Transnational war in Syria: the Eisenhower doctrine in the 21st century?

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Introduction: The History of US Geopolitical Strategy in the Middle East

This article aims to explain the geopolitical interests of the United States (US) in the Middle East. The ongoing conflict in Syria since March 2011 is used as a case study in order to explore US strategy. It is argued here that the Syrian conflict can only be understood by looking at global, regional, and local factors over longer periods of time. Thus, in order to identify intellectual forerunners of the post-WW2 conduct of the US in the Middle East, one needs to turn to geopolitical theorists broadly associated with the realist tradition in international relations. In this context, the writings of Dutch-born Yale University Professor Nicholas J. Spykman (1893-1943) deserve particular attention. Spykman developed his views about future US strategy after an expected victory in WW2 against the background of earlier geopolitical theorists of sea power, namely Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), and of land power, namely Sir Halford Mackinder (1861-1947).

In contrast to the former two authors, Spykman argued that US "security" could no longer be guaranteed by focusing on regional defense, such as in concepts of a western hemisphere, or concerns with the relative dominance of either sea power or land power, such as in the relative geopolitical advantage of the US as the leading sea power or of Russia (between 1924 and 1991 the Soviet Union) as the leading land power. Instead, Spykman suggested that future US policymakers would have to integrate sea-, land- and air power in order to advance a truly global system of American defense. This would mean the removal of positions of influence of competing powers – including those of countries allied with the US – and the construction of a permanent network of military bases to extend US military power to every part of the world.

The global US strategy advanced by Spykman and implemented after WW2 must be understood in the context of the traditional realist concern with regional balances of power, particularly in Europe. As an external balancer, the US shared many earlier British concerns but intervened in Europe from the

outside. This was well-put in Spykman's statement that "[w]e have an interest in the European balance as the British have an interest in the continental balance"[1]. Moreover, Spykman shared with Mackinder the fear that land powers of Eurasia, especially Russia and Germany, might form an alliance that would exclude sea powers, i.e. the US and the United Kingdom (UK), from effective intervention on the Eurasian "world island" (Mackinder's term) with Russia at its core[2].

From Spykman's point of view, the US had to be concerned about *any* combination of state alliances in Eurasia and elsewhere that would exclude the US from direct access to a region. This concern was particularly pertinent in view of the coastal regions of Eurasia where most of the global population and economic activity was located in the mid-1940s and is still located today. In addition, Mackinder considered it possible and Spykman considered it likely that China would emerge in the long run as the leading power in Asia, which would constitute another future challenge to US policymakers. Thus, Spykman agreed with Mackinder's earlier analysis that the territories that separated Russia from the maritime regions, namely Scandinavia, Western and Central Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and East Asia including China, were of the highest significance in any global strategy and should be under the effective control of the US in cooperation with local allies.

From the US point of view, the "rimland" (Spykman's term) or "inner/marginal crescent" (Mackinder's terms), that reached from Scandinavia via Central Europe, Turkey, the Arab states, Central Asia, and India toward Indochina, Korea, and North and East China – surrounding Russia as the leading land power – had to be controlled by advancing regional balances of power that included the US as the major external balancer. According to Spykman, concern with the "Eurasian Conflict Zones" suggested that "the United States is obliged to safeguard her position by making certain that no overwhelming power is allowed to build itself up in these areas"[3]. Thus, effective veto power in every geopolitical theater, and especially the "rimland", was required to allow the US to gain and maintain global hegemony[4].

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1 N.J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1942, p. 124.

2 H.J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History", *The Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1904, pp. 421-437/436.

3 N.J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1944, p. 51.

4 Spykman's 1944 pamphlet includes a Map 46 (p. 52) displaying potential future conflict zones between sea power and land power titled "Heartland versus Rimland". The map focuses on a ring of states in relative proximity to the borders of Russia/the Soviet Union and includes in the Middle East zone Syria, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, and Jordan. The very same map could also be utilized to characterize the main conflict zones between the US and Russia in today's world.

In Spykman's words, the US main political objective must be "to prevent the unification of the Old World centers of power in a coalition hostile to her own interests….Balanced power on the Eurasian Continent is one of the objectives for which we are fighting and the establishment of such equilibrium and its preservation will be our objective when the fight is won"[5]. The crucial point, therefore, is to construct and maintain regional state systems that are always internally divided in ways that favor external balancing by the US. From the US perspective, this is a preventive measure to "make up for the fragmentation and tensions of the European and Asian state systems within a global balanced system, in which the relatively weaker position of neighbors or alliance partners is in the national interest of the USA"[6].

Turning now to the analysis of Middle Eastern affairs, Spykman's strategy was implemented at the regional level as follows. After the end of WW2, the US initiated a step-by-step hegemonic transition away from the earlier Anglo-French system of regional control. The earlier system, i.e. the Sykes-Picot Franco-British diplomatic agreement of 1916 that divided the Middle East into French and British zones of influence, was transformed[7]. In the first step, the US formed an alliance with the UK to block the re-entry of France into the Middle East. At least partially due to this Anglo-American alliance, Arab nationalists successfully fought off Charles de Gaulle's efforts to restore a French military presence in Syria and Lebanon between 1945 and 1946. The country's subsequent role as the main military supplier of Israel

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5 N.J. Spykman, *The Geography…*cit., p. 45 and p. 60. See also G.J. Martin, *America's Geography and Geographers. Toward Geographical Science*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2015, pp. 862-863.

6 S. Fröhlich, *Amerikanische Geopolitik. Von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, Landsberg am Lech, Olzog, 1998, author's translation (all subsequent German language sources translated by the author). Idealist critics of realism might argue against this proposition that US President Franklin D. Roosevelt pursued a multipolar world order on account of his rhetoric about the "four policemen", which stood in Roosevelt's discourse during WW 2 for the leading role that the US, UK, Soviet Union, and nationalist China were supposed to jointly assume after the end of WW2 in terms of the policing of regional zones of influence. However, Roosevelt was in practice not concerned about existing spheres of influence of the competing powers (e.g. his alliance with King Saud of Saudi Arabia was advanced without any concern for Britain that had previously played the role of patron of the House of Saud). To put it differently, "idealistic promises of the Atlantic Charter and Yalta Declaration [were due] because, in short, the establishment of such ideals translated into realistic contributions to the security of the United States", H. Jones, *Crucible of Power. A History of American Foreign Relations from 1897*, 2nd ed., Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2008, pp. 241-242.

7 For recent research on the Sykes-Picot Agreement, see S. Pursley, "'Lines Drawn on an Empty Map'. Iraq's Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State (Part 2)", June 2, 2015, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21780/lines-drawn-on-an-empty-map_iraq%E2%80%99s-borders-and-the (accessed July 20, 2016).

resulted in further decline of French influence in the Arab world before this position was in turn taken over by the US.

The period between the end of WW2 and 1956-1958 constitutes the transition period during which the US first removed France as a regional power in the Middle East and then – following on British policy failures in Egypt and Iraq – replaced the UK as the region's hegemon. To begin with, the Truman Doctrine, announced on March 12, 1947, held that alliances should be formed with regional powers to contain the Soviet Union. In the early Cold War, this translated into the US focus on the "Northern Tier" states of Greece, Turkey, and Iran directly bordering the Soviet Union. In the case of the former two countries, the US took over the economic and political sponsorship role from Britain, since both countries were considered crucial to enforce the containment strategy. Yet the lack of any overarching US strategy for the entire Middle East region created new geopolitical problems. Lebanon and Syria, the two former French-dominated entities, had now turned into weak independent states without any clear-cut regional or global alignment. In this period, the regional Arab state system was fragmented between British clients (Egypt, Jordan, Iraq), a non-Arab neighboring state in which the US and UK shared interests (Iran), and Saudi Arabia that had been turned into a US ally by Franklin D. Roosevelt's diplomacy in WW2.

Due to the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and the subsequent rise of a new kind of Arab nationalism under Gamal Abdel Nasser's leadership across the region, the British position deteriorated further. The growing US regional influence at the expense of the UK became apparent in the first year of the Eisenhower administration when the 1953 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) led coup in Iran, conducted in collaboration with British intelligence, against Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh reversed the latter's nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian oil company of 1951. The coup restored the Shah to power and subsequently brought back western control of the Iranian oil sector. In this context, the former dominant role of the British was replaced by the US and the Shah's Iran turned into a US client state.

After the Iranian coup, the UK made one final effort to reorganize the regional security system in advancing the Baghdad Pact of April 1955. The Pact linked Iraq and Turkey in a mutual assistance and defense treaty that was later enlarged to include Iran, Pakistan, and the UK. Yet the agreement remained on paper only and the US did not join. In fact, Nasser had personally warned US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles against the idea of a treaty-based regional security system, arguing that "alliances with outside powers were suspect and unpopular with the Arab peoples" and "to try to create them was self-defeating [and] would only weaken the Arab governments"[8]. In 1956, Nasser's decision

[8] R. Stephens, *Nasser. A Political Biography*, Penguin, London, 1970, p. 145.

to nationalize the British-controlled Suez Canal triggered the military attacks of Israel, France and the UK on Egypt. After their failure to remove Nasser from power, the British position was damaged beyond repair.

In a phone call, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower reduced British Prime Minister Antony Eden to tears in blaming the UK for "pulling in the Soviet Union" by engaging in a military operation that failed in every respect, not least on account of further strengthening Nasser's bargaining position and prestige[9]. According to Eisenhower, the refusal of the US to back military action against Nasser was due to concern that the prestige of the Soviet Union would otherwise rise in the eyes of the Arabs:

> "We could not permit the Soviet Union to seize the leadership in the struggle against the use of force in the Middle East and thus win the confidence of the new independent nations of the world. But on the other hand I had by no means wanted the British and French to be branded as naked aggressors without provocation"[10].

One might suggest that Eisenhower's second sentence was delivered tongue in cheek.

The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957: US Hegemonic Ambition in the Middle East

In response to the Suez crisis and pointing to the moment of hegemonic transition in the Middle East from the UK to the US, the American President Eisenhower announced his Doctrine on 5 January 1957. The Doctrine was framed in terms of warnings about the Soviet Union's firm intention to dominate the entire Middle East. Yet Eisenhower's argument lacked historical validity in the sense that Russia (and later the Soviet Union) had held more modest regional aspirations in the past, namely to control the Turkish Straights (the Dardanelles) and to gain a stake of influence in Persia. In fact, the former objective had been encouraged by the western powers France and Britain before WW1 and had influenced the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, while the latter had produced the US-backed joint British and Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 to secure oil resources and transport routes for the British and Soviet war effort.

In overstating the case that the Soviet Union was interested to take over the entire Middle East, the US president gained in turn an excuse to offer US

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9 H. Jones, *Crucible of Power. A History of American Foreign Relations from 1897*. 2nd ed., Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2008, p. 326.

10 D.D. Eisenhower, *White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961*, Doubleday, New York, 1965, p. 83.

assistance to *every* state in the region, namely "to employ the armed forces of the United States to assist to defend the territorial integrity and the political independence of any nation in the area against Communist armed aggression" which was in turn clarified to include "aggression from any nation controlled by International Communism"[11].

Notably, the Eisenhower Doctrine was unilaterally announced and entered into force after agreement in the US Congress. Thus, it was a statement of intent for the entire region that differed in style and substance from the British tradition of making local dependent regimes sign "mutual treaties"[12]. In fact, the new Doctrine amounted to a guarantee to maintain all the existing anti-Communist regimes in the region, in particular the various royal families that the British had historically worked with in Jordan, Iraq, and the Gulf. Yet it left open the question which of the regional states would not fall under the newly extended US defense guarantees. A debate arose about whether Nasser was in fact "controlled" by "International Communism" – and the discussion quickly produced US plans to block the expansion of Nasserism and of other currents of Arab nationalism in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

However, the final blow for the British position in the Middle East – after which the US no longer had to seriously negotiate with powers other than the Soviet Union – was the Iraqi revolution of July 14, 1958. When looking back, this event must be considered of nearly equal significance with the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and as a major turning point in Middle Eastern history. The revolution produced the complete destruction of the British-backed regime and underlined that US and UK observers had failed to act on their own intelligence about the extreme disconnect between the Iraqi royal regime and the population at large[13]. Directly after the revolution, the Saudi, Iranian, and Turkish leaderships all demanded US military intervention to topple the new Iraqi leadership. However, Eisenhower refused to intervene on account of the domestic popularity of the new Iraqi nationalist leadership and the complete absence of resistance on the part of the old regime[14].

