use Mike Davis' analogy - a Russian-doll-like complexity ("wars within wars"). On the ground, this fragmentation is a bloody and tragic affair, but on a strategic level it makes the region weak and also potentially uncontrollable. A highly complex web of alliances creates a diplomatic framework, within which small escalations can draw much bigger players into the conflict (possibly resembling the situation in 1914, when an assassination on a hot, sunny day in Sarajevo on June 28, triggered the First World War).[1] The millions of internally and externally displaced masses deprived through this destructive war could become, in Hanna Arendt's sense, the receptive masses for the origins of a new totalitarianism.[2] Against this background, here are four scenarios.

#### ***The Best Possible (but Improbable) Scenario: National Reconciliation, Collective Trauma Treatment and Democratic Elections***

The best scenario can be described in short, for it is the simplest, but unfortunately also the least likely one. Outside actors will refrain from direct intervention until the ammunition of the warring factions in Syria runs out. This might take between two and three years of further bloodshed if arms embargos against all conflict parties are strictly adhered to. In the end, there will be between 160,000 and 300,000 direct and indirect fatalities - the majority of them civilians. Foreign intervention plans will be suspended, since foreign powers have understood that the grand Arab trauma, reflected in the secular and religious narratives of modern Arabs, is the loss of sovereignty and imposed heteronomy.[3] The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) is probably the historic event that most strongly evokes collective Arab feelings of humiliation and

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betrayal: Before the end of the First World War, France and Great Britain secretly divided Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire among themselves, creating artificial (non-nation) states, and drawing the lines of borders across ethnic and religious affiliations.[4] This process is now being reversed almost one hundred years later. The “immense significance” of the present upheaval in Syria and the wider region is that throughout “the region the ethno-religious community is coming back, the European-style nation-state is disintegrating.” Especially the artificial states created by the colonial powers “with no consideration to ethno-religious realities” are hit hard by his process, with the result that “ethno-religious sects are uniting – against each other.”[5] Proposals, such as the one by US Republican Senator McCain to create a humanitarian corridor inside Syria, will thus be wisely discarded (courageously the former Republican presidential contender recently sneaked into northern Syria to have his picture taken with some of the rebels). After the war, multi-national peacekeeping forces will assist in the rebuilding of Syria, which will probably end up with a weak central government and quasi-autonomous sectarian and ethnic regions, as Michael O’Hanlon and Sean Zeigler have argued (“Civil wars and Syria: lessons from history”).[6] A return and resettlement of refugees will be accompanied by de-traumatizing programs, which are overseen by United Nations bodies and NGOs like the Children and War Foundation. The traumatologist David Berceci, for example, who has developed a simple, but effective method to release traumata through body tremors [Trauma Release Exercises (TRE)] will also participate with a team of several hundred skilled practitioners (among them also psychiatrists, psychologists, art-therapists and Alexander-Technique teachers). These programs can be applied to large numbers of people and will pave the way for the acceptance of country-wide truth-finding committees which work in combination with traditional local reconciliation mechanisms (*sulh, musalaha, cem*). The strongest shared factor of social cohesion will be popular culture. Mediators will assist in setting up cultural programs, which refer to values like reconciliation, solidarity, equality and progress. This will help to rebuild fragile social structures.

***The Worst Scenario: A Jihadi Super-region from the Euphrates to the Nile and all along the North African Coast and an Extremely Hot Cold War in the Middle East***

After the downfall of Assad’s regime and the dispersal of his forces, multiple Sunni-Jihadi factions will enter into fragile warlord-coalitions. This mobilises Jihadis in Iraq, Jordan, Yemen and Egypt eager to ignite civil wars in their home countries. Over the next ten years, a jihadi super-region will emerge that reaches from the Euphrates to the Nile and stretches all along the North African Coast, reaching south into the African Sahel region and beyond. Sooner or later, inner-political strife and civil war will also befall Turkey, one of the most important strategic partners of the West in the Middle East. The starting points of this development lie in Syria and in Tunisia.[7] A Tunisian-Syrian axis of Salafi-Jihadis has already emerged and causes a wave-like motion of Salafi-Jihadi currents from the east and from the west to converge in the middle, maybe in Egypt. Thus, after the Levant has fallen, North Africa will follow; first Tunisia, whose

