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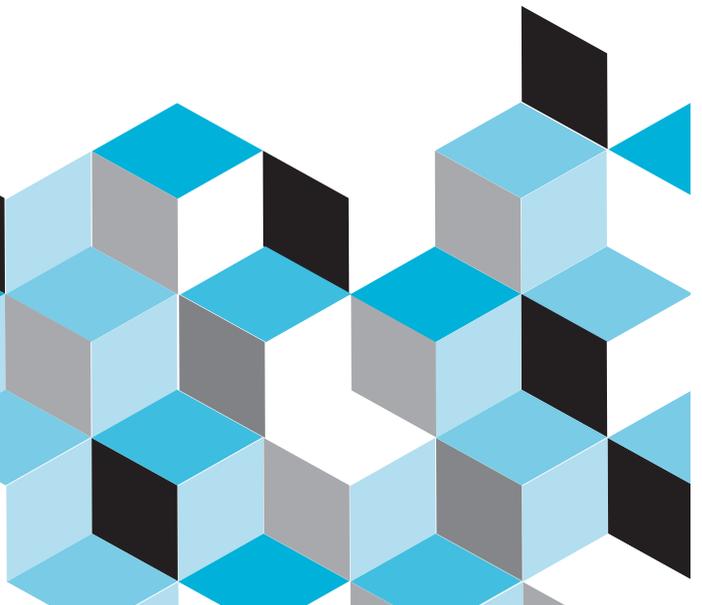
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**THE IMPLICATIONS
OF THE SYRIAN WAR
FOR NEW REGIONAL ORDERS
IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the impact of the eight-year war in Syria will reverberate across the region for years to come, and explores, in particular, four noteworthy legacies. First, it examines the series of interventions in Syria by regional and foreign powers (including Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) that reconfigured the role of such powers across the region. Second, it reveals the emergence of two opposing alliances in the region, each comprising Arab states, regional Arab and non-Arab powers, global powers and local non-state actors. These or similar alliances may well reappear in other Middle Eastern conflicts. Third, it analyses the striking number and variety of foreign forces that either directly fought in Syria or indirectly supported warring factions. Since 2012, these forces have included at least twenty states and major non-state players, alongside hundreds of smaller tribal, Islamist and secular rebel and pro-Assad groups. Finally, the paper suggests that the international community's weak response to the untold war crimes on both sides, and its apparent de facto acceptance of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's incumbency, portend continuing regional authoritarian and violent political systems for the foreseeable future.

INTRODUCTION

It is not surprising that the land of Syria, which was a pivotal international and regional battleground a century ago both during and after the First World War I, today is again a regional and international battleground: literally a field of active military battles among a much wider range of warring parties. As political and military leaders from Alexander the Great and Napoleon to King Faisal up through to Vladimir Putin have all understood, this reflects Syria's historical geopolitical position as a strategic pivot around which regional and international powers have routinely competed for influence or hegemonic control of the Levant region and wider Western Asia. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War and the assertion of British and French colonial control in the Levant gave Syria new strategic relevance a century ago, which it has maintained until today, occasionally adjusting its alliances and priorities as regional geostrategic and military conditions required (Barnes-Dacey and Levy 2013).

Syria's history in its modern Middle Eastern setting reflects a pendulum-like legacy, in which Syria and the Middle East in turn shape and reshape each other within the context of international interventions. For instance, on the one hand, Western colonial interests and regional power intrigue in the Middle East shaped Syria a century ago and carved out its modern borders. On the other hand, during the postcolonial period, Syrian sovereign policies reshaped regional relations

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for half a century, until regional and foreign forces quickly exploited the indigenous non-violent Syrian uprising that challenged the state starting in early 2011. Syria was then reshaped by these dynamics, particularly when these forces physically entered the picture militarily and politically to generate all-out war and the fracturing of the Syrian state.

The main focus of this paper, then, is to analyse how, in particular, events in Syria during 2011–18 have helped shape new regional dynamics and orders in the Middle East. The consequences of the seven-year-long Syrian war will now become clearer and are likely to have an impact in different ways across the region for years to come. Syria represents one of the sharpest recent examples of the interplay among local, regional and international powers whose strategic interests are constantly evolving. Syria has been at the receiving end of those dynamics since 2011, and in the imminent post-war period, the legacy and lessons of what occurred in Syria will once again reshape other parts of the Middle East.

