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# Violent Non-State Armed Actors in the Syria War : Emergence, Retreat and Survival: A Case Point for the Arab World and Africa

Mona Alameh

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**Mona ALAMEH**

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## **Violent Non-State Armed Actors in the Syria War. Emergence, Retreat and Survival.**

*A Case Point for the Arab World and Africa.*

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Devant le jury composé de :

Karine BENNAFLA, Professeure, Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3, Présidente

Taline TER MINASSIAN, Professeure, Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Rapporteuse

David ROMANO, Professeur, Missouri State University, Rapporteur

Fatiha DAZI HENI, Chercheuse, Ministère de la défense (IRSEM), Examinatrice

Cyril ROUSSEL, Chercheur, CNRS, Examinateur

Fabrice BALANCHE, Maître de conférences HDR, Université Lumière Lyon 2, Directeur de thèse

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Université Lumière Lyon 2

ED 483 ScSo (Histoire, géographie, aménagement, urbanisme,  
archéologie, architecture, sciences politiques, sociologie,  
anthropologie, ergonomie)

**Violent Non-State Armed Actors in the Syria  
War  
Emergence, Retreat and Survival**

A Case Point for the Arab World and Africa

**Mona Alami**

Géopolitiques

Sous la direction de Professeur Fabrice Balanche

Présentée et soutenue publiquement Avril 2024

Composition du Jury:

Karine Benafla

Fatiha Dazi-Heni

Taline Minassian

David Romano

Cyril Roussel

# **Dedication**

To Lokman Slim, assassinated by Hezbollah. His murder remains unpunished.

To My father who taught me the meaning of truth and the defense of justice

To Amal, my cousin, and Maya, my friend, who saved my life.

# **Abstract**

## **Les Acteurs Violents Non Étatiques (AVNE) dans la guerre en Syrie**

En juin 2011, 200 opposants du régime autoritaire syrien se sont réunis à l'hôtel Damas Semiramis pour appeler à une transition pacifique vers la démocratie et à la fin du monopole de la famille Assad sur le pouvoir, avertissant que le chaos à venir. Cet événement pacifique marque les prémices de la guerre en Syrie. Le régime du Président syrien Assad devient par la suite de plus en plus répressif et les manifestations progressivement violentes, jusqu'à ce qu'une guerre totale oppose une opposition armée au régime. La guerre civile en Syrie a alimenté les rivalités régionales, exacerbé les identités religieuses et ethniques et permis l'expansion transnationale en Syrie d'acteurs armés non étatiques violents (ci-après dénommés AVNE), soutenus par des puissances régionales et internationales. L'accent mis sur ces AVNE et leur relation avec la nouvelle théorie de la guerre de Marie Klador sera le point principal de cette thèse, illustré par l'exemple de la Syrie. Cet angle a été choisi compte tenu de la lente progression que ces mouvements ont commencé à prendre depuis les années 80, culminant avec le rôle massif qu'ils ont joué dans la vague de troubles post-2011 qui a façonné la région du Moyen-Orient et qui semble de propager aujourd'hui en Afrique et jusqu'à un certain point en Europe.

**Violent Non-State Armed Actors in the Syria  
Emergence, Retreat and Survival**

A Case Point for the Arab World and Africa

**Mona Alami**



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# Thesis Introduction

When I first started covering the protests in Syria in the wake of the Arab Spring, little did I know of the regional implications the emerging conflict would have. In June 2011, calm still prevailed in the Damascus city center by day. Minivans filled with workers flocked toward the center of the city. Street sellers ran behind cars, carrying their precious bounty. But in the preceding days, pro-democracy protests had been staged by night in the various suburbs of the capital. In addition, every Friday, residents joined the rallies in the city's suburbs of Midan or Douma. The Baathist regime, ruled by the Alawite Assad family, had been in power for over 40 years. The father Hafez who came to power in 1970 had been replaced by his son Bashar at his death in 2000, but 11 years after he took power, Syria saw a wave of pro-democracy protests, just as was the case in other Arab countries.

That same month, 200 critics of Syria's authoritarian regime met at the Damascus Semiramis Hotel calling for a peaceful transition to democracy and an end to the Assad family's monopoly on power, warning that chaos might destroy the country.