Yet in order to show that his Doctrine had teeth, he agreed within 24 hours of the Iraqi revolution a request for the dispatch of US troops to Lebanon

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[11] D.D. Eisenhower, "Special Message to the Congress on the Situation in the Middle East", January 5, 1957, capital letters in the original, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=11007 (accessed July 20, 2016).

[12] The unilateral declaration of "Doctrines" is in fact in line with the unwillingness of all post-WW2 US administrations to formally declare wars or to sign peace treaties.

[13] B.R. King, "America's Search for Control in Iraq in the Early Cold War, 1953-1961", Doctoral Thesis, Graduate Department of History, University of Toronto, 2014, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/65675/1/King_Brandon_R_201406_PhD_thesis.pdf (accessed July 20, 2016).

[14] M.A. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf. A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833-1992*, The Free Press, New York, 1992, p. 79.

from the country's pro-western President Camille Chamoun to protect the latter against local Nasserist challenges. This event, the first large-scale military intervention of the US with ground troops in the Middle East, established a pattern for future US regional conduct. Namely, the US approaches each state unit of the Middle East in the manner of a "cybernetic" external balancer: in order to influence events in country A, intervention in country B might be required. The entire region is always considered as a single theater, which differs from the earlier Sykes-Picot system, in which two external balancers, Britain and France, controlled two distinct regional blocs.

The US management of the regional balance of power in the Middle East since the late 1950s until the present has been based on a system of bilateral alliances with some major regional powers, namely Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran (until the 1979 Islamic Revolution). In the context of US alliance partners, Egypt is a special case and less significant: the country's military is since the late 1970s principally concerned with domestic policing rather than the exercise of an Arab leadership role[15]. The US alliance partners are supposed to remain dependent on US patronage at all times, and any conflict amongst them helps to further increase US leverage. Close monitoring of the behavior of each aligned state's core executive by the US goes hand in hand with the management of the relative power of each state unit in order to make them balance each other.

Crucially, US regional alliances in the Middle East are balanced in an asymmetric manner: Israel has been guaranteed a large military and technological edge by the US over all other regional allies, especially since the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars[16]. This US policy has been implemented by combining measures such as allowing Israel privileged access to the latest US military technology (not available to the other three powers), a willingness to tolerate Israeli spying/technology transfer, and by tolerating the subsequent domestic ability of Israel to manufacture advanced weapons systems locally or to engage in their reengineering[17]. In 2008, this approach was further formalized

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[15] Nasser's doctrine of the "three circles" (i.e. the effort of Egypt to exercise influence in the Arab, African, and Islamic world) and his reliance on military assistance from the Soviet Union allowed the country to gain autonomy from the western powers and to assume a leadership role in the Arab world. This role was abandoned after the US succeeded in "turning" his successor Anwar al-Sadat. Following Sadat's unilateral decision to remove Egypt from the Arab line-up, by signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1978 (the Camp David agreement), the US re-assumed the role of sponsor of the Egyptian military which it continues to exercise today. Egypt has since lost its influence on the Arab peninsula.

[16] R. v. Dehn, *Jahre der Entscheidung. Die amerikanische Israel-Politik 1967 und 1973*, Disserta Verlag, Hamburg, 2010, p. 34.

[17] J.S. Landay, "Why is Israel's nuclear arsenal not mentioned in Iran deal debate?", August 15, 2015, McClatchy DC, http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article31470917.html (accessed July 20, 2016).

when the US Congress "enacted a law … requiring that arms sales allow Israel to maintain a 'qualitative military edge' in the region. All sales to the Middle East are evaluated based on how they will affect Israeli military superiority"[18].

At certain times, the US has sold more weapons to regional clients other than Israel in budgetary terms, namely the Shah of Iran appears to have received more supplies than Israel during some periods in the 1970s, while US arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia have more than doubled during the two Obama Presidencies, turning the Wahhabi Kingdom into the world's fourth largest arms market[19]. However, this has never questioned Israel's status as the only regional military superpower with an independent nuclear arsenal, nuclear-capable submarines, advanced ballistic missiles, and other weapons of mass destruction.

In terms of the other three major US allies in the larger Middle East region, only one, Saudi Arabia, has been an Arab state while the other two, Turkey and Iran under the Shah until 1979, have acted as additional external balancers on Arab politics. This allowed the US to pursue different agendas with different clients and to keep them in a relationship of close direct dependency. In addition, the US could afford a degree of negligence with regard to some of the weaker state entities in the Middle East that were less significant

[18] M. Mazzetti, H. Cooper, "Sale of U.S. Arms Fuels the Wars of Arab States", *New York Times*, April 18, 2015.

[19] One author charges that "[d]uring the decade of the 1970s, the United States sold more arms to Iran than any other country" before qualifying this assertion with the statement that "[n]o attempt is made to analyze these arms acquisitions in terms of sophistication or practicality as the question is not what weapons were purchased but *how much was paid*". See G.F. Gates, "An Analysis of the Impact of American Arms Transfers on Political Stability in Iran", Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, September, 1980, https://archive.org/stream/analysisofimpact00gate#page/n5/mode/2up (accessed July 20, 2016), pp. 4, 20-21, emphasis added. More recent data sources such as the SIPRI data base on arms transfers suggest, however, that Israel has received more weapons (even in budgetary terms) at various points in the same decade (see http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers for historical information on the arms trade). Crucially, this highlights methodological problems in analyzing military strength in quantitative academic research. In fact, Israel and the US have made efforts to obscure the degree of military transfers: Israel receives US arms deliveries at discounted prices or for free which is obscured in quantitative data. Thus, quantitative data is bound to give only a partial picture of reality with regard to Israeli technological dominance in the military field. Another interesting qualification in terms of US balancing of client states in the Middle East is McGlinchey's suggestion that "[t]here was never a genuine plan to establish a twin pillar system with Saudi Arabia and Iran [during the 1970s]. Nor was there a serious intention to empower other Arab states". See S. McGlinchey, *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2014, pp. 174-175. The same author holds (ibid., original emphasis) that collaboration with Iran was the "essence" of "the entire US approach to the Gulf" and that "Nixon established Iran as *the* pillar of US security in the Gulf, the opportunity to invest in Saudi Arabia in a comparative sense was put on the back burner. Saudi Arabia languished in relative military primitiveness through the 1970s […]".

in the context of intra-Arab and Cold War conflicts. This concerned in particular Lebanon, in which the pro- and anti-western actors balanced each other out, and Jordan, where the historical links between Britain and the Hashemite royal family were allowed to continue to some extent because the US did not consider Jordan as a significant independent actor.

However, this still left a formidable number of Arab states that did not belong to the US sphere of influence. These states were considered hostile from the point of view of subsequent US administrations as stated in the Eisenhower Doctrine. The list of major opponents of the US in the Middle East region included Egypt between 1956 and 1978, Syria between 1956 and 1961 and from 1963 until the present, Iraq between 1958 and 2003 (and to an extent until now due to the alliance between the current Shia-dominated Baghdad government and the Islamic Republic of Iran). Most importantly, these states gained their autonomy from the US by turning to the Soviet Union, thereby taking advantage of the Cold War to pursue their own Arab nationalist agendas.

This development began with Nasser's shift toward the Soviet Union in 1956 to access economic and military assistance, which was in turn motivated by the earlier US refusal to grant such assistance for Egypt. Nasser's move produced a new kind of Arab state, namely the "garrison state" in which the military turned into the backbone of all other state institutions. This new kind of regime was dominated by a "state class" which represented the military or a combination of the military and Arab nationalist elites. In turn, the state class was able to monopolize political power due to its control of economic resources, namely political and/or oil rent income. Such rent income, once acquired, was distributed according to political rather than market criteria and produced systems of clientelism and patronage that proved to be highly stable over time[20].

Subsequently, the garrison state gained stability and some degree of legitimacy due to charismatic leadership in the case of Nasser and later of Hafiz al-Assad in Syria and, in the case of Syria and Iraq, the rapid expansion of oil rents since the 1970s, which further expanded the state executive's autonomy. Nasser's "Arab socialism", therefore, combined political leadership from above with efforts to develop the economy in order to satisfy the material demands of popular constituencies. His political project, soon copied elsewhere, allowed for the emergence of an "authoritarian bargaining" between state executives and the broader population, based on the distribution of oil and political rent income to

[20] For the concepts of "state class" and "rentier state", see H. Elsenhans, *Abhängiger Kapitalismus oder bürokratische Entwicklungsgesellschaft: Versuch über den Staat in der Dritten Welt*, 2nd. ed., Campus, Frankfurt/M., 1984. For Syria as a rentier state, see J.M. Dostal, "Analyzing the Domestic and International Conflict in Syria: Are there Lessons from Political Science?", *Syria Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1-80, https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/822 (accessed July 20, 2016).

the population. This bargain could be maintained and further expanded as long as the distribution of rent income by the state translated into upward social mobility of the majority of the population. The formula generally worked in Syria, Iraq and other Arab states during the 1970s when oil revenue skyrocketed allowing for public sector expansion and rising living, health and educational standards. However, the model entered crisis mode whenever oil or political rents were in decline. On the other side of the equation, the dominance of the state sector, based on rent income from oil and gas, produced in practically all cases a permanently underdeveloped national bourgeoisie and civil society.

Following Nasser's example, Syria also opted for Soviet economic and military assistance since 1956, while Iraq joined the fold, although in a more delayed fashion, after the Iraqi revolution of 1958. What made Soviet assistance so attractive in the eyes of the Arab leaders was that, contrary to Eisenhower's claims, the Soviets had no earlier political footprint in the Arab world. Moreover, Soviet assistance appeared to offer increased autonomy for Arab nationalist regimes, who felt threatened by the US and its regional clients rather than by the Soviets as regional outsiders. In addition, the Soviet Union was in the unique position to offer Nasser and those following his example in Syria and Iraq advanced military hardware to turn each country's military into a serious force and to balance out the military might of Israel. In particular, the willingness of the Soviet Union to deliver advanced jet fighters (the cutting edge military technology of the 1950s) allowed the Egyptian and Syrian military to quickly become serious regional power factors. This, in turn, strengthened their position in the regional state hierarchy and created a divided yet at the same time relatively stable system of state entities.

The rise of two regional camps (US-backed and Soviet-backed) did also "lock in" regime and political economy characteristics in these countries, particularly authoritarian government on both sides of the divide and neo-patrimonial patron-client relationships between state executives and the local population. Differences in the regime types were due to objective factors, such as the size of oil or political rents that were at the disposal of state executives, and the political background of the regime. In the case of US-backed regimes, the various sets of royal families, such as the one in Saudi Arabia, did perhaps not even qualify for the term *neo*-patrimonial as they failed to accommodate to modern mass politics. The Soviet-backed Arab nationalist regimes, on the other hand, engaged in the construction of political systems that appealed in rhetoric and sometimes in reality for approval from broader sections of the population, such as in the case of "authoritarian populism" in Egypt, Syria, and, to a lesser extent, in Iraq[21].

[21] For the concept, see R. Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution From Above*, Routledge, London, 2001.