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Salafi-Jihadis have a major input in the Syrian war, then Libya (where the Jihadis of Mali regroup) afterwards Algeria and Egypt. In parallel, a massive Shiite-Sunni conflict will devastate the whole region to the east of the Mediterranean coast, especially in the Shiite Crescent that stretches from Lebanon via Syria and Iraq to Iran. Sectarian killings between Sunnis and Shiites and ethnic cleansing will be daily news. There are indicators that this process has already started in May 2013, when Shiite militias and Syrian government troops cleansed the Syrian village of Bayda and the city of Baniyas from Sunnis, killing hundreds of them. Turkey's closeness to the Syrian conflict and its bridging role to Europe might make it a pathway for a massive migration of Jihad volunteers from Europe. They are either adventurers or truly feel that they have to demonstrate their solidarity with fellow Muslims. European countries with a high number of naturalised Muslim citizens will feel the repercussions of this development, when volunteers return battle-hardened from the Middle Eastern fronts, carrying the idea of global jihad ever stronger into European-Muslim communities.

Due to the involvement of other major players in proxy wars in the region, notably Russia and China, the United States loses its quasi uni-polar position and slides into a Middle Eastern Cold War. The U.S. plan to re-structure the Middle East and create ethnic minority states (*divide et impera*) backfires. One of the problems is that Russia knows with whom it wants to team up, while the U.S. and their allies cannot clearly decide whom to support, because they are trapped in dichotomous thinking - good democracy versus evil Salafism - which deprives it of real-politic strategic imagination. Other major Middle Eastern actors will come forward with unexpected strategies. For example, Iran and Pakistan, while supporting the Shiite-Sunni divide tactically on the ground, might disregard it on the geo-strategic level, because a common front against the West looks more important. Pakistan thus might join a Russian-Chinese-Iranian bloc that opposes the United States, its remaining moderate Sunni allies in the region and France and Great Britain. Saudi Arabia will be protected by U.S. forces, and Israel will entrench itself behind the concrete wall it claims it has originally built to hold back suicide attacks [8], unless some serious trouble is in the offing, in which case Israel will count on the involvement of the United States or use its own nuclear weapons if challenged in its very existence.

***The First Most Likely Scenario: Assad Loses Power, Syria Breaks up into Different Regions with both Turkey and Israel being Badly Affected by the Consequences***

After Assad has lost power, forced population displacements (ethnic and religious cleansing) will lead to the establishment of new territorial entities.[9] Older partitions of the Levant, such as the Ottoman administrative divisions, or the colonial patchwork of six separate mini-states created under the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, are superimposed from above. But new territorial entities will only superficially resemble this structure.[10] For example, the downfall of the Assad regime isolates Lebanese Hezbollah geographically from Iran, which encourages Israel to re-open its northern front. The Israeli pressure northwards will be met with

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Hezbollah's effort to establish a continuous territorial entity, together with Syrian Alawites near the Lebanese border and the approximately half million Arab Alewites in south-eastern Turkey at the border with Syria (not to be mistaken with Turkish Alevis, who have a different background). All communities that stand in the way of this constellation will be compelled to cooperate or will be suppressed and driven from their homes in campaigns of ethnic-/religious cleansing. As a result, the Lebanese state, one of the most fragile artificial constructs in the history of colonialism, breaks apart. Iran will be adamant that the new Shiite entity, which includes the remnants of Assad's government forces, adopts the Iranian religio-political doctrine and drops the Ba'ath nationalist ideology.