In the city center, residents such as Mouheb, who spoke on condition his name would be changed, had prescient words about the protests.

“What do these people know of our country and of what we need? They have been living in the West for over 30 years. They want us to turn Syria into a warzone like Iraq. They are causing bloodshed in the name of democracy,” he emphasized at the time.

And bloodshed it was. The regime of Syrian President Assad grew more repressive with the protests progressively turning violent until an all-out war pitted an armed opposition against the regime.

The civil war in Syria fueled regional rivalries, exacerbated religious and ethnic identities, and allowed for the transnational expansion of Violent Non-State Armed Actors (hereby termed VNSAA), backed by regional and international powers. The focus on these VNSAA and their relation to Marie Klador's new war theory<sup>1</sup> will be the main focus of this

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, (Stanford University Press, 2012).

thesis. This angle was chosen given the slow evolution of such movements that started in the 80s, culminating with the massive role they played in the post-2011 wave of unrest that shaped the Middle East region.

## **Defining Violent Non-State Armed Actors**

According<sup>2</sup> to Krause and Milliken, an armed group is “an armed, non-state actor in contemporary wars ... [with] a minimal degree of cohesiveness as an organization (to be distinguished as an entity and to have a name, to have some kind of leadership) and a certain duration of its violent campaign.”

Krause and Milliken identified several conditions applicable to VNSAAs, namely, armed forces under responsible command; the ability to exercise control over territory, carrying out concerted and long-term military operations; and finally the capacity to implement Additional Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions<sup>3</sup>.

These VNSAAs are divided into several categories: Insurgent groups, Militant Groups, War Lords and Criminal Networks, Transnational Groups, and Private Militias.

### *Insurgent Groups*

These groups can carry out sustained attacks on a state that they seek to defeat or are engaged in a sustained confrontation against. They must also have control over part of the state's territory. Krause and Milliken associate this particular category with the “notions of armed groups as ‘proto-states’ or ‘states-in-formation’.”

### *Militant Groups*

Krause and Milliken defined these groups as “seeking to redress perceived political and economic injustices through violent means” but they may not have control over the state's territory.

### *Warlords and Criminal Networks*

This particular category includes “groups whose main purpose appears to be the pursuit of illicit profits through control over natural resources, drugs, trafficking in people,

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2 Keith Krause and Jennifer Milliken, “Introduction: The Challenge of Non-State Armed Groups,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, (Volume 30, 2009- Issue 2), pp. 202-220. Accessed here on June 9, 2023 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13523260903077296>)

3 The protocol refers to the protection of victims of non-international conflicts. Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), 8 June 1977, International Committee of The Red Cross, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/475?OpenDocument>

kidnapping, etc., [They] have traditionally been left to the field of criminologists. They have, however, become increasingly significant in internal war situations, as well as in so-called non-war contexts where the levels of violence involved can approach or surpass the threshold of deaths in war and armed conflicts.”

### *Transnational Groups*

These groups are generally spread across different countries. They may profess specific ideologies and share a common cause. These groups include organizations such as al-Qaeda or ISIS (Islamic State) but this category can be broadened in the context of the Syrian war to other groups such as Hezbollah, which has expanded its activities from Lebanon to Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, as well as the Kurdistan Workers Party (also known as the PKK), which originated in Turkey and contributed to the establishment of the People’s Protection Units (YPG), which in turn came to form the backbone of the American-supported “Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF).

### *Private Militias*

For Krause and Milliken, states (both powerful and weak) are increasingly relying on private security companies and militias to supplement state security forces. This typical devolution has been witnessed in Syria where the government has relied on community militias such as the National Defence Forces and the Local Defense Forces (LDF) to maintain order or fight insurgents.

While all these groups have emerged and thrived in the conflict context of Syria in the post-2011 phase, this thesis will mostly focus on transnational or transnational linked groups ( whether militant or insurgent), namely ISIS, Hezbollah, the YPG-SDF construct and briefly the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces.

## **Overview of the thesis**

The Syria war and the emergence of VNSAAs fell within a wave of regional revolutions and globalized activism.



### *New Wars and the Syria Conflict:*

The New War theories framework is linked to globalization, eroding frontiers, strong feelings of ethnic or sectarian identity, and large refugee movements. These factors were exacerbated by flailing regional states and opposing geopolitical interests<sup>4</sup>.

