Syria's Predicament: State (de-)Formation and International Rivalries

by Adham Saouli

Introduction[1]

The Syrian uprising, which emerged as a peaceful protest against Bashar Asad's regime in March 2011, has transformed into a fully-fledged civil war. The civil war has so far cost the lives of more than 190,000 people, turned more than three million people into refugees, and damaged most of Syria's economic infrastructure.[2] More detrimental and consequential for Syria's political future, however, is the fracturing of its social – sectarian, ethnic, and regional – fabric.[3] In a period of two years, Syria has morphed from a significant political actor in Middle East politics – an actor which directly influenced the political dynamics of neighbouring Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and Iraq – into a battlefield for regional and international rivalries.

Syria's war raises important questions about the interaction between the domestic and external dimensions of the conflict. What are the main areas of contention, and how do they relate to regional and international dynamics? Why has the conflict developed into a regional and international battle, and who are the main actors in this rivalry? And, finally, what are the realistic options for ending the Syrian war? The aim of this paper is to answer these questions. It divides into three main sections.

In the first, I examine the domestic origins of the Syrian crisis by focusing on the process of state formation and deformation in Syria. In the second section, I consider the main areas

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2   "Three million refugees have fled Syria, says UN", *The Guardian*, 29 August 2014, http://gu.com/p/4x5c2/tw.

3   Emile Hokayem, "Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant", *Adelphi Series*, No. 438 (2013).

of contention that shape the Syrian civil war and its regional and international dimensions. Finally, I assess the conditions under which Syria – as a divided state in a polarised region – can end the war. In the absence of a military solution to the war in Syria, a political solution, I argue, may be the only hope for ending the crisis; but such a solution is fraught by varying domestic and external interests in Syria.[4]

1. The Formation and Deformation of the Syrian State: The Road to the 2011 Uprisings

Domestic and external political rivalries have directly shaped the origins and political development of Syria as a modern state. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire gave birth to many states in the Middle East; initially, these were conceived of as spheres of influence for colonial powers. Modern Syria, carved out for France as part of the British-French Sykes-Picot Agreement, and cut from historical Greater Syria (the modern Syria, Lebanon, Palestine/Israel and Jordan), emerged as a frustrated state. It is here where Arab nationalist ideologies, which aimed to revise the regional boundaries and establish independents states, sprang up.[5]

However, under colonial rule (1920-1945), attempts at national independence and socio-political reforms were violently repressed by the French authorities. It was only with the emergence in 1945 of two superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union (USSR), that conditions for socio-political change within Syria became possible. The Cold War gave regimes in the developing world the leverage to play off the global powers against one another and, consequently, increase their autonomy. In 1946, Syria became officially independent. Like other Arab states (Iraq, Egypt, Yemen and Algeria) in the post-colonial era, Syria split over the nature of the political regime which the nascent state should install. The hegemonic ideals of that period, which centred on Arab nationalism, socialism, anti-imperialism and socio-economic reforms, shaped the political rivalries. Notwithstanding these ideological divisions, the capturing of strategic positions within the army became a pre-requisite for monopolising political power. Hence, starting with the Free Officers coup – which then turned into a revolution – in 1952 in Egypt, the era of military regimes emerged in the Middle East. In Syria, a series of military coups in the 1950s and 1960s culminated in the political domination of the Baath Party led by Hafez Asad in 1970. But the rise and consolidation of Baathist rule in Syria reflected the country's social as well as cultural composition and divisions, an understanding of which is necessary to explain the Syrian uprising and its

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4   For an analysis of state formation and deformation in the Arab world, see Adham Saouli, *The Arab State. Dilemmas of Late Formation*, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 49-67. For a theoretical and empirical analysis of stability in divided states, see Adham Saouli, "Stability Under Late State Formation: The Case of Lebanon", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (December 2006), p. 701-717.