Crucially, the management of the Cold War in the Middle East was based on the maintenance of the existing state system by both major external actors[22]. The regional actors were not allowed to take each other over, and efforts of regional actors to challenge the existing state system resulted either in quick failure (e.g. Syria's intervention in the Jordanian civil war in 1970) or in lengthy and inconclusive wars (e.g. Nasser's intervention in the Yemen and Saudi countermoves for much of the 1960s). This basic stability of state units did not, however, mean the absence of wars. Rather, the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars and the War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt between 1967 and 1970 were conducted by the regional actors based on their external military alliances. In this context, the most dramatic point was the 1973 war, which one observer described as "the first high-tech war in the history of humanity" suggesting that "military attaches from all over the world were swept away by the efficiency of modern weapons systems and keenly took notes"[23].

The 1973 Arab-Israeli war differed from the previous ones in the sense that the Arab states displayed their ability to use advanced Soviet weapons technology in an effective way making the outcome of the war inconclusive. On the one hand, Arab losses were still significantly higher than the Israeli ones. On the other hand, the display of Arab solidarity was much more effective than in previous conflicts. Crucially, the Soviet Union had not encouraged the Arab states to engage in military action but had suggested caution. In 1973, Brezhnev personally counselled the Egyptian leadership against war, stating that "we are of the opinion that Egypt is not prepared"[24]. Thus, the Soviet Union behaved as a status quo power in the Middle East – quickly rearming its Arab clients after successive defeats but not allowing for Arab states to achieve full balance with US clients, especially Israel. In fact, the Soviet leadership assumed that a full-scale challenge of existing US clients, especially Israel, could trigger a global war.

On the Israeli side, in turn, the experience of the 1973 war and the degree of Arab solidarity on display (Iraq entered the war on the Syrian side, contributing to a stabilization of the frontline in the Israel-occupied Syrian Golan) resulted in the long-standing Israeli effort to "deconstruct" the Arab states in order to avoid any repetition of the effective Arab military alliance building. This included the openly acknowledged Israeli long-term efforts to break up Syria and Iraq as unified states and to replace them with smaller units that would be easy to control, while also allowing for further consolidation and

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[22] The case of the "United Arab Republic", the unified state of Egypt and Syria between 1958 and 1961, was the exception that proved the rule.

[23] J.A. Elten, *Karma und Karriere*, Rowohlt, Hamburg, 1994, p. 64.

[24] S. Meining, "Geheimoperation Aleppo: die geheime Beteiligung der DDR am Oktober-Krieg 1973", report MÜNCHEN, October 6, 2008, http://www.poolalarm.de/kindersuchdienst/raf/Beteiligung_der_DDR%20_am_Yom-Kippur-Krieg_1973_Israels_mit_den_arabischen_Staaten.pdf (accessed July 20, 2016).

expansion of the Israeli settlements in occupied Arab territories, such as the West Bank and the Syrian Golan[25].

Major Past Episodes of Political Destabilization in Syria

Every analysis of the conflict in Syria since 2011 must be historically embedded. Syria has always suffered from deep internal divisions and belongs to a divided Arab state system that is in turn dominated by outside powers. Thus, for the purpose of analysis it is useful to put forward a matrix with a temporary axis that accounts for short-, medium-, and long-term factors, and a spacial axis that takes account of local Syrian, regional Arab, and global political factors. These factors, i.e. a matrix with nine fields, must all be considered to explain the violent escalation in Syria since 2011 analytically (see Table 1). The current paper tries to present at least a rough summary of the major factors in fields 1 to 6 and a brief sketch of geopolitical reasoning of the external powers as located in field 9. It should be stressed that all fields of the matrix are loosely coupled with each other. Thus, any analysis of the Syrian crisis that focuses only on single fields (such as field 1, which inevitably dominates the coverage of the Syrian war in the news media) fails to produce a better understanding of why Syria has turned into a transnational battlefield.

Table 1

Analytical Perspectives on the Syrian Conflict

	Local Syrian political factors (state level and below)	Regional Arab and Middle Eastern political factors	Global political factors (international system)
Short-term (less than a decade)	1	2	3
Medium-term (decade or more)	4	5	6
Long-term (Middle Eastern geopolitical regime, i.e. 1920s to 1958, 1958-1991, and since 1991)	7	8	9

[25] See O. Yinon, "A Strategy for Israel in the Nineteen Eighties", [orig. Hebrew in KIVUNIM (Directions). *A Journal for Judaism and Zionism*, no. 14, February 1982], available at: turkishforum.com.tr (accessed July 20, 2016). For an update on recent Israeli settlement expansions, see K. Shuttleworth, "Israel Plans to Demolish 13,000 Arab Buildings in West Bank, UN Says", *Guardian*, September 7, 2015. The current Israeli government does not pretend that it is interested in "land for peace" negotiations and the last decades of the US-steered so-called "peace process" have enabled permanent Israeli territorial expansion.

In terms of earlier time periods of destabilization in Syria, one must highlight the following major events: 1949, 1957, 1976-82, and since 2000 (with the advantage of hindsight, the entire period of the presidency of Bashar al-Assad and in particular the push against Syria's regional position in Lebanon in 2005 and 2006 relate to the current crisis and must be re-evaluated in the regional and global context). This section now briefly discusses these four main episodes of past destabilization.

To begin with, Syria gained its independence and emerged as a postcolonial state in 1946 under the leadership of the traditional Sunni landowning class. In the context of a not-yet developed system of modern mass and party politics, the first democratically elected Syrian president, Shukri al-Quwatli, relied on his personal relationship with the Saudi King in order to bolster his position against potential destabilization from regional competitors, especially the British-backed Hashemite royals in Jordan and Iraq. However, the Syrian president was removed in a military coup in 1949. The coup (the first of three in the same year) was due to a combination of global, regional, and local factors. In terms of the global factors, the sluggishness in which Quwatli answered to US demands to grant right of way for the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline) was the main reason for local CIA involvement in his removal from office. Between 1947 and 1949, Tapline was constructed on behalf of the US-owned Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco) as the largest US regional construction project in order to pump oil from Saudi Arabia via Syria to western European markets.

The CIA was also involved in at least one of the two other coups in the same year[26]. In fact, practically all domestic actors in Syria looked for outside backup to advance their bids for power, and their behavior could only be understood in the larger regional and global context[27]. Yet when the most sophisticated of the strong men then emerging from the Syrian military, Adib Shishakli, who assumed the presidency following another coup and controlled the country until 1954, offered the US a privileged alliance with Syria on condition of a more balanced approach in the Arab-Israeli conflict, this offer was rejected by Eisenhower. At this time, Syria appeared to offer nothing of strategic significance compared to the pre-existing US alliance with the Zionist state.

In 1956, an alliance of Baathists, Communists, and Nasserists gained the ascendancy and assumed control of the Syrian government. The US duly changed their approach to Syria and considered to bring back Shishakli, who had in the meantime been exiled from the country. During 1956 and 1957, the US and the UK engaged in efforts to bring down the government in Damascus as part of some broader offensive to stop a Nasser-style expansion of Arab nationalism, which was in turn interpreted as a front for "International

[26] D. Little, "Mission Impossible: The CIA and the Cult of Covert Action in the Middle East", *Diplomatic History*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2004, pp. 663-701.

[27] P. Seale, *The Struggle for Syria. A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1965.

Communism" in line with the rhetoric of the Eisenhower Doctrine. The joint intelligence operations of the US and the UK proceeded under different code names – Operation Straggle, Operation Wappen, and Preferred Plan, to name but a few – and included at various times France, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab client regimes in efforts to link up with Syrian rightist forces willing to lead a coup to remove the leftist government from office[28]. In this context, the British preferred their Hashemite allies in Iraq and/or Jordan to take over Syrian politics, while the Americans wanted to coordinate with Syrian tribes and minority communities in a "Free Syria Committee" to engineer a domestic uprising in line with the CIA's earlier covert action that had forced out Prime Minister Mossadegh of Iran in 1953[29].

The US and the UK shared a pragmatic outlook in the sense that plans for a takeover of Syrian politics were made and discarded quickly – a long-term strategy was noticeably absent. Ultimately, the various plots triggered the "Syrian crisis" of August-October 1957, which started due to Turkish preparations to invade Syria militarily to bring down the Syrian government. However, this move resulted in the quick breakdown of the anti-Syrian coalition since the pro-western Arab clients, led by Saudi Arabia, were opposed to a Turkish invasion of an Arab country. Following Soviet counter-threats against Turkey, a diplomatic effort on the part of the US and the Soviet Union occurred which succeeded in negotiating a closure of the crisis by withdrawing the mutual threats. In summary, the Syrian crisis of 1957 underlined that a balance of power had emerged in the Middle East that was now policed by the two superpowers and that the domestic stability of each Arab state unit depended on security guarantees from outside.

The Syrian crisis of 1976-1982, the first extensive domestic destabilization of Syria before the 2011 conflict, was triggered by the uprising of a faction of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood against the Baath regime of Syria's President Hafiz al-Assad. The uprising was due to a combination of domestic disenchantment of the Brotherhood with the regime and criticism of Syria's intervention in Lebanon, which was seen as biased in favor of non-Muslim groups. The uprising consisted of a campaign of urban terrorism against representatives of the Syrian state targeting in particular members of the Alawite community, a religious minority to which the Assad family belongs. A first peak of sectarian violence was reached on 16 June 1979, when a commando aligned with the Brotherhood killed a large number of unarmed Alawite cadets at the Aleppo Artillery School. Between 1979 and 1982, the violence further escalated for geopolitical reasons. The Brotherhood was

[28] A. Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria, 1949-1961*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1995, chapter 5.

[29] M. Jones, "The 'Preferred Plan': The Anglo-American Working Group Report on Covert Action in Syria, 1957", *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2004, pp. 401-415.

considered a valuable proxy in efforts to weaken Syria's regional position by neighboring countries and in particular from Saddam Hussein's Iraq[30].

When Saddam decided to go to war against neighboring Iran in 1980, the Brotherhood appeared as a useful counterweight against the emerging Syria-Iran defense alliance. Additional support for the Brotherhood came from Jordan, Turkey, and anti-Syrian factions in Lebanon. Ultimately, the Brotherhood campaign failed due to its limited domestic support base when the Syrian military crushed the organization's uprising in the city of Hama in 1982. Most western accounts focus almost exclusively on this event (the "Hama massacre"), but fail to take account of the Brotherhood's terrorist activities beforehand.

Moving on to the period of 2000-2011, the transition of the Syrian presidency after Hafiz al-Assad's death in office to his third son, Bashar al-Assad, could be understood as an effort of the part of the Syrian regime to avoid internal conflicts. Looking back at the transition with the advantage of hindsight, it appears that there were domestically-oriented factions (the majority), while there were also factions (or at least individual high-ranking Syrian officials) that had built up connections with conservative Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, and hoped to use their connections to shift the regime in their favor. Yet the transition to Bashar proceeded smoothly and he quickly became the main representative of the regime, while many older Baathists retired and generational renewal took place. However, the resignation of long-standing Vice President of Syria Abdul Halim Khaddam, a prominent Sunni and long-term associate of Hafiz, in mid-2005, followed by his sudden departure to Paris at the end of the same year to link up with the Muslim Brotherhood in exile to found a "National Salvation Front" underlined that some degree of infighting must have occurred.