Globalization meant that TV channels such as Al-Jazeera, as well as social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, could shape and influence conflicts by diffusing live images and information regarding the unrest and the severe repression. This resulted in a contagion effect that spread from Tunisia where the Arab Spring started to Libya and Egypt and finally to Syria

The grievances, whether in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere, were the same, calling for more freedom, more jobs, and less repression. The Middle East was suffering from a youth boom along with declining economies and failing state services. Autocratic states simply did not have the luxury of being able to implement their repressive policies without consequences, as the social contract they offered slowly eroded.

Yet unrest in Syria would not be confined to a peaceful transition or a political coup



like in other countries such as Egypt.

Figure 1: Map of Syria

Syria had a unique geographic position and makeup. To the north, it was connected to Turkey and provided a gateway to Europe. To the east, its desert expanded into Iraq, which

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4 Amaël Cattaruzza and Pierre Sintès, *Géopolitique des Conflits*, (Bréal, 2016).

represented an essential transitway for Tehran. Syria was considered as part of the Axis of Resistance extending from Iran to Lebanon.

Iran thus viewed Syria not only as an essential partner to its coalition but as a land bridge connecting it to its Lebanese proxy. To the south, Syria had direct access to the Israeli-Arab conflict through the occupied Golan, and to Jordan to the southeast. It hosted the only Russian naval outpost on the Mediterranean Sea. Gulf countries viewed the relationship between Syria and Iran with suspicion and wanted to break the alliance between them. The stakes in Syria were thus high for regional and international powers. In addition, the regime's internal composition was unique as it was built on a closely knitted political system shored up by multiple intelligence services keeping tabs on and competing with each other. The military officer corps was also dominated to a great extent by Assad's fellow Alawites.

Syria was also located amid a system of conflicts. Nearby Lebanon had been struggling since 2005 with internecine strife as political rivalry pitted a Western-backed coalition (March 14) against a pro-Iran and Syrian alliance (March 8) led by Hezbollah. Iraq's Shi'i-led government had been contending with a jihadist insurgency, first in the form of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and then the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), the immediate predecessor to ISIS. In the north, Turkey had been staving off the insurgency of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), an organization that the Assad regime had used in the 1980s and 1990s to put pressure on Ankara.

All these prior and ongoing conflicts would have repercussions in Syria, which descended into instability. Grievances of livelihood, politics, and questions of identity exacerbated the rise of a militant insurgency and the fragmentation of the country.

The war was first driven by the political and economic demands of a rural and disenfranchised protest movement that quickly evolved into an armed insurgency. While the primarily Sunni composition of this protest movement and insurgency was not necessarily at the forefront right from the start, identity would eventually become paramount in the Syrian conflict, particularly along lines of Sunni Arabs vs. Alawite Arabs, and Sunni Arabs vs. Kurds.

The multidimensional nature of the conflict combined with regional entanglement was not without grave consequences for Syria and to a larger extent the region, as it allowed for various transnational expansions of VNSAAs.

As early as 2012, Hezbollah began intervening to support Assad’s regime, fighting alongside pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, some of which would later form key elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces that officially constitute a part of Iraq’s armed forces.



Figure 2: Hezbollah Military Parade

Second, Gulf countries joined the fray. They variably financed the Free Syrian Army as well as a flurry of factions emphasizing a more Islamic identity such as the Salafi Jaysh al-Islam based in East Ghouta and Ahrar al-Sham, which was arguably the strongest Salafi faction for a time in the 2012-2013 period.

Third, Syrian elements of the PKK formed the YPG, which would later form the backbone of the SDF. The latter, later supported by the U.S.-led international coalition against ISIS, played an instrumental role in the war on the terrorist organization born from the ashes of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

ISIS itself benefited from the generalized chaos to expand from Iraq into Syria, seize large amounts of territory in both countries and declare its “caliphate.”