A division of Syria into sectarian-ethnic enclaves may look attractive to outside players, but France, Great Britain, Russia, China, the U.S., Turkey and Germany will quickly see that this is no guarantee for more permanent influence. Proxies will frequently turn against their patrons and no deal will be good enough to secure true loyalty in the Syrian-Iraqi-Lebanese conflict zone.[11] Weapon smuggling across the borders of both countries is a lucrative business and will form the backbone of large organized crime networks. For many members of these networks, the sectarian factor will be irrelevant, as long as the arms are being paid in hard currencies and the cash flows. Chemical and possibly biological weapons of the former Syrian regime will be spirited away in the back channels of these criminal networks. With the increased involvement of Christians in the conflict, also the influx of international Christian volunteers into militant scenes in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq will become a fact. The violence against Christians in the Middle East (i.e. of the Eastern Rite) will lead to fighting alliances between Assyrian, Turkish, Arab and Kurdish Christians (Copts, Maronites as well as Orthodox) who organize their own fronts in the conflict. [12] Once more a regional conflict will be one (as in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991), in which members of the three monotheistic religions battle each other.

In this dangerous situation, Turkey needs to keep its own Sunni-Jihadis in check - those who hitherto trained and fought in Chechnya, Pakistan and Afghanistan.[13] Turkey's best option is to continue to support the moderate Islamists among the Syrian Sunnis, but soon there might be none left. Turkey also wants to thwart alliances between Sunni-Jihadis and Kurds, such as can presently be found in the Turkish-Syrian border town of Ra's al-'Ain. Yet as the Turkish state becomes more authoritarian, public consensus at home breaks down and ignites a major secular opposition movement. Some of the myriad of extremist and terrorist groups, which existed in Turkey in the 1970s and 1980s, might revive and exploit this instability. As a result, Turkey will be drawn heavily into the conflict, facing dramatic domestic political changes. One possibility is that, as external and internal pressure grows, Turkey switches sides and joins a Russian bloc, becoming again friendlier towards Shiite powers and actors.

This situation is a downright encouragement for apocalyptically minded Sunni-Jihadis from all over the region to become heavily involved in the Syrian civil war and bring this civil strife

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back to their home countries.[14] For example, the Lebanese cleric Ahmad al-Asir has announced the formation of the Lebanese Sunni-Salafi “Free Resistance Brigades” (*Kata'ib al-Muqawama al-Hurra*, KMH) in April 2013 in order to counter foreign and local Shiite forces in Syria.[15] In addition, al-Asir vowed to revenge Hezbollah’s killings of Sunnis in Syria by attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon. Al-Asir is thus one of the many local sheikhs and clerics who use the theological argument of the 1980s Jihad ideologue Abdullah 'Azzam: international participation in “the defensive jihad” of an attacked Muslim country is an individual religious obligation for every capable Sunni-Muslim. But in addition, al-Asir gives the theological command to Sunnis to “secretly form small groups of five to six in Lebanon, arm themselves and prepare for the struggle with Hezbollah.”[16] This double strategy in Lebanon and Syria resembles the global jihad concept of Al-Qaeda strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (who was released from a Syrian jail by the Assad regime in early 2012!). It further ignites sectarian strife, causes anarchic chaos in the region, out of which new Islamic orders will arise, extending the reach of the Iraqi Al-Qaeda to Syria and Lebanon. It would be interesting to know who sponsors al-Asir. However, this is just a little detail. What matters most is the possibly disastrous spillover effect of this constellation. Put into practice, this means the combined effects of 1980s Afghan Jihad (internationalisation), the 1990s Chechnya, Bosnian and Algerian Jihads (with their excommunication practices and massive civilian killings), the present Iraq Jihad (brutalization and professionalisation of tactics including propaganda). According to Syrian president Assad, this is “a new style of war: terrorism through proxies.” In fact, we are speaking about dozens, if not hundreds of groups on both the regime side and the one of the rebels; and the most powerful groups which emerge at the moment are religious doctrinaire groups.