The paper will contextualize and frame the Syrian war's main developments that, as of today, appear likely to persist, to influence geopolitical and strategic developments in the Middle East, and to reconfigure the prevailing order, its power structures and its main actors. Such evolutions can only be fully understood in the wider recent context of the cumulative impact of four successive moments of transformation: (1) the end of the Cold War around 1990; (2) the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003; (3) the 2011 uprising against the Bashar al-Assad government that ultimately transformed into the 2011–18 war; and (4) the post-war period that started to materialize in mid-2018. This latest era of geostrategic transformation in Syria and the region – like the past seventy years – reflects interactions among many combinations of local, regional and global actors. If the key actors and interests that drove the events of the 2011–18 war are clear, it is impossible to say definitively which forces will persist, which ones might fade away or what combination of local states, foreign powers and non-state actors (NSAs) might shape the future regional orders that materialize.

1. KEY DYNAMICS

Syria is not unique in most respects of its recent history, as it captures the past century of erratic state-building within individual Arab countries. Half a dozen other Arab states have also fractured in recent years, and others face serious internal and regional stresses in the political, economic, environmental and security realms. The Syrian war, however, seems to reflect some important new geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East that are likely to ripple across the region for years to come. Four in particular are noteworthy:

- 1) The direct, long-term intervention simultaneously of regional and foreign powers in Arab internal affairs, using military, political and economic means, which led to the reconfiguration of the role of such powers across the region, that is, the emergence of a more influential Russia, the expansion of direct Turkish and Iranian influence in Arab affairs, and the apparent downgrading of US intervention in Syria and Iraq in favour of focusing on confronting Iran.

2) The critical role of non-state actors in the form of militias and paramilitary groups (Lister and Nelson 2017) that represent domestic as well as foreign interests (Khatib 2017). In some cases the lines between domestic and foreign were blurred, such as the many foreign fighters that joined the Free Syrian Army, which also enjoyed foreign state support, as well as the People's Protection Forces (YPG)² and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2016) in northern Syria that included Syrian, Kurdish and occasionally other non-Syrian elements among their fighters or supporters.

3) The sheer number of foreign fighting forces that simultaneously fought on the ground or in the air, or did so indirectly by arming, financing and training fighting forces in Syria since 2012: we can count at least twenty different states and major NSAs (e.g., Hezbollah, Free Syrian Army, Islamic State, al Qaeda, Ahrar el-Sham, YPG, SDF), and the number reaches into the several hundreds if the many smaller tribal, Islamist and secular rebel groups are counted (Agence France Press 2015). The transformation of an important Arab country into a virtual open international battleground where any state or NSA could join the fight to defeat or save the ruling government sets a precedent that could reverberate across the entire Middle East in forms that have appeared in Syria, or in new ones that we may not yet recognize today.

4) The fierce, often gruesome ways in which most local and foreign actors on both sides fought. These included using chemical weapons, ethnic cleansing, civilian massacres, barbaric torture and killing methods, starvation sieges and other acts that some international human rights organizations have called war crimes (Nebbehay 2018). The prolonged ferocity of the fighting signalled the unacceptably high cost of losing for key protagonists, especially the Syrian government, Iran and Hezbollah, whose tripartite alliance revealed a determination to prevail at any cost over the forces that sought to weaken them. Russia intervened fiercely because of what it saw as the imperative of maintaining the Assad government in power, given the pivotal role of Syria in Moscow's reassertion and expansion of its strategic interests across the Middle East. The international community reacted for the most part with a few intermittent practical responses to the sustained military brutality against both armed elements and civilians. It remains to be seen if these patterns will define the future acceptable behaviour of governments and rebels within states, as well as of foreign forces that join the fray.

2. THE GAME-CHANGER: NEW TRANSNATIONAL ALLIANCES

An overarching new development that largely determined the outcome of Syria's war, and which is likely to impact the region for years, was the formation of coalitions among many different kinds of actors. These included big and medium-sized regional powers, local state and non-state actors and international powers. The key regional powers are Turkey, Iran, Israel, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Hezbollah; local actors include the Syrian state, assorted militant or moderate Islamist/jihadi forces, Kurdish groups, local and transnational paramilitary groups, and the states of Jordan and Lebanon, whose actions are very localized, unlike, for example, the regional impact of Hezbollah; and the international powers are mainly Russia, the United States, Great Britain and France.

