



**Clingendael**

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

# Between brutality and fragmentation

Options for addressing the Syrian civil war

Erwin van Veen  
Iba Abdo

**CRU report**

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**About CRU**

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a think tank and diplomatic academy on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team within the Institute, conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organizations in their engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

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# Executive summary

In 2011 the initially peaceful demonstrations in Syria reflected the hopeful beginning of yet another popular uprising that seemed to spell the inevitable end of an autocratic regime. In the course of 2012-2013, levels of violence, radicalism and brutality rapidly intensified and expanded into a full-blown civil war. Today, in 2014, the Syrian conflict increasingly looks like the fuse that lighted the regional powder keg: next door, Iraq now faces a civil war of its own, strains on Lebanese society are increasing and the Islamic State's Caliphate now shares, for all intents and purposes, a frontier with Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

The recent regional conflagration rightly worries the international community. Yet, it almost obscures how the social fabric of Syrian society and the integrity of its governance continue to unravel at the same time at the hands of radicals, criminals and warlords. Individuals and groups have been swept up in the madness of violence, dictated by the logics of survival, profit and ideological contestation. Domestic misery and regional conflagration combine with a growing international threat.

How can it have come to this? This report seeks to answer this question through an analysis of the Syrian civil war's trajectory, its international entanglements and its current battlefield situation. Subsequently, it proposes three elements of what a more active and forward-looking Western policy could look like which would hold a promise of helping to end the conflict in the medium term.

It is certain that the civil war could not have reached this point without sustained external backing for most of the conflict parties, or if it had been possible to put a robust international crisis management response in place. The absence of such a response created a strategic vacuum in which the civil war could more easily become a regional conflict by proxy, fuelled by opposing national interests in the context of broader Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry. As a result, violence has escalated, the opposition has fragmented and significant blowback effects have already occurred that external patrons may yet come to regret.

Despite all external support, the current battlefield situation is both stalemated and fragmented. While this suggests that a 'mutually hurting stalemate' may have arrived, the regime's control over Syria's urban heartland, most of its coastal areas and much of its infrastructure (excepting the country's oil and gas fields) puts it in a comparatively advantageous position vis-à-vis the opposition, with few incentives to compromise. Even if the six to seven main armed opposition groups were willing to negotiate, the estimated 5,000+ brigades and militias they consist of would make such a process unmanageable. Meanwhile, the Islamic State has developed into a cross-border wildcard, able to switch men and resources across civil wars in pursuit of its Caliphate.

This situation makes talk of negotiating a transition deal – the professed aim of European, US, Russian and Iranian policy – somewhat fanciful at the moment for three reasons: 1) neither the regime nor the range of mostly Islamic opposition forces fighting it are incentivised to negotiate; 2) a number of regional issues that are hardly debated need to be resolved as part of a transition deal to end the civil war: what role for Hezbollah in Lebanon, what of the Kurds in north Syria and with what stripe of Islam can Western countries still negotiate; and 3) the

international consensus necessary to nudge such a process of negotiation along and endow it with staying power is not present at the moment.

In consequence, there are no good policy options to bring the fighting to an end in the near term. Western countries especially have little leverage. This makes continuing conflict, crime and civilian misery, punctuated by spikes of intense fighting and further atrocities, the more likely prospect. Yet, it is possible to identify elements of a policy that could create openings in the medium term to work towards a transition deal between the Assad regime and opposition forces. A role for President Assad would seem a necessary condition for such a deal given the current level of regime control, possibly as ruler of one of the constituent parts of a future Syrian state.

In this context, three policy elements could help shape a forward-looking Western policy that might push the Syrian civil war towards an end in the medium term:

- **Focus more strongly on regional containment** that increases 1) humanitarian engagement, 2) support for the Lebanese and Jordanian governments, and 3) counterterrorist activities and intelligence sharing, including with President Assad. Executing these actions could make trans-border flows of goods, money and people more difficult, re-establish informal relations with the regime which in turn could facilitate later negotiations, mitigate some humanitarian risks and increase the resilience of Lebanon and Jordan;
- **Stimulate a Saudi-Iranian regional deal** by 1) facilitating the negotiation of a gentleman's agreement of domestic non-interference, 2) working towards more stable and inclusive governance of Iraq by leveraging Saudi and Iranian influence in a coordinated effort, and 3) exploring how Iranian and Saudi interests in Syria can be reconciled in a transition deal that maintains Syria's territorial integrity on a (con)federal basis and a role for Assad, while also containing possibilities for longer-term change. Executing these actions could create balanced pressure on the fighting parties, enable trade-offs in the short vs. long term under international guarantees to accommodate Saudi and Iranian interests, and reduce regional power rivalry as a conflict-driver;
- **Increase support for parts of the Syrian opposition** by agreeing – with the Gulf countries, Jordan and Turkey – 1) what 'effective' and 'moderate' opposition means today, 2) helping such groups cohere politically and operationally through mediation, financial support and sanctuaries and, perhaps, 3) providing them with lethal military equipment, training and supplies. Executing these actions could draw moderate Islamic factions, in addition to the Free Syrian Army, into a process of support and negotiation, increase military pressure on Assad, create stronger Islamic State-countervailing forces and make radical spillover more difficult.

The key is to put a realistic, concerted policy in place very soon, accepting that there is not much that Western countries can do to influence the course of the civil war directly or in the short term, but plenty that could prevent even greater damage and destruction in the medium to long term.

# Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgements   | 7  |
| 1. Introduction  | 8  |
| 2. Charting the course of the Syrian civil war                           | 10 |
| Three transformative shifts  | 10 |
| International and regional entanglements                                 | 13 |
| Current battlefield conditions: Fragmentation and stalemate              | 18 |
| 3. A more active Western policy that can work towards a transition deal? | 22 |
| The risks of continuing current Western policy                           | 22 |
| Towards what sort of transition deal?                                    | 26 |
| Policy element 1: Much stronger regional containment                     | 28 |
| Policy element 2: Stimulating a regional Saudi – Iranian agreement       | 30 |
| Policy element 3: Increased support for parts of the Syrian opposition   | 33 |
| 4. Conclusion  | 37 |
| Annex 1: Overview of the main armed opposition and regime groups         | 39 |
| References and methodology   | 41 |

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# 1. Introduction

There was a time when the Syrian conflict represented the hopeful beginning of yet another popular uprising that seemed to spell the inevitable end of an autocratic regime. The rallying cry of 'Dignity, Work, Liberty and Citizenship' echoed from the streets of Cairo, Tunis and Benghazi through the streets of Damascus with renewed vigour. Now, years later, the sounds that are heard most often are those of barrel bombs, sniper bullets and collapsing buildings. The glow of civil resistance and revolutionary passion has been dimmed by the dust of destruction and tarnished by the brutality of the fighting. Gritty endurance has replaced the initial optimism of opposition fighters; a cautious hope the regime's fear of being overthrown in a manner similar to a number of other autocrats across the Arab world.

The fundamental unpredictability of war<sup>1</sup> has asserted itself in several ways by turning a domestic uprising into a regional proxy-conflict, by providing another lease of life to militant Islamic fundamentalism and by re-awakening colonial-era legacies. The consequences thereof are likely to be profound but difficult to fully understand at this point in time. Who realised in 1989 that through many twists and turns, US support for the Mujahedeen would come back to haunt it on 11 September 2001 – more than a decade later? Yet, a few broad geopolitical contours could already be outlined.

First and foremost, the Syrian civil war has amplified pre-existing conflicts in Lebanon and Jordan, and greatly exacerbated those in Iraq. The governance of those countries was already contested, making them more vulnerable to radicalisation and violence. In Lebanon, Hezbollah's choice to assist its Syrian ally has put its moral claim to the title 'defender of the Lebanese nation' at risk, as well as its normalisation as a political party. Assassinations and bombings have been part of the consequences. In Iraq, the persistent 'marginalise-and-rule' policies of Prime Minister al-Maliki has enabled the Islamic State (IS)<sup>2</sup> to ride waves of Sunni discontent to the gates of Baghdad.<sup>3</sup> It is not difficult to conceive of Lebanon-Syria-Iraq as an interlocking series of conflicts, akin to the Great Lakes or Yugoslavia in the 1990s, with Hezbollah and the IS as key cross-border agents that perpetuate them.<sup>4</sup> While some may think this a sub-regional problem limited to the Levant, the Syrian civil war has also become a fulcrum of wider regional Saudi-Iranian rivalry. This ensures that its spillover effects will reverberate across the region and beyond.

Moreover, the Syrian civil war has facilitated the rise of powerful militant and fundamentalist Islamic groups, in particular Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) and the IS. While JAN has taken a flexible

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1 Clausewitz, C. (1993) [1832], *On War*, David Campbell Publishers Ltd, London.

2 It used to be referred to as the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS) or the 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL) prior to its announcement of the Caliphate and its associated name change (Institute for the Study of War, Iraq [blog update](#), 30 June 2014).

3 For example: Philbrick, S. (2013), *Islamists and the State: Legitimacy and Institutions in Yemen and Lebanon*, I.B. Tauris; International Crisis Group (ICG) (2013a), *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, Middle East report no. 144, Brussels.

4 See: Clark, F. (ed.) (2004), *The African Stakes of the Congo War*, Palgrave Macmillan, London; Silber, L. and A. Little (1996), *The Death of Yugoslavia*, Second revised edition, BBC-Penguin, London.

approach to the implementation of its radical principles to win hearts and minds,<sup>5</sup> the IS has developed into a category of its own, increasing its legitimacy through battlefield successes and by laying claim to the reinstated Caliphate. Wealthy individuals in the Gulf who sympathise with their ideology have so far had little trouble in transferring hundreds of millions of dollars to them.<sup>6</sup> The same holds for the ease with which individuals attracted to their ideology have been able to join them. While the activities of JAN and the IS are limited to Lebanon-Syria-Iraq at the moment, the Southern Caucasus and Gulf both offer access to resources and viable targets should the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars stabilise.

Finally, the Syrian civil war is interacting with two unresolved issues dating back to the colonial period, namely the aspirations of the Kurdish and Palestinian people for greater recognition and statehood. While the Syrian Kurds so far neither occupy areas that are overly significant in a geopolitical sense nor maintain particularly good relations with their Iraqi brethren, there is no telling what the consequences would be if Prime Minister Erdogan should decide to end the current Turkish-Kurdish détente to draw attention away from his increasing domestic troubles. Israel, on the other hand, is likely to feel vindicated in its 'siege mentality' by the ascent of militant violent extremism, the disappearance of the Syrian army as a potential threat and the conundrum Hezbollah has placed itself in.<sup>7</sup> This bodes ill for the Palestinian people.

There are ample reasons, in addition to the tragedy of the fighting itself, to end the Syrian civil war as soon as possible. However, domestic incentives and abilities to do so are limited because of current civil war dynamics<sup>8</sup> while external action is severely constrained by the recent history of military intervention, the multitude of interests at play and broader conflict legacies in the Middle East. For these reasons, this report argues that ways to bring the fighting to an end in the near term are in short supply, especially from a Western perspective. The more likely prospect is continuing conflict, crime and civilian misery, punctuated by spikes of intense fighting and further atrocities. Yet, it is possible to identify elements of a policy that could create openings in the medium term for working towards a transition deal between the Assad regime and opposition forces. Regional initiatives will be critical to success. They have the additional advantage that they can also help keep some of the tinder dry that is piled up around the Syrian conflict.

Section 2 charts how the civil war has unfolded in terms of three transformative shifts that characterise its grisly evolution, its international entanglements and its current battlefield state. Section 3 starts by highlighting the risks of continuing the status quo and considers what sort of transition deal is desirable. To this end, it identifies elements of a Western policy that could nudge the civil war towards a negotiated settlement: much stronger regional containment, facilitating rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and increasing support for parts of the Syrian opposition.

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5 For example: Al-Mustapha, H. (2013), *The al-Nusra Front: From Formation to Dissention*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, [online](#) (retrieved 20 May 2014); [Al-Monitor](#), 14 May 2014 (retrieved 20 May 2014).

6 Dickinson, E. (2013), *Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home*, *Saban Center at Brookings Analysis Paper No. 16*, Washington DC; [Al-Monitor](#), 14 May 2014 (retrieved 20 May 2014).

7 The longer it stays engaged in the Syrian civil war in support of its patron, the more its legitimacy as a political actor in the Lebanese polity is likely to suffer. See for example: International Crisis Group (2014a), *Lebanon's Hezbollah Turns Eastward to Syria*, Middle East report no. 153, Brussels.

8 See also Zartman's (2014) recent argument in this regard from a 'mutually hurting stalemate' perspective in: Zartman, W. (2014), *Lambs and Lions of the Arab Spring*, *Clingendael Policy Brief No. 29*, The Hague.

## 2. Charting the course of the Syrian civil war

This section provides a stylised overview of the evolution of the Syrian civil war. It starts with an overview of the three shifts that characterise its transformation from its early beginnings until today: from peaceful protest to violence, from violence to brutality and from moderately to radically religious. It continues with an analysis of the main international and regional relations in which the conflict has become entangled. Finally, it closes with a brief assessment of the fragmented and stalemated nature of the current battlefield. Together, these elements set the scene for the policy options discussed in section 3.<sup>9</sup>

### Three transformative shifts

From early 2011 to early 2014 at least three shifts can be identified in the Syrian civil war that have, step by step, raised the stakes of the conflict, sown the seeds of its continuation and increased its social, political and economic damage:

*Shift 1: From peaceful protest to (counter)violence.* It has become an almost distant memory that the protests against President Assad were initially peaceful. As in other 'Arab Spring countries', peaceful street protests were quickly met with regime violence. The combination of the regime's campaign of repression and the paralysis of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, which prevented the international community from protecting the Syrian people instead of its government, forced protestors to take recourse to armed self-defence. As a result, local armed groups emerged spontaneously that later came to form the Free Syrian Army (FSA). In addition, the Syrian situation proved exceptional in that the downward spiral of government repression, counter-violence and stronger repression did not lead to the downfall of the regime.<sup>10</sup> Instead, it remained relatively intact. The tight-knit nature of the top of the elite around Assad, the relative loyalty of his broader support base, the cohesiveness of the Syrian army and the political and military support the Assad regime received from its allies ensured his continuous grip on power.<sup>11</sup> In consequence, the regime has been able to wage both its propaganda offensives and the war in a relatively coordinated and focused fashion. In addition, contrary to the unified and coherent international military intervention that turned the tide against regime forces in Libya, Syria has seen a kaleidoscopic palette of interventions by foreign sponsors providing financial and military support to Syrian factions willing to subscribe to their political agenda. This gave the conflict significant centrifugal and self-perpetuating tendencies early on.