The emergence of these new players fell within what Cattaruzza and Sintès<sup>5</sup> considered to be an arc of poverty stretching from Southeast Europe to South East Asia and passing through the Middle East. In this arc of poverty, unemployment, horizontal inequality, and poverty, rapid societal changes combined with economic stressors often lead to intractable conflicts also known as civil wars. Syria, which had low human development indicators and many of these features, fell within this arc. Syria unfortunately was also surrounded by countries considered to be failed states, such as Iraq and Lebanon, plagued by unequal development, large populations of refugees and internally displaced people, demographic pressures and rampant inter-communal violence, international and regional interventions, and failing state services.

These factors would pave the way for the “New Wars,” one of the main principles around which this thesis is centered. In new wars, the weakened state would lose its monopoly on violence, which was partly appropriated by local and foreign armed groups. The new civil war in Syria swept away the inter-state wars that had characterized the period 1960-2000 in the Middle East and that had taken place along the Clausewitz model.

According to Kaldor, Clausewitz defined war as an act of violence intended to compel a country's opponent to fulfill said country's will. As Kaldor pointed out, at the time this definition was formulated, opponents were generally “states and the will of one state could be clearly defined”.

In Syria, all the indicators pointed to the end of these classical inter-state wars and the emergence of what was known as intra-state wars, also known as informal wars, postmodern or New Wars. They were marked by the privatization of violence, and distinguished between state violence and private violence. They were also called hybrid wars because of the blurring of the lines of state and non-state actors. They involved several types of war such as conventional war and counter-insurgency. This meant that first, the violence was partially the result of a phenomenon of rapid globalization that led to the marginalization of certain populations. Second, we also witnessed in this particular form of conflict the outsourcing of violence from the state to militias, whether they were loyalists or rebel insurgencies. In addition, these conflicts led to an increased interconnectedness of militias with organized crime, whether in the case of ISIS which relied on theft, racketeering, smuggling, confiscation, and taxation to raise funds, or Hezbollah, which has long been accused of involvement in various illicit ventures ranging from drug trade to counterfeiting money and

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<sup>5</sup> Cattaruzza and Sintès, *Géopolitique des Conflits*.

money laundering. Diaspora communities also became increasingly involved, particularly in the case of the Syrian opposition as well as the Syrian Kurds. Finally, politics became more defined along the lines of religious and ethnic group identities.

The war also took on another feature defended by Kaldor, which was centered around the concept of barbarism. To fight off the insurgency, the regime in Syria relied on a combination of indiscriminate bombing, besieging urban areas where populations, and triggering large-scale displacement and demographic shift. This generalized violence allowed the various non-state armed actors to expand their influence and implant their ideologies among newly acquired popular support bases. The state, in the meantime, faltered despite retaining control over the most important cities throughout the war.

More importantly, the civil conflict in Syria also led to a normalization of the role of VNSAAs as successful geopolitical tools of influence and their institutionalization in Syria itself as well as in nearby countries such as Iraq and Lebanon where these players were used to reflect the priorities of their various regional backers. Their use in Syria later led to the replication of the model by the Turks in Libya and by Iran in Yemen.

The author's choice to study Hezbollah, ISIS, and the SDF was based first on the fact that they were the most homogeneous and powerful players in the Syrian war. The author also had access to fighters for these groups or to open source materials delineating them carefully. The author had studied Hezbollah for years and saw ISIS and the SDF as its counterparts in terms of military organization and motivation.

### *New Wars in Syria a new geopolitical tool?*

Various regional and international powers were divided around the Syria issue, with diverse if not conflicting objectives. The US wanted to minimize direct intervention and focused primarily on rolling back ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Russia had learned the lesson of Libya, as it has been sidelined from the conflict there, and sought to restore its imperialist standing while maintaining its access to the Mediterranean and exerting influence over Turkey, a major NATO member. Gulf countries fought a cold war with Iran for domination of the region, an objective also sought by Turkey.

The use of VNSAAs allowed powers to avoid direct intervention and minimize human and economic losses. The US backing of the YPG and the formation of the SDF dominated by the militant group led to the weakening of ISIS territorial control and the SDF's capture of large swaths of northeastern Syria while minimizing US casualties in comparison with the thousands killed during the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. US policy was faced with a

Russian low-cost war in Syria that amounted to less than \$2 billion a year for Moscow, combining air attacks, a small Russian ground engagement, and bolstering of local militias. Both the Gulf countries and Turkey initially backed armed opposition groups instead of sending in their direct troops, though Turkey's calculations changed from 2016 onwards and now the country has thousands of troops inside north and northwest Syria. The various regional players believed that the fate of Syria would define the new leaders of the Middle East.