2 See the Kurdish Project website: *YPG: People's Protection Units*, <https://thekurdishproject.org/?p=1191>.

The most important such alliances were the Russia–Syria–Iran–Hezbollah collaboration that preserved Assad’s rule, and the counter-alliance against Assad and his allies that comprised fluctuating combinations of the USA, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Turkey, Qatar, Israel, the UK and France, most importantly. Different members of the anti-Assad alliance aimed to overthrow the Damascus government for varying reasons, but nevertheless they collectively supported the anti-Assad forces. Some supported opposition groups in order to overthrow the autocratic Damascus regime and support populist democratic aspirations. Others did so to promote their direct national interests, or to weaken the regional reach of Iran and Hezbollah by breaking up their tripartite alliance with Syria. The Russia–Turkey–Iran collaboration was a new alliance among states that created a new negotiating process in Astana and Sochi that paralleled the Syrian Geneva negotiations; sometimes other states joined in, such as Jordan did when these four countries established short-lived “de-escalation zones” in 2018 that helped wind down the war. If the war experience is any guide, the post-war years will continue to see large and small states working together with NSAs in both enduring and temporary alliances in order to improve their strategic positions and national interests, rather than acting on their own.

The legacy of the Syrian war is likely to prod external powers that seek to intervene to achieve certain desired goals in the future to use direct, sustained, military intervention inside Arab states, in close coordination with NSAs, while staying the course on the ground for years. Russia–Iran–Hezbollah did this very successfully in Syria, though obviously at great cost to Syria and themselves. Merely sending arms and offering training and indirect support to the rebels, as the anti-Assad coalition did, would now appear to be a more questionable strategy in the face of a decisive grouping such as the one that supported Assad. The poor track record of the USA, European countries including the UK and France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar in supporting the anti-Assad rebellion might resonate with them in future instances in which they might contemplate supporting anti-government rebels in other countries. Such rebels themselves who might seek support from abroad are likely, in turn, to ask their foreign backers for a long-term commitment of substantive support, including a sustained on-the-ground presence, in view of the Syrian experience.

3. LESSONS FROM TURKISH AND AMERICAN POLICIES

The Syrian Kurdish experience, in particular, will resonate for years in the minds of political actors across the region, due to the policies pursued by the USA and Turkey. The erratic track record of American support to Kurdish groups – such as the SDF, which is led by the YPG and its parent Democratic Union Party (PYD) – reflects how the United States’ short- and medium-term goals changed in the face of heightened direct Turkish intervention in northern Syria (Amini 2017). The outcome of the jockeying for power in northern Syria among the Damascus government, Kurdish groups (notably the YPG-dominated and US-backed SDF) and Turkey proved less significant for direct American national interests, it seems, which is why Washington adjusted its support to the PYD/YPG Kurds in order to balance its more important ties with Turkey.

For its part, Turkey proved to be a strong regional power that could intervene when it saw the need to do so. In this case, its national interest was to prevent the creation of an autonomous Kurdish proto-state in northern Syria. Turkey also showed that strong regional powers could evolve and change their positions as circumstances required. As Syrian Kurdish groups such as the YPG

in 2017 defeated Islamic State and others in parts of northern Syria, and expanded the areas under PYD/Kurdish control, Turkey did not hesitate to change its previously harshly anti-Assad tone; it spoke less about removing Assad from power and entered into northern Syria militarily to prevent the formation of a single large contiguous Syrian–Kurdish region. During talks with Iran and Russia, Ankara also agreed to the definition of de-escalation zones in strategically important Idlib in the north-west and elsewhere around the country. Turkey’s national interest was more sharply clarified, with less focus on removing Assad from power and more emphasis on preventing PYD-dominated Syrian Kurds from controlling the entire north. By mid-2018 it was evident that predominantly Kurdish groups in the north such as the SDF were exploring negotiations with the Assad government to end the war and prevent permanent Turkish control of lands in the north-west of the country (Jansen 2018).

4. RUSSIA ENHANCES ITS REGIONAL IMPACT

A fascinating consequence of Russia’s emphatic, consistent and kinetic support for Syria has been its emergence as the international power with the most leverage diplomatically across the entire region. Its systematic, patient expansion of working relations with every significant party (notably Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Israel and Turkey) and its deeper military and economic anchorage in Syria allows it to play substantive diplomatic roles in most of the conflicts and multilateral issues that occupy the region (Meyer and Abu-Nasr 2017). This was most evident in Russia’s effort, along with Turkey and Iran, to establish the de-escalation zones, the backdoor discussions to assuage Iranian and Israeli mutual concerns, and the negotiations with Jordan in mid-2018 to deal with the sudden rush of Syrian refugees from the Deraa border area. Russia’s ascendancy is partly a consequence of the broad weakness and apparent downgrading of already erratic American diplomacy in the region; it also reflects the continued placid European role, and the inability of the three non-Arab regional powers – Turkey, Israel and Iran – to attempt such region-wide intermediation, due to several factors: their involvement in intense bilateral conflicts (e.g., Israel–Iran), inconsistent relations and trust (e.g., Turkey–Israel) (Uzer 2017), widespread Arab perceptions of Turkey as a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Arab Islamists (Kirişçi 2013) and the fact that Israel does not enjoy diplomatic ties with most Arab states while it also faces hostile public opinion in most of the region (al-Masri 2013).