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9 This section makes extensive general use of the blogs of Joshua Landis (University of Oklahoma) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace ('Syria in Crisis') – see annex 2.

10 Lynch, M. (2012), *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, Public Affairs, Philadelphia.

11 For a good analysis of President Assad's support base, see: Briscoe, I., F. Janssen and R. Smits (2012), *Stability and Economic Recovery after Assad: Key Steps for Syria*, Clingendael Conflict Research Unit report, The Hague. For an interesting assessment of the sources of strength of the Syrian Arab Army, see: Alam, K. (2014), *Pax Syriana: Neither Vanquished, Nor All-Conquering*, [Open Democracy Arab Awakening](#), 30 June.

*Shift 2: From violence to brutality.* As the fighting intensified, the conflict's second transformation turned the 'hero rebel vs. villain regime' frame into one of general ugliness and brutality. Reports on atrocities committed by all sides abounded, including the large-scale use of torture and famine by the regime, summary executions of wounded prisoners of war by opposition militias, rape, and the use of barrel bombs as improvised explosive devices to wreak indiscriminate destruction.<sup>12</sup> For a while, news about such horrors increased the momentum for involvement of the international community, culminating in the threat of direct US strikes on key assets of the Syrian regime and army after its alleged chemical attack in the suburbs of Damascus on 21 August 2013. However, this avenue was basically closed through US congressional and UK parliamentary opposition to plans to intervene by force, and supplanted by the US-Russian deal to remove Syria's chemical weapons. The alternative, supplying weapons to the moderate elements of the opposition, was perceived as too risky, at least publicly, at the point in time when they would arguably have made the greatest difference, largely because of the opposition's fragmentation.<sup>13</sup> Despite the recent resurgence of the idea amongst Western countries, the US in particular, serious misgivings and issues remain.<sup>14</sup> As a result, Western countries have largely been sitting on the fence in terms of action that could materially influence the course of the conflict. To paint a complete picture, however, it must be noted that the legitimacy of their action is constrained by the UN Security Council (UNSC) blockage and its sustainability by a lack of domestic support. Some have argued this makes for a Srebrenica moment in the waiting,<sup>15</sup> but what is certain is that this shift in the conflict led to a major increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDP), refugees and casualties (see figure 1 below).

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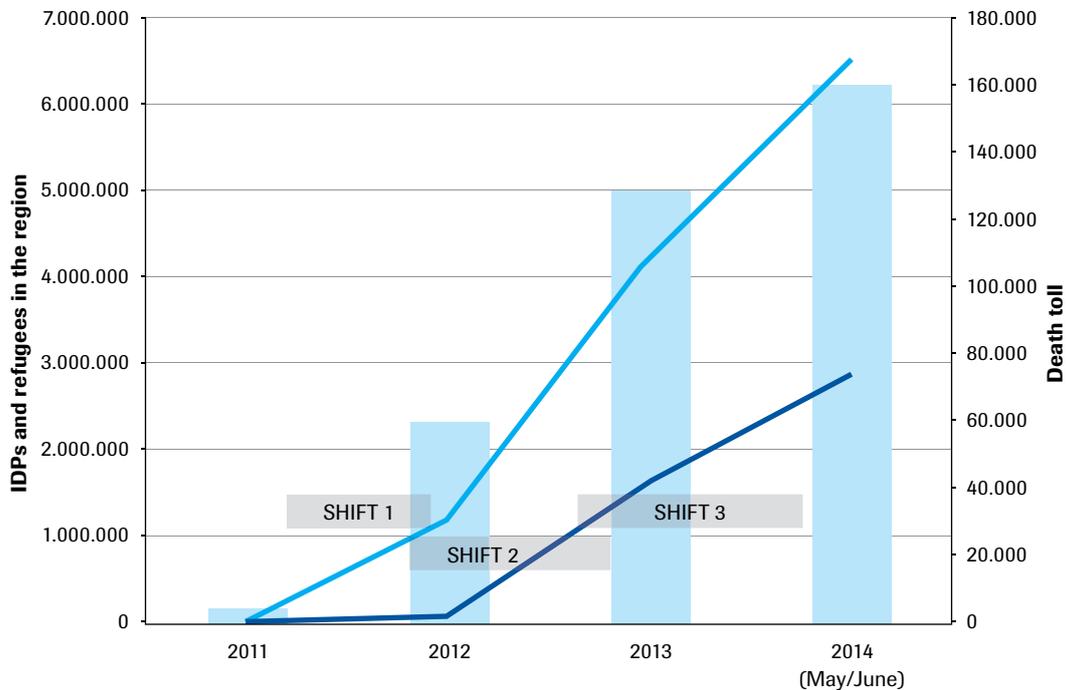
12 See for example Eliot Higgins' blog of 31 December 2013 on [summary executions](#); Joshua Landis' blog of 1 February 2014 on [starvation](#), the Washington Post of 15 February 2014 on the use of [barrel bombs](#) and @joshua\_landis on 16 February 2014 for a gruesome [image](#) of a Jabhat Al-Nusra fighter beheading a regime soldier.

13 Lynch, M. (2012), *op.cit.*; [Washington Post](#), 10 June 2014. This is not to suggest that some material support has not been forthcoming, but it has been much less and slower to arrive than it could have been and seems to have included little by way of actual weaponry. Yet, it must be noted that the key advantages of the Syrian army – armour, aircraft, superior training and a relatively integrated command structure – are not easily countered by small arms and light weapons.

14 It is likely that US and especially Saudi sponsored arms deliveries to selected rebel groups started relatively early on in the conflict and never stopped. Yet, the US remains wary of arms falling into the hands of radical groups as happened when warehouses of the Free Syrian Army at the Bab-Al-Hawa border crossing were seized by the Islamic Front in December 2013 (for example: Carnegie's *Syria in Crisis*, 14 February 2014; *Economist*, 22 February 2014). Al-Jazeera recently reported Jordanian reluctance to participate in a ramped-up US-led training scheme for Syrian opposition forces within its borders for fear of blowback effects ([Al-Jazeera](#), 12 July 2014) (retrieved same day).

15 See for example: [Boston Globe](#), 13 February 2014 (retrieved 22 February 2014).

**Figure 1** Estimated numbers of IDPs and refugees in the region (left axis), and casualties (right axis) from 2011 to mid-2014



*Legend: The light blue line denotes estimated IDP numbers, the dark blue line refugees in the region and the blue bars casualty figures.<sup>16</sup> The rectangular shapes denote the approximate period in which each shift mostly took place.*

*Shift 3: From moderate to radically religious.* Overlapping to a significant extent with the second shift, the third shift re-framed the conflict in religious and sectarian terms with terrorist overtones, and inextricably nested it in a broader regional ‘conflict by proxy’ logic. Key events were the rapid rise of radical religious groups such as JAN and the IS, which positioned themselves as protectors of the Syrian Sunni population against the repression of the Assad regime and as counter to his Shia supporters.<sup>17</sup> This reinforced a Sunni-Shia view of the conflict and fed fears of growing Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism. Having publicly excluded indirect and direct military intervention against the Assad regime, and faced with very limited access to most of Syria, Western countries have essentially been left by the rise of radicalism without a viable strategy in this respect. Instead, it has kept underlining the importance of dialogue and trying to manage the humanitarian crisis. In contrast, a number of Gulf countries, organisations and citizens have – despite sharing the abhorrence of the

16 Figure 1 is based on the authors’ compilation of the following sources: the United Nation’s Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), as well as selected articles from *The Guardian*, Reuters, BBC, CNN and *The Huffington Post*. It should be noted that the last reliable and triangulated casualty count dates from 13 June 2013 by UNHCR and amounted to 93,000. Since then, casualty figures mostly reflect the estimates of the London-based SOHR; it is not clear how it arrives at its figures. See for example its [website](#) notice of 19 May 2014 (retrieved 10 July 2014).

17 For example: [Washington Post](#), 25 May 2013 (retrieved 5 March 2014); [Reuters](#), 21 February 2014 (retrieved 5 March 2014); [Al-Monitor](#), 6 March 2014 (retrieved 10 March 2014).

brutalities being committed on the battlefield – proven less wary than Western countries of religiously inspired groups. Available evidence suggests that they continue supporting them with cash and weapons in the belief this can create battlefield conditions that will either lead to victory or prompt more serious negotiations.<sup>18</sup> Events so far have not seen this expectation fulfilled, as regime forces have proven themselves to be as resilient as the opposition, fragmented, paradoxically, in no small part because of the external support it has received. A major consequence thereof is that many Syrian citizens who have not engaged in the fighting are caught between the brutality and offensives of President Assad’s armed forces, and the terrorizing methods of radical religious groups. For example, in the province of Raqqa civilians were – and continue to be – squeezed between regime attacks from the air and an IS campaign of terror to impose its extremist views. This situation has also contributed to the huge numbers of refugees and IDPs that figure 1 reflects. In addition to Syria’s civilian population, moderate opposition groups have also had to resist the combined onslaught of the forces of both Assad and the IS. Having to fight a two-front war with limited resources has significantly reduced the ability of already fragmented groups like the FSA to improve their military position. The recent battles in Aleppo and Deir al-Zour illustrate this point.

## International and regional entanglements

The civil war could not have reached this point without sustained external backing for most of the conflict parties. In a nutshell, the situation can be summarised as a global stand-off that has prevented concerted international crisis management and instead has enabled a regional war by proxy to escalate, fuelling an increasingly grisly civil war that is gradually destroying the very fabric of Syrian society.

### A global stand-off...

At global level, the US and Russia are locked in an unproductive stand-off that prevents concerted, legitimate international intervention, while the European Union (EU) has so far largely focused on limited containment measures in the form of sanctions and humanitarian assistance. Both the US and Russia believe in the need for a political settlement through negotiations and fear the consequences of the rise of radical Islamist groups for regional stability. However, their views on the role of Bashar al-Assad in any transitional government are miles apart. Russia aims for a transition period with Assad in power while the US insists there can be no such role.<sup>19</sup> The difference in the US and Russia positions was highlighted once more in the run-up to and during the latest round of Geneva negotiations.<sup>20</sup> As long as Presidents Obama and Putin are not willing to try to creatively bridge their political preferences, it is unlikely that any diplomatic effort to reach a settlement will bear fruit, as the full power and legitimacy of the UN Security Council cannot be brought to bear. The Russian annexation of the Crimea in February/March 2014 has made any such rapprochement rather unlikely to happen in the near future.

The US has significant means at its disposal to nudge the warring parties, directly or indirectly, towards serious negotiations, but it lacks both appetite and legitimacy for foreign military adventures after Iraq and Afghanistan under President Obama. Its strategic alignment

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18 See: Dickinson (2013), op.cit.; Joshua Landis blog; Sayigh, Y. (2013), *Unifying Syria’s Rebels: Saudi Arabia Joins the Fray*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut.

19 Sharp, J. and C. Blanchard (2013), *Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Response*, Congressional Research Service, 7-5700, Washington D.C.

20 See for example: [The Guardian](#), 22 October 2013 (retrieved 10 February 2014).

and influence over key regional partners (notably Turkey, Israel and Saudi Arabia) has also come under pressure, partially in consequence of its inconsistent and sometimes weak responses to the Arab Spring<sup>21</sup> and the Syrian conflict.<sup>22</sup> The absence of both any direct US national interest being at stake and a clear US engagement strategy has left regional allies such as Turkey with room to pursue their own agenda in respect of the Syrian civil war while leaving others, such as Saudi Arabia, feeling exposed.

It is probably fair to assume that Syria's stock of chemical weapons was a primary US anxiety in respect of the civil war, not so much out of concern for its own safety but for that of Israel and other regional allies.<sup>23</sup> This was cleverly recognised by both Russia and the Assad regime, instrumentalized through the Russian-American deal to remove Syria's chemical weapons and formalized by UNSC resolution 2118 of 27 September 2013 in order to defuse imminent US military intervention.<sup>24</sup> On 23 June 2014 the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed that all Syria's declared chemical weapons materials had been removed or destroyed.<sup>25</sup> Some analysts have suggested that the US might consider reverting to the use of military force after the complete destruction of Syria's chemical arsenal, but President Obama's recent speech at West Point does not suggest direct military action is on the table.<sup>26</sup>

However, another threat to US interests has emerged since the 'game of red lines', namely the increasing possibility of Syria-Iraq becoming a base for Jihadist groups.<sup>27</sup> The IS tops the list of concerns, as it has made its global ambitions quite clear from its base in the shadowlands between Syria and Iraq. Its recent capture of Mosul and declaration of the Caliphate was nothing short of dramatic.<sup>28</sup> While JAN's public statements focus on the need to oust Assad and establish a Sharia-based state in Syria – suggesting it does not intend to carry its Jihadist ambitions abroad for the moment – it must be borne in mind that it is an Al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliate and that territory under its control is likely to be used as a global staging ground at some point.<sup>29</sup> Other radical Islamist groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham and the Islam Army that

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21 An example of inconsistency is the contrast between the early encouragement of President Obama of the protestors in Egypt that triggered the fall of President Mubarak and the later endorsement of the Egyptian military by Secretary of State Kerry after its coup against President Morsi (*New York Times*, 24 September 2012 vs. *New York Times*, 3 November 2013). This switch can be understood through a realpolitik-type lens, but that does not make it more consistent. An example of a weak response was when the US turned a blind eye to the Saudi repression of the uprising in Bahrain despite its strong pro-democracy statements in relation to the Arab Spring at large.

22 A good illustration of inconsistent and weak policy vis-à-vis Syria is that neither the use of chemical weapons in March 2013 around Aleppo, nor their subsequent use in August 2013 around Damascus, had any direct consequences despite this being pronounced a red line several times. International disunity and multiple (counter)claims as to who the most likely culprit was, were used to delay action until the Russian-US-Syrian deal on the destruction of regime-held chemical weapons was formalized by UN resolution 2118. See also: Lynch (2012), op.cit.

23 Sharp, J. and C. Blanchard (2013), op.cit.

24 UNSC resolution 2118 (retrieved 26 May 2014).

25 OPCW website (retrieved 26 May 2014).

26 For example: *Al-Monitor*, 26 May 2014 (retrieved 3 June 2014); Obama, B. (2014), *America Must Always Lead, Speech at West Point*. (retrieved 3 June 2014).

27 For example: *Washington Post*, 2 May 2014; *The Guardian*, 29 January 2014 (both retrieved 10 July 2014).

28 *The Telegraph*, 9 July 2014 (retrieved 10 July 2014).