5   Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002.

external dimensions.[6]

The progressive movements (Arab nationalists, Baathists, communists and socialists) of the Arab world of the 1950s and 1960s carried, among other things, political ambitions aiming at eradicating economic injustice, fostering political and economic independence, and, significantly in the case of Syria (but also Iraq, Yemen and Libya), overcoming tribal, regional, religious and sectarian divisions. In emulation of European countries, the aim was to build a modern nation-state. As a divided, heterogeneous state,[7] Syria was plagued by these divisions, which influenced its state formation process. The majority of Syrians are Sunni-Arabs (around 60-65 percent), but Syria has a significant proportion (30-35 percent) of sectarian (Alawis, Druzes, Ismailis and Shi'a), religious (Christian) and ethnic (Kurdish) communities. Other divisions are economic, such as the urban/countryside division, and regional, such as the traditional competition between Damascus and other main cities such as Aleppo or Homs, which cut across sectarian and ethnic divides.[8]

This cultural and economic context has influenced, and continues to do so, political dynamics in Syria, not least the process of state formation that began in post-independence Syria. State formation processes involve attempts by political actors to monopolise power by dominating three spheres: the ideological, coercive, and economic. In the first half of twentieth century, Syria was fraught with ideological divisions between Arab nationalists, Islamists, and communists, who presented varying political visions for the country. However, in the absence of democratic institutions and norms, the resolution of political divides centred on coercion. Those who captured the coercive agencies of the state (the army, security, intelligence and police) managed to impose their political and ideological visions.[9]

In Syria's political development, we observe as of the late 1950s through to 1970 a trend to monopolise power, primarily through the control of the army. In this process of power monopolisation, there is a gradual transformation from the rule of an ideological party (the Arab nationalist Baath Party), to Alawi-dominated Baathist rule, and finally to family rule. To consolidate their power and immunise their regimes from potential military coups, leaders in Syria (but also in Iraq, Yemen and Libya)[10] relied on loyalists from their sectarian communities, tribes, regions, and family. In consolidating their authority, paradoxically, but

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6   For a conceptual understanding of state formation within varying cultural structures, see Adham Saouli, *The Arab State. Dilemmas of Late Formation*, cit., p. 8-28.

7   For Ian Lustick, a society is deeply fragmented if "ascriptive ties generate an antagonistic segmentation of society, based on terminal identities with high political salience, sustained over a substantial period of time and a wide variety of issues". Ian Lustick, "Stability in Deeply Divided Societies: Consociationalism versus Control", *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (April 1979), p. 325.

8   For an analysis of Syria's sectarian and social divisions, see Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 4th ed., London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2011.

9   As Raymond Hinnebusch observes in the case of Syria: "when the legitimacy of the party institutions and the holders of coercive power were confronted in the starkest fashion, the latter triumphed". Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from Above*, cit., p. 56.

10 Adham Saouli, *The Arab State. Dilemmas of Late Formation*, cit., p. 50-58.

understandably, these regimes entrenched the social cleavages which they ideologically sought to eradicate.

In this process we broadly observe three phases which laid the foundation for the formation of the Alawi-dominated Baath party: 1) The military coup that brought the Baathists to power in 1963, in which the Baathists tried to monopolise power by dominating over the army against their ideological foes; 2) The 1966 coup, which came as a result of divisions between the Baathist military rulers, and which led to purges of Sunni officers and later Druze military leaders; and 3) The 1970 military coup, which was the result of rivalry between the two Alawi Baathist leaders, Salah Jadid and Hafez Asad.[11]

Asad's rise to power and his establishment of a strong regime was, therefore, a continuation of a trend that preceded that regime. By 1970, when Asad initiated his "Corrective Movement," he had gained control of the army, and hence monopolised coercive power in Syria, which in turn facilitated his domination of the Baath party.[12] Unlike the preceding minoritarian and socialist regime of Jadid, ideologically, Asad represented the moderate, pragmatic faction of the party. Having monopolised power, he was in a position to incorporate the conservative urban Sunni bourgeoisie and to increase the political representation of Sunni figures in the Baath party and state. As such, Asad's regime was based on three main pillars: the Asad family (particularly Asad's brothers and sons), which controlled key posts in the state; the army and security forces, which were predominantly controlled by Alawi officers; and the Baath party, which incorporated figures from different sectarian communities, and which presented the ideological shield of the regime.

