

Book Review: Christopher Phillips' 'The Battle for Syria'

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by Ian Black

Syria's war is far from over but it is already the subject of a large number of books – many about the internal dynamics of the conflict or the headline-grabbing jihadis who dominate perceptions of it. Christopher Phillips' impressively-researched study of its international dimensions is an important contribution to understanding the bleak story so far. Based on interviews with officials and a mass of secondary sources, it identifies and examines the key *external* components of the worst crisis of the 21st century: the fading of American power, Russian assertiveness, regional rivalries and the role of non-state actors from Hezbollah to ISIS.



[The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the new Middle East](#) (Yale University Press, 2016)

Phillips' principal argument is that the Syrian uprising of 2011 – pitting ordinary people against an unforgiving regime – was transformed into a civil war because outside involvement helped escalate and sustain it – and of course still does. Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown was followed by other actions that made a significant difference: 'omni-balancing' Qatar's early backing for rebel groups despite its own limited capacity; ill-considered US and Western calls for the Syrian president's departure; Turkish and Saudi sponsorship of anti-Assad forces; and, from the start, Russian and Iranian support for Damascus that raised the stakes and created an asymmetry of strategic commitment that persists to this day.

Inaction mattered too – whether in the lack of adequate assistance for the rebels or Barack Obama's failure to respond to the breaching of his famous 'red line' when Assad used chemical weapons in Ghouta in August 2013. Phillips correctly acknowledges the lingering after-effect of the false prospectus of the 2003 Iraq war on the British parliamentary vote against military action but I think underplays the wider paralysing role of that intervention.

It was the misfortune of Syrians that their chapter of the Arab uprisings opened in what the author succinctly characterises as 'an era of regional uncertainty as the perception of US hegemony was slowly coming undone'. Obama's reluctance to get involved may well have made sense after the lessons of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, but he was unable to manage his allies and, crucially, raised unrealistic expectations amongst Syrians and the Gulf states.

Only ISIS, with its transnational agenda, moved him to act.

The landmarks of the crisis are familiar but they are illuminated by some fascinating details: Before 2011 knowledge

about Syria was surprisingly limited, so there was insufficient understanding of the differences between its security-obsessed, 'coup-proofed' regime and those in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain. In 2009, the US Department of State Syria desk consisted of one official; of 135 Turkish diplomats working on the Arab world, only six spoke Arabic. Francois Hollande's diplomatic adviser, wedded to the 'domino theory' that meant Assad would follow Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi, didn't want to hear the nuanced reports from the well-informed French ambassador in Damascus. Mistaken analysis drove what Phillips calls the 'escalator of pressure'. Russia, with better intelligence, understood that Assad was more secure than others predicted (or wanted to believe) and that the appetite for western involvement was limited.

If underestimating Assad's durability was a key failure, that was compounded by over-stating the capabilities and cohesiveness of the opposition. Sponsorship by rivals who prioritised their own agendas, misleading extrapolations from the Libyan example, inevitable tensions between the external opposition and fighters on the ground, and the exclusion of the Kurds were all highly damaging. Policy towards the armed rebel groups was incoherent: despite vast expenditure, no foreign state was able to gain leverage over them.

International and regional institutions performed little better, Phillips argues. The short-lived Arab League mission to Syria was led by a Sudanese general linked to the genocide in Darfur. UN envoys Kofi Annan and Lakhdar Brahimi failed to overcome US and Arab resistance to Iran taking part in the 2012 Geneva conference, thus excluding a key player at a sensitive moment. Staffan de Mistura shuttled between parties who refused to even meet each other in Geneva, where the Syrian government delegation specialised in stonewalling and abuse. It has not been a case of third time lucky for the UN. 'Everybody had their agenda', in Brahimi's words, 'and the interests of the Syrian people came second, third or not at all'.

This judicious and measured book stands well back from the Twitter-driven 'war of narratives' that has distorted too much media reporting on the Syrian conflict. In the heat and controversy of complex and terrible events, it is helpful to pause and look coolly at the big picture. But it is sobering to contemplate the damning evidence of how outside actors helped fan the flames of 'an internationalised civil war' without any end in sight.

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