29 See for example the [founding statement of Jabhat Al Nusra](#) (Arabic). In this statement, al-Golani specifically states that Syrians are not allowed to receive support from 'the West and the United States', which, according to him, are considered as Assad's partners in crime. JAN has already formed an official affiliate in Lebanon.

are largely united under the umbrella of the Islamic Front, follow a Salafist ideology that has a predominantly domestic focus on turning Syria into a Sharia-based state. However, while JAN and the IS have an interest in conducting attacks abroad, it is unlikely that either will have the time or resources for such ventures while the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars rage. The risk will logically increase when the frontlines stabilise or the conflicts shifts to a lower-intensity mode. In consequence, these groups probably represent more of a medium- to long-term risk in this regard. In itself, this may not be sufficient to compel the US or key EU member states to take action of the sort that could materially influence battlefield conditions in Syria. The US administration has many competing foreign policy objectives on its plate, including the Ukraine and Crimea, increasing trouble in the South China Sea, and its nuclear negotiations with Iran. As the latter in all likelihood represents a higher US foreign policy priority than the civil war in Syria, the administration might, in fact, hope that a breakthrough on the nuclear issue will facilitate a breakthrough on the Syrian civil war.

Russia, in contrast, has more direct stakes in the conflict. To start with, it is concerned about religious groups gaining power in Syria and the subsequent effect this might have on its own struggle with religiously inspired resistance against Russian rule in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia.<sup>30</sup> In addition, there are practical issues that tie Russia to Syria, such as debts owed for past arms deliveries, the Russian diaspora, and Russia's use of the Tartus naval base. Finally, Russia considered NATO's military support in the overthrow of Gaddafi an intolerable stretch of interpretation of UNSC 1973 and its desire to avoid a repeat of such events in Syria also plays a role in its resistance. Consequently, Russia has performed the critical role of diplomatic sponsor of the Syrian regime, which has contributed to a deadlock in the UN.

Despite obvious interests being at stake, mainly in terms of its proximity and the viability of its broader neighbourhood policy, the EU's policies and actions towards the Syrian civil war have largely been passive and focused on containment. In part this reflects a divergence in views between member states of what constitutes the most appropriate course of action, in part an apparent absence of a sense of urgency and in part the broader challenge of articulating the purpose of its external action more strategically.<sup>31</sup> The EU continues to state that there can only be a political solution to the conflict and that this should be achieved via the Geneva process – despite its lack of progress and the fact that the incentives of the conflict parties are stacked against it (see next sections).<sup>32</sup> EU initiatives have amounted to putting a sanctions regime in place, which has been expanded several times, and to providing humanitarian assistance to the tune of US\$2.8 billion.<sup>33</sup> Of late, the prospect of battle-hardened EU citizens returning home has, somewhat belatedly, spurred eight EU

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30 See: International Crisis Group (ICG) (2014b), *Too Far, Too Fast: Sochi, Tourism and Conflict in the Caucasus*, Europe report no. 228, Brussels. Russia has long perceived the Arab Spring through the prism of its potential for worsening its own troubles in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The reality is that its fight against 'religiously infused separatism' has taken the form of a ruthless ground war in southern Russia, with fatalities hovering around 20,000 (UCDP, retrieved 20 February 2014), followed by sustained low-intensity conflict. This stands in marked contrast to the way in which the US could carry its fight to territories far removed from American soil. Russian views and fears can be traced all the way back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as is illustrated by the following quote of an Afghan elder in 1989: 'He said that the Russian soldiers are heading north to go home', my translator explained, 'And later on they will go even farther north, leaving their Muslim republics behind' (Borovik, A. (1990), *The Hidden War*, Grove Press, New York).

31 See: van Veen, E. (2014), *The Strategic Prizes of EU External Action*, Clingendael Opinion (retrieved 12 July 2014).

32 Council of the European Union (Foreign Affairs) (14 April 2014), *Council Conclusions on Syria*, Luxembourg.

33 For example: Council of the European Union (23 June 2014), *EU Strengthens Sanctions Against the Syrian Regime*, Press release, Luxembourg; ECHO Fact Sheet on the Syria Crisis (30 June 2014).

members into greater action by adopting an action plan to make it more difficult for their citizens to join the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars.<sup>34</sup>

As to the EU's larger member states, France and the UK have regularly found themselves at odds with Germany, in particular on the questions of whether the EU arms embargo should be lifted in favour of the Syrian opposition and whether the use of chemical weapons in Syria should lead to retaliatory airstrikes.<sup>35</sup> Despite its initial interventionist stance, the UK government subsequently suffered a parliamentary defeat when it sought to join US-led strikes on the Assad regime, which left France, their other European proponent, out on a limb when US Congressional support also failed to materialise.<sup>36</sup>

### **Enabling a regional conflict by proxy...**

In brief, disagreement between, and prevarication of, key global players has not just prevented more concerted international crisis management, it has also given regional influences a larger space in which they have been able to make themselves felt on the civil war, mostly in ways that fuel and perpetuate it. The regional situation abounds in additional complexities with Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq playing important roles in keeping the conflict going. These are briefly explored below. A number of Gulf states play secondary roles.

To start with, the insistence of Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan that President Assad should go, its hosting of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (hereafter SOC for short – Syrian Opposition Council), and repeated reports of Turkish intelligence ferrying arms across the Turkish-Syrian border to the benefit of opposition groups have eliminated the possibility of it acting as a credible mediator.<sup>37</sup> However, Turkey's options for more direct intervention are severely constrained by negative public opinion vis-à-vis military involvement.<sup>38</sup> In brief, by taking an adversarial posture Turkey has jettisoned the advantage of relative neutrality without being able to see a more muscular approach through. This has arguably resulted in a somewhat paralysed Turkish foreign policy that proved out of sync with facts on the ground for a long time.<sup>39</sup>

In their turn, Iran and Saudi Arabia have sought to increase their influence through an ongoing clash of arms by continuing to support the fighting parties affiliated with them. In the case of Iran, this amounts to having extended a multi-billion dollar credit line that helps keep the Syrian government afloat, as well as the provision of manpower and training by the

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34 [European Voice](#), 9 July 2014 (retrieved same day).

35 See for example: [The Guardian](#), 28 May 2013; [Financial Times](#), 28 May 2013; [NSNBC International](#), 29 July 2013; [German Federal Foreign Office](#), 6 September 2013; [Spiegel Online](#), 10 September 2013 (all retrieved 10 July 2014).

36 On 30 August 2013 the House of Commons defeated the government's motion to join US-led strikes on Syrian targets by 285-272 ([BBC](#), 30 August 2013) (retrieved 12 July 2014). In early September President Obama asked Congress to delay a vote authorising such strikes. He justified his request with reference to the Russian proposal to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons, but it was widely seen as a defeat in light of strong resistance among the general public and in Congress ([CNN](#), 11 September 2013) (retrieved 12 July 2014). A vote never took place.

37 For example: [Hurriyet Daily News](#), 19 January 2014.

38 65% of its population said it opposes aiding the opposition while 62% stated it fears violence spreading to Turkey ([Pew Research survey](#), 16 May 2013) (retrieved 20 February 2014).

39 It is in this light that, for example, President Gul's remarks at a luncheon for Turkish ambassadors must be considered. [Al-Monitor](#), 15 January 2014 (retrieved 10 July 2014).

Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).<sup>40</sup> More indirectly, one could also add its encouragement of Hezbollah to join the fight. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this amounts to formal relations and financial support for the SOC, and informal relations and financial support for a range of opposition groups that include elements of both the Islamic Front and the Southern Revolutionary Front.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, the exclusive rule of Prime Minister al-Maliki in Iraq has not only negated US efforts at establishing a more inclusive way of governing the country, it has also alienated its Sunni population to such an extent that West Iraq is now a relatively safe area where ISIS recruits, fundraises and re-groups outside the effective control of the Iraqi state through a combination of persuasion, crime and the threat of violence.<sup>42</sup>

This combination of global stand-off and regional competition has played an important part in enabling the civil war to continue its grisly course. The former in effect created a strategic vacuum that has given individual and national interests in the region free rein to support different conflict factions as they see fit. A good example is how Gulf states, Kuwait in particular, were able to develop into key conduits for funds to Islamist groups in Syria from (mostly) Gulf-based individuals, charities and states.<sup>43</sup>

This dynamic has perpetuated itself to some extent because it allowed the US and other Western countries to take a more passive stance towards the civil war. Because the support of their allies such as Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar for various Syrian opposition groups prevented their collapse, the US and other Western countries could simply await further developments. However, such support has not only helped assure the opposition's 'survival', it has also had the unintended effect of significantly fragmenting it because it has been driven by divergent national interests on the part of its providers. The result is that the conflict is increasingly perpetuated by regional influences that compete by proxy in a zero-sum game. This fuels polarisation, amplifies violence and complicates conflict resolution. In the meantime, the Syrian people continue to pay the price of ongoing conflict in blood, a situation for which parts of the international community must shoulder some of the blame.

In brief, this analysis of the global and regional entanglements of the Syrian civil war suggests it is likely to continue for the foreseeable future until the global stand-off is resolved, regional

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40 Lister, C. (2014), *Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape*, Policy Briefing, Brookings Doha Center, Doha; Syrian Center for Policy Research (2014), *Squandering Humanity: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report on Syria*, Combined third and fourth quarter report (July – December 2013), Damascus; Reuters, 21 February 2014; *Al-Arabiya*, 18 May 2014; Fulton, W., Holliday, J. and Wyer S. (2013), *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War (retrieved 14 July 2014); *Al-Monitor*, 21 August 2012 (retrieved 14 July 2014); Sadjadpour, K. (2013), *Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC; Sadjadpour, K. (2014), *Iran: Syria's Lone Regional Ally*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC; Fulton, W. (2013), *How Deeply is Iran Enmeshed in Syria?*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC; Abdo, G. (2011), How Iran keeps Assad in power in Syria, *Foreign Affairs*, online (all retrieved 14 July 2014).

41 The Southern front is nominally part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). See: *Al-Monitor*, 15 February 2014; Joshua Landis [blog](#), 15 February 2014 (retrieved same day). Not all such support is sanctioned by the Saudi state, part of it is provided by charities and individuals.

42 ICG (2013a); op.cit.; *Al-Monitor*, 25 February 2014; Joshua Landis' [blog](#), 13 February 2014 (retrieved same days).

43 Dickinson, E. (2013), op.cit.; Stevenson, J. (2014), *The Syrian Tragedy and Precedent*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London.

support for affiliated conflict parties is reduced, or battlefield conditions change. It is to these current battlefield conditions that the next section turns.

## Current battlefield conditions: Fragmentation and stalemate

The negotiations that aim to bring the conflict to an end have completely stagnated.<sup>44</sup> At first glance, so have the battlefields as regime gains alternate with modest opposition counter-advances.<sup>45</sup> However, the low ebb and tide of territorial gains disguises four important phenomena, namely the simultaneous presence of local ceasefires in certain localities<sup>46</sup> and intense fighting in others, the ability of opposition forces to simultaneously compete and cooperate,<sup>47</sup> the deep fragmentation of opposition forces in general and the marginalisation of moderate opposition groups in particular. The first two phenomena can largely be understood as straightforward reflections of the state of readiness vs. exhaustion of the various fighting forces and their military interests at particular points in time. However, the issues of fragmentation and marginalisation require deeper analysis since they are crucial to the likely duration of the conflict and the nature of its resolution. After all, the more and the longer the opposition is divided, the less effective it is likely to be on the battlefield, which lessens the prospects of incentivizing President Assad to negotiate seriously and makes the different opposition factions more and more beholden to their respective sponsors.<sup>48</sup>

The fragmentation of the opposition originally amounted to a significant gap between its moderate military (FSA) and political (SOC) elements on the one hand, and the loose nature of the FSA on the other. Even when the FSA briefly dominated the headlines of the armed opposition in 2011-2012, its main fighting elements were united only loosely under a common brand rather than in an integrated command structure.<sup>49</sup> Its political counterpart (the SOC)

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44 For example: Makdisi, K. (2014), *Brahimi Resignation Signals Geopolitical Shift Favoring Assad*, International Peace Institute Global Observatory, New York.

45 For a visual overview of territorial advances, compare for example [this map of 16 February 2014](#) (retrieved 16 June 2014) with [this one of 1 June 2014](#) (retrieved 6 June 2014). See also: Lister, C. (2014), *Dynamic Stalemate: Surveying Syria's Military Landscape*, Policy Brief, Brookings Doha Center, Doha. For an interesting cartographic approach to the conflict, see: [OrientXXI](#), October 2013 (retrieved 4 July 2014).

46 For example, the ceasefire in Homs ([Al-Monitor](#), 11 May 2014; retrieved 3 June 2014), steps towards a settlement in Douma ([Al-Monitor](#), 15 May 2014; retrieved 3 June 2014), two ceasefire agreements in the Yarmouk refugee camp in February and June 2014 ([BBC](#), 22 June 2014) and the many previous efforts to reach a ceasefire in Wa'er neighbourhood in Homs ([Al-Araby al-Jadeed](#), 14 June 2014) (retrieved 10 July 2014) (Arabic). These ceasefires generally represent net gains for the regime because they tend to be the result of siege-and-starvation tactics that result in rebel exhaustion.

47 For example: [Huffington Post](#), 29 May 2014 (retrieved 3 June 2014); [Al-Araby al-Jadeed](#), 13 July 2014 (retrieved 14 July 2014) (Arabic).

48 Annex 1 provides an overview of the objectives, leadership and approximate military presence of the main opposition groups at the time of writing. See the *New York Times* for a visual [introduction](#) (7 February 2014; retrieved 3 June 2014). For a more descriptive overview: Lavoix, H. (2013), *Potential Futures for Syria in the Fog of War, Volume 1: Focus on the Syrian battlefield*, A red team analysis report (retrieved 8 May 2014). For analysis of recent group formation processes, see: The Carter Center, *Syria Countrywide Conflict Report No. 3*, Washington DC.