The two major challenges in the first period of Bashar's time in office were external, however. First, the US had during the Bill Clinton presidency officially committed to a policy of regime change in neighboring Iraq (the so-called "Iraq Liberation Act" of 1998). Second, this policy – perhaps worth to be called a "Doctrine" and underlining the continuity between Clinton and Bush administrations – followed up on earlier UN-led economic sanctions against Iraq that had according to some observers resulted in the dead of around a million Iraqi citizens during the 1990s due to the sanctions-imposed breakdown

[30] The declassified Defense Intelligence Agency report "Syria: Muslim Brotherhood Pressure Intensifies", 1982, May, https://www.syria360.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/dia-syria-muslimbrotherhoodpressureintensifies-2.pdf (accessed September 1, 2015) refers to the Brotherhood as a "Sunni Muslim Islamic fundamentalist organization" and suggests further that most Syrians "would probably admit that the current level of tension in Syria is a result of Brotherhood actions" (p. iii, p. 8). It is important to stress that US and UK policymakers have always been interested in Islamist groups, such as the Brotherhood, for their potential as proxies against secular Arab nationalism.

of the Iraqi economy, health care, and education systems[31]. Ultimately, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 took out Saddam's Sunni-led regime. The destruction of the Iraqi Baath regime subsequently produced a Shia-dominated Iraqi government in Baghdad with close relations to neighboring Iran, i.e. the remaining most powerful regional US opponent. Thus, US military action allowed, for the first time in the postcolonial histories of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, the emergence of a triple-alliance between the three states by adding Iraq to the pre-existing Syria-Iran defense alliance. Because of this unintended outcome, US state executives in the Bush, Jr. and Obama administrations advocated for another round of rebalancing – this time by shifting to coalition building with Sunni forces in Iraq and other Arab countries to isolate the "triple alliance" of Syria, Iraq, and Iran[32].

From today's point of view, regime change in Iraq was part of a larger US agenda, started under Clinton and continued by the so-called "neocons" that came to dominate the Bush, Jr. foreign policy agenda, to replace governments in seven countries, namely Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran[33]. In the build-up to the US occupation of Iraq, Bashar followed a mixed strategy. On the one hand, some collaboration in the US-declared war on terrorism was offered, while the alliances with Iran and the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon, rightly seen as the backbone of Syria's regional position, were also entrenched.

Following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a politician strongly linked with France and Saudi Arabia, in February 2005, Syria was blamed in the western media and by pro-western factions in Lebanon, although no evidence has ever since been presented to solve the case. The Hariri assassination acted as a catalyst to increase the pressure on Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon, where they had been stationed since the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990. The decision of Bashar to withdraw the

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[31] M. Lüders, *Wer den Wind sät. Was westliche Politik im Orient anrichtet*, C.H. Beck, Munich, 2015, p. 44.

[32] This paper uses the terms "Sunni" and "Shia" to explain geopolitical rather than religious alignments. Thus, state executives might chose to appeal to religious identities in order to mobilize for political purposes. At the same time, they will often accept that geopolitical concerns overrule other potentially significant cleavages, such as religion or ideology. For example, the close links between Armenia and the Islamic Republic of Iran are due to geopolitical reasons overruling other cleavages.

[33] Differences between the so-called "neocons" and the so-called "liberal interventionists" are usually over style rather than substance of US foreign policymaking. Thus, the Bush I, Clinton, Bush II, and Obama years were all characterized by the embeddedness of the "neocons", moving between positions in government, corporations, and think tanks. They all wish for Hillary Clinton to become the next US president. For "neocons" during the Bush Jr. years, see in particular W.P. Lang, "Drinking the Kool-Aid", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 39-60, and for US efforts at "regime change" in the Middle East and the Arab world, see in particular W. Clark, "Speech at the Commonwealth Club of California", San Francisco, October 3, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8FhZnFZ6TY (accessed July 20, 2016).

Syrian troops, in response to the UN Security Council Resolution 1559, in April 2005 weakened the country's regional position to a large extent. Removing troops under external pressure, which Russia did not oppose at the time, might have been considered a sign of weakness by observers keen to consider Syrian regime change scenarios.

Directly following on the Syrian withdrawal, the 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah took place in the south of Lebanon during July and August of 2006. The war was inconclusive, resulted in Israeli withdrawal after large-scale devastation of the Shia regions of Lebanon, and strengthened the position of Hezbollah in the context of Lebanese politics. From today's point of view, the period after the end of the 34-day war might be considered the high point of Bashar's presidency, as it appeared that the Syrian influence in Lebanon did not, ultimately, depend on troops, but could also be exercised in a more indirect manner.

Next, there was the interlude of the European Union's (EU) offering to Syria of a so-called "Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Agreement". This Agreement would have opened the Syrian market for EU products and investments and was perhaps expected to trigger a major shift in Syria's domestic political economy away from a state-led system toward a "social market economy" (a term that was popular with some Syrian government officials for some time). During the negotiations, Bashar was invited to Paris by then French President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008, which could be considered the high point of external recognition of the Syrian regime. However, the entire EU policies in the region had little impact and were poorly though through. Ultimately, the Syrian regime could not realistically be expected to open its market for EU products without undermining its domestic economic structures[34]. This interlude, just like the short flourishing of friendly relations between the western powers and Libya around the same time, served as little more than a distraction.

[34] J.M. Dostal, "The European Union and Economic Reform in Syria", in J.M. Dostal, A. Zorob, *Syria and the Euro-Mediterranean Relationship*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Col., 2008, pp. 18-20. Another interesting feature of the period between 2005 and 2011 was the insistence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that Syria would soon run out of oil and gas deposits. The IMF suggested in this context that the Syrian government should urgently cut domestic subsidies and levels of state employment. With the advantage of hindsight, it appears that the IMF pushed this line at a moment in time when it had already become obvious to informed observers that Syria was in fact likely to have access to significant new gas fields on the Mediterranean coastline. These new assets might have influenced deliberation amongst western strategists on how to deal with Syria and made efforts to remove the Assad government from power more attractive. See N. Ahmed, "Western Firms Primed to Cash in on Syria's Oil and Gas 'Frontier"', December 1, 2015, https://medium.com/insurge-intelligence/western-firms-plan-to-cash-in-on-syria-s-oil-and-gas-frontier-6c5fa4a72a92#.etjvo1uod (accessed July 20, 2016). One must keep in mind that the oil and gas fields in the Mediterranean might attract claims from all states in the proximity, notably Cyprus, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel – as well as Syria.

Once the Syrian domestic conflict began in March 2011, the regime change discourse reappeared in the context of US and EU announcements. These took place in the context of inappropriate comparisons with the situation in other Arab countries. The starting point was the long-standing commitment of the US to regime change in Syria, sometimes acknowledged and at other times covered, during the Bush, Jr. administration, which started out with the "Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act" announced in December 2003.

In the period directly after the US invasion of Iraq, there was fear in Damascus that Syria would be next on the agenda. This fear resided when the US started to visibly fail to gain the ascendancy in Iraq in terms of enforcing direct political control and had to fall back on Shia political forces in the country that were close to Syria's main ally Iran. In fact, US pressure helped the regime to organize strong pro-Bashar and pro-Syrian nationalism rallies across the country that showed that many Syrians were keen to avoid domestic conflict by backing the existing state. The general feeling was that Syria was surrounded by danger zones, especially in Lebanon and Iraq, and that everything should be done to avoid a spillover of conflict into Syria. The visible presence of large numbers of Iraqi refugees all over Syria also added to the feeling of immediate danger that was expressed by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in a 2007 interview, when he suggested that "chaos and internal battles like in Iraq" could also happen in Syria[35].

In 2007, the US media acknowledged that the Bush, Jr. administration had launched a campaign against the Syrian regime, which was apparently run by Elliot Abrahams, described as "a conservative White House aide in charge of pushing Bush's global democracy agenda"[36]. In July 2008, the Syrian leadership took the initiative to have the Syrian ambassador in the US call for new negotiations with Israel over the issue of the occupied Syrian Golan and the other conflicts. While details are still difficult to confirm, it should be stressed that Syria had engaged with Israel concerning a settlement of the conflicts between the two countries for much of the 1990s and during the early 2000s. Ultimately, Israel always refused to make concessions with regard to the substantial issues. Three days after the 2008 initiative, an Israeli commando

[35] Quoted in S.M. Hersh, "The Redirection. Is the Administration's New Policy Benefitting our Enemies in the War on Terrorism?", *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2007. This article remains the most significant brief account of the US strategic rebalancing from "Shia" to "Sunni" in the period following the 2003 Iraq invasion.

[36] W.P. Strobel, "U.S. steps up campaign against Syrian government", *McClatchy Newspapers*, http://www.idahostatesman.com/2007/03/30/1421258_us-steps-up-campaign-against-syrian.html?rh=1 (accessed September 1, 2015). See also "Roebuck" [i.e. William V. Roebuck, US Political Councilor at the US Embassy in Damascus between 2004 and 2007], "Influencing the SARG [i.e. Syrian Arab Republic Government] at the End of 2006", December 13, 2006, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAMASCUS5399_a.html (accessed July 20, 2016). The memorandum outlines scenarios on how to destabilize Syria.

entered Syria and assassinated a Syrian general, which was described in a US National Security Agency report as the "first known instance of Israel targeting a legitimate government official"[37].

Under the Obama administration, the funding of Syrian opposition groups continued. There was also a noticeable, although poorly documented, steady rise in armed clashes between Islamist groups and the Syrian army and security forces in the run-up to March 2011, when the uprising in the southern Syrian city of Daraa started the current conflict. Nevertheless, the most crucial geopolitical reason for the shift in US strategy on Syria, from covert action to acknowledged efforts at regime change, must be found in the larger regional context. In particular, Obama's decision to withdraw most US troops from Iraq in 2011 made the US lose its direct military veto position against efforts to consolidate the triple alliance of Syria, Iraq, and Iran. This was certainly the most unfortunate geopolitical outcome of the Iraqi invasion from the US point of view. On the other hand, regaining direct military access to Iraq – US troops returned in mid-2014 to "fight Islamic State" – and removing the Syrian government from office constituted another US effort to realize geopolitical gains from the post-2003 Iraqi occupation.

One of the political expressions of a potential consolidation of the triple alliance was the refusal of Bashar, in 2010, to agree to the construction of the "Qatar-Turkey Pipeline" across Syrian territory. He also refused to allow an extension of the already existing "Arab Gas Pipeline" across Syria toward Turkey. The former project, jointly pushed by Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, concerned plans to construct a Qatari and Saudi oil and gas pipeline across Syria to reach Turkey and the EU markets[38]. The latter project concerned an extension of an existing gas pipeline that currently connects Egypt and Jordan with Syria and Lebanon, and, crucially in geopolitical terms, could have been extended from its current end point in the Syrian city of Homs toward Turkey[39]. The two projects would have served the interests of the pro-US conservative Arab states. Conversely, they would weaken Russia's position in the European energy market in the medium and long term and negatively affect the future prospects of Iran to sell energy resources internationally.

Crucially, the triple alliance states advanced an alternative project, the so-called Friendship pipeline (termed the "Islamic Pipeline" in western accounts), that would connect Syria, Iraq, and Iran with the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. This plan excludes the Sunni states and could also potentially

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[37] M. Cole, "Israeli Special Forces Assassinated Senior Syrian Government Official", https://theintercept.com/2015/07/15/israeli-special-forces-assassinated-senior-syrian-official/ (accessed July 20, 2016).

[38] C. Lin, "Syrian Buffer Zone – Turkey-Qatar Pipeline", *ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security, No. 367*, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/192741/367_Lin.pdf (accessed July 20, 2016).

[39] J. Robinson, "Why Syria? An Examination of The Iran-Iraq-Syria Pipeline", August 27, 2013, http://ftmdaily.com/what-jerry-thinks/whysyria/ (accessed July 20, 2016).

serve as part of a larger "Silk Road" strategy of linking with China and other expanding oil and gas consuming markets in Asia. In this context, a meeting between the then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Bashar in February 2010, underlining the close geopolitical alignment between both countries, must have been considered provocative by US policymakers[40].

The subsequent rejection of Bashar to do business with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar is the most crucial regional factor to explain external support for the Syrian insurgency by the regional opponents of Syria. In addition, the US "withdrawal" from Iraq, always incomplete and by now already reversed to a large extent, is the most crucial reason for US interest at regional rebalancing by removing the Syrian president from power. This also means to send new US troops into the Arab world, including Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In fact, such military escalation is openly acknowledged in the US media as an ongoing concern and shows that Obama's promises about withdrawing from Iraq have been broken[41].