In this scenario as in the other three, one of the most likely spillover effects will be Sunni and Shiite attacks against Israel, which will be answered by air strikes. But there is a problem. Let us assume that Assad, before he left Syria with his closest entourage to an Iranian or Russian beach-resort, gave his Russian rockets as well as his chemical weapons to Shiite militias and Hezbollah. In addition, Sunni rebels, equipped with surface to air shoulder-fired missiles obtained from France and Great Britain might turn these against Israeli civilian planes isolating the Jewish state from its allies. In response, and going up higher on the ladder of escalation, in the plain words of an Israeli intelligence officer “If something serious happens to us, this time we will take all of them with us!” The question remains if this stops or motivates religious extremists, once they have acquired larger quantities of Sarin nerve gas out of Syrian stocks and the rockets necessary to deliver it. This could either open the door to an apocalypse or create a fragile deterrence equilibrium.[17]

***The Second Most Likely Scenario: Assad Retains Power and Re-opens the Golan Front for a Lengthy War of Attrition with Israel***

Assad retains power but suffers huge territorial losses[18] and utilises Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah's support to rebuild his influence in the region. He does by no means exercise the level of control prior to the break up of Syria. Basically, the whole center and east of Syria - large parts of which are unproductive desert - will no longer be under his control. Everything to the east of the Euphrates will be ungovernable, uncontrollable and unwanted: a safe-haven for militant groups and a new hotbed of Sunni extremism. Shiites in the West near the Mediterranean coast will be geographically isolated from Shiites in the East, in Iraq and in Iran. By re-instituting air supply lines and diplomatic support for Assad's smaller but stronger power base, Iran gains more influence in the region. The Western bloc will concentrate on exerting influence in traditional bases in Turkey, Israel, Lebanon and Jordan.

The Institute for the Study of War argued in a recent report ("Iranian Strategy in Syria") that the Syrian government does not need to keep control of the whole Syrian territory to play an important role in the region. "This combined force [remnants of the Syrian Army and pro-government militias], allied with Lebanese Hezbollah and Shi'a militant groups like AFAB [Liwa' Abu Fadl al-'Abbas], can continue to compete for limited territory within Syria and ensure that Iran remains able to project its force necessary to provide strategic depth and deterrence." [19] This constellation will leave Lebanon intact, but Hezbollah will play a much more dominant role in Lebanese politics than it already does.

After Assad's position has been stabilized, he calls upon volunteers from all over the Arab world to join the struggle against Israel. In this case, he plays the pan-Arab and Shiite cards at the same time.[20] The re-opening of the Golan front for a war of attrition will divert the focus away from Assad as major bogeyman and refocus hostility towards Israel. Assad will keep his chemical weapons supply as a deterrent against larger retaliation. Many Sunnis, especially foreign volunteers, will be likely to join, or at least, become more sympathetic to Assad. Hezbollah similarly tries to regain bonus points, which it earned among Sunnis through its battle against Israeli ground troops in the 2006 war, but lost - some say irrevocably - in the current Syrian civil war, when supporting Assad's murderous campaigns, for example, in the taking and destruction of al-Qusayr. As long as the war on the Golan does not threaten the very existence of Israel, the United States will not intervene. After a while though, the U.S. might signal with aerial attacks that it is prepared to crush Assad's stronghold for good (remembering the high costs of leaving Saddam Hussein in power in 1991 and ousting him at much greater costs in 2003). At this moment, Russia enters the game and risk, with its anti-air defences placed in the remainder of Syria, an intense air-confrontation. This show of force will either keep all major players at check and lead to a power equilibrium or the U.S. remains unimpressed and destroys Assads stronghold for good. This leads us back to consider the worst case scenario, or the most likely scenario 1,

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where Sunni militias are dominant and Shiites re-organise, with varying degrees of destruction and damage.