However, as Asad aimed to strengthen his state, he was, unintentionally, creating the conditions for its deformation in three main ways. Firstly, the absence of political freedom and transparency alienated different political forces from political decision-making. Although the regime incorporated different social forces – peasants, urban (Sunni) bourgeoisie, minority groups (particularly the Alawis) – politico-strategic decisions were restricted to a small circle surrounding Asad. The regime not only imprisoned its main foes (many among whom were Baathists and Alawis), but it also repressed political activism and mobilisation. By the mid- to late 1970s, it became apparent that corruption plagued the state, whilst attempts to limit or end it proved impossible. The regime faced a crucial dilemma: on the one hand it relied on loyalists' control of strategic posts to protect it against military coups and political revisionism, but on the other it was these same loyalists who engaged in corruption. By clipping the loyalists' wings, the regime risked becoming vulnerable to security and political threats. By prioritising survival, the regime aggravated corruption problems; and through Asad's loyalists' social networks, sectarian, business, and tribal forces infiltrated the state,

11 Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, cit., p. 34-74.

12 For a biography of Asad and his rise to power, see Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria. The Struggle for the Middle East*, London, I.B. Tauris, 1988.

hence deforming its institutional capacity.[13]

Secondly, the regime's ideological and sectarian characteristics exposed it to attacks from Syria's political opposition. The purging of major Sunni and Druze military officers in the 1963-70 period, and the increasing dominance of Alawi officers and Asad's brothers (especially Rifaat Asad, who led a paramilitary force and defence companies) in the 1970s, led several political forces to challenge the regime on both ideological and military grounds. The secular (communists, Arab nationalists, and dissident Baathist) and Islamic (mainly the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, MB) opposition accused Asad of establishing Alawi and family rule. In doing so, they challenged the regime's legitimacy as guardian and promoter of Arab nationalism. Furthermore, this challenge was not limited to verbal onslaughts. In 1979-1985, the Syrian regime faced a major threat when Islamist extremist factions, many associated with the MB, began violently to target regime figures, particularly Alawi officers and Baathist officials.[14] The regime, in return, initiated a repressive campaign against the MB,[15] culminating in the bloody crackdown on the MB in Hama in 1982, which caused the deaths of thousands of people.[16] Though successful in maintaining Asad's power, the regime's repressive strategy exacerbated and deepened social (political, sectarian and ethnic) divisions. The Hama massacre and the campaign against the MB aggravated Sunni sectarian feelings and perceptions of the minoritarian nature of the Asad regime. On the other hand, the MB's bloody campaign against the regime, its onslaught on the Alawis, and its Islamic agenda drove many socio-political forces (Alawis and other minorities, secular forces, and many urban Sunnis looking for stability) back into the regime's camp. Feeling threatened, Asad buttressed his regime by tightening his grip over the security forces, creating paramilitary organisations, and installing family members in major positions within the state. As such, the state – which in essence should be an institution that is "above society" – became a family-dominated organisation.

Thirdly, Asad's domestic repression, which aimed to curb potential threats in order to immunise his country against external subversion, has, as in the cases of other authoritarian regimes in the Arab world,[17] had adverse effects. Instead of immunising Syria, domestic repression has rather exposed it to external influence and penetration. Asad's regional rivals, which as of 1975 included Jordan, Lebanese Christian parties, Egypt, and Israel, found in

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13 In 1977, Asad formed a committee to investigate illegal profits, but as Van Dam observes: "The campaign was doomed to failure from the very beginning, since some high-placed military officers in the direct entourage of President Hafiz al-Asad, who constituted an indispensable part of the hard core of his (mainly Alawi) officers' faction, were also found to have been guilty of involvement in corrupt practices". Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, cit., p. 73.

14 In one incident in Aleppo's artillery school in 1979, in which 32 cadets were killed and 54 were injured, it was believed that most of those killed were Alawis. See Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, cit., p. 91.

15 After a failed attempt by the MB to kill Hafiz Asad in Damascus in 1980, two units of Rifaat Asad's defence companies were ordered to kill about 550 MB prisoners in Palmyra. Ibidem, p. 106.