49 A recent example is the [statement](#) of 16 February 2014 (Arabic) from the FSA's Supreme Military Council (SMC) that declares its commander, General Idriss, was fired and replaced by General Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir al-Noeimi. This subsequently resulted in General Idriss breaking with the SMC and denouncing the legitimacy of the interim government. General Idriss' response can be found [here](#) (retrieved 20 February 2014) (video, Arabic). See also: Carnegie's Syria in Crisis blog of 17 February 2014 (retrieved 25 February 2014); Bishara, A. (2013), *Syria: A Path to Freedom from Suffering. An Attempt in Contemporary History (March 2011- March 2013)*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha.

was as factitious as one would expect in a country where political opposition was not tolerated, association prohibited and the freedom of expression severely restrained.<sup>50</sup> Political infighting and the external support discussed in the previous section created a vicious cycle of fragmentation. A noteworthy consequence of the divisions between different factions of the moderate Syrian opposition was that once Western countries, in particular the US, UK and France, were sufficiently appalled by the atrocities committed by the regime and its tactics to escalate the violence, they also perceived the opposition as too fragmented to work with.<sup>51</sup>

However, fragmentation rapidly acquired an entirely different dimension of internecine warfare between opposition groups following the battlefield rise of radical Islamist armed groups such as JAN and the IS. It is these groups in particular that have engaged in a series of violent and vicious confrontations since late 2013–early 2014 in Syria’s northern provinces.<sup>52</sup> They are made all the more salient by the appreciable personal dimension underpinning them in the form of the conflict between Messrs Al-Bagdadi and Al-Golani about control over JAN earlier in 2013.<sup>53</sup> In the course of this fighting, Al-Zawahiri, AQ’s global leader, rejected the IS as an AQ affiliate.<sup>54</sup>

It is noteworthy that many of the clashes between the IS, on the one hand, and JAN with the Islamic Front and the FSA on the other, have taken place in the oil-rich province of Deir al-Zour, pointing to the importance of the area’s oil fields as a source of revenue to sustain the conflict.<sup>55</sup> To achieve dominance, both JAN and the IS courted local tribal forces who, in turn, sought to secure income from the oil fields by aligning themselves to the group that had the most advantageous deal on offer.<sup>56</sup> The tide of battle in the east has waxed and waned. After a period of intense fighting, JAN was initially able to chase the IS out of most of the Deir al-Zour area, although the IS retained control over the outskirts of the city of Deir al-Zour

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50 During its 40 years of rule, the Assad regime ran a repressive policy of imprisonment, exile or physical elimination of political opposition figures. See: Pace, J. and Landis, J. (2009), ‘The Syrian opposition: the struggle for unity and relevance, 2003–2008’, in Lawson, F. H. (ed.) (2009), *Demystifying Syria*, SAQI, Lebanon. In addition, Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood was not of the Egyptian coherent, popular and articulate variety and proved unable to rapidly mobilise popular support (Becker, P. (2013), *Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Still a Crucial Actor: Inclusivity the Order of the Day in Dealings with Syria’s Opposition*, *SWP Comments No. 34*, Berlin.

51 Lynch, M. (2012), op.cit. It is worth noting that many voices in the Arabic media take the view that Western countries use the existence of divisions in Syrian opposition as an excuse for inaction. For example: [The Republic](#), 29 December 2012; [All4Syria](#), 22 June 2014; [AlQuds](#), 7 May 2014 (all retrieved 10 July 2014) (all Arabic).

52 [Al-Araby al-Jadeed](#), 7 March 2014, (retrieved 23 June 2014) (Arabic).

53 Al-Bagdadi was the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), now the Islamic State (IS) and attempted to wrest control over JAN from Al-Golani who used to be an ISI member. For a more extensive overview of events: Lister, C. (2014), op.cit.; Abouzeid, R. (2014), *The Jihad Next Door: The Syrian Roots of Iraq’s Newest Civil War*, *Politico Magazine*, 23 June 2014.

54 The cult-like and autocratic behaviour of the IS leader, Al-Baghdadi, its brutality and its criminal activities in Western Iraq very likely all contributed to its de-franchising by AQ corporate. It remains to be seen whether disownment by the central AQ leadership will sufficiently undermine IS credibility to threaten its longer-term legitimacy and support base, or whether the AQ brand lost its copyright. For example: [Al-Monitor](#), 11 February 2014 (retrieved 3 June 2014); [Al-Arabiya](#), 7 February 2014 (retrieved 24 June 2014) (Arabic).

55 [All4Syria](#), 28 April 2014 (retrieved 10 June 2014) (Arabic). The Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) also benefits from the limited oil refining in the parts of Hasakah province under its control ([Joshua Landis blog](#), 17 December 2013; [Al-Monitor](#), 18 February 2014) (both retrieved 12 March 2014).

56 See, for example, [Carnegie’s Syria in Crisis blog](#) of 27 December 2013. This dynamic can also be witnessed in Iraq, where tribal support enabled the IS to capture Mosul and advance rapidly towards Baghdad.

and a limited number of lesser strategic footholds along the Euphrates River.<sup>57</sup> However, the IS was recently able to regain much of the terrain it previously lost, thanks in part to the capability increase that resulted from its Iraqi successes, aggressive advances and a series of JAN defections. Its gains have included Syria's two biggest oil fields (al-Taim and al-Omar) as well as the city of Abu Kamaal, which, strategically located on the Euphrates River near the Iraqi border, is important for the transit of IS fighters, funds and weapons.<sup>58</sup>

All this infighting has had two main effects. To start with, it splintered the opposition's fighting forces with predictable consequences for their orientation from fighting the regime to fighting against each other in order to survive and to compete for international funding and public attention. In addition, it gave the regime a much-needed breathing space and enabled it to continue grinding away at opposition positions to re-establish its control over the Damascus-Aleppo urban corridor and the adjacent coastal areas.<sup>59</sup> The recent capture of Yabroud by the Syrian army and its Hezbollah paramilitary aides (16 March), the Krak des Chevaliers (20 March) and Homs (9 May), for example, made it possible for the regime to cut off the opposition's supply lines to Lebanon and increase its own territorial coherence in the Damascus-Homs-Latakia area.<sup>60</sup> These regime advances in turn triggered a surprise offensive by JAN, the Islamic Front (IF) and other radical Islamist forces in Kassab (in the northern countryside of Latakia province) in early April in an attempt to reduce the regime's military pressure on other areas. While this provided temporary relief, regime forces managed to recapture Kassab by mid-June 2014.<sup>61</sup>

In summary, the current battlefield situation is characterised by a relative stalemate in which the regime enjoys a substantial measure of military and territorial dominance over large parts of western Syria, while the east, north-west and south-west have become a patchwork of areas under the territorial control of different opposition groups.<sup>62</sup> Of those groups, only the IS has realised some modest advances from the territorial axis it controls between the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo to Abu Kamaal in Deir al-Zour. The regime's control over Syria's urban heartland, most of its coastal areas and most of its infrastructure (with the exception of the country's oil and gas fields) puts it in a comparatively advantageous position vis-à-vis the opposition, with few incentives to compromise. President Assad's public statements, including in relation to the recent presidential elections, reflect the regime's intransigence.<sup>63</sup> Despite the

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57 *Financial Times*, 12 February 2014 (retrieved 2 July 2014); The Carter Center (2014), *Syria Country-wide Conflict Report*, No. 3 Washington DC; Al-Shark al-Awsat, 19 June 2014 (retrieved 5 July 2014) (Arabic).

58 See: [http://al-shorfa.com/en\\_GB/articles/meii/features/2014/04/14/feature-01](http://al-shorfa.com/en_GB/articles/meii/features/2014/04/14/feature-01); <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/05/article55332332>; al-shuhail, al-Mayadin (all retrieved 18 May 2014) (Arabic); Cafarella, J. (2014), *ISIS advances on Deir ez-Zour*, Blog of the Institute of the Study for War, 5 July 2014; Al-Jazeera, 15 July 2014 (retrieved same day); Al-Arabiya, 17 July 2014 (retrieved 22 July 2014).

59 See, for example, Lister, C. (2014), op.cit.

60 This episode also provided a good illustration of the spillover effects that the violence in Syria has on Lebanon, as JAN in Lebanon retaliated symbolically in response to the capture of Yabroud by conducting a suicide attack in Nabi Othman in Lebanon (nearby Aarsal) (CNN, 17 March 2014; retrieved 26 May 2014).

61 Al-shark al-Awsat, 16 June 2014 (retrieved 24 June 2014) (Arabic).

62 The head of Aleppo's Provincial Council, Abdelrahman Dadam, warned on 7 July 2014 of the 'imminent encirclement' of Aleppo by regime forces, indicating that regime forces might soon further consolidate their control over Syria's urban heartland. See: [National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces](#), 8 July 2014; Institute for the Study of War, [Blog post](#), 8 July 2014 (both retrieved 10 July 2014).

63 President Assad has stated he is willing to negotiate with a legitimate opposition, i.e. one that is not armed, does not rely on external support, enjoys strong social support and is based within Syria. As long as these conditions are not fulfilled, he considers the opposition illegitimate (Interview with Bashar al-Assad on [Youtube](#), 21 October 2013) (Arabic). As to the elections, the Syrian Arab News Agency reported he won 88.7% of the votes ([SANA](#), 4 June 2014; retrieved 11 July 2014).

initial threat of manpower shortages, the assistance of Hezbollah and other Shia militias has ensured it continues to have the military means to back it up.<sup>64</sup>

Another advantage for the regime is that the opposition continues to be extremely fragmented. Although the preceding sections discussed the main opposition groups as unified entities for the sake of easy reference, the reality is that each is formed by a sheer inexhaustible array of brigades, militias and smaller armed groups.<sup>65</sup> These parochial groups are largely characterised by strong vertical ties with particular areas and communities, but feature weak horizontal ties with other groups and leaders. This makes them vulnerable to local counterinsurgency strategies of disembedding and to leadership feuds (consider for example the JAN-IS episode), which easily lead to further fragmentation.<sup>66</sup> It also means that they can group and re-group with relative ease irrespective of their present affiliation. This, in essence, makes their parent organisations loose franchises of varying strength that are vulnerable to reductions in resources and to defections.<sup>67</sup> Even the radical Islamist armed groups, which have shown themselves to be organisationally and financially more efficient, suffer from this phenomenon. Recent efforts at consolidation, such as in the form of the Syrian Revolutionary Front, largely seem to be opportunistic affairs motivated by competition for funding and recruits, leaving much of the underlying substructure of militias and brigades intact.<sup>68</sup> As a consequence, a process of consolidating opposition groups is probably required before meaningful negotiations can start.

On a final note, the brutal, predatory and fragmented state of affairs outlined above stimulates opportunistic plunder and violence that, in turn, create conflict-perpetuating drivers. The current patchwork of control essentially amounts to a series of autonomous mini-fiefdoms ranging from relatively benign to criminal protection rackets. Possibilities for using violence for exploitative purposes have been further enhanced by the significant rise in crime rates that predates the conflict and the purposeful release by the Assad regime of thousands of criminals from Syrian prisons from June 2011 onwards.<sup>69</sup> Criminal activity has simultaneously become a tool to finance military operations, a way to survive and an organised method for self-enrichment while breaking down social trust and hardening attitudes.<sup>70</sup>

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64 On regime manpower shortages, see: [Syria in Crisis](#), 21 February 2014 (retrieved 10 July 2014).

65 In March 2014, The Carter Center (2014), *op.cit.* counted over 5,546 armed groups representing at least 100,000 opposition fighters. This translates into an average group size of 20 fighters. It also notes the recent formation of much larger meta-formation than previously witnessed (for example, the Syrian Revolutionary Front), but observes that these formations remain a long way from the kind of integration that is battle-relevant.

66 Staniland, P. (2014), *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell University Press, London.

67 Countless examples can be found on Joshua Landis' blog. By way of concrete illustration: 12 groups who were affiliated with the FSA switched sides to JAN on 24 September 2013 in protest against the SOC's participation in the Geneva-II talks. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) form an important exception to the fragmentation described here.

68 Sayigh, Y. (2014b), *Is the Armed Rebellion in Syria on the Wane?*, Carnegie Middle East Center (retrieved 10 June 2014); The Carter Center (2014), *op.cit.*

69 Crime rose by an estimated 52% in the period 2001-2006 due to the poor living conditions of broad segments of the population, the deteriorating state of the agricultural sector and increasing corruption in state institutions (Bishara, A. (2013), *Syria: A path to Freedom From Suffering*, Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, Doha).

70 As for example, suggested by reports of politically influential cartels plundering national resources through theft of land and oil smuggling ([Reuters](#), 28 May 2014) (retrieved 5 June 2014). Iraqi intelligence officers got hold of 160 memory sticks just days before the fall of Mosul, which points to the sale of oil, antiquities and smuggling as important sources of IS income ([The Guardian](#), 15 June 2014).

### 3. A more active Western policy that can work towards a transition deal?

The preceding section analysed how the dynamics of the Syrian civil war have increased its complexity, arguably to a point where policy options that can bring an end to the fighting in the short term no longer exist. These dynamics include: the brutal and radical overtones that the fighting has acquired; the international deadlock on the terms for dealing with the conflict – unhelpfully reduced to the question of whether Assad should remain or stay; Western prevarication over the recognition that negotiations are currently a dead end; and proxy-type support from around the region for a gamut of more and less conservatively oriented Sunni Islamic groups. These developments have resulted in the marginalisation of the moderate opposition, greater regional conflagration and a relatively stalemated battlefield on which, however, regime forces operate from the position of greater strength.

This situation makes talk of negotiating a transitional deal, the mainstay of European and US public policy,<sup>71</sup> somewhat fanciful at the moment.<sup>72</sup> While it may remain the desired end-state, such aspirations need to be underpinned by a clear-eyed acknowledgement of three important facts. First, neither the regime nor the range of mostly Islamic opposition forces fighting it have much by way of incentives to negotiate. Second, a number of regional issues need to be resolved as part of a transition deal to end the civil war: what role for Hezbollah in Lebanon, what of the Kurds in north Syria, and with what stripe of Islam can Western countries still negotiate? Third, the international focus and coordination necessary to nudge such a process of negotiation along and endow it with staying power is not present at the moment. These hard issues will need to be thoughtfully considered while the civil war looks increasingly like a house fire that has already leaped over to its neighbour and may just burn down the rest of the street as well.

#### The risks of continuing current Western policy

The recent public statements and absence of innovative initiatives on the part of quite a few Western countries suggest that the temptation is great to continue current policies, with marginal adjustment on the basis of events. This certainly requires the fewest intellectual, diplomatic and financial resources. In essence, it amounts to hoping that with the passage

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71 UK Foreign Secretary William Hague remarked to the House of Commons on 24 February 2014: 'Those supporting the regime side, including the Russian and Iranian governments, need to do far more to press the regime to take this process seriously and to reach a *political settlement* [italics authors]', as we have done with the opposition.' See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-statement-to-parliament-on-ukraine-syria-and-iran> (retrieved 11 April 2014). President Obama is quoted as having said on 14 February 2014: 'we are going to be continuing to work with all the parties concerned to try to move forward on a *diplomatic solution*' [italics authors']. See: <http://rt.com/news/obama-syria-new-steps-181> (retrieved 11 April 2014). The EU's Council [conclusions on Syria of 14 April 2014](#) contain similar statements (retrieved 8 June 2014).