### **Conclusion**

The international Geneva II conference on Syria (following Geneva I of June 2012) – if it materializes[21] – is the last chance to bring the fratricidal conflict in Syria to a halt. If it fails, the Syrian conflict might well spread like a wildfire over the whole region. The future then becomes highly unpredictable while at this moment it still can to some extent be planned if the members of the Security Council with veto powers and the key players on the ground can come to terms. This should include Syrian civil society actors who have not taken up arms.[22] Moreover, a political deal can only work if the U.S., Russia, Iran, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are involved. One possible solution could be “Guiding Principles” based on the original Geneva text, to which all parties commit: “the territorial integrity of Syria; provisions for the political transition; cessation of violence; no further militarisation; and access for humanitarian aid.”[23] To achieve this, the United States should pressure Qatar and Saudi Arabia to exert influence on their Syrian proxies to agree to a ceasefire; they should invite Iran to Geneva II; and Turkey should return to its “good neighbour” policy and become the major diplomat between the fronts. [24]

The brave front which Obama, Putin and Cameron put up at the recent G8 Summit could point toward such a conciliation on the Syria issue. But there is no indication that a non-binding show of goodwill and the blatant disregard for facts on the ground will be a game changer. The Western bloc desires a “public act of capitulation by the [Syrian] government delegation followed by a handing over of power to the opposition,” which Russia objects. This condition sounds like an illusion from a fairy tale, considering the diverging interests of the main players. If the G8 were really to reach an agreement without Assad that binds in Russia and non-G8 UNSC member China, then this would probably add up to drafting a UNSC resolution, a total arms embargo and a heavy military strike against the regime. Yet that would still not solve the problem that the seeds of Jihadi and sectarian warfare have firmly taken root in the region. This concerns, among other factors, the influx of international militants into disturbed and war torn ethnic-religious communities.

The scenarios sketched here indicate the great potential for mayhem if no cease-fire is reached. While none of the scenarios sketched above is likely to come close to what is exactly going to unfold in the months and years to come, they can nevertheless serve as eye-openers for the dangers ahead unless some settlement can be reached in the near future.

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**Notes:**

[1] See Jamie Dettmer, "Mideast War in Our Time? The Syrian conflict threatens to draw America, Russia, and Europe into a wild inferno engulfing the entire Mideast," accessed June 10, 2013, at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/05/31/mideast-war-in-our-time.html>.

[2] See David Bromwich, "Stay Out of Syria!", accessed June 10, 2013, at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/jun/20/stay-out-syria/>.

[3] Secular Arab nationalists, religious rebels and regime loyalists all hate the idea of foreign intervention into internal affairs; they foster prejudices against groups which profited from past interventions, such as the Lebanese Maronite Christians, when the French League of Nations Mandate power cut its part of "Greater Syria" (*Bilad al-Sham* in contemporary Islamist and Salafist terminology) into six pieces -(the states of the Greater Lebanon, Damascus, Aleppo, of the Alawites, of the Jabal Druze and the Sanjak of Alexandretta. The Syrian loss of the Golan Heights to Israel in 1967 adds to this, not to speak of the trauma caused by the Palestinian expulsions in 1947/48 and 1967.

[4] Before the end of WW I, as it became clear that the Entente would win, France and Great Britain divided large parts of the Ottoman Empire's Arab territories among themselves (Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine and parts of the Arabian Peninsula). The secret agreement was made public by Russian Bolsheviks in 1917. The French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon after WW I was an outcome of an agreement negotiated between the French diplomat Francois Georges Picot and his British colleague Mark Sykes.

[5] According to Uri Avnery, veteran Israeli political activist. Uri Avnery, "Butterflies in Damascus," accessed June 10, 2013, <http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avnery/1370633207/>.

[6] Michael O'Hanlon and Sean Zeigler, "Civil Wars and Syria: Lessons from History," accessed June 10, 2013, at <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2013/05/22/civil-wars-and-syria-lessons-from-history/>.

[7] Thousands of Tunisians are probably already fighting in Syria; they have the support of Tunisian Salafi-Jihadi clerics as well as the Tunisian government, which is eager to export its ultra-radical opposition abroad, similar to Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. The theological underpinning for the "divine command" to join jihadis is provided by popular Sunni mainstream clerics, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who revives the doctrine of the pioneer architect of Al-Qaeda, Abdullah 'Azzam (1945-1989), and his call to join an international jihad.

[8] The border wall and fence have also created facts on the ground that thwart any fairly negotiated solution with the Palestinians.