16 For details, see Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria*, cit.

17 Adham Saouli, *The Arab State. Dilemmas of Late Formation*, cit., p. 49-65.

SHARAKA
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شراكة
تعزيز التفاهم والتعاون في علاقات الاتحاد
الاوروبي ودول مجلس التعاون الخليجي

Konrad
Adenauer
Stiftung

his domestic opposition important allies to undermine his power. External intervention in turn led Asad's regime to further aggravate its authoritarianism. In 1975, Syria clashed with Sadat's Egypt after it became clear that the latter was preparing the way for a political settlement with Israel. For Asad, this was part of the US strategy to divide the Arabs, by neutralising Egypt through a settlement with Israel, isolating Syria, and terminating the Palestinian cause. Whilst Syria accused Sadat and Jordan of treason, Sadat accused Asad of using Baathist Arab slogans to conceal his regime's "true" sectarian nature. The Syrian domestic opposition, notably the MB, exploited these regional divisions to weaken Asad. Threatened by the possibility of regional isolation, Asad tightened his authoritarian rule. After a brief rapprochement with Iraq's Baathist regime, Asad broke his regional isolation by inaugurating a strategic alliance with Iran, which was to become one of the longest and most stable alliances in regional politics.[18]

As such, a combination of democratic deficit, corruption and nepotism, sectarian and ideological agitation and, by consequence, susceptibility to external influence has over the past four decades led to the deformation of the Syrian state. It is against this background that we should understand Syria's uprising and its regional and international dimensions.

2. The Regional and International Dimensions of Syria's Uprising

The Syrian uprising of 2011 is a continuation of previous contentious struggles between Asad's regime and his domestic and regional enemies. The transmutation of Syria's uprising from a peaceful protest into a civil war can be understood as a process of *de-monopolisation* of the three manifestations of power that the Syrian regime (now led by Hafiz Asad's son Bashar, who came to power in 2000) had striven to consolidate. Firstly, the politically heterogeneous protesters challenged Asad's ideological capacity by making new claims on power: democracy, freedom, Islamism, and termination of Alawi power. When the protests turned into an armed struggle, this challenged Asad's capacity to monopolise coercion in Syria, facilitating the opposition's control of different areas of Syria. Finally, by securing independent sources of income, and by controlling oil fields as in the case of the "Islamic State" (IS), the Syrian opposition challenged the regime's monopoly over economic resources. As a result, regime dominance over three social spheres faltered; Syria turned into a collapsed state fraught with a protracted civil war.

What are the main areas of contention that characterise the Syrian civil war? How do these conflicts relate to regional and international politics? There are five areas of contention, or "critical fault lines,"[19] that directly influence the war in and for Syria. The first is the transforming regime-society relations in the Arab world; namely the political uprisings that have shaken

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18 Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran. Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, London and New York, Tauris Academic Studies, 2006.
19 Emile Hokayem, "Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant", cit., p. 10.

the authoritarian pillars of several regimes (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain) in the Arab world, and which had the effect of a demonstration for Syria's uprising. Second are the regional and international rivalries for control of the Middle East, especially the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As a divided state that is strategically important for regional and international powers, Syria has been at the heart of this rivalry.[20] The third is the growing perception of a Sunni-Shi'a divide, which mirrors the Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry. The predominately-Alawi regime and Syria's alliance with Iran and Lebanon's Hizbullah has accentuated the perception of a "Shi'a camp" (or "Shi'a Crescent" extending from Iran to Lebanon) in the region. The fourth area is the challenge Islamic movements (especially the MB and other Jihadist groups) are posing to Arab regimes and societies. Finally, Syria, unlike Tunisia or Egypt, which are relatively more homogeneous, is a heterogeneous state. As mentioned above, Syria is composed of different sectarian and ethnic communities, which in periods of political transition become nervous and conscious about their fate, and hence contribute to ethnic and sectarian divisions and agitations.

As such, Syria's uprising and consequent civil war has had regional and international dimensions. When the Syrian uprising erupted, some political actors perceived an opportunity, but others sensed a threat. The first camp, which includes pro-Western regional actors Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey and their international allies, the US, France and the UK, saw an opportunity. Asad's fall, it was perceived and calculated, would be swift. For the US and Saudi Arabia, such a prospect would bring to an end the Syria-Iran-Hizbullah alliance.[21] The coming to power of a pro-Western regime (representing Syria's Sunnis) would contain Hizbullah in Lebanon, leading the Islamic armed movement to accommodate a domestic political arrangement by which it would surrender its arms to the Lebanese state; a Sunni regime in Syria would also form a counterbalance to Iraq's predominantly Shi'a regime; and, finally, Asad's fall would roll-back Iran's influence in the Arab region, strategically isolating the Islamic Republic.