At the heart of the struggle for Middle East primacy was the use of low-cost war through reliance on various VNSAAs. Depending on whom you spoke to, these VNSAAs were terrorists, freedom fighters, or "mujahideen". Ideologically the main VNSAAs fell under the Islamist and leftist labels. While both Hezbollah and ISIS had relied on a strong Shi'i and Sunni jihadist narrative respectively to recruit and motivate their fighters, the PYD adopted a one-party-dominated "democracy" ideologically inspired by the PKK. Yet ISIS also aspired to create a better "ideal" society. These models also affected the structures of these organizations in Syria. Both ISIS and the PYD formed state-like structures. ISIS set up a caliphate with various 'diwan' (departments/ministries) and a seemingly conventional army comprising divisions, brigades, and battalions. The PYD created an "Autonomous Administration" based on the idea of a future federal Syria. Hezbollah, on the other hand, operated as a hybrid army at the vanguard of Iran's military effort in Syria and was also partly responsible for the establishment of the LDF, a network of militias working with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah while also tied to the Syrian state.

Hezbollah and ISIS differed in their approaches to financing. ISIS had adopted a governmental approach based on the 'diwans' that allowed it to generate revenue in a variety of ways, including oil sales, antiquities smuggling and excavation, confiscations, taxes, fees, and fines. Hezbollah relied on massive donations from Iran, which represented the bulk of its budget but also depended on revenue generated by licit and illicit sources including money laundering and drug money as well as investment in various business ventures in Africa.

The financial dimension was one aspect that defined the territorialization of VNSAAs. It affected the shape and form of territorialization in Syria: a complete state form for ISIS, an autonomous region of the PYD, and an offensive military force for Hezbollah deployed alongside the Syrian army and having its bases in Qalamoun, Homs, and Aleppo while building infrastructure in southern and eastern Syria. The conflict in Syria also ultimately affected the territorialization of these groups in their countries of origin. The victory of the Syrian-Russian-Iranian axis allowed Hezbollah to expand its control over Lebanon, moving



from the state within the state to the semi-state to finally taking over the state. ISIS' rise and consequent fall resulted in a loss of territory in its home country of Iraq, while the factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces greatly expanded their influence within Iraq. Both Hezbollah and ISIS became regional actors despite their different fates. Hezbollah expanded its activities in Iraq and has become involved in Yemen, while ISIS has expanded itself into a global jihadist brand with a center in Iraq-Syria and a network of "provinces" spanning West Africa to the Philippines.

Ultimately what the evolution and development of these specific VNSAAs in Syria showed was that their long-term survival was either linked to the accommodation of nearby countries with them (resulting in the facilitation of fighters and weapons flow to local players) or support they could garner from regional and international backers. The ultimate challenge such as in the case of Hezbollah is whether they can govern in the long run.

Why is Syria important to this debate? Because it crystallized the emergence of VNSAAs and their weaponization by countries waging low-cost proxy wars in the country.

The long-term institutionalization of some of these VNSAAs heralds a new phase in the future of Syria, the Levant, and the larger Middle East region. It offers a military model that is being and could be copied elsewhere in the world.

## **The method and theories:**

The Transnational Expansion of Violent Non-State Armed Actors in the Syria war is based on an inductive qualitative method or bottom-up approach. This means that much of the research has been built on open-source documents, books, articles, and field investigations in the United States, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Iraq as well as Jordan. The author also relied on direct sources, through interviews with members of Syrian militias, Hezbollah, the Jihadist community, Syrian refugees, Iraqi militias, experts, bankers as well as Iraqi and Lebanese army officials in both on-the-record and off-the-record interviews. This allowed me to base my theories on various primary and secondary sources.

The main research question this thesis seeks to answer from the Syrian conflict is whether VNSAAs will survive in the long term because of the geopolitical interests of foreign states and the prevalence of failed states in the region. I attempt to answer this question by looking at the Syrian war and the emergence of transnational VNSAAs there from the perspective of Geopolitical, New War, and Terrorism theories.