[9] There are already strongholds of Shiites and old-regime loyalists in western and in south-western Syria at the borders with Lebanon and Israel, Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria, Christian enclaves at the border with Lebanon and in the center, as well as the Druze in the southwest of Syria. They will have to choose sides between the powerful Sunni or Shiite players. The Sunni-Shiite conflict may also force more Iraqi Sunnis and Christians to migrate to former Syria, Jordan and Turkey which will exert tight pressure on everyone involved, but especially on Shiite communities in eastern Syria at the border with Lebanon. Syria is a Sunni majority and Iraq a Shiite majority country. For decades the dictators in both countries were members of the religious minority. Assad in Syria is an Alewite-Shiite, and Hussein in Iraq was as a Sunni Muslim. This unequal constellation and the traumata caused by the former regimes will nurture a transnational Sunni-Shiite conflict. Both groups nurture



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narratives of victimization and conspiracy against each other. Shiite militias from Lebanon, Syria and Iraq are already merging and operating together in Iraq and Syria. The same goes for Sunni groups.

[10] Clemens Wergin, *Syrien und die zerfallende Ordnung des Nahen Ostens*, June 5, 2013, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://flatworld.welt.de/2013/06/05/syrien-oder-die-zerfallende-ordnung-des-nahen-ostens/>. For a map of the Ottoman administrative divisions in the Levant see Elie Kedourie, *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth: The McMahon-Husayn Correspondence and its Interpretations 1914-1939* (Cambridge: University Press, 1976), 81.

[11] Russians, Iranians and possibly Chinese will have a much easier hand to play in order to exert influence on their hierarchically and centrally organized Shiite proxies than the West will have with the Sunni proxies. The U.S. will have to decide if supporting the Sunni-Jihadis is the lesser evil than allowing the creation of a more stable Shiite bloc. The other Lebanese and Syrian minority communities (Christians, Druze, Kurds and Yazidis) will cling to any opportunity or partner that promises to secure their existence. One example is the Sunni-Jihadi “Defence Front” (*Jabhat al-Nusra (li-Ahl al-Sham - JAN)*), which is already splintering into a pro-global jihadi Al-Qaeda faction led by outsiders and locally oriented Islamist fighters. Fighters from less extremist groupings under the umbrella of the “Free Syrian Army” (FSA) are frequently defecting to JAN.

[12] There are an estimated 300,000 Iraqi-Christian refugees in Syria, who now find themselves under pressure in the new war zone. Also Lebanese Christian paramilitaries of the notorious Phalanges Party (*Hizb al-Kata'ib al-Lubnaniyya*) will not sit idle while their state disintegrates. The Phalangists became notorious in the Lebanese civil war for their massacres and brutality, weapons they buried after the Ta'if Agreement in 1991 will be quickly dug out and they might become military leaders of Christian alliances.

[13] Turkey wants to prevent a unilateral intervention in Syria without international consensus. However, a spillover of the conflict into Turkey's territory, triggering the anger of Turkey's Arab Alawites, is a nightmare for Ankara. The same goes for an escalation of the Kurdish question; Turkey wants to prevent at all costs the autonomy of the Syrian Kurds as this could become a stepping stone to a Kurdish state in the region. See Murad Batal al-Shishani, “Turkey and Syria's Jihadis: More Than Free Passage?”, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/turkey/2013/130522A.html>.

[14] At the moment, Sunni groups from Lebanon and Tunisians are getting more heavily involved in Syria, as well as Shiite groups from Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. Thousands of individual volunteers, often in small cells, are adding to this. In addition, the large Salafi and Jihadi scenes in Jordan are getting prepared to throw their lots into the militant sectarian lottery for power that wages throughout the region. We also need to keep in mind that the spillover to Iraq is in full swing. In April alone, more than 700 people died in terrorist attacks in Iraq, which is directly linked to the developments in Syria and reflects Sunni and Shiite extremists' wishes to exploit the Syrian turmoil and to accelerate the spill-over of the Shiite-Sunni conflict to the rest of the region.