But within the pro-Western camp, there were major divisions. Whilst Turkey and Qatar (and Egypt under the toppled MB president, Mohammad Morsi), favoured an MB alternative to Asad, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE were more cautious. The initial fear of the rise of the MB in Syria was that it would threaten the survival of Jordan's monarchy and present serious threats to Saudi Arabia's regime.[22] As such, Saudi Arabia faced a strategic dilemma: whilst toppling Asad would isolate Iran (a strategic gain), the rise of the MB would threaten the monarchy's politico-religious establishment (a strategic loss). For Turkey, an MB regime

20 For analysis of the geopolitical developments leading to the Arab uprisings, see Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Arab Uprisings and the Geopolitics of the Middle East", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (June 2013), p. 32-46, http://www.iai.it/pdf/articles/salloukh.pdf.

21 For an examination of this alliance, see Rola El Husseini, "Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 5 (2010), p. 803-815, http://moodle.bbk.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=81827.

22 For an analysis of Saudi Arabia's response to the Arab uprisings, see Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution", *Orbis*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Winter 2012), p. 96-104, http://explore.georgetown.edu/publications/61403.

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would increase its influence in Syria and by consequence in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and, possibly, Jordan. Turkey perceived an opportunity to become a regional leader at a moment of US retreat, possible Iranian isolation, and Egyptian retrenchment. As for Qatar, the rise of the MB in Egypt and the rest of the region presented a counterweight to Saudi influence, which would give the wealthy, but demographically and militarily weak, emirate greater autonomy and influence in a volatile and transforming region.

As for the US, it fluctuated between realist prudence and ambivalence in relation to the Syrian crisis. Under President Obama, the US is prioritising domestic issues, particularly the economy. Haunted by the Republicans' adventures and failures in Iraq and Afghanistan and constrained by a weak American economy, Obama's administration wanted Asad toppled, but without much US direct involvement or military intervention.[23] This initial strategy began to expose its limits with the rise and consolidation of territories in Iraq and Syria by IS, which has led the US to lead an international coalition to contain IS's further expansion, as will be further discussed below.

On the other hand, for the opposing camp, representing Iran-Syria-Iraq-Hizbullah, the fall of Asad was perceived as a strategic threat. For Iran, Damascus provides strategic depth in the Levant and forms a main corridor to the Arab region; a corridor that facilitated the rise and consolidation of Hizbullah's power in Lebanon and bridged Iran's relations with other resistance movements (such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad); as a consequence, the Islamic Republic intensified its influence in the Arab-Israeli conflict. For Iran, the fall of Asad, which the Islamic Republic considers a "red line," is a stepping-stone to Iran's regional isolation, and possibly the collapse of its regime. As such, Iran called for political reform in Syria, and opposed any external intervention in the country.[24]

For Hizbullah, Asad's fall presents grave strategic threats. In Hizbullah's strategic calculation, the toppling of the Syrian regime would directly serve American and Israeli interests. First, Hizbullah would lose a major ally in its war with Israel. Asad has directly supported Hizbullah's war with Israel by acting as a source for, and a conduit of, arms for the Islamic movement. Second, Hizbullah feared that Asad's fall would very likely bring a pro-Western regime (allied to one of the two camps mentioned above) to Damascus. If such a prospect were to materialise, Hizbullah would be strategically isolated by Israel in the south and Syria in the east and north. In the movement's perception, such a possibility would increase Hizbullah's exposure, setting the conditions for a possible Israeli attack. Thirdly, Hizbullah fears that Asad's fall would isolate its major ally and ideological and financial patron, Iran. Finally, a

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23 For Obama's policy and prudence, see F. Gregory Gause III and Ian S. Lustick, "America and the Regional Powers in a Transforming Middle East", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (Summer 2012), p. 1-9, https://www.sas.upenn.edu/polisci/sites/www.sas.upenn.edu.polisci/files/Gause_Lustick_2012.pdf. For the administration's ambivalence, see Mark Mazzetti, Robert F. Worth and Michael R. Gordon, "Obama's Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed", *The New York Times*, 22 October 2013, http://nyti.ms/18IOdv3.