The Political Nature of the Syrian Uprising at the Domestic Level

It is certainly true that geopolitical analysis delivers only a partial picture of reality. However, the events of the so-called "Arab spring" have underlined that accounts stressing domestic drivers of uprisings in Arab states and North Africa were equally unable to provide convincing analysis. Although this paper focuses on geopolitical factors, the current section attempts a brief and "neutral" description of the domestic origins of the Syrian uprising.

To begin with, propaganda works generally by selecting "facts" that become isolated from the larger context to which these "facts" belong. Such "facts" are used to construct simple narratives following the logic of good

[40] I. Black, "Iran and Syria Put On a Show of Unity in Alliance Clinton Finds 'Troubling'", *Guardian*, February 25, 2010.

[41] In this context, the current Emirati ambassador to the US, Yousef al-Otaiba, is quoted stating that "Americans and the Emiratis were in agreement about the need for intervention in Yemen – and more specifically about having a military presence in Aden", see M. Mazzetti, E. Schmitt, "Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen", *New York Times*, March 13, 2016. At the moment of finishing this paper in July 2016, the Obama administration has moved new troops to practically all conflict spots in the Middle East region, including Yemen, to allow maximum freedom of choice for the successor administration to escalate existing commitments. In the words of one US observer: "Starting wars under murky circumstances and then watching limited commitments expand exponentially is by now so ingrained in America's global strategy that it's barely noticed", see P. Van Buren, "5 lessons American Has Failed to Learn from the Iraq War", *Salon*, May 17, 2016, http://www.salon.com/2016/05/17/5_ways_iraq_and_syria_continue_to_haunt_america_partner/, originally published at tomdispatch.com (accessed July 20, 2016).

versus evil in which critical scrutiny is considered unnecessary in order to establish the "essence" of events. The major element of propaganda is patient repetition of *apparent* facts: they are turned over time into *established* facts by the very process of repetition. An example is the claim that the Syrian army has used chemical weapons against domestic opponents, which is generally treated as an uncontested fact by the western media. Thus, discursive repetition produces the exclusion of counterfactual evidence and reality, as filtered by media discourse, produces an "essence" of events that becomes accepted as the foundation for further discourse.

In the context of the Syrian uprising, the following claims were turned into facts by the exclusion of counterfactual evidence: (1) the Arab Spring is a pro-democracy movement across the Middle East; (2) the Syrian opposition is part of the pro-democracy movement; (3) the Syrian regime has lost the support of "the people" and "the people want the fall of the regime"; (4) the Syrian regime is based exclusively on repression and cannot be reformed domestically; (5) support for the opposition will break the regime, which is isolated from the people, and will issue in a more democratic state in Syria. Very briefly, each of these "facts" has never been more than a claim, and counterfactual evidence has been written out of the western media discourse. To begin with, most Arab Spring movements were ad-hoc coalitions of Islamist, leftist and liberal democratic forces, challenging various authoritarian regimes that were in turn very different in terms of their political support base and foreign backing. In all states other than Tunisia, the movements were either quickly repressed (Bahrain), produced a renewal of military rule (Egypt), or resulted in failed statehood (post-Gaddafi Libya).

In the Syrian context, the five "facts" indicated above need to be clarified as follows: (1) the profile of the protest movements in the streets of Syria was from the beginning mostly Islamist and the slogan "No to Iran, no to Hezbollah, we want a leader who fears god" [i.e. a Sunni Islamist figure, rather than Bashar] expressed the movement's intention to create an Islamist state that would exclude Syria's minorities. The support for the protests in the streets, which included almost from the beginning armed attacks on the Syrian state, was strongly concentrated in rural areas and in parts of Syria in which local Sunnis had tribal links with neighboring conservative Arab countries opposing the Syrian leadership. At no point did the majority (or even a large share) of the Syrian Sunnis join the opposition, nor did the movement enjoy support from any of Syria's religious and ethnic minorities with the exception of a tiny minority; (2) the Islamist nature of the opposition movement meant that leftist and liberal democratic components were only present at the margins and they failed to play any significant role. Some of the leftist and liberal groups supported the Syrian government, either as part of the "official opposition" engaging in dialogue with the regime or in joining the government directly,

while other elements could never break out from their own political isolation[42]; (3) the Syrian regime has engaged in impressive mobilizations across the country, notably the pro-government street rallies of the years 2011 and 2012 that were the largest political rallies in the history of the country, in the 2012 constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections, and in the 2014 presidential and 2016 parliamentary elections. On each of these occasions, the degree of political mobilization for the government was very high, especially when compared with developments in other Arab countries, such as the 2014 Egyptian presidential elections, in which rates of participation were very low[43]. In comparison with pro-government rallies, opposition rallies were much smaller and also small in comparison with the "Arab Spring" mobilizations in other countries. This observation was either explained away by claiming that government repression was to blame (even at times, when the Syrian state had withdrawn from opposition territories, such as in sectors of the city of Homs at various points), or by claiming high numbers of participants in fictitious opposition rallies; (4) domestically-driven democratic reforms were never explored. Contrary to western claims that the regime offered "too little too late", one needs to stress that reform projects and efforts to engage in dialogue were taking place directly after the uprising started. For example, the "Consultative Meeting for National Dialogue" in Syria issued a resolution that supported "Dialogue [as] the only way leading the country to ending the crisis", and the Syrian Vice-President Farouk al-Shara said on this occasion that he hoped to see the "transformation of Syria into a pluralistic, democratic state where its citizens are equal and participate in the formation of their homeland's future"[44]. However, there was never any willingness on the part of the Islamist groups to engage in dialogue with the state, which in turn weakened those parts of the regime that genuinely intended to offer it; (5) finally, western and conservative Arab state's financing of the insurgency amounted to support for Islamist groups rather than support for democracy.

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[42] In particular, the group "Building the Syrian State" appears to represent a liberal-democratic program. It has neither followed the regime nor has it joined the insurgency. Yet it never received any attention from those claiming to advance "democratization" in the Middle East, nor has it gained recognition in western media discourse. In short, the failure of the group to influence events shows the weakness of liberal democratic forces in Syria.

[43] The pro-government bloc in Syria is much larger than the highly factionalized armed insurgency with its large non-Syrian component or any of the political opposition groups. It might be argued that many Syrians do no longer support any political current, since people must spend all their energy in order to survive poverty and devastation issued in by the war. Certainly, the long-term political future of Syria will be shaped by the Syrian people's judgement about who is to be blamed for the country's destruction.

[44] Syrian Arab News Agency, "Dialogue Only Way to Ending Crisis, Comprehensive National Dialogue Conference", July 12, 2011.

To sum up, the Syrian conflict would have ended a long time ago with the reassertion of the Syrian government's authority, based on its superior domestic support base, if the geopolitical factors would not have motivated the US and the regional Sunni powers to deliver arms and offer political support for the Islamist groups to turn the domestic Syrian conflict into a full-scale transnational war with ongoing local, regional, and global repercussions.

Transnational War in Syria: Local, Regional, and Global Factors

This section provides a short analysis of the major periods of the Syrian conflict, which started in mid-March 2011 with protests against the Syrian government in some cities, especially the Southern Syrian city of Daraa, and has subsequently escalated into a large-scale and sustained transnational war. This conflict has been described at various times as a civil war, international civil war, proxy war, and as Syria's global war. The number of parties in the armed conflict has increased over time, while the political meaning of the conflict has become increasingly contested. In particular, the initial division between pro- and anti-government forces has been replaced by a number of parallel wars that point far beyond Syria's territory.

At present, one might identify wars between the Syrian government and Islamist insurgents; wars between different groups of Islamist insurgents; wars between Islamist insurgents and the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) terrorist organization; wars between the Syrian government and IS; air strikes of the US against IS in Iraq and Syria that appear to have had no impact on the latter, while more recent Russian air strikes, since September 2015, appear to have had a significant impact; air strikes of Turkey on Kurds in Syria and Iraq; clashes between Kurdish militias (YPG) and the IS terrorist group as well as Turkish-supported militias, some of this fighting with the direct participation of US soldiers, possibly on more than one side, which in turn is based on recent US efforts to rebrand the Kurdish militias as "Syrian Democratic Forces" (SDF), a move that is in turn opposed by Erdogan's Turkish government; wars between various other ethnic and sectarian militias; air strikes of Israel on Syrian government targets; and Israeli medical and logistical assistance to Islamist insurgents in the Syrian Golan, to name but a few[45]. In addition, one must also stress the "hybrid" nature of the conflict, in which military escalation proceeds in parallel with propaganda warfare, economic sanctions, and permanent rebalancing of the groups fighting on the ground by external powers, especially

[45] R. Ahren, "Israel Acknowledges it is Helping Syrian Rebel Fighters", *The Times of Israel*, June 29, 2015.

Russia, Hezbollah and Iran on the side of the Syrian government, and the US and the Sunni conservative Arab states on the side of the insurgents.

The rebalancing is in turn balanced, i.e. the outside powers know that they essentially maintain the ability of the different groups to sustain the fighting on the ground, rather than to allow any of the parties to "win". In fact, the high number of actors in Syria's transnational war makes it logically difficult to conceive any clear-cut outcome of the conflict. The scenario of a failed state is therefore the default option, which will in turn destabilize neighboring countries, as already demonstrated in the case of Libya and Iraq. In addition, the Syrian refugee crisis inflicts high costs on neighboring countries and the EU countries, both economically and in terms of undermining security efforts to stop the cross-border proliferation of Islamist groups. Notably, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar remain largely unaffected by the Syrian refugee crisis as they have refused to open their borders[46]. In sum, it is currently impossible to predict if the conflict will end soon or will continue for another decade or more. This section provides a brief periodization of the conflict and explains how local, regional, and international factors have interacted in each period.

The following ten-stage periodization is suggested: (1) initial protests and slow-scale militarization (March 2011-July 2011); (2) the NATO bombing campaign in Libya produces the destruction of the Gaddafi regime and subsequent Libyan state failure. The result is large-scale proliferation of arms from Libyan depots to Islamist groups and especially the Syrian insurgents, under the guidance of western and Arab intelligence agencies and delivered via Turkey. In turn, a steady escalation toward a full-scale war-like situation in many areas of Syria follows due to the increased military strength of the Islamist extremists. Finally, the assassination of the Syrian Defense and Deputy Defense Ministers and of other high-ranking Syrian government officials in an explosion in Damascus on 18 July is expected to issue in the "Syrian revolution" but fails to have the expected impact since the Syrian state continues to function (August 2011-July 2012); (3) further escalation of fighting across the country. This produces the growth of pro-government militias to balance out the increased strength of the Islamists and ends with the recapture of the strategic city of Qusayr by the Syrian army and Hezbollah (August 2012-June 2013); (4) further escalation and proliferation of Islamist groups. By now, the US military supplies for the insurgents are openly acknowledged for the first time (July 2013-December 2013); (5) IS enters the Syrian war (January) and the "Nusra Front" (i.e. the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda) engages in sectarian attacks on the Syrian-Armenian town of Kessab from bases in Turkey (March); the

[46] The Gulf sheikdoms and Saudi Arabia claim, against their own better knowledge, that they house Syrian refugees on their territory. In fact, they count pre-crisis Syrian migrant workers employed in construction and services as "refugees" in order to obscure their political role in the Syrian crisis.