*Geopolitics:*

In his book *Géographie Politique et Géopolitique: Une Grammaire de L'Espace Politique*, Stéphane Rozière established a clear distinction between political geography and geopolitics.<sup>6</sup> For Rozière, political geography was built around space as a framework. It is "constituted by territories delimited by frontiers, linked by networks, forming fundamental political lines and ruled over by hubs. Territories, lines, and hubs form a fundamental geometry of the political space." While in the first chapter, this thesis looks at Syria through the political geography lens, it focuses mostly on the geopolitical importance of Syria and its position in the Levant and international geopolitical interests that would ultimately shape the conflict and contribute to the emergence of VNSAAs.

For Rozière, and contrary to political geography, geopolitics envisions, "the space as a (political) stake". "In this perspective", he says, "space is not of interest for what it is as it is in classical geography or political ( geography) but what it represents".

In addition, Syria fell in the Levant or Near East area. In their book, *Geopolitique du Moyen Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord*,<sup>7</sup> Tancrede Jossieran, Florian Louis, and Frederic Pichet say the Levant, where Syria was located was already doomed given its plurality, instability, and its search for unity. This problem was worsened in their view by the fact that it was a highly coveted region.

The authors believe that the Levant plays a pivotal role not only by linking the heartland of three continents but also by being the backbone of Eurasia.

Besides looking at Syrian geopolitics and international and regional geopolitics, the thesis will also focus on the geopolitics of conflicts as delineated by Cattaruzza and Sintes in *Géopolitique des conflits*. The thesis will also focus on the geopolitics of terrorism as delineated by Dasque in *Géopolitique Du Terrorisme*.

The international geopolitical part of this thesis tries to understand the motivations for international players to intervene in Syria. All players, whether Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia,<sup>8</sup> and others saw the destabilization of Syria as an attack on the status quo and a change in the balance of power in the region. It also in many ways showcased how they viewed their role as countries, their religious leadership, as well as how countries rich in resources wanted to maintain the power they had across the region. "Eternal Iran, Shiite, Persian, and a petrol

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6 Stéphane Rozière, *Géographie Politique et Géopolitique: Une Grammaire de L'Espace Politique*, (Ellipses, 2007, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

7 Tancrede Jossieran, Florian Louis and Frédéric Pichet, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord*, (Presses Universitaires de France, 2012).

8 Ibid.



power always affirmed its identity among Arabs, Turks, Indians, and Europeans," said Bernard Hourcade in his book *Géopolitique de l'Iran*.<sup>9</sup>

The fight between the West and Russia in Syria is also linked to geopolitical changes witnessed from the time of Soviet Russia and its modern version. In his book *Geopolitique La Longue Histoire D'aujourd'hui*, Yves Lacoste delves into Russia's nostalgia for Greater Russia and how it shapes the country's geopolitical ambitions.<sup>10</sup>

#### *New War Theories:*

Besides geopolitics, one major premise of this thesis is New War Theories, developed by Mary Kaldor in her book *New and Old Wars*.<sup>11</sup>

The study of conflict is common in the Western world. It explores the various types of conflicts: local, national, and international. It also looks at its political, social, and psychological dimensions. However, modern conflicts are less and less clear-cut given the threat of a global war, and more and more intertwined in their definition, which is why I have relied so much on Kaldor's theories. Kaldor believed that in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new type of organized violence erupted first in Eastern Europe and then in Africa. While these wars were internal wars, they also included transnational connections. In their book *Nouvelles Guerres, Comprendre Les Conflits du XXe Siècle*, Bertrand Badie and Dominique Vidal surmised that after the Second World War, the two main superpowers- namely the U.S and the Soviet Union- started to rely more heavily on proxy wars in poor countries.<sup>12</sup> The framework of New Wars is an essential paradigm in identifying the type of conflict that unfolded in Syria and more specifically identifies the patterns of evolution of VNSAA there as well as the various dynamics about them.