5. IRAN’S EXPANDING CONNECTIONS

The biggest regional impact of the US-led war in Iraq in 2003 had already been to allow the expansion of Iran’s influence and presence across parts of the Arab region (Van Buren 2015); the Syrian war heightened this to a new level of efficiency and impact in many ways. The Tehran government has had close strategic ties with Syria and Hezbollah since the early 1980s. In recent decades, it has quietly and patiently exploited new openings that presented themselves to forge closer links with both states and NSAs in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Turkey, Palestine and elsewhere. The Syria–Hezbollah–Iran alliance was strengthened after 2003 by adding an emphatic Iraqi component to it, as Iran-friendly Shiites assumed majority power in Iraq. Iran added a new dimension to its web of regional contacts by improving relations with Russia, especially on supporting the Syrian government but also on bilateral energy, trade and nuclear issues.

The expanded Syria–Iran–Hezbollah–Iraq alliance has been further enhanced by including militias and paramilitary groups that have been formed in Syria and Iraq since 2012 (Fulton et al. 2013), usually with direct Iranian assistance and often with the participation of Iraqi and Afghan “volunteers”. This model provides relatively inexpensive alternatives for stressed governments that need additional fighting forces but whose armed forces are overstretched. The battlefield experience that Hezbollah has gained in Syria in semi-conventional warfare action for five years also adds new dimensions to its already significant capabilities: it enjoys enhanced battlefield experiences it can apply in its ongoing confrontation with Israel when needed; and this increases the ability of Iran and Hezbollah to provide tactical, training and technical support to allies in need in other parts of the Middle East. Yet this has also generated new pushbacks against Hezbollah’s more activist regional posture, from within Lebanon and also from Saudi Arabia and others across the region that have tried unsuccessfully to contain Hezbollah in order to clip Iran’s wings.

If Iran’s expanded regional clout was the primary after-effect of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the significant long-term impact of the Syrian war may have to be measured in several dimensions. The most clear effect at this juncture is the successful tight, multi-year, transnational collaboration among the Syrian government, a major NSA (Hezbollah), a non-Arab regional power (Iran), numerous localized NSA militias and paramilitary groups, and a global power (Russia) across political, economic and military domains (Miller 2015). Each alliance member has also been strengthened and can play a larger role in the region and beyond, including Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and some of the paramilitary forces and militias that emerged in Syria and Iraq.

6. MORE INTENSE IRAN–SAUDI ARABIA RIVALRY

The triumph of the Syria-centred international alliance has accelerated and deepened the regional confrontation that pitted two camps of nations roughly allied to either Iran or Saudi Arabia (Barnes-Dacey 2018). That description is slightly simplistic, but it captures the two groups of states that are now facing off in a war of words, sanctions, threats, proxy battles, clandestine operations, competition for allies and occasional direct confrontations (Barnes-Dacey et al. 2018). On one side is the Russia–Syria–Iran–Hezbollah grouping to which we can link the Houthi (Ansarullah) movement that controls northern Yemen, and occasionally Hamas in Palestine; on the other side is the Saudi–Emirati–American–Israeli-led grouping that continues to assert itself in its common goal of pushing back Iranian influence in the region, though this includes calls for both regime change and state behaviour change in Iran.

Unlike the decisive actions of those who supported Assad in Syria, much of the anti-Iranian rhetoric and calls to “roll back” Tehran’s influence across the Middle East are expressed in economic sanctions, strong rhetoric, regular accusations and threats, some subversive covert actions, and indirect and mostly unsuccessful proxy battles. These proxy battles that sought to weaken Iranian allies, most importantly, in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain and Iraq used both political and military means (Mabon 2017). The end of the Syrian war is likely to intensify the rhetoric and the actions of the UAE–Saudi–Israeli–American grouping against Iran, given the steady increase in the intensity of anti-Iranian rhetoric and action by the Saudi and Emirati leaders since Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman effectively assumed the reins of power in Riyadh in 2015–17, when he was successively named Deputy Crown Prince and then Crown Prince (Al Jazeera 2017). Most

of the political and military moves by this group of states have not been successful, and some have even backfired. For example, the Saudi–Emirati-led boycott of Qatar in June 2017 had as one of its aims severing Qatari–Iranian ties, but these have only increased in 2017–18. The war in Yemen has not removed the Houthis from the capital Sana’a, and has caused immense material and human damage throughout the country. The Saudis’ apparent pressure on Lebanese Prime Minister Saïd Hariri in November 2017 to make strong anti-Hezbollah and anti-Iran statements during his forced stay in the kingdom aimed to weaken Hezbollah’s and Iran’s standing in Lebanon by fostering internal opposition to them both (Nakhoul et al. 2017). It not only failed to achieve that, but also generated a spontaneous show of national unity in support of Prime Minister Hariri (Karasik and Cafiero 2017).