[15] His goal is first of all to battle Hezbollah in Syria and at home. But the fight of his group also included taking aim at the Abu Fadl al-'Abbas Battalion (*Liwa' Abu Fadl al-'Abbas, LAFA*), which merges international Shiite groups in Syria (i.e. from the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iraqi *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* and the Iraqi *Kata'ib Hezbollah*.) Another foreign Shiite group fighting in Syria is the Iranian “al-Quds Force,” which has the mission to export Iranian-style revolutions abroad.

[16] “*Al-Shaykh al-Asir yu'lan 'an 'Kata'ib al-Muqawama al-Hurra' wa fatawa hamma ukhra,*” accessed June 10, 2013, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pm8CK8Yy8MA>.

[17] Recently, pro Al-Qaeda rebels, allegedly in possession of considerable quantities of Sarin, were arrested in southern Turkey. At the beginning of June, the U.S. announced a shift of policy to arm the rebels over the alleged use of chemical-weapons by the Syrian regime. But rebels might also fake organophosphate poisoning and produce appropriate media footage in order to provoke this reaction. According to Jamestown analyst

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Nicholas A. Heras, the U.S. are totally unclear if, for example in the battle of Qusayr, opposition or regime forces were using nerve gas. Thus, the U.S., according to Heras, is rather looking for the “systematic use” of chemical weapons, which would cross their red line. “Al-Qusayr: On the Road to Damascus,” April 28, 2013, accessed June 19, 2013, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidesyria/2013/04/201342872735993198.html>.

[18] The regime’s power center remains Damascus, and it will foster a Shiite-Alawite belt via Homs, Hama, Aleppo, the mountainous coastal region around Latakia in northern Syria and stretches of territory towards the western banks of the Euphrates. The majority Sunni population in this territorial axis and the large Christian community in Aleppo will either be forced to cooperate or flee. Reports point into this direction, there are tales about sectarian cleansing in Sunni enclaves in the northern coastal region by pro-government militias, as well as stories on the buildup and training of a new Alawite “national defence force” with the help of Hezbollah and the Iranian al-Quds Force.

[19] Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, “Iranian Strategy in Syria,” joint report by the American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project and the Institute for the Study of War, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/iranian-strategy-syria>, 27.

[20] He has recently mentioned this idea in an interview to Hezbollah owned al-Manar TV, and there is no reason why we should not trust him. “Interview Given by President al-Assad to Lebanese al-Manar TV,” accessed June 10, 2013, <http://sana.sy/eng/21/2013/05/31/485037.htm>.

[21] The U.S. and their allies are trying to convene a second conference in Geneva to find a solution to the Syrian crisis. But not only the hosts of the Geneva conference have problems to find a common agenda and bind in the Russians, also the political and military wings of the Syrian opposition are deeply divided. The conference date was initially set for June 2013, but canceled for these reasons. At the same time, Iran boasts that it will shortly host an own conference on the Syrian crisis with more than 40 countries willingly attending.

[22] Marie O.Reilly, “Peace Talks on Syria Should Include Nonviolent Civil Society Actors,” Accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.theglobalobservatory.org/analysis/515-peace-talks-on-syria-should-include-nonviolent-civil-society-actors.html>.

[23] Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy, “Syria: The Imperative of De-Escalation,” European Council on Foreign Relations, accessed June 10, 2013, [http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR80\\_SYRIA\\_BRIEF\\_AW.pdf](http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR80_SYRIA_BRIEF_AW.pdf).

[24] “US Needs Iran, Turkey For Diplomatic Surge in Syria,” accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/us-iran-syria-diplomatic-surge.html>.