72 Consider, for example, Brahimi's comments on [Reuters](#), 24 March 2014 (retrieved 11 April 2014).

of time a war of attrition will create conditions more conducive to negotiation, and in the meantime mitigating as much as possible the human misery the conflict causes. This approach not only explains the appreciable gap between strong Western rhetoric in favour of moderate elements of the Syrian opposition and the modest support actually delivered to it, but also carries significant risks. This is mainly because the uncertainties inherent in open conflict cannot possibly be predicted: the result of 'wait and see' can just as easily be a 'mutually hurting stalemate', a self-perpetuating low-intensity war or a regional terrorist imbroglio.<sup>73</sup> The capture of Mosul and recent advances of the IS towards Bagdad provide a good illustration of the sort of black swan events that can happen.<sup>74</sup> In addition, three major risks are discussed in more detail below to build the argument for a stronger Western policy towards the Syrian civil war.

**The refugee situation will not only worsen, but also 'institutionalise' itself.** At the moment, around 2.9 million refugees are registered in the region, mostly in Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. This amounts to roughly 15% of the pre-civil war Syrian population.<sup>75</sup> Given the level of destruction in Syria and the likely protracted nature of the conflict, it is highly unlikely that many of these will be able to return over the next five to ten years, even if the conflict were to end tomorrow.<sup>76</sup> In consequence, there is a credible risk of Syrian refugees acquiring a status and presence similar to the Palestinian refugees of the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973.<sup>77</sup> As many refugees have sought shelter in Lebanon and Jordan, states with contested governance and major domestic challenges themselves, this could create challenges similar to those that Jordan faced during its 'Black September' episode of 1970.<sup>78</sup> In addition, the influx of refugees will facilitate the passage of violent extremists who seek to expand their agenda and networks. It was on the back of the Iraqi refugees in 2003 that Al-Qaeda managed to infiltrate Jordan, conducting a series of deathly bombings in Amman in 2005.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the permanent humanitarian emergency in the Gaza Strip shows that the poor conditions and lack of prospects of many refugees make them more vulnerable to abuse and (sectarian) mobilisation for criminal, political and violent purposes.<sup>80</sup> Finally, an entire generation of Syrian children is growing up without much of an education and faces much-diminished prospects for the future in consequence. This is bound to aggravate such challenges.<sup>81</sup>

73 Clausewitz dubbed this the 'fundamental unpredictability of war'. Clausewitz, C. (1993) [1832], *On War*, David Campbell Publishers Ltd, London.

74 For day-to-day updates on the situation in Iraq, see the blog of the Institute for the Study of War at <http://www.understandingwar.org/>.

75 UNHCR, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php> (consulted 3 July 2014).

76 In 2009, nearly two-thirds of a global total of six million refugees found themselves in protracted refugee situations. Their average stay is approaching 20 years. These figures reflect upward trends compared with the 1990s. Loescher, G. and J. Milner (2009), Understanding the Challenge, in: *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 33. For example, there are presently over 300,000 Eritrean refugees in the Horn of Africa despite the Eritrean-Ethiopian war having ended in 2000 (UNHCR, January 2014; retrieved 3 July 2014).

77 See, for example, Feldman, S., A. Aly and K. Shikaki (2013), *Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

78 Feldman, S. et al. (2013), op.cit.

79 *Syria in Crisis*, 24 June 2014 (retrieved 3 July 2014).

80 Consider, for example, the government-orchestrated counter-demonstrations to the popular protests to #BringOurGirlsBack in Nigeria as a relatively harmless variation of the possibilities. Allegedly each 'counter-protester', mostly unemployed young men, was promised US\$25 for each day of participation (*International New York Times*, 5 June 2014) (retrieved same day).

81 It is estimated that about 50% of school-age children are not presently attending school and that net enrolment rates in primary education have dropped to the second lowest position of the world (World Development Indicators). Syrian Center for Policy Research (2014), op.cit.

**Unrest, violence and radicalism may well gradually expand to Lebanon and possibly to Jordan.** A prolonged conflict means a prolonged Hezbollah presence in Syria. Its entry into the civil war has not only already corroded its standing as a positive and stable element in Lebanese politics after moving from opposition into government over the past decades<sup>82</sup>, it has also triggered a violent backlash and radicalisation of Lebanese Sunni groups.<sup>83</sup> While the Lebanese polity has proven itself to be politically resilient in the past, a number of the structural factors that led to the 1975-1990 civil war, such as structural inequalities, extensive elite patronage and ethnic-religious imbalances, remain in place.<sup>84</sup> This increases the risk of political use of conflict dynamics to achieve sectarian gains, especially with Hezbollah forces employed elsewhere.<sup>85</sup>

While the situation in Jordan is currently relatively stable, economic tensions in the Kingdom are rising against a backdrop of social division between Palestinian and East-Bank citizens. At the same time, its governance has not changed much over the past years except for a few Arab Spring-induced concessions.<sup>86</sup> As the influx of Syrian refugees rekindles memories similar to that of the influx of Palestinian refugees after 1948 among East-Bank Jordanians – who already happen to be the main ‘losers’ from two decades of privatisation and agricultural decline – apprehensions are likely to become more hostile in the near future. Should this result in social turmoil or even violence in Jordan, the conflict will also have reached Israel’s borders. A similar scenario can be painted for any IS incursion into Jordan, either by stealth in the form of new IS cells, or by further encroachment on the Turaibil border-post between Iraq and Jordan. This could create a pull for direct Israeli, US and/or Saudi intervention that will be more difficult to resist.<sup>87</sup>

**Further regional escalation in Iraq and possibly in the autonomous Kurdish areas of Syria represents a significant threat.** As to Iraq, the current situation in Anbar and Nineveh provinces is already one of utter chaos with the recent IS-led capture of Mosul and a number of smaller towns in western, northern and central Iraq. While the rapid advance of the IS creates an impression of strength and control that is probably not matched by facts on the ground,<sup>88</sup> it also reflects the symbiosis between its Syrian and Iraqi fronts in terms of the

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82 See Philbrick (2013), op.cit. for a more in-depth analysis of this argument.

83 See, for example, Chatham House (2014), *Syria and Its Neighbours: Regional Dimensions of the Conflict*, Middle East and North Africa Summary, London; International Crisis Group (2013b), *Too Close For Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon*, Middle East report no. 141, Brussels.

84 Rabinovich, I. (1985), *The war for Lebanon 1970-1985*, Revised edition, Cornell University Press, London; [The Guardian](#), 9 June 2012 (retrieved 14 July 2014).

85 In addition, while rising sectarian tensions in Lebanon may not pose a direct threat to Israel, the possibility cannot be discounted that Israel will use an increase in violence on its northern border as a pretext for an attempt to eliminate Hezbollah’s support structure and arsenals.

86 For example: International Crisis Group (ICG) (2012), *Popular Protest in North-Africa and the Middle East: Dallying with Reform in a Divided Jordan*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 118, Brussels. By way of illustration, the Zaatari refugee camp in northern Jordan has become the country’s third-largest city ([UNHCR](#), 16 June 2014).

87 Rothkopf, D. (2014), *The Real Red Line in the Middle East*; [Foreign Policy](#), 30 June; [Syria in Crisis](#), 24 June 2014 (consulted 3 July 2014); [Al-Monitor](#), 1 July 2014 (retrieved 3 July 2014).

88 The much-touted IS capture of Mosul happened in part thanks to an alliance of convenience with local tribal forces and former Ba’athist army elements. Its different constituent parts now control different parts of the city, apparently without much internal coordination between them. [Open Democracy](#), 21 June 2014 (retrieved 3 July 2014). Capture, control and governance should not be equated.

mobility of resources, men and weapons<sup>89</sup> as well as the limits of current Western policy.<sup>90</sup> While its brazen ‘conquest’ of Mosul is bound to activate counter-forces that the IS is unlikely to be able to resist in open combat, the underlying sources of Sunni discontent in western Iraq – the fertile soil on which the IS has grown so rapidly – will not be so easily addressed.<sup>91</sup> The tenacity with which Prime Minister al-Maliki is holding on to power is not promising in this regard.<sup>92</sup> Apart from a need for much more inclusive, Bagdad-led policies towards Iraq’s Sunnis and Kurds, an important indicator for IS growth prospects is whether it learns from its massive decrease in popular legitimacy in Syria that resulted from its brutal methods of rule.<sup>93</sup>

However, while all eyes are on the IS at the moment, the currently largely autonomous Kurdish areas of Syria pose another challenge that has largely remained under the radar. These areas are currently relatively secure and resilient. Sustained IS attacks have not been able to make inroads so far. However, should they seek to emulate the example of neighbouring President Barzani of Iraqi Kurdistan to establish some form of independence, trouble is bound to ensue for two reasons.<sup>94</sup> To start with, the Syrian Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD – Democratic Union Party) is basically an affiliate of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). The latter is sanctioned as a terrorist group by a number of countries and such a move would therefore be tantamount to creating a terrorist-run statelet in the eyes of some. Moreover, neither Iran nor the US will condone such a move for obvious reasons.<sup>95</sup> And yet, the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars have ensured the Kurdish question can no longer be ignored.<sup>96</sup>

Worse, regional spillover effects could extend well beyond the Levant. Turkey and the Gulf states will increasingly need to plan for facing fall-out from the conflict.<sup>97</sup> For example, Saudi Arabia recently reported dismantling an IS cell on its soil that was in the process of becoming operational.<sup>98</sup>

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89 [The Guardian](#), 10 June 2014; [Al-Arabi al-Jadeed](#), 10 June 2014 (Arabic); [Al-Hayat](#), 14 June 2014 (all retrieved 24 June 2014) (Arabic).

90 [Al-Hayat](#), 21 June 2014 (retrieved 24 June 2014) (Arabic).

91 Potentially ranged against it are Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, Shia militia, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps ‘volunteers’, as well as US drones, arms and intelligence. A good overview of the various fighting forces can be found here: [Al-Jazeera](#), 27 June 2014 (retrieved 3 July 2014).

92 [Al-Hayat](#), 25 June 2014 (retrieved 10 July 2014).

93 International Crisis Group (2014c), *Iraq’s Jihadi’s Jack-in-the-Box*, Middle East Briefing No. 38, Brussels/Beirut; Abouzeid, R. (2014), op.cit. provides an excellent outline of the learning process within AQ of how its brutality and dogmatism had alienated many Muslims. JAN under Al-Golani took these lessons to heart in its attempts to win hearts and minds first. Its AQ affiliation was only declared much later by none other than Al-Bagdadi, together with the announced intent to merge ISIS and JAN that led to the subsequent in-fighting. A twitter search on #AllEyesOnIsis will generate an avalanche of further information, opinion and cluttered noise on the IS.

94 For example: [Al-Hayat](#), 25 June 2014 (Arabic); [Voice of America](#), Interview, 2 July 2014 (both retrieved 3 July 2014).

95 The Iranian view on President Barzani’s ‘flotation’ of independence was clearly articulated by the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahiyan, in [BasNews](#), 2 July 2014; see also: Stansfield, G. (2014), *Iraq Falls Apart*, Chatham House The World Today, [online](#) (retrieved 22 July 2014); Turkey’s reaction has been more muted, perhaps in part because Prime Minister Erdogan needs domestic Kurdish support for his presidential bid. See also: [Al-Jazeera](#), 2 July 2014. For a good discussion on the Kurdish take-over of Kirkuk: Hiltermann, J. (2014), *Kurdish Independence: Harder than it Looks*, New York Review of Books [blog post](#), 10 July (all retrieved 11 July 2014).

96 [Al-Monitor](#), 27 March 2014 (retrieved 16 June 2014); see also: Fromkin, D. (2009), *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, Holt Paperbacks, New York.

97 See, for example, this [Spiegel](#) interview with Brahimi (7 June 2014) (retrieved 10 June 2014).

98 [Al-Monitor](#), 8 May 2014 (retrieved 10 June 2014).

For these reasons, continuation of currently rather passive Western policy is risky. At the same time, direct military intervention remains unlikely because of five factors: 1) disenchanted domestic publics that prevent Western policy makers from embarking on more interventionist policies; 2) the legitimacy and capacity legacies of the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts; 3) the chaos into which Libya has descended after the UN sanctioned intervention; 4) the conflict's regional nesting – exacerbated by the strains and tensions of a decade-plus of the war on terror;<sup>99</sup> and 5) the lack of direct US national security interests being at stake. Direct Western military intervention also remains undesirable as the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan suggest it may in fact further cohere and galvanise violent extremist groups, in addition to offending local sensitivities. Elements of a more active Western policy that could work towards a transition deal to end the Syrian civil war therefore need to be sought in diplomacy, much stronger containment, and perhaps indirect intervention. It is to these issues that the next sections turn.

### Towards what sort of transition deal?

Most Western countries, as well as Russia and Iran, have expressed the belief that a political solution in the form of a transition deal is the only way out of the Syrian civil war. However, given that they have different views on what such a deal should entail and that the fighting parties currently lack incentives to negotiate one, this raises two critical questions: first, what should such a deal look like; second, how can it be realised? This section outlines the contours of an answer to the first question; the remaining sections explore elements of a policy that could help bring about such a deal.

The two issues that are critical to any transition deal are the territorial integrity of the post-war Syrian state and the role of President Assad in the post-conflict period. In respect of the territorial dimension of a transition deal, it is probably safe to assume that the international community is unlikely to accept a *de jure* partition of Syria into several new states because neither the US, Russia or Turkey will be in favour of such a scheme. Despite talk of the Sykes-Picot borders being altered by reality, their formal existence is likely to enjoy surprising longevity.<sup>100</sup> This would limit the governance structure of any transition deal to variations on the confederal-federal-unitary state continuum. In respect of a role for President Assad, the current level of control and support for the regime make it highly likely that there will need to be one for him, quite possibly as ruler of one of the constituent parts of a future Syrian state.<sup>101</sup> In consequence, a *de facto* partition of Syria with a certain level of institutionalisation reflecting the interests of different sectarian groups is not an unlikely outcome. In a way, it would mix the territorial logic of Bosnia-Herzegovina's Dayton Accord with the institutional and representative logic of Lebanon's Taif Agreement. This could be acceptable internationally and workable domestically. Whether it is also desirable and sustainable will

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99 See: Ahmed, A. (2013), *The thistle and the drone: How America's war on terror became a global war on tribal Islam*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC.

100 For an excellent analysis see also: Sayigh, Y. (2014a), *Are the Sykes-Picot borders being redrawn?*, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, [online](#) (retrieved 15 July 2014).