The inability of this alliance to topple the Assad government by half-heartedly supporting Syrian rebels or to weaken Tehran’s links across the region is likely to usher in a new strategy to achieve regime change or behavioural change more effectively. Military action against Iran or other regimes is an improbable option, given the continuing negative fallout from the attack to overthrow the Baathist government in Iraq in 2003. A more likely approach already under way is to squeeze Iran through primary and secondary economic sanctions that seek to bleed its economy nearly to death in an attempt to foment popular opposition to the governing power elite.

6.1 MORE ACTIVIST SAUDIS–EMIRATIS

Another way in which the survival of Assad as Syrian president has started to impact the region has been the more decisive policies and interventions by some of the anti-Assad and anti-Iran camp, especially the Saudi–Emirati grouping (Wintour 2017). They have acted to date in two realms: they have initiated actions on their own in their immediate neighbourhoods (launching the war in Yemen, boycotting Qatar, pressuring Lebanon by briefly detaining Prime Minister Hariri, seeking closer ties with Iraqi Shiite leader Muqtada Sadr), and they have acted regionally/globally by seeking greater US and Israeli cooperation in weakening Iran through a variety of means that continue to be explored. It remains to be seen how realistic the heightened Saudi–Emirati expectation is that their ties with the USA and Israel can “roll back” or contain Iran more effectively than have the largely failed policies across the region by these two regional powers, especially in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar and Yemen.

6.2 WASHINGTON AND THE “DEAL OF THE CENTURY”

The failure of the American–Saudi–Emirati attempt to push for Assad’s resignation could prod them collectively to strengthen their coordination with Israel in order to pressure, threaten and sanction Iran or even attempt to change the Tehran government. There are signs and much speculation that the US-led diplomatic effort to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict – the “deal of the century” – is in part the American–Saudi–Emirati–Israeli group’s attempt to reconfigure main political lines in the region and improve their posture following their apparent failures in Syria and elsewhere. This aims to see them stand a bit more firm before the strengthened Syrian–Iranian–Hezbollah alliance that now includes major Iraqi actors as well (Ricks 2012). It also tries to blunt the regional impact of Russia’s success in maintaining Assad in power, and the benefits it and Iran will reap from their management of post-war reconciliation, transition and reconstruction in Syria (Tabatabai 2018).

This reflects several dynamics. One is that the United States seems keen to compensate for its ongoing withdrawal from Syria and Iraq by reasserting its role as the main mediator in the Palestinian–Israeli and Arab–Israeli conflicts. Washington has been widely criticized, even ridiculed, for its erratic performance in Syria at the military and diplomatic levels; offering the “deal of the century” to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict could restore some of its political credibility and respect, promote stronger and more direct ties between Israel and Washington’s Arab Gulf allies, and push ahead with the anti-Iran campaign that is central to the Trump administration’s policies in the Middle East.

Another dynamic is the desire of the Saudis and Emiratis to work closely with others in the region – notably Egypt, Jordan and Israel – to protect their interests after their unsuccessful proxy assaults against Iran, and to move ahead more aggressively in the anti-Tehran effort (Mekay 2017). The new American and Saudi–Emirati moves in this respect both seem to seek to compensate for the political and credibility losses they suffered in the Syrian war. Despite eighteen months of non-stop diplomacy by the White House and parallel lobbying in the Arab region by the Saudi leadership, all public indications in key Arab quarters – especially Palestine, Jordan and Arab public opinion broadly – suggest that the “deal of the century” will not succeed. This is due primarily to the widespread public criticism of the deal in Arab public opinion and the refusal of the Palestinians to engage with the USA after Washington unilaterally recognized occupied Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved its embassy to occupied East Jerusalem (Baroud 2018). It has also become apparent that Jordan refuses to drop its opposition to the US move in Jerusalem or to cede its custodianship of the holy sites in Jerusalem to Saudi Arabia (Badrakhan 2018), even in the face of political and financial pressures to do so.