Syrian army recaptures Kessab and Syrian multi-candidate presidential elections take place (June) (January-June 2014); (6) US air strikes on IS in Syria and Iraq start since September 2014; they have little or no impact but allow the US to bring back ground troops into Iraq. Some further Syrian army advances occur until app. February 2015 (July 2014-February 2015); (7) increased coordination of Islamist insurgency groups financed and supplied by Qatar, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, e.g. "Southern Front" (supplied from Jordanian territory), "Nusra Front" and "Army of Conquest" (supplied from Turkish territory), pointing to the tactical realignment of different Islamist currents on the ground and resulting in advances against the Syrian army (March 2015-September 2015); (8) the Russian military mission enters Syria based on an invitation by the Syrian government and targets IS and other Islamist groups with heavy airstrikes that restore momentum for the Syrian army (September 2015-March 2016); (9) the declaration of a Syrian ceasefire by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), co-chaired by Russia and the US, occurs in late February, which is followed by the announcement of the partial withdrawal of the Russian air force detachment from Syria in mid-March; this produces a decline in fighting but is used by the sponsors of the Islamist groups to resupply them. These resupply includes anti-aircraft rockets in an effort to strengthen their capabilities against the Syrian army and Russian air force; (10) the announcement of "'concrete steps' to ensure a long-term ceasefire in Syria" between Russia and the US is issued during a meeting between the foreign ministers Sergey Lavrov and John Kerry in Moscow on July 16 (March to July 2016)[47].

Looking at the periodization – that is only indicative, highlighting some of the major events – one should stress that the conflict would have already ended a long time ago with a "victory" of the Syrian government in the absence of foreign intervention. The Syrian government is the only actor with a conventional army, air force, superior local intelligence, and deep roots in state and society. However, the western mainstream media have always claimed that the Assad regime was just about to break down, thereby inviting further efforts to tip the balance by military means and by linking up with Islamist insurgents. In this context, the western media were in turn influenced by efforts and large-scale spending on the part of the conservative Sunni states engaging in psychological warfare on Syria. It is therefore significant to stress that external

[47] "US, Russia Agree on Concrete Steps on Long-term Ceasefire in Syria – Lavrov", July 16, 2016, https://www.rt.com/news/351626-lavrov-kerry-syria-ceasefire/ (accessed July 20, 2016). The "agreement" comes at a moment in time when the Syrian army is advancing against the insurgents. However, all previous Syrian army advances have been rebalanced by new supplies of advanced weapons to the insurgents. It should be noted that the supply of anti-aircraft rockets to the insurgents is a major threat to international civilian aviation. It is too early to judge if the Moscow agreement between Russia and the US is going to influence the behavior of the next US administration.

balancing in different fields (not just with regard to the military situation) constitutes the major mechanism to regulate the Syrian war and to keep it going. Any successful peace talks would therefore demand all three conflict levels (local, regional, and global) to be jointly addressed. At present, this continues to be unlikely, although progress toward a "neither war nor peace" scenario might de-escalate the situation if Russia and the US were ready to collaborate. There are, however, reasons to assume that such collaboration would focus only on short-term interests.

The remainder of this section briefly highlights the main developments in each of the ten periods outlined above, looking in turn at local, regional, and global factors. In the first period (March-July 2011), the anti-government rallies were claimed to amount to a "peaceful revolution" in Syria. At the local level, anti-government mobilization was said to be met on a large scale with government repression. This description of the situation was quickly accepted in the western media discourse and constitutes the greatest – and only ever – political success of the opposition groups. This ignored the fact that the opposition rallies entailed nearly from the very beginning violence against representatives of the Syrian state and large-scale casualties amongst the police force, the military and pro-government civilians. For example, on March 20, 2011 (three days after the first anti-government rallies in Daraa), "seven police officers were killed, and the Baath Party Headquarters and courthouse [in the city of Daraa] were torched"[48]. In the western media, "peaceful opposition

[48] It is still difficult to reconstruct the *actual* events in Daraa in late March 2011. An early Israeli media source, G. Kahn, "Syria: Seven Police Killed, Buildings Torched in Protests", March 21, 2011, http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/143026#.Ve09qZsVhFp (accessed July 20, 2016), might be interpreted as an effort to make the Syrian authorities look weak. This is also suggested by a source from a different section of the media spectrum, S. Narwani, "Syria: The Hidden Massacre", *Russia Today*, https://www.rt.com/op-edge/157412-syria-hidden-massacre-2011/ (accessed June 20, 2016), which quotes an anonymous Daraa citizen stating that "[a]t that time, the [Syrian] government did not want to show they are weak and the opposition did not want to show they are armed". What is uncontested in different sources is that the Daraa Baath Party headquarters was burned down 72 hours after the first anti-government rallies took place and that there were casualties on both sides. A more recent source, J. Marshall, "Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War", Consortiumnews.com, July 20, 2015, https://consortiumnews.com/2015/07/20/hidden-origins-of-syrias-civil-war/ (accessed July 20, 2016), provides links to a number of other relevant sources about the early conflict. Some of these links, such as the one relating to *Al Jazeera*, the voice of the anti-Syrian government Qatari royal family, and notorious for its disinformation on Syria, should in turn be read critically. Moreover, the online comment section of Marshall's article provides some useful clarifications on the original research. What aspires from any serious and critical evaluation of the 2011 Daraa events is that they cannot be adequately summed up as being exclusively due to Syrian government brutality. In fact, who is to blame would require a genuinely independent inquiry – which is unlikely to ever occur, as the subsequent violence has turned the Daraa events into little more than a footnote.

rallies" and "government repression" quickly became the only news worth reporting, however. In this context, the Qatar-based and royal family-financed *Al Jazeera* TV station became so one-sided in its news coverage and so shameless in pushing freely invented news about events in Syria that many journalists resigned in protest from the station and its reputation was damaged beyond repair[49].

In the second period, the Gaddafi regime in Libya was brought down in August 2011, following on the NATO bombing campaign. This resulted in the proliferation of weapons from Libyan arms depots across the region. In parallel, US President Obama demanded in a "rhetorical escalation" on 18 August for the first time President Assad's resignation[50]. There was a steady increase in the levels of violence in Syria that must be attributed – at least to a large extent – to the delivery of weapons to the insurgents:

> "With help from the C.I.A., Arab governments and Turkey have sharply increased their military aid to Syria's opposition fighters … expanding a secret airlift of arms and equipment for the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad …. The airlift, which began on a small scale *in early 2012* and continued intermittently through last fall, expanded into a steady and much heavier flow late last year, the data [based on air traffic control] shows"[51].

The insurgents generally hoped that the US and/or NATO would engage in air strikes to destroy the Assad regime. This hope was due to the sponsorship of western governments for meetings of the so-called "Friends of Syria". During these meetings, western government officials mingled with Syrian opposition groups that were financed by the Sunni states and controlled

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Crucially, subsequent political developments in places as different as Egypt, Ukraine, or Turkey have shown that the contest for power in the streets quickly produces an escalation of violence and is manipulated by domestic and international actors. In places other than Syria, this has not been used to vindicate the large-scale arming of insurgents.

49 V.P. Haran, "Roots of the Syrian Crisis", *IPCS Special Report 181*, March 2016, New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, http://www.ipcs.org/pdf_file/issue/RootsoftheSyrianCrisis_VPHaran.pdf (accessed July 20, 2016), p. 11.

50 S. Wilson, J. Warrick, "Assad Must Go, Obama Says", *Washington Post*, August 18, 2011.

51 C.J. Chivers, E. Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.", *New York Times*, March 24, 2013, emphasis added. The two quoted Times journalists failed to follow up on their own story, which subsequently dropped from public attention. The same paper has ever since, especially between 2013 and 2015, been filled with reporting about "non-lethal aid" to the insurgents and other disinformation. Clearly, the role of the *Times* as the "paper of record" in the Syrian crisis has been the opposite of what it claims to do, i.e. news about the possibly largest ever covert action of the CIA in alliance with other intelligence agencies in the Middle East and the large-scale spending that was undertaken in pursuit of regime change in Syria is only covered after the event, reluctantly, and in response to other sources that have already removed "plausible deniability".

by their intelligence agencies. However, the decision of EU states to recognize claims of such bodies to form the "legitimate government of Syria" never produced any political unity on the part of the opposition. Instead, the opposition bodies subsequently dropped from international attention and have not had any impact on the situation within Syria since then. A new climax in the crisis was reached on 18 July when the Syrian Defense Secretary, Deputy Defense Secretary and others died in an explosion in Damascus. On 19 July, the battle for Aleppo started when insurgents entered the city from the surrounding countryside. This subsequently resulted in the large-scale devastation of Syria's largest city that had not previously been affected by the violence elsewhere. The western media discourse by now suggested that the Syrian regime was about to dissolve due to defections, while the Syrian army was claimed to break up along sectarian lines, with the Sunni sections turning against the regime.

In the third period between August 2012 and June 2013, it became clear that the Syrian government did in fact not suffer any significant defections. Moreover, the Syrian army, increasingly backed up by Hezbollah and rising numbers of pro-government militias, continued the fight against the insurgency despite of very high casualty rates. The period started with US President Obama's announcement, in August 2012, of a "red line" in case of the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons that would change his "calculus" on the conflict. There were subsequently many claims by the insurgents that Syrian government forces had used chemical weapons on the battlefield, but none of these claims was backed up by conclusive evidence. The recapture of the strategic city of Qusayr in June 2013 by the Syrian army and Hezbollah "raised fears in Washington that large parts of the rebellion could be on the verge of collapse"[52]. This potential turning point in the conflict resulted in a major push on the part of the US and the Sunni states to resupply the insurgents with new weapons. These weapons deliveries were now also publicly acknowledged for the first time; although they had already been in place since at least January 2012.

Between August and December 2013, the war escalated further and it appeared that direct US intervention with airstrikes on Syrian government targets, or even clashes between the US and Russia over Syria, would be possible. The US and Russia engaged in parallel in a naval build-up on the Syrian coast. At the same time, claims about the use of chemical weapons on the part of the Syrian government further proliferated in the western media, while other observers of the situation in Syria pointed out that the insurgents might have conquered facilities to produce chemical weapons, or could have been supplied with such weapons by Turkish intelligence keen to draw the US

[52] M. Mazzetti, M. Gordon, M. Landler, "U.S. is Said to Plan to Send Weapons to Syrian Rebels", *New York Times*, June 13, 2013.

into direct intervention on the ground[53]. The major turning point was Obama's apparent willingness to go to war over Syria that was only stopped after the surprise diplomatic initiative on the part of Russia to advance a deal between Putin and Obama on the decommissioning of the Syrian chemical weapons under international supervision. This deal was immediately accepted by the Syrian government, on 10 September, and resulted in the subsequent decommissioning of these weapons.

From the Syrian point of view, the handing over of the chemical weapons was one-sided, since these weapons had been procured as a deterrent against possible ground attacks on the country by the superior Israeli army that in turn had access to a large WMD arsenal. With the advantage of hindsight, the Syrian leadership acted wisely since the weapons had little value as a deterrent and could have potentially fallen into the hands of the insurgents. In any case, the deal ended the mutual standoff between the US and Russia and avoided further escalation of the conflict in the direction of a large regional or global war for the time being. At this point, western analysts had also become fully aware that the insurgents were overwhelmingly Islamist, often of non-Syrian origin, and that they were not controlled by any set of civilian opposition leaders[54]. Thus, the marketing of a "war for democracy" was no longer credible.

In 2014, the IS terrorists joined the insurgency in Syria on a larger scale and started fighting the Syrian government and other insurgents. In March, the "Nusra Front" entered Syria from Turkey and attacked the Syrian-Armenian town of Kessab, located in close proximity to the Turkish border. The intense collaboration between Turkish intelligence and the Islamist terror groups became well-documented, although the western media failed to further inquire into these connections. In June 2014, Bashar al-Assad was re-elected in Syria's presidential elections that were characterized by a fairly high degree of popular participation. Following the elections, which underlined that the government continued to enjoy significant levels of support, the violence further escalated and the US started to engage in air strikes against IS in Syria since September 2014. Since IS had earlier moved into the Syrian oil fields, mostly located in the northern Kurdish region of Syria and close to the Iraqi border, these

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[53] A. Baker, "Syria's Civil War. The Mystery Behind a Deadly Chemical Attack", *Time*, April 1, 2013. Baker's story is said to be based on interviews with Syrian informers and quotes Mohammad Sabbagh, the owner of the "only chlorine gas manufacturing plant in Syria" stating that his factory had been occupied by insurgents. This story was not followed up in the western media, which has instead relied on sources originating with the insurgents, who claimed in turn that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons. For the larger context, see S.H. Hersh, "The Red Line and the Rat Line", *London Review of Books*, April 17, 2014.