101 As long as Western countries do not accept a role for Assad and wish to oust him instead, their choice is between joining the conflict by proxy or finding a way to convince Iran to abandon its client.

depend to what extent its fine print would include provisions that can gradually address the root causes of the conflict and mitigate the risk of resurgent sectarian politics.<sup>102</sup>

In short, a more active Western policy should strive for a balance between influencing the incentives that could bring a transition deal closer and prevent further regionalisation of the conflict. Unfortunately, little should be expected of it in the short term. Instead, it will be a difficult and in part expensive undertaking that holds promise of delivering medium-term benefits, including greater mitigation of the risks previously discussed. The remainder of this report discusses what key elements of a policy to this effect could look like; they are largely complementary and could, in fact, be part of a single policy. Table 1 provides a brief summary. Naturally, any policy on Syria will be implemented in a constantly changing environment, to uncertain effects, meaning that it must be subject to continuous monitoring and frequent adjustment.

**Table 1 Elements of a more active Western policy towards the Syrian civil war**

| Headline  | Main activities  | How it will influence the prospects for a transition deal...  | How it will prevent further regionalisation of the conflict...  |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Much stronger regional containment</b>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increasing humanitarian engagement</li> <li>- Supporting the Lebanese and Jordanian governments</li> <li>- Increasing counterterrorist activities and intelligence sharing, including with Assad</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It can make trans-border flows of goods, money and people more difficult</li> <li>- It can re-establish informal relations with the regime</li> </ul>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It can mitigate some of the humanitarian risks</li> <li>- It can increase the resilience of Lebanon and Jordan</li> </ul>                      |
| <b>Stimulating a regional Saudi-Iranian agreement</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Concluding a gentleman's agreement of domestic non-interference</li> <li>- Working towards more stable and inclusive governance of Iraq</li> <li>- Exploring what arrangement in Syria could meet Iranian short- and Saudi long-term interests</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It can create balanced pressure on the fighting parties in Syria</li> <li>- It can make trade-offs in the short vs. long term</li> </ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It can reduce regional power rivalry as conflict driver</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Increased support for parts of the Syrian opposition</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Agreeing what 'moderate' and 'effective' opposition mean</li> <li>- Helping moderate and effective groups cohere politically</li> <li>- Providing lethal military equipment, training and supplies?</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It can draw factions other than the FSA into a process of consolidation of the opposition</li> <li>- It can increase military pressure on Assad</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- It can create stronger countervailing forces to violent extremism in Syria</li> <li>- It can make radical spill-over more difficult</li> </ul> |

102 A key lesson from both Lebanon and Bosnia-Herzegovina is that while their respective 'peace treaties' ended the violence, their framing and clauses also created new structural barriers to reconciliation, the creation of a more inclusive polity and more equitable economic growth. See, for example: Ashdown, P. (2007), *Swords and ploughshares: Bringing peace to the 21st century*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London; Darby, J. and R. MacGinty (2008), *Contemporary peacemaking: Conflict, peace processes and post-war reconstruction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

A question likely to jump out from this table is how intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation with President Assad's regime could be combined with stronger support for the 'moderate' opposition in the same policy towards the Syrian civil war. While the strategic logic that brings these elements together is to influence incentives by offering both carrots and sticks, it does create operational challenges. These can be resolved in two ways. One is that Western countries create a division of labour between themselves whereby some engage in intelligence collaboration with the regime and others provide stronger support to the opposition – while coordinating their efforts through a revamped version of the Friends of the Syrian People forum without Syrians and behind closed doors. Another is that Western countries articulate their policy as a principles-based approach for getting to a transition deal. They work with the regime to curb violent extremists who are not amenable to negotiate and they work with the opposition to push the regime that is not willing to negotiate at this point in time either.

### Policy element 1: Much stronger regional containment

The objective of this policy element is to prevent further perpetuation and regional spillover of the Syrian conflict, which its recent extension into Iraq demonstrates to be far from impossible. It builds on the current approach of most Western countries, but expands it significantly. Putting this element into practice will require much greater Western diplomatic, development and intelligence engagement in and with Syria's direct neighbours along three planks:

**Increasing humanitarian engagement:** Lessening the plight of the millions of refugees and containing their negative impact on Lebanon and Jordan in particular are essential to avoid creating a vortex of human misery, abuse and sectarian as well as criminal activity. However, the Syria Regional Refugee Response Plan for 2014 is currently only funded for 32%.<sup>103</sup> As the average civil war lasts for seven years, these costs are likely to rise, or at least recur, for several years to come.<sup>104</sup> Western countries will therefore have to either increase their humanitarian expenditure significantly, or, probably more realistically, convince the deep-pocketed Gulf countries to underwrite most of the humanitarian cost.<sup>105</sup> This may be part of a deal by which these countries are enticed by other policy elements discussed below. However, greater thought also needs to go into how these funds will be spent and how refugees will relate to the local population. For example, the policy of scattering Syrian refugees throughout Lebanese villages and rural areas in the east of the country is facilitating popular mobilisation along sectarian lines, localising authority and security provision, and creating increasing competition for jobs, housing and foodstuffs – fuelled by geopolitically informed aid delivery.<sup>106</sup>

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103 UN OCHA's Regional Response Plan – dealing with refugees– increased from US\$2 billion in 2012 to US\$4.2 million in 2014, reflecting a 210% increase. Its Syria Humanitarian Assistance Response Plan – dealing with IDPs – of September 2012 appealed for US\$1.4 million, its fifth revision for US\$2.3 million for 2014, reflecting a 164% increase. The latter is currently funded for 26%. UN OCHA (retrieved 4 July 2014).

104 Collier, P., A. Hoeffler and M. Söderbaum (2004), 'On the Duration of Civil War', *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 253-273; Fearon, J. (2002), *Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?*, Working Paper, Stanford University, <http://www.stanford.edu/group/ethnic/workingpapers/dur3.pdf> (retrieved 16 June 2014) estimates it at about ten years. The Syrian conflict features many factors that tend to lengthen the duration of a civil war. The Washington Post of 23 October 2013 contains a good overview of what existing research says about factors that influence the length of a civil war (retrieved 16 June 2014).

105 Their significant contributions to date should be acknowledged: Osborne, A. (2014), *Syria Pledging Conference: Who Promised What?*, Global Humanitarian Assistance Blog.

106 Price, M., F. Janssen and R. Smits (forthcoming), *The political economy of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon*, Clingendael Conflict Research Unit Policy Paper, The Hague.

**Supporting the Lebanese and Jordanian governments more strongly:** Lebanon and Jordan are vulnerable states that are critical to containing the Syrian civil war. Because they are fragile, the nature that greater support for their efforts should take is not self-evident. For example, Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance has already been destabilised by the large influx of refugees in ways that have diminished the reach and authority of the central government. Governance and security provision are becoming increasingly local and sectarian. Worse, its main security organisations, the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), either have a history of inefficiency or are increasingly considered to be sectarian as well.<sup>107</sup> The most neutral way of providing greater international support to Lebanon might in fact be to increase the capabilities of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Its mandate revision of 2006 already enables it to assist in border control and humanitarian assistance, while its presence along the Syrian border might prevent overt sectarian behaviour on the part of the ISF or LAF. As its authorised troop level of 15,000 troops is only resourced at 4,609 at present, UNIFIL has scope to expand.<sup>108</sup> However, its current mandate ends in August 2014 and sufficient diplomatic effort would have to be expanded very soon to make sure it continues to operate. Alternatively, supporting inter-sectarian Lebanese oversight mechanisms at local level, either formally instated or more informally congregated by diverse community members or community-based organisations, could provide an avenue for greater support.<sup>109</sup> Yet this is likely to require a relatively fine-grained community-security programme that will be time and expertise intensive.

**Increasing counterterrorist activities and intelligence sharing:** The growing concern in Western capitals about the radicalisation of the conflict largely centres on the possible return of some of the estimated 3,000 EU citizens who have joined radical opposition forces in Syria.<sup>110</sup> Syria's (and now Iraq's) neighbours are of course even closer to the fire of violent extremism.<sup>111</sup> Hence, much stronger counterterrorism coordination and intelligence sharing between Western countries, Jordan, Turkey and some of the Gulf countries, including a focus on reducing funding flows to the Syrian conflict, stands to reason.<sup>112</sup> President Obama's recent statement on the priority of 'laying down a more effective counterterrorism platform' suggests that there is momentum that can be built on.<sup>113</sup> Since countering terrorism is about the only shared interest between President Assad and Western countries, it might be a useful entry point for re-establishing informal relationships that can subsequently help to better understand what might move the regime towards the negotiation table.

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107 Price, M. et al. (forthcoming), op.cit.

108 UN DPKO, 31 May 2014 (retrieved 4 July 2014).

109 Price, M. et al. (forthcoming), op.cit.

110 *Financial Times*, 5 June 2014 (retrieved 4 July 2014).

111 See for example: *Al-Monitor*, 25 June 2014 (retrieved 4 July 2014) for an analysis of the view from Jordan.

112 While the IS's limited dependence on external funding suggests that reducing financial flows will not necessarily diminish the financial prospects of some radical groups by much (instead, it seems to rely on income from extortion, kidnapping, loot and oil sales), there is evidence that it is more important for other groups (McClatchy DC, 23 June 2014; CSM, 18 June 2014) (both retrieved 4 July 2014).

113 *EA Worldview*, 20 June 2014 (retrieved 4 July 2014).

## Policy element 2: Stimulating a regional Saudi – Iranian agreement

The objective of this policy element is to reduce the flow of weapons and funds to the Assad regime and the opposition forces through a reduction in the level of strategic competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>114</sup> This would require a sustained diplomatic effort that might lead to a regional deal, which the West could help facilitate. Therefore, it is a bit ‘out of the box’ as it does not focus on the Syrian civil war directly and would take years to realise, but it is arguably precisely the current state of Western policy and the civil war that ask for longer-term and more innovative thinking. Giving such an initiative a chance of success requires a strong public endorsement from each head of state, a mutually acceptable mediator (such as Oman) and a viable process. This could, for example, take the form of two parallel tracks: one consisting of a series of meetings between think tanks and universities that seek to understand the main fears/priorities on both sides, identify confidence building measures and explore the contours of a regional deal; the other, a series of informal but structured conversations between high-level officials.

Critics may counter that these arch rivals will not even deign to talk with each other.<sup>115</sup> This, however, is probably a mistaken analysis based on overly black-and-white enemy images. While Saudi Arabia and Iran have often sought to outcompete (for example, in Lebanon and Palestine) or outmanoeuvre each other,<sup>116</sup> both countries have also historically shown pragmatism and caution in their foreign policy, cognizant of their own vulnerabilities and proximity, and despite sometimes fiery rhetoric.<sup>117</sup> It is on this basis that the policy element builds. It also reflects the changing geopolitical balance of the Middle East, where an untypical decade of Saudi dominance, brought about by President Bush’s<sup>118</sup> isolation of Iran and the US invasion of Iraq, is under pressure because of the cautious US–Iranian rapprochement on the latter’s nuclear programme.<sup>119</sup> This perspective, together with recent developments, may make it possible to build on two key points of convergence between

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114 On their relation see for example: Wehrey, F. et al. (2009a), *Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation and Implications for US Policy*, RAND National Security Research Division, Santa Monica; Aarts, P. and J. van Duijne, ‘Saudi Arabia after US-Iranian Détente: Left in the Lurch?’, *Middle East Policy*, vol. XVI, No. 3, Fall 2009.

115 In the 1970s, the relationship between the Saudi royal family and the regime of Iran’s Shah was friendly, premised on the common enemies of communism and Arab nationalism, with the US as mutual ally. Yet, the 1979 Islamic revolution and the challenge that Iran’s governance model of ‘velayat-e faqih’ (guardianship of the jurist) posed to the Saudi royal family, the Shia uprising in Saudi Arabia in 1979 and the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq war (and Saudi support for the latter) rapidly changed this. Al-Suwaidi, J. (1996), *Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability*, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies, Abu Dhabi; Wehrey, F. et al. (2009b), *Dangerous but not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, RAND, Santa Monica; Wehrey, F. (2013), *The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC.

116 For example: [Reuters](#), 17 May 2012; [Al-Monitor](#), 9 December 2013 (retrieved 11 June 2014).

117 For a recent example: [Al-Monitor](#), 14 May 2014 (retrieved 11 June 2014). Iranian posturing in the nearby Gulf has, for instance, been much less aggressive than in the further-away Levant (Wehrey, F. et al. (2009a), op.cit. For a more in-depth discussion of respectively Saudi and Iranian foreign policy: Nonneman, G. (2005), ‘Determinants and patterns of Saudi foreign policy: Omnibalancing and relative autonomy in multiple environments’, in: Aarts, P. and G. Nonneman, *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, Hurst and Company, London; Posch, W. (2013), ‘The Third World, Global Islam and Pragmatism: The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy’, *SWP Research paper No. 3*, Berlin. For a more hard-line interpretation of Saudi–Iranian rivalry, see this [Carnegie interview](#) with Christopher Boucek and Karim Sadjadpour (20 September 2011) (retrieved 11 June 2014).

118 President Bush’s 29 January 2002 State of the Union speech can be found [here](#) (retrieved 11 June 2014).

119 For example: [OrientXXI](#), 24 June 2014 (retrieved 4 July 2014).

Iranian and Saudi interests: a more stable Iraq and minimising the influence of radical Sunni Islamist groups in the region.<sup>120</sup> Pursuing this policy element to arrive at a regional deal would require an agenda that gradually builds confidence by working from relatively easy to more difficult steps.

**Concluding a gentleman's agreement of domestic non-interference:** A good way to build confidence in the short term would be a series of high-level statements from both sides that disavow interference in each other's domestic affairs by stirring up unrest in religious or ethnic minority groups. This would help address lingering fears throughout the Gulf states of Iranian support for their Shia minorities to challenge ruling Sunni royal families and tribal elites.<sup>121</sup> Conversely, Iran has a significant Arab minority that could provide an entry point for external meddling and Saudi Arabia has a track record of encouraging radical Salafist activism, in part to counter Iran's revolutionary doctrine. Both issues could be downplayed in this manner.<sup>122</sup> Contrary to the 1980s, such minorities do not actually seem to have been used recently by either side for externally induced domestic troublemaking, but it is past legacies and symbolism that counts here.<sup>123</sup> Such statements could culminate in a gentleman's agreement of non-interference that lays the foundation for a relationship between relative equals.