#### *Terrorism:*

Terrorism is at the crux of the study of VNSAAs in Syria with the actors studied in this thesis related to some or extreme levels of violence to expand their project or achieve their goals. Of course, the terrorism of ISIS is not debatable, given the organization's propensity for unprecedented public display of terror as a weapon of choice. However, when

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9 Bernard Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran: Les Défis D'Une Renaissance*, (Armand Colin, 2016)

10 Yves Lacoste, *Géopolitique: La Longue Histoire d'Aujourd'hui*, (Larousse, 2006).

11 Kaldor, *New, and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*

12 Bertrand Badie and Dominique Vidal, *Nouvelles Guerres, Comprendre Les Conflits du XXe Siècle*, (La Découverte, 2016).

it comes to other non-state armed actors such as YPG and Hezbollah, the terror connection is via backers, historical or punctual. The terror angle of VNSAAs will be explored based on the works of Martha Crenshaw<sup>13</sup> and Louise Richardson.<sup>14</sup>

## **Why this thesis is different from the rest of the literature on Syria's conflict:**

Many books have been written on Syria, since the onset of the war. One of the most notable is *Destroying A Nation, The Civil War In Syria* by Nikolaos Van Dam,<sup>15</sup> who describes in his book how following the Arab Spring, Syria shattered into pieces, it's fracturing bred terrorist movements, and caused one of the biggest refugee crises. The writer delves into the recent history of Syria, focusing on the failure of the Assad regime to meet the expectations of its people, the unfolding drama of the war via political developments, and the resulting divide, which led to the destruction of Syrian society and the nation as a whole.

Another is Fabrice Balanche's monograph, called *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*<sup>16</sup>. Balanche's book is different because its premise is sectarianism. Unlike other academics who say it might be a contributing factor but not a pivotal building block of the war, he is convinced that on the contrary, it is.

He believes that the dynamics of the conflict make sectarianism an essential element of the war as power and repression are mainly in the hands of Alawites, which exacerbates hatred between communities. Balanche nonetheless admits that other factors play into the war, but stresses that sectarianism is one factor that in no way can be ignored, proving his point by relying on a multitude of maps.

Thirdly, there is David Lesch's book called *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*<sup>17</sup>. He is one of the few academics who had personal access to President Bashar al-Assad. The author knew Assad well as he wrote an earlier book about the Assad regime, called *The New Lion of Damascus*. His insight shows the inner workings of the regime. Lesch believes that the power built over the years by the intelligence services led them to be overconfident, which backfired against the regime.

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13 Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes, and Consequences*, (Routledge, 2011).

14 Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat*, (John Murray, 2006).

15 Nikolaos van Dam, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*, (I.B. Tauris, 2017)

16 Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War: A Geopolitical Study*, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018). Accessed here: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sectarianism-syrias-civil-war-geopolitical-study>

17 David Lesch, *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad*, (Yale University Press, 2012).

*The Syrian Jihad* by Charles Lister<sup>18</sup> is one of the most detailed books on the rise of jihadism in Syria. He showcases the role Islamic extremism has played in the civil war. He describes how Syria became home to the largest, most complex, and arguably the most powerful collection of Sunni jihadist movements in our modern history. Lister believes that while in the past Syria had many moderates, the Syrian war changed that and radicalized many moderates. He argued that the longer the war continued, the more radical people's position became.

Christopher Phillips' book *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*<sup>19</sup> suggests the thesis that much of this foreign interference has prolonged the war instead of helping a quick win. In the book, Phillips analyses the Islamic State (ISIS). He rightly remarks that ISIS had many progenitors and that if the Assad regime bore responsibility for it, so did his many enemies, whether Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or the West. ISIS's claim to fame was also partly the result of the toppling of the Iraqi regime of President Saddam Hussein during the US-British invasion in 2003.

*Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust For Power Destroyed Syria*<sup>20</sup> is the result of years of investigative journalism by Sam Dagher who lived in Syria and was one of the only foreign journalists to remain in Damascus after most were kicked out by the regime. He provides formidable insight into the personal story of Bashar Assad and his family and the dynamics that unfolded during the war. A lot of the story is told in a very personal manner via discussions taking place between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his friend and army commander, Manaf Tlass, who later defected. Assad had turned to Tlass for advice about how to respond to the protests. Tlass pushed for conciliation but Assad decided to crush the uprising.