24 "Iran opposes any foreign intervention in Syria: Leader", *PressTV*, 29 March 2012, http://www.presstv.ir/detail/233736.html.

regime change in Syria would, likely, shift the power balance to Hizbullah's domestic foes, the pro-Saudi March 14 Movement, and possibly generate a Lebanese civil war.[25]

The Syrian uprising created new dilemmas for the divided and fragile Iraq (with its predominantly Shi'a government). Although, prior to the uprisings, Asad and Maliki (the Shi'a Prime Minister of Iraq) were rivals (the Iraqi government previously accused the Syrian regime of seeking to destabilise Iraq), the civil war in Syria led the two regimes to form a common perception and strategy. Maliki's main fear centred on the prospect of the coming to power of a "Sunni" regime in Syria, which would then attempt to alter the balance of power by supporting its Sunni brethren in Iraq. On the other hand, were the Syrian regime to collapse and the whole country to fall into total anarchy, Maliki would fear the crossing of extreme Islamist factions to his own country, a prospect that would further aggravate Iraq's Sunni-Shi'a conflict. Strategically, the fall of Syria and the coming to power of a rival regime might block Iraq's access to the Mediterranean Sea, hence threatening its goal of boosting its exports of oil.[26] One direct consequence of the rise and expansion of IS in Iraq was the removal of Maliki's government and the coming to power of Haidar al-Abadi. Whilst this move aimed to allay Sunni fears and demands in Iraq, it remains to be seen if the new Prime Minister will change course in relation to Syria.

Finally, for Russia, and China, the Syrian civil war is at the centre of the battle for the Middle East. In the Russian perception, Asad's fall constitutes a major step to Western domination of the region. Syria is one of the two major Russian allies in the Middle East region (the second is Iran). After Egypt's strategic shift to the Western orbit during the Cold War, Syria became Russia's main ally in the Middle East. The only naval base that Russia has on the Mediterranean (and outside the former Soviet Union) is in Tartus. As with other allies of Asad, Russia fears that the collapse of the Syrian regime will weaken the anti-Western alliance in the Middle East region. It would possibly give rise to Islamist governments, which would in turn support or engage the Muslim republics in the Russian Federation.[27]

As such, regime survival or fall in Syria ceased to be a mere Syrian, domestic affair; it ceased to be a revolutionary situation that pits a democratic movement against an authoritarian regime. Rather, it became the locus of regional and international rivalries. Asad's enemies wanted to de-monopolise his coercive, ideological, and economic power. By arming and financially sponsoring the Syrian rebels and by challenging the legitimacy of his regime, Asad's external enemies were contributing to the rebellion of his domestic foes. Turkey,

25 For a detailed study of Hizbullah's strategy in the wake of the uprisings, see Adham Saouli, "Hizbullah, Hamas, and the Arab Uprisings: Structures, Threats, and Opportunities", *Orient*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2013), p. 37-44.

26 For a detailed study of Iraq's foreign policy, see Adham Saouli, " The Foreign Policies of Iraq and Lebanon", in Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, 2nd ed., Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2014, p. 105-132.

27 For an analysis of the Russian position, see Emile Hokayem, "Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant", cit., p. 172-177.

Qatar, and Saudi Arabia hosted the various groups of the Syrian opposition and backed the rebels with financial and military support.[28] The US, France, and the UK led an international political campaign against Asad at the Security Council and other forums, such as the so-called "Friends of Syria" meetings.[29]

This pro-Western campaign generated a counter-intervention led by Asad's external allies aiming to contribute to his hold on power. Iran supplied economic and technical military support; Hizbullah, seeking to protect strategic areas on the Lebanese-Syrian border, joined the Syrian war with direct military intervention; Iraq secured the Syrian-Iraqi border in attempt to prevent the crossing of Islamists from Iraq to Syria (or vice versa); Russian and Chinese international diplomatic opposition and veto power at the Security Council blocked any UN-sanctioned military intervention in Syria.

This regional and international balance of power has been directly reflected in the Syrian civil war. Moreover, it can be argued that the protraction of the Syrian civil war is a direct consequence of external intervention in Syria. Caught up in the international intervention in Syria, neither the regime nor the opposition is able to win the battle.[30]

After it appeared that Asad's regime was losing ground in late 2012 and early 2013, a turning-point began to emerge in mid-2013.[31] First, the Syrian opposition's failure to unite and coordinate its efforts and to present a clear – and one should emphasise realistic – political agenda has worked to the advantage of the regime. The Syrian opposition is not only divided politically, but various factions within it reflect different, and usually opposing, regional political goals (some support Saudi Arabia; others, like the MB, are closer to Turkey and Qatar).