***Info-Box: The Syrian Conflict (2011-2013)***

There are many frontlines within fronts and armed conflicts within conflicts in the Syrian war. Five levels - communal, local, national, regional and global – of these conflicts intermix and multiple militias fight these out. Patrick Cockburn correctly observed: “Five distinct conflicts have become tangled together in Syria: a popular uprising against a dictatorship which is also a sectarian battle between Sunnis and the Alawite sect; a regional struggle between Shia and Sunni which is also a decades-old conflict between an Iranian-led grouping [Hezbollah] and Iran’s traditional enemies, notably the US and Saudi Arabia. Finally, at another level, there is a reborn Cold War confrontation: Russia and China v. the West.”[1] Israel is an active party in this struggle and has a strong interest – now that the Assad regime appears weakened - to crush the Shiite axis that has been stretching from Iran via Syria to southern Lebanon since the early 1980s.

The United States might see here a new chance for its strategy to restructure the Middle East, force Iran to cancel its alleged nuclear arms program and secure American strategic influence in the Persian Gulf region for the future. Yet the U.S. and Israel find it difficult to decide what the lesser of two ‘evils’ is: Shiites or Sunnis. Their lack of decision is partly compensated by France and Great Britain; both appear more ready to rush forward in reversed colonial style, mixed with democratic enthusiasm, to provide weapons to “freedom fighters.” This is likely to bring about absurd looking quasi-alliances, which have yet to be tested. For example, support of Sunni-Jihadis may benefit the Israelis if it can crushes the Assad regime, while at a later stage an alliance with Shiite forces might be advantageous to protect its vulnerable northern borders. Inside Syria, different players are involved in national, regional and international conflicts. In fact, there is a national war theatre in which some Shiites are battling some Sunnis who are engaging Christians who are fighting Druze and vice versa - in multiple local constellations. Moreover, religious zealots are fighting secular actors. Then there is an ethnic dimension to the conflict: Arabs, Kurds, Turks and Persians are partly cooperating, partly fighting each other. The regional dimension of the conflict involves the question who will gain regional hegemony in that part of the Muslim world, with Iran and Turkey being the strongest contenders. Together with Russia, Iran supports the Assad regime. Under their patronage, very well trained Shiite groups (integrating Syrian, Iraqi and Lebanese fighters), whom we may call “Mahdist-Jihadis,” are using Iran’s (and Russia’s) protection to further ignite the sectarian conflict, in an effort to change the ethno-religious landscape of the region and create new borders. Turkey is a

NATO-partner and has no interest in any conflict escalation, but would rather side with “moderate” Sunni actors in the neighbour’s civil war. The Turkish position stands in stark contrast to that of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Tunisia - all eager to widen their sphere of influence and directly supporting Salafi-Jihadi groups in Syria. The conflict also touches the older global rivalry between the U.S. and Russia, which could possibly turn into a proxy-war in Syria.

As a consequence, the conflict is not only about sectarian divisions, but also about old rivalries and influence spheres in the Persian Gulf Region. The Western bloc finds allies in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, countries opposing Assad’s Syria, Hezbollah and its sponsor Iran, which in turn is supported by Russia and, to a lesser degree, China. This might be a road to catastrophe if Iran acquires weapons of mass destruction, or Israel is using its nuclear arsenal if it sees its national existence threatened. Russia as well as the U.S. - in a display of power influenced by the still prevalent Cold War mentality (at least on the side of President Putin) may get entangled in the conflict if its aircrafts or aircraft carriers come under attack. Many things could go wrong at any given moment and there might be no lucky escape as during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

In terms of global energy strategy, influence in the oil-rich Middle East could be irrelevant, if we want to believe neo-liberal conservative predictions that energy-independence and an energy revolution through fracking and the exploitation of undersea methane were imminent. In reality, Russia is much more independent on the energy front. U.S. self-sufficiency in energy is predicted only for the end of the decade [Sol Sanders “Woe is not us: From one new energy revolution (shale gas) to another (fire ice)”] but the United States (and even more so Western Europe) are not yet there. While global power might shift to the Pacific in the years to come, the present conflict between Muslim and their non-Muslim allies makes clear that for the moment the world’s stability still stands or falls with the Middle East.

***Notes:***

[1] Patrick Cockburn, “How Syria became a more dangerous quagmire than Iraq,” accessed June 10, 2013, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/05/31/how-syria-became-a-more-dangerous-quagmire-than-iraq/>.