**Working towards more stable governance of Iraq:** Once an initial level of confidence has been established, attention could turn to what is arguably the issue of greatest significance to Iran and Saudi Arabia: the governance of Iraq. A stable neighbour that produces little by way of security threats and negative externalities represents a clear common interest. The current civil war, the rise of radical Islamist Sunni groups and the IS-led capture of Mosul show that precisely the reverse situation is at hand. Talk of fragmentation of Iraq is already rife and this represents a dangerous situation for these two countries as both their regimes are despised by radical Sunni groups and share a hard-to-control frontier with Iraq.<sup>124</sup> What provides cause for optimism is that the Saudi and Iranian positions seem less adversarial in Iraq than they are in Syria, infused by greater pragmatism on the basis of proximity. The question is how Saudi Arabia and Iran could help stabilise Iraq while building confidence between themselves in the process. Iran enjoys varying measures of influence with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Muqtada al-Sadr and Prime Minister al-Maliki – all politically and militarily influential Shia organisations or individuals – while Saudi Arabia has strong tribal ties with southern and western Iraq that it could leverage.<sup>125</sup> Given Iraq's religious composition, it is probably inevitable that Shia parties and leaders will dominate its central government. However, if this can be combined with strong and credible guarantees for its Sunni minority as well as more

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120 The Saudi fear of radical Sunni groups might seem paradoxical given its own adherence to Wahhabism as an ultra-orthodox interpretation of Islam. The short answer is that such radical groups take issue with what they perceive as the hedonistic lifestyle of the House of Saud, its US alliance and the nature of Saudi Arabia as nation-state, as opposed to its dissolution into a Caliphate that unites the entire Muslim community.

121 See for example Wehrey, F. (2013), op.cit.

122 Milani, M. (ed.) (1996), 'Iran's gulf policy: from idealism and confrontation to pragmatism and moderation', in Al-Suwaidi, J. (1996), op.cit.; Wehrey, F. et al. (2009b), op.cit.

123 See for example: Wehrey, F. (2013), op.cit.; Aarts, P. and G. Nonneman (2005), op.cit.; Posch, W. (2013), op.cit.; Wehrey, F. et al. (2009b), op.cit. argue that Shia minorities in the Gulf have, in fact, distanced themselves from Iran.

124 As, for instance, recently recognised by Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council in *Al-Monitor*, 11 June 2014 (retrieved 12 June 2014).

125 See Wehrey, F. (2009b) op.cit.; Aarts, P. and J. van Duijne (2009), op.cit.; *Al-Monitor*, 25 June 2014 (retrieved 4 July 2014).

inclusive policies, Saudi Arabia might accept such a state of affairs because Iraqi Shia are a far cry from being Iranian agents.<sup>126</sup> Hence, it is conceivable that Iran and Saudi Arabia could work with key Iraqi power brokers behind the scenes, exerting a combination of diplomatic pressure and financial inducements, to help stabilise the country through a coordinated effort.

**Exploring what arrangement in Syria could meet Iranian short- and Saudi long-term interests:**

Addressing the Syrian civil war is the ultimate aim of a regional Iranian–Saudi deal. At face value, their positions seem impossible to reconcile: Iran tries to maintain its political alliance with the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, while Saudi Arabia seeks to break it.<sup>127</sup> However, the failure of Saudi efforts to dislodge the Assad regime so far, its inability to provide advanced weapons systems to affiliated opposition forces (absent US agreement), and the steadfastness of Iranian support have likely forced a downward adjustment of Saudi cost-benefit calculations of victory through conflict by proxy.<sup>128</sup> This may make it more amenable to negotiate, while Iran might welcome an opportunity to reduce an expensive foreign engagement as its economy is in dire straits. The progress of the IS has created a parallel, shared incentive. But the terms of a deal will matter: finding a workable role for Assad will be critical to Iran, avoiding those features of Dayton that prevented longer-term development of the state will be critical to Saudi Arabia (to create the possibility of ‘soft’ regime change in the longer term), and a credible internationally enforced power-sharing formula will be critical for both countries (to avoid later renegeing or manipulation of the deal).<sup>129</sup> Earlier Saudi–Iranian collaboration in Lebanon could provide a basis for initial talks – a de facto partition of the Syrian state under a (con)federal umbrella might be the result.<sup>130</sup>

In short, Western facilitation of this policy element might help realise a Saudi–Iranian regional deal that puts their relationship on a more stable footing. There would still be plenty of space for competition, for example in wooing the smaller Gulf countries, preponderance in the Gulf, and economic influence, but the need to resort to virulent rhetoric, sectarian mobilisation and violence would decrease.

In the longer run, both countries could work towards a broader, informal understanding of spheres of influence. It will be key that Iran accepts Saudi claims on religious leadership of the Sunni Muslim community, as it is one of the key pillars on which the rule and legitimacy of the house of Saud rests, and that Saudi Arabia comes to terms with Iranian preponderance in people, military capacity, and, likely, economic clout. Getting to such an understanding may require several inducements, such as the complete lifting of sanctions and possibly moving

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126 For example, contrary to Iran’s, Iraq’s Shia clerics preach against clerics taking up political office. Iraq’s Shia are also nationalists, imbued with a relative distrust of Iran. Furthermore, it is telling that the Iraqi regime managed to forestall significant domestic Shia resistance during the Iran–Iraq war without too much trouble, even though the appeal of the Islamic revolution was at its zenith in the early days of the war. For example: Wehrey, F. (2009b), *op.cit.*

127 This alliance provides Iran with leverage in the Levant, credibility in its anti-Israel/US rhetoric and ideology, as well as a reputation for asymmetric warfare. For more background on the role of ideology in Iran’s foreign policy: Posch (2013), *op.cit.*

128 There are, however, indications that President Assad’s regime cannot take Iran’s support for granted ad infinitum: [The Huffington Post](#), 14 April 2014 (retrieved 12 June 2014).

129 Ashdown, P. (2007), *op.cit.*

130 Iranian – Saudi collaboration enabled the formation of a Lebanese government under Prime Minister Tammam Salam in February 2014 after ten months of political deadlock. [The Daily Star Lebanon](#), 16 May 2014 (retrieved 12 June 2014); also: Gause, G. (2014), *Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement? The Incentives and the Obstacles*, The Brookings Institute, Washington DC.

the fifth fleet from Bahrain to a location further removed from the Iranian littoral of the Gulf. Such concessions cannot be made by Saudi Arabia alone and will not be made before the nuclear issue is settled, but the ideas need to be developed now. The 2003 Iranian offer to the US of full transparency on its nuclear programme and withdrawal of its support for Hamas and Hezbollah in exchange for normalisation of diplomatic relations and security assurances show that such game-changing deals are possible.

### Policy element 3: Increased support for parts of the Syrian opposition

The objective of this policy element is to increase the political cohesiveness and operational effectiveness of a sufficient number of elements of the Syrian opposition so that ensuing improvements in their battlefield performance will put greater pressure on the Assad regime to become more serious about negotiating a transition deal. An ancillary objective is to help resist further advances by radical Islamist groups. It can be implemented in two phases with clear decision points in between them. A first phase would consist of increased diplomatic and development support for selected moderate opposition groups in the form of funds, intelligence information, capacity building and mediation. A possible second phase would consist of military support in the form of lethal equipment, training and improved command and control. It should be noted that all of this is already being done to some extent. To make a difference, this policy element would require inclusion of moderate Islamic groups in support initiatives, greater focus on reconciliation and cooperation between different opposition groups (which, in turn, would require a more unified Western–Gulf approach to the Syrian opposition), and a scale-up of existing efforts in a way that is sustainable and reliable.

**Agreeing what ‘moderate’ and ‘effective’ opposition means:** Before going into either phase in more detail, a discussion is warranted on the meaning of ‘moderate’ and ‘effective’ in the current conflict context. Although many may immediately associate these terms with the SOC and FSA, this runs into two problems. First, these organisations always represented broad umbrellas characterised by significant levels of internal strife and fragmentation.<sup>131</sup> As a consequence of their lack of unity, limited external support, domestic competition and aggressive regime tactics, both organisations have lost much of their influence and their following has been reduced. In short, they may still be moderate, but it is questionable to what extent they are still effective. Second, all opposition groups – irrespective of their real intentions – have come to employ Islamic rhetoric and orientations in pursuit of funding, recruits and the retention of their fighters. This effect can, in part, be ascribed to the rapid rise of JAN and the IS. Its net effect is that ‘moderate’ in the secular, Western sense of the term does not exist in Syria – and never did. In short, the understanding of neither ‘moderate’ or ‘effective’ is straightforward. Yet, greater Western support for a sufficient mass of acceptable opposition groups to turn the tide against President Assad logically requires identifying who is involved.

One consequence is that an effective coalition of opposition forces will require inclusion of moderate Islamic opposition groups beyond the SOC and FSA to make a difference

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<sup>131</sup> See for example: Kodmani, B. and F. Legrand (2013), *Empowering the democratic resistance in Syria*, Arab Reform Initiative, Paris; O’Bagy, E. (2013), ‘The Free Syrian Army’, *Middle East Security Report No. 9*, Institute for the Study of War, Washington DC.

on the battlefield.<sup>132</sup> In turn, this raises a selection problem as many of these groups are probably not acceptable to Western publics and decision-makers. A useful way out of this conundrum might be to consider groups as moderate that publicly subscribe to commitments such as: 1) not to impose ideology by force, 2) respect the collective rights of groups with other convictions, 3) respect the human rights of each individual and 4) accept the notion of pluralism as the organising principle for the future Syrian state. While this may seem a no-brainer at face value, it does mean that options for a greater role for Islam in the governance of post-civil war Syria would be on the table for discussion. Such a pragmatic approach would exclude doing business with the IS, JAN and the larger, more radical factions of the IF (in particular Ahrar al-Sham and the Islamic Army), but might well include IF-affiliated groups with a more moderate religious outlook (for example groups like Suqour al-Sham and Liwa al-Tawhid that used to be affiliated with the FSA).<sup>133</sup> In any case, it would require a detailed analysis of the composition and interests of the many groups that constitute the IF.<sup>134</sup> In the meantime, it is important to keep communication channels open, especially given the IF's size and relevance. Earlier efforts by US Syria envoy Robert Ford in December 2013 to enter into a dialogue with the Islamic Front, as well as Ahmed Tomeh's (head of the Syrian Interim Government – linked with the SOC) declaration that dialogue with the IF is possible despite differences of view, reflect this logic.<sup>135</sup>

**Helping moderate and effective groups cohere politically:** Section 2 briefly introduced the term 'parochial organisations' to characterise many of the Syrian opposition groups. It denoted organisations that are well grounded in specific areas and local communities but feature weak connections between them.<sup>136</sup> Such groups struggle to form larger coalitions and fight insurgencies less effectively. The trust between leaders and groups simply does not extend far enough beneath the surface. A promising strategy to help these groups develop stronger links to improve their coherence and fighting effectiveness is 'factional fusing'.<sup>137</sup> This refers to an extended process of foreign support to build the horizontal links, trust and familiarity between the leaders of different local groups required for achieving greater effectiveness. However, at the moment, foreign support can rather be characterised by a 'divide and rule' approach whereby different external patrons support factions of their

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132 Time works against this policy element. The marginalisation of the FSA and a number of groups affiliated to it suggests that a moment might arrive soon at which Islamic groups will be the only relevant opposition actors in play. For example, 11 rebels groups in areas with a dominant IS presence (Raqqqa and Deri al-Zour) recently asked the SOC to provide them with weapons to fight the IS. Failure to meet their demand, they suggested, would require them to pull their fighters from the conflict. ([Arabi21](#), 2 July 2014 (retrieved 11 July 2014) (Arabic).

133 Lund, A. (2014), *The Politics of the Islamic Front: An Umbrella Organization*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC; Interview with Hamza al-Mustafa on 27 May 2014; [Al-Jazeera](#), 6 May 2014 (retrieved 8 July 2014) (Arabic).

134 The IF manifesto is relatively clear on its general orientation, but rather non-specific about the strategies and approaches it intends to follow. It does, for example, reject the idea of a popular vote on the future governance of the Syrian state and the character of its society. These should reflect Islam and be solely based on Sharia law. Yet, its language on this is vague without much clarification of what this will mean in political, judicial and operational terms. In general, the document comes across as ill-thought through, suggesting there may be scope for negotiation. [Manifesto of the Islamic Front](#) (2013), The Umma project (Arabic).

135 Reuters, 18 December 2013; [Al-Arabiya](#), 19 December 2013 (Arabic) (both retrieved 10 July 2014).

136 The number of armed opposition groups is currently estimated at 5,000+. The Carter Center (2014), op.cit.

137 See Staniland, P. (2014), op.cit.

choice.<sup>138</sup> The results have been as predictable as they have been devastating. A successful process of factional fusing would require three conditions:

- coherent and unified international support for selected opposition groups. This demands a substantial and intense diplomatic alignment between Western (the US in particular) and Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular). After all, although the Friends of the Syrian People have supported the SOC to some extent and the US has dabbled in supporting the FSA, it is the Gulf countries that have put up most of the fragmented support for the Syrian opposition;
- more inclusive leadership within the SOC, meaning leadership that goes beyond immediate self- and group interests, and more towards an institutionalised manner of decision-making. The divisive effects of regional competition do not exempt the Syrian opposition from its own responsibility to overcome internal feuds;
- sanctuaries, such as Gaziantep, that are available on an extended and reliable basis as areas for relationship building and staging.<sup>139</sup> Hence, both Turkey and Jordan need to be closely involved in any closed-doors diplomatic deliberations on who to support and for what reasons.

A joint Gulf–Western diplomatic and financial effort would be essential for success and must be underpinned by deep intelligence to manage the obvious risks involved. Diplomacy should come in the form of pragmatic, hands-on mediation between different armed opposition groups to explore how they can be brought closer together and build relations of trust. Financial support should pay for salaries, overhead, basic relief and communication of selected opposition groups (both their representatives as well as rank and file).