7. PRAGMATISM AMONG REGIONAL ACTORS

Some states exhibited bold pragmatism during the Syrian war years as they adjusted and even reversed some of their policies in the light of events on the ground. Caught between the two main camps of states that broadly pursue pro-Iranian or pro-Saudi positions, several small and large states have pursued more pragmatic policies that have allowed them to navigate among these groupings and pursue their own strategic interests. Countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan and even Russia sometimes have taken strong actions to support or to weaken Syria’s government; yet they have also negotiated, or even reached, military, commercial, technological or logistical transport arrangements with a range of countries in both camps. Russian and Turkish hot-and-cold ties with Israel are a good example of this, as is the complex matrix of multi-sectoral relations and interests that link Russia, Turkey, Iran and Israel (Han 2016). As the war was winding down in mid-2018, Syrian government forces with Russian support were attacking rebel positions in the south near Deraa – at the same time as the Russians were negotiating with rebels and with the Jordanian government to achieve an end of hostilities and allow refugees to return to their home regions. Simultaneously, Russian officials were in touch with Israeli and Iranian officials to discuss those states’ interests in the situation in southern Syria.

This aspect of the Syrian war, which might resonate across the region for years to come, is that a foreign power’s sustained military presence on the ground coupled with decisive diplomatic contacts with all concerned parties has allowed it to assume a pivotal role in the unfolding events,

as Russia has just shown the world. The contrast with Washington's unsuccessful policies in Syria and the Arab-Israeli conflict is striking, and hints to regional powers how they might more effectively combine their military and political assets in forging successful foreign policies.

Turkey and Qatar also both supported anti-Assad efforts during the early years of the war in Syria, then eventually accommodated themselves to the continuity of the Damascus government when it was clear that Assad would remain in power (Outzen 2016); and Turkey indirectly coordinated with the Syrian government when the Russia-Turkey-Iran group established de-escalation zones in several parts of Syria in 2017-18. Turkey and Qatar seem to have expected that the government that would replace the Assad regime would be dominated by less extremist rebels with whom they have long been friendly (Wheeldon 2017). When their anticipations did not materialize, they stopped actively supporting rebel groups, and in Turkey's case turned their attention to direct and proxy military campaigns in northern Syria to block the formation of a PYD-dominated Kurdish proto-state.

A corollary to Russia's growing impact in the region due to the Syrian war has been the emergence of Russia-Turkey-Iran as a powerful grouping of countries that can impact some key issues in the region (Hallinan 2018); these include future constitutional arrangements in Syria and Iraq, the status of Kurdish groups within Arab states, energy policy coordination in volatile times, Israeli-Iranian tensions and Middle Eastern states' procurement of nuclear and defensive missile technologies, to mention only the most obvious ones (Geranmayeh and Liik 2016).

An intriguing development in the Syrian war that could reverberate globally in the future was the Russia-Iran-Turkey group's ability to establish a parallel track of diplomacy towards the end of the Syrian war, alongside and linked to the track managed by the UN Security Council (UNSC) and its successive mediators since the Geneva I talks in June 2012. In May 2015, Russia-Turkey-Iran launched in Astana, Kazakhstan, a series of consultations and negotiations that would continue to meet in Moscow, Geneva, Vienna, Sochi and other locations. This effort shifted the centre of gravity of the peace negotiations from the UNSC to the Moscow-led camp, at a time when Russia's military was actively attacking anti-Assad targets throughout Syria. The Astana talks eventually led to agreement on four de-escalation zones in Syria that temporarily reduced the fighting, while Moscow also took the lead in moving the negotiators towards creating a reconciliatory draft constitution for the post-war years.

The Astana process and the United Nations both repeatedly affirmed that the two tracks complemented each other, yet neither achieved its aims of ending the war and creating a political agreement for post-war transition and governance in Syria. The significant residue from this experience is that strong alliances of powerful and decisive actors that put their troops on the ground can create negotiating structures that achieve two aims: they temporarily bypass existing talks and forums in the UN or elsewhere, and they remove the constraints of UNSC vetoes that diplomacy often encounters. It will not be lost on anyone that the three decisive actors who managed the Astana process diplomacy were all directly involved in the fighting on several fronts.