[54] IHS Aerospace, Defense & Security, "Analysis: Syria's Insurgent Landscape", September 2013, http://www.ihs.com/pdfs/Syrias-Insurgent-Landscape-oct-2013.pdf (accessed September 1, 2015).

bombardments resulted in the destruction of some of Syria's oil infrastructure, thereby further undermining the country's economic base.

Next, the period since March 2015 witnessed further adjustment of western narratives about the Syrian conflict. First, the capture and subsequent large-scale destruction of the historical sites in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra by the IS terrorists (in turn liberated by the Syrian army on 27 March 2016) showed that the Syrian government and military were increasingly weakened. Second, it became obvious that Erdogan's Turkey had been engaged in a long-standing program of arms supplies to the Islamist groups, including IS, and had accepted oil smuggling from Syria to Turkey on a large scale, which in turn financed IS terrorism[55]. This was in addition to IS and Nusra Front funding from Saudi sources that has been duly acknowledged in the US media[56]. While this support might have proceeded in an indirect manner, by supplying groups that in turn supplied IS, it was now clear that IS received its logistical and military supplies from networks in Turkey and Iraq. These networks were in turn connected with other conservative Sunni states on the financial, military, and intelligence planes. They all worked in turn closely with the CIA in coordinating the exchange of intelligence. In addition, the US provided a budget "approaching 1 billion dollar a year" for training of its own sets of "rebels" and amounting to "roughly 100.000 dollar per year for every anti-Assad rebel who has gone through the program"[57].

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[55] D.L. Philips, "Research Paper: ISIS-Turkey Links", *Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University*, September 11, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke_b_6128950.html (accessed July 20, 2016).

[56] B. Norton, "Saudi Arabia Funds and Exports Islamic Extremism: The Truth behind the Toxic U.S. Relationship with the Theocratic Monarchy", *Salon*, January 7, 2016, http://www.salon.com/2016/01/06/saudi_arabia_funds_and_exports_islamic_extremism_the_truth_behind_the_toxic_u_s_relationship_with_the_theocratic_nation/ (accessed July 20, 2016).

[57] The US-funded "moderate rebels", such as the "First FSA Battalion", have in the meantime disappeared into the Syrian insurgency landscape. The very high amount of US funding that is unaccounted for in the context of support of "moderates" in CIA-led "train-and-equip" programs in 2013 and 2014 left one US general, Lloyd Austin III, in doubt whether "four or five" fighters were still under the guidance of the US authorities. See A.S. Ahmed, "Only '4 or 5' U.S.-Trained Rebels in Syria? Not Exactly", *Huffington Post*, September 16, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/four-five-fighters-pentagon-syria_us_55f9ad27e4b0d6492d63ed49 (accessed July 20, 2016); G. Miller, K. DeYoung, "Secret CIA Effort in Syria Faces Large Funding Cut", *Washington Post*, June 12, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/lawmakers-move-to-curb-1-billion-cia-program-to-train-syrian-rebels/2015/06/12/b0f45a9e-1114-11e5-adec-e82f8395c032_story.html (accessed July 20, 2016). The point here is not to stress perceived incompetency on the part of the CIA, or the complete lack of accountability over large amounts of funding for covert action that was noted but not sanctioned by observers in the US Congress. Rather, it appears more likely that the training of "moderate" insurgents was little more than a sideshow for other kinds of

This increased transparency about the role of Turkey and its intelligence agencies in the logistical and military supply of the Syrian insurgency was in turn partially due to a battle of different currents within the Turkish state apparatus. On the one hand, Erdogan and his Justice and Development party (an organization with close links to the Muslim Brotherhood in other countries) used the resources of the Turkish state to supply the Syrian insurgency with military and logistical support. On the other hand, the three other main political parties in Turkey all oppose Erdogan's Syria policy, and he has also fallen out with the Gülen movement, a Sunni religious reform group named after its leader Fethullah Gülen. The latter used to collaborate with Erdogan but has been opposed to him in recent years. This conflict produced in turn a campaign by Erdogan to exclude Gülen supporters from the state apparatus, which took off after a 2013 effort of Turkish prosecutors, claimed to be close to Gülen, to start inquiries into corruption among Erdogan's close collaborators.

It also resulted in Erdogan's decision to take over *Zaman*, a Turkish newspaper with links to Gülen and a remarkably well-balanced editorial line on the Syrian conflict in its English-language edition *Today's Zaman*, on March 4, 2016, in order to turn it into a government mouthpiece. Apart from arresting journalists, the Turkish government also swiftly dismantled the papers online presence, which showed the strength of the Turkish authorities in "unpublishing" unwanted news coverage. One of the main reasons for Erdogan's decision to repress the opposition media has been the latter's coverage of the delivery of weapons by the Turkish MIT intelligence service to the Islamist insurgents in Syria[58]. News coverage of conflicts between the MIT and the regular Turkish police force over weapons hidden in delivery vans driven by MIT personnel on the Turkish side of Syria's border resulted in the arrest of the *Cumhuriyet* journalists Can Dündar and Erdem Gül, among others[59]. In June 2016, Erdogan's party used its majority in parliament to remove parliamentary immunity from anti-Erdogan parliamentarians, altogether a third of all lawmakers. This move targeted in particular the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP).

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supplies of the actual insurgency. One can only hope that the history of recent CIA activities in Syria might be written by a self-critical participant at some future point.

58 No stated author, "Turkish Court Arrest 17 Soldiers who Stopped Syria-bound Intelligence Trucks", *Hürriyet*, April 10, 2015, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-court-arrests-17-soldiers-who-stopped-syria-bound-intelligence-trucks.aspx?PageID=238&NID=80872&NewsCatID=509 (accessed July 20, 2016).

59 According to another prosecuted Turkish journalist, Arzu Yıldız, "the government can manipulate everything, the pictures, the media and so on. But the reports I have authored are the official evidence that the government has delivered weapons to Dschihadist groups in Syria". E. Caylan, "Druck auf Journalisten: Die Waffen des Staates", *taz.de*, May 27, 2016 (accessed July 20, 2016).

Finally, the Turkish coup events of 15 July 2016, described by Erdogan as a "gift from Allah", have triggered what amounts to the largest political cleansing operation in recent Turkish memory with dismissals and arrests of tens of thousands in the Turkish army, police force, legal and education system, and virtually all other branches of the Turkish state. At least two dozen newspapers and websites have been closed down and Erdogan's assertion that these moves target Gülen supporters serves as a convenient fig leaf. In fact, the repression is so enormous that it cannot be explained by efforts to go after those involved in the coup, and lists of "enemies of the state" that are being "purged" are so extensive that they must have been prepared long in advance of recent events. While Erdogan currently appears to be back in the driving seat, not least due to his militant Islamist support base in the streets, he also appears to have lost all sense of self-control and does no longer pretend to offer anything other than authoritarian rule. His Syria policy remains a failure and his dilemma about whether to continue to target the Syrian government or to focus more on repression of Kurdish nationalism still remains in place.

The outcome of the Syrian tragedy as it stands today is as follows: the arming of the Syrian insurgency has been coordinated by Washington acting in its traditional role as principal of the conservative Sunni regimes since at least the beginning of 2012. The US media has failed to report adequately on US policy – with minor improvements since 2016, especially due to the countervailing role played by Russia in Syria – and has instead been keen to follow up on made-up news about the supply of "moderate" rebels with so-called "non-lethal assistance". In a debunking of the official US media discourse, worth quoting at length, it was pointed out that:

> "[T]he scale of the material aid reportedly delivered to the armed Syrian opposition by the U.S. and its allies…dwarfs anything discussed in the government's public narrative. Exact figures are not available…but a few comparisons are illuminating. The delivery of just *twelve* antitank missile launchers to Harakat Hazm [so-called 'moderate' insurgents] consumed nearly a month of press coverage in the public narrative in early 2014. In contrast, if the figures from SIPRI [Stockholm International Peace Research Institute] are to be trusted, the CIA helped organize the airlift of 3,500 *tons* of heavy weaponry in a single operation from January 2012-March 2013"[60].

The same author suggested that the difference between the public narrative about reluctant US involvement in Syria and the reality of US direct and indirect arming of the insurgency was due to the following reason:

[60] J. Veldkamp, "Narrative and Reality in United States Aid to the Syrian Armed Opposition: 2012-2014", paper presented at the 2015 Middle East History and Theory Conference, University of Chicago, May 1-2, 2015, p. 11, original emphasis.

> "If the U.S. began cautiously trickling arms to trusted groups in Syria in June or September 2013, after nearly two and a half years of civil war, then it is a responsible actor grappling with a difficult situation. If the U.S. helped deliver thousands of tons of weapons to the opposition from (at least) nearly the beginning of the armed conflict, an opposition that quickly became dominated by extremists, then it is a party to a vicious proxy war with sectarian overtones"[61].

In the context of US strategy on Syria, all local Sunni regimes (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) have been weakened by their lengthy and so far failed campaign to destroy the Syrian regime. In the case of the latter two states, this weakening has been acknowledged by the retirement of the older generation within the royal courts and their replacement with a younger generation of princes. In the case of Erdogan, his political survival appears to depend on escalating the conflict with Kurdish nationalists in order to produce a Turkish national unity wave to keep him in office. The very fact that this "plan" has been discussed at length in the until the beginning of 2016 still relatively free Turkish media makes his long-term success less likely, although he might succeed in turning Turkey into a garrison state.

As for Russia, Iran, and the Baghdad government in Iraq, these countries are aware that a breakdown of the Syrian state would issue in a failed state and would result in the break-up of the geopolitical alliance that has kept Syria out of the western sphere of influence since the mid-1950s. The breakdown of the Syrian regime would also question the continuing existence of Iraq as a unified state, would result in efforts to remove the Hezbollah movement as a significant political factor in Lebanon, and would put further pressure on Iran. In any case, the destruction of the regional power balance would issue in new conflicts that would further weaken all regional powers other than Israel.

Conclusion: From the Eisenhower Doctrine to the Transnational War in Syria

The conflict in Syria since 2011 has turned into the most dramatic power contest in post-Cold War history. It points to the continuity and further escalation of local, regional, and global geopolitical conflict in the 21st century and questions humanity's ability to use the remaining global resources in a manner that will sustain a future worth living. At the moment of writing, the outcome of the crisis is the multi-dimensional destruction of Syria. To put it differently, what is being fought over has been broken and humanity's heritage,

[61] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

as represented by Syria's unique past going back to the earliest high cultures, is being dismantled. What is the ultimate reason for this disaster?

The geopolitical view suggests that disturbances in the balance of power issue in conflicts if actors believe that they can realize gains at the expense of others. In the Syrian context, there are multiple starting points to explain why the domestic actors in Syria have become victims of forces that are related to the larger regional and global planes. These start with the direct political environment of Syria, i.e. the Zionist colonization in neighboring Palestine and the foundation of the Zionist state as an ally of the US, when the latter emerged as the new main power in the Middle East in the post-WW2 period. Syria therefore lacked a geopolitical patron in the period between decolonization and the emergence of the Cold War in the Middle East. This left the country vulnerable in comparison to most of its neighbors and triggered the subsequent alignment with the weaker of the two superpowers, the Soviet Union, due to the lack of any viable alternative[62]. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 once again resulted in the loss of geopolitical patronage for Syria and the decision of US policymakers to destroy the Iraqi Baath regime appeared to further isolate Syria in the region. Last but not least, the long-standing effort on the part of Israel to "deconstruct" Syria and Iraq, the two last Arab contender states still challenging Israel's conquest of Arab lands, must be seen as crucial to understand how Syria's internal conflict has played out.