Second, the loss of different areas in Syria to radical Islamist groups (some indirectly or directly related to Al-Qaeda) raised fears that extremists would come to power in Syria, leading many supporters (including Western countries) of the Syrian uprising to curb their support. This fear materialised in June 2014, with the announcement of an "Islamic Caliphate," extending from Mosul in Iraq to eastern Aleppo in Syria, by IS. The rise of IS in Iraq and Syria and the challenge this poses to Western interests led to the emergence of an international coalition led by the US, its Arab allies (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Jordan), and, reluctantly, Turkey, which aims to contain and then dismantle the rising power of IS.[32] The brutal and

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28 Ibidem, p. 110-127.

29 The US, through the CIA base in Jordan, has trained and armed certain (non-Islamic) factions of the Syrian opposition. See Mark Mazzetti, Robert F. Worth and Michael R. Gordon, "Obama's Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed", cit.

30 For a detailed analysis of the Syrian civil war, see International Crisis Group, "Syria's Metastasising Conflicts", *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 143 (June 2013), http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/143-syrias-metastasising-conflicts.aspx.

31 See Emile Hokayem, "Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant", cit.

32 "Isis rebels declare 'Islamic state' in Iraq and Syria", *BBC News*, 30 June 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28082962.

bloody armed engagements by the IS and *Jabhat al-Nusra* raised many suspicions about the alternative such groups would present for Syria.

Thirdly, Hizbullah's military involvement since at least May 2013, especially in the strategic town of Qusair, which links Damascus to Homs and the Syrian coast, tipped the military balance back in Asad's favour. Finally, the toppling of Mohamad Morsi in Egypt weakened the MB's regional ambitions, and divided the pro-Western alliance: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Jordan supported the popular-military coup in Egypt, but Qatar and Turkey rejected the "military coup."

These divisions in and over Syria have contributed to the lengthening of the conflict; however, are there factors which can facilitate the breaking of the deadlock in Syria?

3. Ending the Syrian War: A Political Solution?

As a divided state that is strategically located in a polarised region, Syria's political fate, as the above discussion has shown, is interwoven with regional and international dynamics. Previous civil wars in the region, such as the Yemen War of the 1960s or the Lebanon War of 1975-1990, as well as the current civil war in Iraq, show that stability in these countries was, and continues to be, linked to geopolitical rivalries. Lebanon provides a good example. The fluctuations in the country's stability (1958, 1975-1990, 2005-) reflect a direct relationship between its fragile domestic politics and varying levels of regional stability. A study of Lebanon has shown that the more polarised regional politics were, the more Lebanon became unstable.[33] Similarly, the Yemen war came to an end after a Saudi-Egyptian rapprochement, which was one of the main consequences of Egypt's defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. Iraq's current instability reflects both a failure of political and sectarian inclusion in the state at domestic level, coupled with regional rivalries aiming to re-shape Iraqi political processes.

An important reason for this predicament is that most of these – especially divided – states have failed to design institutions that incorporate different sectarian and ethnic communities. The failure to incorporate different groups, as the case of Syria illustrates, increases a state's vulnerability to external subversion. This is because political boundaries in the Middle East remain porous: transnational identities (such as Arabism or Islamism) and sub-national identities (such as Shi'a, Sunni, Christian and Kurdish) continue to form vehicles for political mobilisation that shape politics within and across states in the region.

Given the above, under what conditions can the war in Syria come to an end? An answer to this question requires analysis of both domestic and external factors.

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33 Adham Saouli, "Stability Under Late State Formation: The Case of Lebanon", cit., p. 706-714.

Domestically, the state-formation trajectories of the last five decades in divided states like Syria, Iraq, or Lebanon reveal that any attempt by one party, community, or leader to monopolise power will, sooner or later, lead to the aggravation of fears of other communities; as a consequence, such a monopolisation will entrench communal divides that increase instability and external intervention, causing civil war. The heterogeneous composition of these divided states and their location in strategic areas imposes the need for the articulation of power-sharing formulas that aim to incorporate various communities in the state. The translation of such a prospect in the case of Syria would require the articulation of a political solution that is inclusive of all groups. The establishment of such a prospect would require the acceptance of the reality (at least given the current domestic and regional balances of power) that no party or community will be able to win the Syrian war or to control Syria. A possible political framework for Syria could be based on consociational democracy.[34] Such a political system, though not ideal given Lebanon's (and Iraq's!) experience of it, would guarantee an end to the civil war and fair representation for the various groups in the state. The rise and potential expansion of IS in Syria presents a challenge to all major communities and political movements, and could therefore act as a catalyst to a political solution. However, without an external consensus among major regional and international powers, such a prospect cannot be realised.