8. DEEP STATES WILL PERSIST

Middle Eastern states with strong, decisive and usually authoritarian governments – such as Egypt and Algeria, for example – might conclude from the Syrian war that they can emulate Assad’s use of brutal force against his own people and cities in the assault against local and foreign rebels (Clark and Salloukh 2008). Egypt’s harsh military measures, curfews, arrests and demolitions of entire neighbourhoods in Sinai is an example where a deeply entrenched, authoritarian Arab state is using immense and disproportionate force against home-grown rebels, with two notable results: the rebel threat does not seem to be disappearing in the face of persistent military attacks against it, and the rest of the world does not seem to care much about what is taking place inside Egypt in this respect (Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2017). The war in Yemen is another example of Arab states (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) with foreign support (the USA and UK) using disproportionate military force against a much poorer, weaker target for years on end, without any significant objection from the rest of the world, beyond the occasional arms sales embargo by some European states including Norway and Germany (Salacanian 2018); others in Europe may join the embargo, following a pan-European parliamentary vote to do so (Rankin 2016).

Not only did most of the world respond in a low-key manner to Syria’s hardline military response to rebels and civilians alike; some countries, including the USA and Russia, directly participated in the fighting that assumed brutal proportions in Raqqa, Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta and other places. This raises an issue that only started to be seriously considered globally and regionally in early 2018: what forms of reconstruction will take place in Syria after the fighting ends? Who will provide most of the financing? Who will manage the process of planning the rebuilding and distributing lucrative contracts? The lesson from the war again suggests that those countries whose troops fight on the ground for years on end will control the post-war process in all its political and commercial dimensions.

We will need many years to discern the nature of the future Syria. Specifically, will post-war reconciliation and agreement on a new constitutional transitional process lead to a Syria whose political governance will perpetuate the top-heavy, centralized state model of the last fifty years of Assad family rule? Or will it open a path towards more participatory and accountable governance (Heydemann 2018)? Most indicators to date suggest that the world broadly accepts President Assad remaining in power – if the war ends, and Syria’s 12 million refugees and internally displaced nationals can resume a normal life. This conclusion derives from foreign states’ behaviour during the war years, the governance and power trends in areas that were under state control in 2018, and the prevalent international indifference to how Syria emerges from its war. In other words, the message that will be heard clearly across the Middle East is that the world will not care or intervene if you brutally attack your own people or weaker neighbours, as long as you do not use chemical weapons, carry out localized genocides against minorities or threaten the world with terrorism or refugees.

This highlights a bigger issue that permeates most Arab countries (with the exception of wealthy energy producers) with top-heavy central governments that monopolize power: they suffer the same vulnerabilities that surfaced to drive the 2011 Arab uprisings and that hardline Islamists and foreign countries exploited in Syria to generate a full-blown war. These vulnerabilities comprise

disenchanted citizens who suffer increasingly difficult life conditions in the socio-economic, political and material realms, and who eventually rebel against the state's policies. The uprisings, including Syria's, have generated discussions across the region since 2011 about whether top-heavy Arab autocratic systems might respond to their citizens' stirrings. The common issues that defined most uprisings, including Syria's, still prevail across the region and have deteriorated in most cases; these include vulnerabilities in socio-economic disparities, state legitimacy, citizen dignity, coherent national identity, environmental viability and sustainable economic development. Syria's war experience suggests that hardline military responses to citizen political activism are a viable, if costly, option for Arab states that must decide whether to address their weaknesses through structural reforms in the direction of good governance or through repression anchored in "security" imperatives. Syria's recent experience (along with that of Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Yemen) indicates that most foreign countries will support harsh clampdowns on citizen rights across the Arab region if these are contextualized in the wider context of the "war on terror" or the battle to roll back Iranian influence.

9. UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR ISLAMISTS

The Syrian war was the most important recent laboratory in the Arab region for the conduct of Islamist groups and their acceptance among Syrian society. Syria tested both militants such as al Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and more pragmatic and non-violent "moderates" such as the Muslim Brotherhood and dozens of smaller local and national groups (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies 2016). How the full range of Islamists fared in Syria should impact how they are perceived by populations and governments across the Middle East. The war years have resulted in double-edged consequences for Islamists of all kinds, whose anti-government activism, like that of secular opposition forces, seems likely to end in failure. Tens of thousands of hardline jihadists in the al Qaeda or ISIS mould had five to six years in Syria to organize, train, coordinate and plan for the future, and some remain openly or covertly active there in pockets in the north-west and the south-east – though these will almost certainly be wiped out by state action by 2019.

Post-war Syria presents massive new constraints to new attempts by such groups that may seek to repeat the recent attempts to carve out territorial domains where they effectively enjoy sovereignty, as witnessed in the case of ISIS and, to a lesser extent, al Qaeda and its local Syrian offshoots including Jabhat al-Nusra and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. The Syrian experience suggests that for regional and global powers, countering growing threats from militant jihadists anchored in self-proclaimed statelets will remain a higher priority than addressing the threats that emanate from vicious states or collapsing socio-economic orders.