What, then, explains the escalation of the Syrian conflict from a geopolitical point of view? To be sure, any singling out of "main factors" is bound to reduce complexity and fails to fully represent reality. However, it is possible to deduce a hierarchy of motivational factors to explain the behavior of the seven most important state executives with regard to the Syrian conflict, namely of the US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Israel on the side of the challengers of the Syrian regime; and of Iran and Russia on the side of its defenders (see Table 2).

[62] For an account of Syria's turn to the Soviet Union, see J.M Dostal, "Syria and the Great Powers (1946-1958): How Western Power Politics Pushed the Country Toward the Soviet Union", *Syria Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2015, pp. 7-52, https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/issue/viewIssue/127/1 (accessed July 20, 2016).

Table 2

Geopolitical Goals of Seven Countries in the Syrian Conflict

	(1) US	(2) Saudi Arabia	(3) Turkey	(4) Qatar	(5) Israel	(6) Iran	(7) Russia
Ideal result (first preference)	replacement of Assad regime with Sunni pro-US regime	replacement of Assad regime with Sunni-Wahhabist regime	replacement of Assad regime with Muslim Brotherhood regime	replacement of Assad regime with Muslim Brotherhood regime	split-up of Syria into cantons along ethnic and sectarian lines	protection of Iran's position in Syria	protection of Russia's position in Syria
Acceptable result (second preference)	break-up of the triple alliance between Syria, Iraq and Iran	same	same	same	same	maintenance of triple alliance between Syria, Iraq, and Iran	Collaboration with the triple alliance as a means to check US regional dominance
	a very weak Syria that ceases to be a local geopolitical actor	same	same	same	same	maintenance of a unified Syrian state	maintenance of a unified Syrian state
Other important factor	increasing level of arms sales to the Arab oil monarchies	anti-Shia campaign across the Middle East	creation of a Turkish-controlled buffer zone in Syria to control Kurdish nationalism: avoidance of 'de-facto 'Kurdish state		maintenance of lobbying power with US state executives	improvement of Iran's bargaining politics in the Middle East and with the great powers	improvement of Russia's bargaining position in the Middle East
	tactical use of some sectors of Kurdish Nationalism	military build-up against Iran			maintanance of regional military dominance	strengthening of the triple alliance with Iraq and Syria to balance Saudi Arabia	maintenance of Syria as Russia’s oldest geopolitical ally (since 1955) in the Middle East
	pipeline projects across Syrian territory	same	same	same	continuation of the occupation of the Syrian Golan Hights		
Actual results until July 2016	failure to turn local 'moderate rebels' into a significant force	military overstretch (Yemen) underlines military weakness	destruction of Syria's economy removes potential economic competitor	decline of soft power due to the loss of credibility of Al Jazeera	further strengthening of Israeli military superiority	further strengthening of Iran's position with Bagdad government	introduction of Russia's naval force into the Mediterranean
	increased power over conservative Sunni states	potential spillover of external failure to the domestic polity	new war against Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Syria and Iraq	loss of regional influence due to the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood ally in Egypt	further expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories	increase in regional geopolitical strength	Russia exercises diplomatic leadership on Syria

From the point of view of today's US policymakers, the main factor that points back to the Eisenhower Doctrine is the effort to defend the country's position as major, and ideally only, external balancer in the Middle East. In the current context, the main danger for the US regional position would be the consolidation of the triple alliance between Syria, Iraq, and Iran that was in turn only made possible due to the US decision, under the Bush, Jr. administration, to take out Saddam's Sunni regime in Iraq. Yet the 2003 invasion triggered the rise of a Shia-dominated and largely pro-Iranian Iraqi government. This development provided the missing link for the geopolitical emergence of a land bridge reaching from Syria via Iraq to Iran and from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. Further consolidation of the triple alliance would certainly be the worst case scenario from the US point of view, amounting to full-scale geopolitical failure in the region[63]. Thus, the tactical withdrawal of most US troops from Iraq during the second Obama presidency – that has by now been reversed in the context of "fighting IS" – made the effort to "turn" Syria and to break it from its allies all the more urgent. (In this context, many US policymakers still remember how they regained control of Egypt in the late 1970s and would like to repeat the scenario.)

For the US, the ideal outcome of the Syrian war would be the construction of a regional system in the Middle East, in which all Arab state units would have to accept permanent US military bases. While such full-scale military cover would not question the ability of other major powers, particularly China, to enter the Middle East on the economic plane, it would make these powers depend on previous agreements with the US as the guaranteeing power. The US instrument to achieve and defend regional hegemony in the Middle East is the continuation of the asymmetric alliance system, first and foremost with Israel and secondly with the Sunni states and Turkey. As in the past, this system remains balanced in favor of Israel. Overall, the US much prefer weak allies to strong ones, and this attitude certainly also applies to the relationship with EU states. The latter have played only a very limited role in the Middle East and have mostly followed the US line to the letter.

Looking in turn at the goals of the conservative Sunni alliance made up of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, it is important to recognize that the US has no fixed preference with regard to future Syrian domestic arrangements, other than the installment of a new Syrian leadership that stops to challenge US regional objectives. On the other hand, the Sunni states are divided between those supporting a Muslim Brotherhood-type political leadership in Syria (Qatar and Turkey) and Saudi Arabia, which would prefer the export of its own system

[63] J.M. Dostal, "Syria and Iraq: The Long-Term Cost of Geopolitical Destabilisation", *Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs*, 1/2015, Singapore, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, pp. 173-195, http://media.wix.com/ugd/fb1673_ebcb4bee5b68415799304e7ecf1d2f1a.pdf (accessed July 20, 2016).

of Wahhabism. This lack of a unified political project of the Sunni states means that all three powers are actually fairly weak in projecting their power into Syria. At present, sponsorship of a large number of Islamist militias operating on the Syrian battlefield only works to underline the absence of political agreement about the future of Syria. Removing Syria from the triple alliance with Iraq and Iran would theoretically allow the Saudi and Qatari pipeline projects to go ahead. Constructing such pipeline across Syrian territory to reach Turkey would in turn potentially strengthen the Sunni states. However, the large-scale destruction of Syria makes any kind of oil or gas pipeline project utopian for the foreseeable future. In fact, the conservative Sunni states by now (in 2016) try to cut their geopolitical losses rather than to realize any conceivable gains.

From the US perspective, failure on the part of the conservative Sunni states to impose their regional agenda is of no serious concern, since a policy of divide-and-rule suggests that weaker regional Sunni leaderships serve the objective of strengthen the US veto position and regional leadership role. Weakening allies might serve this purpose just as much as the weakening of opponents. This is what Spykman recommended in terms of a geopolitical "pluralism" in the Eurasian rimlands, i.e. the region that includes Syria and all her regional opponents, when he stated that "[w]ho controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world"[64].

From the Israeli point of view, the ideal outcome of the Syrian war would be the division of the country along ethnic and sectarian lines. This was openly acknowledged in the country's media as recently as September 2015. In this context, Israel could consider – jointly with the US – to support some faction of Kurdish nationalism, especially with regard to a potential future division of Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, Israel does not have to do anything and can just stay put, as the ongoing Syrian war weakens all other regional powers. Ultimately, the Israeli position depends less on regional factors and more on maintaining a strong position in dealings with the US core executive – this remains Israel's most crucial concern in the current context. It is already very likely that the next US President (probably Clinton II or Trump) will follow the example of the Obama administration and will not put any pressure on Israel to stop its ongoing policy of expansion of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.

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[64] N.J. Spykman, *The Geography…*cit., (footnote 3), p. 43. For a recent evaluation of Spykman's ideas about how the US should maintain "balance" in the Eurasian rimlands, see also N. Hoffmann, *Renaissance der Geopolitik? Die deutsche Sicherheitspolitik nach dem Kalten Krieg*, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, Wiesbaden, 2012, pp. 36-37.

As for the opposing camp, namely the triple alliance of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, these states must defend the status quo and will aim to further strengthen their alliance. In some respect, they are outnumbered on the military and financial planes in comparison with the conservative Sunni states. The same applies to Russia as the weaker of the two external balancers in the Middle East, which is merely trying to sustain the Syrian government as its most long-standing Arab ally. Yet one should not underestimate the relative strength that is still available to these states at the local, regional, and global level. This has been underlined by the Russian military intervention on the side of the Syrian government in late 2015 and early 2016 that has weakened the Islamist groups, especially the "Islamic State" (IS) terrorist organization, and prepared the ground for the liberation of the Syrian city of Palmyra by the Syrian army. In addition, a unified Iraq, based on mutually satisfying domestic agreements between Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds, could allow this country to quickly recover as *the* major Arab state in the region. In fact, Iraqi oil production has reached record levels in recent years, regardless of the IS terrorism, and the country could quickly consolidate its position in the regional context if it were to regain domestic stability.

In addition, Iran's signing of an agreement with the Obama administration on nuclear issues in July 2015, immediately challenged by Republicans in Congress and the Israel Lobby in the US, is not worth much as a "bargaining chip". In fact, the Iranian leadership is unlikely to place much faith in agreements that are not backed up by its own local and regional strength. The governments in Damascus, Bagdad, and Tehran are convinced that a defeat in Syria would result in the proliferation of Islamist insurgency across the region and new conflicts elsewhere.

Summing up the Syrian transnational war, it is based on the logic of "the proxies of my proxies against the proxies of your proxies". This has become abundantly clear in the writings of US-based analysts. The recent publication of a 2012 memo of the Defense Intelligence Agency, predicting the rise of IS and, at the same time, the likelihood of President Bashar al-Assad to remain in control of a core region of Syria, which went against everything issued by US policymakers in public at the time, is a case in point[65]. This also applies to the casual and honest statement that "the vast majority of the Syrian insurgency has coordinated closely with Al-Qaeda since mid-2012"[66]. Such

[65] Defense Intelligence Agency, 14-L-0552/DIA/ 287 [i.e. August 12, 2012 DIA memo on the expected future development of the Syrian conflict], http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Pg.-291-Pgs.-287-293-JW-v-DOD-and-State-14-812-DOD-Release-2015-04-10-final-version11.pdf (accessed July 20, 2016).

[66] C. Lister, "Are Syrian Islamists moving to counterbalance Al-Qaeda? Will it last?", March 23, 2015, *Brookings Middle East Politics & Policy*,

voices in the US discourse underline that the current chapter of the Eisenhower Doctrine (which was in turn a practical application of the ideas of Spykman) does not need "International Communism" any more to vindicate endless rounds of US regional intervention.

Finally, the transnational war in Syria has entered its sixth year and its outcome is impossible to predict at the moment of writing in July 2016. This conflict must be in many ways understood as the continuation of the 2003 US and UK occupation of Iraq and as another chapter in the efforts of the western powers, especially the US, to keep their regional veto role in the Arab world at almost any cost. Just as in the case of Iraq, the tendency is to turn war into a chronic condition, deliver arms to many actors, produce lengthy regional standoffs, and demoralize the local population.

These new kinds of transnational war in the Middle East differ in style and substance from the earlier conflicts between Israel and the Arabs that were mostly fought in short bursts. Nevertheless, and the extreme degrees of current violence notwithstanding, the study of regional Arab and Greater Middle East history suggests on balance that the most likely outcome of Syria's transnational war will be the restoration of the regional status quo, i.e. the reestablishment of two sets of regional alliances that balance against each other. One certain outcome of the Syrian conflict is to weaken all involved regional actors other than Israel. Once the regional actors have wasted their potential by fighting each other, external intervention will once again become more likely. The recent insertion of US, British, French, and Turkish special forces into Syria, in the air and/or on the ground, gives an idea about what to expect in the future. The cycle of violence is clearly fed by geopolitical contestation and threatens to turn the 21st century into a dark age for the Arabs and their neighbors. Since Europe is not one ocean removed from the Arab world, it will also pay a heavy price.

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http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/03/23-syrian-islamists-balancing-with-alqaeda-lister (accessed July 20, 2016).