Just as it has been very difficult for one group to prevail in the politics of divided states, there is also one constant in Middle East regional politics, which all states, ambitious or marginal, need to accept when engaging in regional politics: since the weakening (1750) and eventual collapse (1914) of the Ottoman Empire, no state has managed to establish a total hegemony over regional politics.[35] The Middle East continues to reproduce a regional balance of power that prevents the rise of any hegemon. In the case of Syria, this balance of power is reinforcing the civil war. For a political solution to be reached, the interests of external actors (such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and the US) would need to be reconciled. A power-sharing domestic formula might placate the interests of different actors, as the Dayton Agreement did for post-civil war Bosnia and Herzegovina. Such a prospect might transform Syria from an area of contention for regional rivals into an arena of reconciliation. On the other hand, the absence of such reconciliation, or the prospect of any external actor losing ground in Syria, might lead to the limitation of any possibility of ending the war there.

The success of such a power-sharing system might help allay many regional fears. A consociational system would be inclusive of religious and ethnic minorities, which would be encouraged by Iraq (itself suffering from the absence of a genuine consociational system

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34 For an analysis, see Ian Lustick, "Stability in Deeply Divided Societies…", cit., p. 325-344.

35 L. Carl Brown, International Politics and the Middle East. Old Rules, Dangerous Game, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984. See also Ian S. Lustick, "The Absence of Middle Eastern Great Powers: 'Backwardness' in Historical Perspective", International Organization, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Autumn 1997), p. 653-683.

that includes its Sunnis[36]), Lebanon, and possibly Iran and Turkey. A consociational system, which would give a say to Syria's Sunni factions, would contribute to the containing of the MB, which would allay the fears of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE, and Egypt. Furthermore, it would restrict the further expansion of extreme Jihadist groups, such as IS, which would be welcomed by the US, Russia, Iran, Iraq and Hizbullah.

Such a prospect is, however, fraught with many hurdles. The rapid and surprising expansion of IS in Syria and Iraq has contributed to the concerted efforts led by an international coalition, including the US and the "Sunni" camp in the region, to attempt to contain and to eradicate the movement; but these efforts continue to constrained by Turkish-US differences regarding the goals of the campaign (Turkey insists on imposing a no-fly zone over Syria and to use that to topple Asad, while the US is reluctant[37]) and by the absence of Iran and Russia from the coalition.[38] The combination of the goal of Turkey and the Gulf states of toppling Asad and the reluctance of the US and the other Western states to engage him – after years of condemning his regime's brutal repression of the Syrian uprising – constrains the potential for a political solution. This is also true of the Syrian opposition, which continues to resist any such prospects. On the other hand, the survival of Asad's regime remains crucial for Russia, Iran, and Hizbullah; this is also true of the majority of Syria's minorities, who fear that his fall might threaten their survival – the alternative represented by IS, moreover, reinforces these fears.

Whether the war against IS, or a breakthrough in the US-Iranian nuclear negotiations, contributes to driving forward such a political solution remains to be seen. But despite the dividing gap between the two main regional camps in relation to the war in Syria, and given the absence of any military solution to the crisis, a political solution remains the only hope of ending the bloodshed in Syria (and Iraq) and the tragedy of its refugees.

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36 For Iraq's post-war political experience, see Toby Dodge, "Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism", *Adelphi Series*, No. 434 (2012).

37 Ewen MacAskill, "US increasingly frustrated by Turkey's inaction against Islamic State", *The Guardian*, 8 October 2014, http://gu.com/p/4296k/tw.

38 Tracy Connor, "Iran's Rouhani Blasts ISIS and 'Ridiculous' U.S.-Led Coalition", *NBC News*, 17 September 2014, http://nbcnews.to/1o3BmIG.

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