Beyond the fate of the hardline jihadi Islamists, the Syrian war also leaves unclear the fate of the "moderate" and more pragmatic Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, that have usually been willing to engage in political activity according to rules set by the state (Morocco, Kuwait, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan are good examples in recent decades) (Pierret 2015). These have faced harsh crackdowns since 2013 in Egypt and the UAE in particular, while their support from Turkey and Qatar remains erratic. Their failure to make headway as elements in the Syrian opposition leaves them as a future unknown quantity in Arab political life. This might portend new rivalries within Sunni Arab communities across the region, where different political Islamists that will

emerge in these countries might try to gain legitimacy and ruling authority, which would reflect in part the Islamists' poor showing in Syria.

CONCLUSION: A CENTURY'S LEGACY OF PAWNS, PROXIES AND PARTNERS

A century after the creation of modern Syria during the First World War era of intense global competition for imperial advantage in the Middle East, Syria once again emerged in 2011–18 as a fulcrum of regional and global political contestations. The Syrian war experience suggests that the passage of a full century has not dulled the legacy of regional and global actors using local vulnerable states and non-state actors as pawns, proxies and partners in the greater pursuit of their own national and imperial interests. While we cannot predict the full repercussions of the Syrian war on regional developments in the years ahead, we can identify a few key dynamics and actors that will shape new configurations in the region. Syria was the one country where all these dynamics and actors converged, interacted, fought and made deals with one another, as they will continue to do for many years to come.

Syria's war was complex, multi-dimensional, fierce and even unique in some ways, for example in providing a central headquarters for jihadi groups from across the world, and in reinvigorating Russia's new role as a powerbroker and interlocutor across the entire Middle East. A wider view of the region suggests that Syria's has been just one of half a dozen active wars or intense political conflicts in the region, each of which offers some lessons of its own for the rest of the neighbourhood. One striking dimension of Syria's war that is more noteworthy than aspects of other conflicts in Yemen, Palestine, Libya, Somalia and Iraq is the longevity and intensity of direct foreign military involvement by those who supported the Assad government, notably Iran, Hezbollah and Russia.

Some analysts might interpret this as meaning that Syria has surrendered its sovereignty as the unavoidable cost for regime survival, and that it is a very weak regime and state that cannot survive on its own. Others might argue that the Syrian government and state are, in fact, strengthened in the long run, given their proven capacity to remain in power in the face of a fierce and prolonged armed campaign against them supported by many Syrians and foreign countries. The most reasonable conclusion seems to be that neither extreme position accurately defines the war's meaning for Syria. A wider view of the Arab region shows that many other states and governments suffer the same vulnerabilities and weaknesses as Syria did in 2011.

The larger lesson of the Syrian war might not be about the Syrian state, but perhaps about the Arab state more broadly – because Arab statehood itself remains fragile, largely because it has never been credibly validated by its own citizenries. These are issues that history will clarify in the decades ahead. Syria's past decade reminds us that the novelty of Arab statehood that emerged, or was imposed, around 1920 remains largely a series of mostly untested prototypes, a collective work in progress. The verdict on this will come ultimately from the actions of today's 400 million citizens of Arab states. Their actions will be intermediated, as always, by a dazzling array of foreign and regional powers, non-state actors and new smaller groups that spring up in society under the banners of religion, ethnicity, tribalism, regionalism, secular ideology and other collective identities that persist robustly under the thin skin of modern statehood. The Syrian state showed that it was prepared to fight for its life when it was challenged by these disparate indigenous identities and

forces that also enjoyed support from abroad. That battle – Arab states in confrontation with their own people – is what we need to keep exploring in order to identify the durable elements that will shape future orders in the Middle East. Syria now offers us some new clues.

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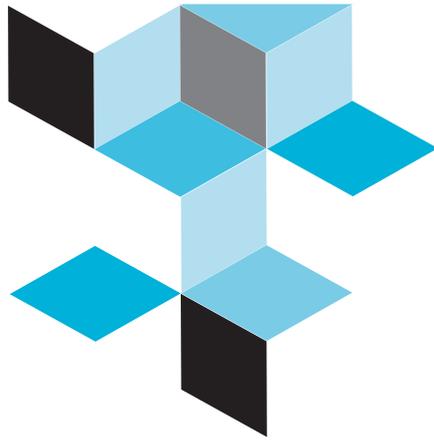
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Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

MENARA is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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