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138 For example, Saudi Arabia and Qatar competed actively through different factions of the SOC and the SMC for control over these bodies. The SMC's leadership, originally established through a joint Saudi-Qatari effort to support the Syrian rebels, splintered in February 2014 when both countries clashed over its future course. The expulsion of the SMC's Chief of Staff, Salim Idris, 'Qatar's man', in favour of Abdel-Ilah al-Bashier, 'a Saudi favourite', was supported by SOC leader Ahmad al-Jarba and then Minister of Defense Mustafa al-Assad (no relation) – both also Saudi men. Idris predictably rejected his dismissal and 13 senior SMC provincial commanders joined him, fracturing the SMC in the process. Lund, A. (2014), *The Free Syrian Armies: Institutional Split*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (retrieved 10 June 2014); *The Daily Star Lebanon*, 18 February 2014; retrieved 10 June 2014); Lister, C. (2014), op.cit.; Interview Hamza al-Moustafa on 27 May 2014; *NorthWest Herald*, 19 February 2014 (retrieved 16 June 2014); *Al-Jazeera*, 19 February 2014 (retrieved 16 June 2014). The divisions in the SMC increase the tendency of external sponsors to bypass it and deliver weapons to groups of their preference (Interview with SNC member Said Lahdo, 17 June 2014). In further twists of events, the appearance of Idris in the establishment video of Haraket Hazm and his blessing for its policies can be interpreted as an attempt to balance the establishment of Syria's Revolutionaries Front, which has the backing of Assad and Jarba. Moreover, Ahmed Tomeh, the head of the Syrian Interim Government, decided on 26 June 2014 to dismiss al-Bashier and the SMC entirely. However, this was quickly disputed by Jarba, who took the view that Tomeh did not have the required authority to do so. (*Zaman al-Wsl and Arabi21*, 26 June 2014; *Al-Arabiya*, 8 July 2014 (all retrieved on 10 July 2014) (Arabic).

139 Staniland, P. (2014), op.cit.

**Providing military equipment, training and supplies?** The US and a number of Gulf countries are already providing lethal military support to selected opposition groups.<sup>140</sup> Hence, the question is whether Western countries should consider increasing such support in terms of its quantity and quality. Which, in essence, amounts to joining the civil war by proxy. The UK did consider (and reject) plans to such effect, while President Obama recently announced his intention to seek US\$500 million in funding for a similar effort.<sup>141</sup> Although it is no doubt technically possible to organise a reliable, high-volume and high-quality supply line of military equipment (in particular, ammunition and anti-aircraft defences could make a difference) to screened elements of the opposition, it is likely to have little effect at this point in time unless greater clarity is first established on what the ultimate aim thereof is, which part of the opposition should receive such support, and how coherence between such groups would be brought about to create sufficient mass.<sup>142</sup> It is illusory to think that greater military support by itself would bring about greater coherence.

Providing military support without meeting these conditions creates a credible risk of stimulating warlordism and entrenching existing levels of fragmentation – in addition to fuelling an arms race with Iran if it decides to match supplies with supplies in a bid to sustain the Assad regime. The risk of arms falling into the wrong hands would need to be mitigated through a combination of intelligence-based selection of partners, technology (e.g. tracking, tracing and the possibility of deactivation of heavier weapons by remote), and careful monitoring. It will clearly not be foolproof. This means that any responsible effort to increase Western military support for part of the opposition will be a long-term endeavour in the ultimate hope that it might lead to a ‘snowball’ effect by which armed opposition groups that were sidelined and/or obliged to join Islamist groups for want of (financial) resources before, re-join the moderate opposition.<sup>143</sup>

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140 For example, it is very likely that Syrian opposition fighters are already being trained and equipped in Jordan. See: [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/syria-deraa-USA-Jordan-FSA-regime-CIA](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/syria-deraa-USA-Jordan-FSA-regime-CIA) (retrieved 3 April 2014). Recent media reports suggest that the US enlarged its CIA-run programme that supplies and trains selected armed groups since early 2014 ([The Washington Post](#), 16 April 2014) (retrieved 9 June 2014). In particular, TOW anti-tank missiles are said to be provided to Harakat Hazm. US officials only acknowledged that this group is one among six rebel units authorised to receive non-lethal assistance ([The Washington Post](#), 27 April 2014) (retrieved 9 June 2014). The effects of this support are estimated to be modest on the southern front and complicated by JAN’s domination of the military balance in Daraa province ([Times of Israel](#), 11 May 2014) (retrieved 9 June 2014).

141 [Washington Post](#), 26 June 2014; [BBC](#), 3 July 2014 (both retrieved 7 July 2014). Earlier, the [Washington Post](#) of 27 March 2014 noted President Obama’s awareness of the mixed record of assistance in the form of lethal military equipment. Charles Lister also raised a number of issues in the [Huffington Post](#) of 4 March 2014 (retrieved 7 July 2014).

142 For example: Sayigh, Y. (2013 and 2014b), op.cit.

143 At the moment, a reverse dynamic can be witnessed whereby local opposition groups join the IS as the arms and loot of its Iraqi campaign are transferred across the border to influence the fight over Deir ez-Zour province. Cafarella, J. (2014), *ISIS advances on Deir ez-Zour*, [Blog](#) of the Institute of the Study for War, 5 July. For an earlier episode, see: [The Guardian](#), 8 May 2013 (retrieved 25 June 2014).

## 4. Conclusion

While the Gulf monarchies with their wealth and legitimacy-enhancing alliances with religious authority weathered the Arab Spring fairly well, Syria demonstrated the greater vulnerability of the quasi-secular autocracies of the Arab world to social unrest in the face of political exclusion and economic marginalisation.<sup>144</sup> Since their peaceful beginnings, Syria's early protests have transformed into a violent, fragmented and protracted civil war with strong elements of a regional conflict by proxy. Thousands continue to die and millions to flee as concerted intervention remains blocked by international tensions, mistrusts and divergent interests.

The rapid intensification and expansion of violence in a society with many sectarian boundaries has radicalised discourse, cast enemy images into starker relief and brutalised fighting practices. This reduces the scope for compromise and strengthens radicalism. Syria was both a strong state with a well-developed national identity and a brittle one in terms of the legitimacy of its regime that governed a multicultural and multi-religious polity. The longer the conflict lasts, the more the capacity and legitimacy of state institutions and of Syria's national identity are at risk of disintegration at the hands of entrepreneurs of violence, radicals, criminals and warlords.<sup>145</sup> Attitudes have hardened and social trust declined, sweeping individuals up in the madness of violence where the logic of conflict has replaced that of ordinary life. Syria's peace constituency decreases day by day.

With the legacies of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya fatally impairing Western intentions to intervene with force, dispute in the UN blocking its legitimacy, and regional interests fuelling a proxy conflict, there are no good policy options that could help bring the Syrian civil war to a swift end at the moment. Consequently, the region and the rest of the world must prepare for worsening spillover effects that result from the conflict's centrifugal tendencies.

What is possible – and urgently required – is to start putting those policy elements in place today that could help halt the fighting in the medium term by laying the groundwork for a transition agreement that provides a starting point for Syria's future governance. This report has suggested that Western countries should consider a combination of three policy elements to make a greater difference to the resolution of the Syrian civil war. These elements are briefly summarised in table 2.

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144 Building on Malise Ruthven (2013), in: Hourani, A. (ed.), *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Faber and Faber Limited, London and Lynch, M. (2012), op.cit. See also: Aarts, P. et al. (2012), *From Resilience to Revolt: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam.

145 Perthes, V. (2014), *A Syrian Farewell to Arms*, [Project Syndicate](#) (retrieved 20 May 2014).

**Table 2 Summary of elements of a more active Western policy towards the Syrian civil war**

| #1 – Much stronger regional containment   | #2 – Stimulating a regional Saudi–Iranian agreement                                | #3 – Increased support for parts of the Syrian opposition      |
|---|--|--|
| Increasing humanitarian engagement  | Concluding a gentleman’s agreement of domestic non-interference                    | Agreeing what ‘moderate’ and ‘effective’ opposition mean today |
| Supporting the Lebanese and Jordanian governments                                     | Working towards more stable and inclusive governance of Iraq                       | Helping moderate and effective groups cohere politically       |
| Increasing counterterrorist activities and intelligence sharing, including with Assad | Exploring what deal in Syria can meet Iranian short- and Saudi long-term interests | Providing lethal military equipment, training and supplies?    |

The key is to put a realistic, concerted policy in place very soon, accepting that there is not much that Western countries can do to influence the course of the civil war directly or in the short term, but plenty that could prevent even greater damage and destruction in the medium to long term.<sup>146</sup>

It should be self-evident that this is directly in the interest of the West, as it is not conceivable by any stretch of the imagination that Syria will be able to recover from its present devastation by itself. Instead, the international community will have to pick up a large part of these costs whenever an agreement, or exhaustion, brings the fighting to an end. Significant international resources, including peacekeepers, are likely to be required in either case and a 10–20-year long commitment can easily be foreseen.<sup>147</sup> Failing this, the risks of creating permanent conditions conducive to crime and terrorism, regional interference, or even a return to civil war, are real.<sup>148</sup>

146 The economic losses of the war alone were estimated at around US\$140 billion at the end of 2013. Syrian Center for Policy Research (2014), op. cit.; Arab Spring News, 23 June 2014 (retrieved 7 July 2014).

147 Those counting on the Gulf countries, with their deep pockets, to pick up a large part of the tab should take heed of the politicisation and sectarianism that similar Gulf largesse has brought about during the conflict.

148 For example: World Bank, ‘Conflict, Security and Development’, *World Development Report 2011*, Washington DC.

# Annex 1: Overview of the main armed opposition and regime groups

**Table 3** Overview of the main armed opposition groups

| <i>Main opposition groups</i>                                 |  |  |   |
|---|--|--|---|
| Name  | Stated objective(s)  | Leadership   | Areas with a military presence  |
| <b>Supreme Military Council (SMC) of the Free Syrian Army</b> | Topple the Assad regime to establish a democratic and inclusive Syria  | Chief of Staff Brigadier General Abdul-Ilah al-Bashir (disputed)                             | The SMC itself does not hold any areas  |
| <b>Syria Revolutionaries' Front (SRF) (SMC associated)</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To unite rebel groups under a unified umbrella to topple the Assad regime, protect Syrian citizens and Syria's territorial integrity</li> <li>- SRF refuses to impose its ideology by force on the people and is willing to accept the rule of people's vote</li> </ul> | Jamal Maarouf (mainly in the north)  | Northwest Syria (Idlib, Hama), southern Syria                                 |
| <b>Hazm Movement (SMC associated)</b>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Topple the Assad regime, regain freedom and dignity of the Syrian people and establish a state of freedom and justice</li> <li>- Hazm believes that supporting the revolutionary forces is 'the real guarantee' to reach a political settlement</li> </ul>              | Hamza al-Shamali (head of the political office); Abdallah Awda (head of military operations) | Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, northern Damascus countryside, Daraa                     |
| <b>Jabhat Al-Nusra</b>  | Topple the Assad regime and establish an Islamic state based on Sharia law   | Abu Muhammed al-Golani   | Deir al-Zour, Daraa, Aleppo, Hama   |
| <b>The Islamic State (IS)</b>                                 | Establish an Islamic state based on Sharia law   | Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi   | Al-Raqqa, Al-Hasaka, Eastern neighbourhood of Aleppo, suburbs of Deir al-Zour |
| <b>Islamic Front</b>  | Topple the Assad regime and establish an Islamic state based on Sharia law   | Ahmed Al-Sheikh (Head of the Shura Council)  | Idlib, Aleppo, Hama   |
| <b>Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG)</b>                          | Protect the Kurdish areas in Syria against any aggression  | Sipan Hemo (Supreme commander)   | Al-Hasaka and Aleppo province   |

Sources: McClatchy DC, 6 January 2014; Lund, A. (2014), *Politics of the Islamic Front, Stagnation?*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Syrian Observer, 30 January 2014; Syrian Interim Government, 30 January 2014 (Arabic); Tharir Sourì, 22 May 2014 (Arabic); Times of Israel, 11 May 2014; Lister, C. (2014), op.cit.; Lund, A. (2013), *Syria's Kurdish army: an interview with Redur Khalil*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (all retrieved 13 June 2014); Interview with Jamal Maarouf in 2013; Official statement Hazm Movement, 27 January 2014 (both retrieved 14 July 2014) (both Arabic).

**Table 4: Overview of the main armed regime groups**

| <i>Main regime groups</i>                |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <b>Name</b>                              | <b>Stated objective(s)</b>   | <b>Leadership</b>   | <b>Areas with a military presence</b>  |
| <b>Syrian Arab Army (SAA)</b>            | To protect the continuity of the Assad regime and restore its rule   | Bashar al-Assad, General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub (Chief of Staff)   | Damascus, Homs, Deir al-Zour, Hama, Aleppo, Latakia, Tartous, Deraa, Hassake, Sweida, Idleb province |
| <b>National Defense Forces (NDF)</b>     | Support the Syrian Arab Army as a paramilitary infantry force  | Organised by province; the Damascus area is headed by Fadi Sakr | NDF is present in the areas under SAA control  |
| <b>Hezbollah</b>                         | To prevent the fall of the allied Assad regime (and the axis of 'resistance') at the hands of radical Sunni groups, the West and Israel      | Hassan Nasrallah (Secretary General)                            | Homs, Damascus, Latakia  |
| <b>Abu Al Fadl al-Abbas brigade</b>      | To protect the holy sites in the area of Sayeda Zeinab in the Damascus area  | Abu 'Ajeeb  | Largely similar to SAA presence – mainly Damascus (there are several other Shia militias)            |
| <b>Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps</b> | To prevent the fall of the allied Assad regime by directing and training Syrian forces, gathering intelligence and defending Zeinab's shrine | Qasem Suleimani (of the entire IRGC)                            | Damascus   |

Sources: [Gulf News](#), 8 September 2013; Lister, C. (2014), op.cit.; <http://www.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=92400&cid=161> (Arabic), [Al-Monitor](#), 6 March 2014 (all retrieved 13 June 2014); [Al-Nahar](#), 25 June 2013 (retrieved 14 July 2014) (Arabic).

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Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed (Arabic)

Hurriyet Daily News

Times of Israel

Al-Shark al-Awsat (Arabic)

All4Syria (Arabic)

Foreign Policy Magazine

New York Times

Washington Post

The Guardian

Economist

Financial Times

Zaman al-Wsl (Arabic)

## Blogs

Joshua Landis: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/>

Brown Moses: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.nl/>

Carnegie Endowment 'Syria in Crisis': <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/>

Institute for the Study of War Iraq Update Blog: <http://iswiraq.blogspot.be/2014/>

Open Democracy Arab Awakening: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/>

## Twitter

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@p\_vanostaeyen  
@Charles\_Lister  
@vvanwilgenburg  
@dickinsonbeth  
@balintzlanko  
@ajaltamimi  
@raniaab

## Methodology

The report is based on desk research of (grey) literature (academic, think tank and policy sources), social media (mainly blogs and twitter), online media and a few expert interviews, most of which are not specified for reasons of confidentiality. The research was conducted in the period February to July 2014. For safety reasons, it was not possible to conduct work inside Syria while budgetary constraints did not permit work in the region either. Consequently, the report is best read as a reliable analysis of the Syrian conflict from afar, insofar as this can be produced on the basis of open-source information.