The book examines the conflict through the story of two families intertwined by power and loyalty, with Tlass and Assad eventually becoming enemies. Dagher shows how one of the world's most vicious police states came to be and explains how a regional conflict extended globally, engulfing the Middle East and pitting the United States and Russia against one another.

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18 Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, (Hurst, 2015).

19 Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, (Yale University Press, 2020- revised edition).

20 Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One's Family Lust for Power Destroyed Syria*, (Little, Brown & Company, 2019).

The only book that compares to a certain extent with this thesis is *Violent Non-State Actors in the Syrian War*, edited by Ozden Zeynep et al.<sup>21</sup> The book looks at the security challenges ushered in by violent non-state armed actors. It also sheds new light on the role of violent non-state actors in the Syrian Civil War, limiting its studies to the YPG and ISIS. It explores the ideologies, and strategies of the latter. Unlike this thesis, it does not look at Hezbollah or deeply studies the calculations of Arab countries as well as Iran.

The thesis is unique in a way as it compares three groups that in appearance are very different but in reality, share any characteristics. In addition, it looks at these groups through the lens of new war theory, geopolitics, and terrorism. The concepts and models used by these VNSA and their sponsors are and will be replicated all over the world in the future.

## **The outline:**

The outline is built around four parts.

The first part tackles the Syrian conflict and the emergence of VNSAAs and is constituted by two chapters: one on the Syrian Conflict and another on the Emergence of VNSAAs in Syria. The main question I seek to address in this first section is what were the root causes of the transnational expansion of VNSAAs in Syria?

The second part is labeled Weak States in a Fragile Regional Context and is subdivided into three sections: namely, Failed States and The Premise of New Wars, then New Wars in Syria, and finally the Geopolitics of International Actors. In this section, I attempt to understand whether new wars will constitute the new forms of war to prevail in the future in the Middle East and elsewhere.

In the third part, we will look at the tools of international powers, the use of VNSAAs, and the terrorism issue. We will study in a first chapter the terrorism issue in Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq, in the second chapter we will look at the ideological angle, namely Jihadism and the leftist "democratic" approach adopted as a political system by the PYD-YPG and then the SDF. A third chapter will study the Military Structures and approaches of VNSAAs and a fourth at the financing approaches of Hezbollah and ISIS. The main question studied here is how do VNSAAs operate and how they survive in the long term.

A fourth part will address the issue of territorialization: This section includes two chapters. The first one will study the evolution of territorial control of VNSAAs, and the

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<sup>21</sup>Ali Murat Kurşun, Emel Parlar Dal, Özden Zeynep Oktav (eds.), *Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War*, (Springer International Publishing, 2017).

second the impact of the translational expansion of VNSAA namely in Iraq and Lebanon. In this section, the main question I am interested in is how do VNSAAs expand transitionally and how this expansion and territorial acquisition impact their home country.

### **Note to the reader:**

Much has changed since the research and writing of this thesis were done, as the field research in Syria only goes up to the final days of ISIS in 2019, a few months before the fall of the group's last stronghold town of Baghouz.

**Caution: Given the thesis was conducted in the midst of the war with fighters from various jihadist groups in Syria, Jordan, as well as Hezbollah fighters, many sources had to remain anonymous to protect their security and that of the author.**

# **Les Acteurs Violents Non Étatiques (AVNE) dans la guerre en Syrie**

## **Résumé**

En juin 2011, 200 opposants du régime autoritaire syrien se sont réunis à l'hôtel Damas Semiramis pour appeler à une transition pacifique vers la démocratie et à la fin du monopole de la famille Assad sur le pouvoir, avertissant que le chaos pourrait prévaloir.

Cet événement pacifique marque les prémices de la guerre en Syrie. Le régime du président syrien Assad devient par la suite de plus en plus répressif et les manifestations progressivement violentes jusqu'à ce qu'une guerre totale oppose une opposition armée au régime.

La guerre civile en Syrie a alimenté les rivalités régionales, exacerbée les identités religieuses et ethniques et permis l'expansion transnationale en Syrie d'acteurs armés non étatiques violents (ci-après dénommés AVNE), soutenus par des puissances régionales et internationales. L'accent mis sur ces AVNE et leur relation avec la nouvelle théorie de la guerre de Marie Klador sera le point principal de cette thèse, illustré par l'exemple de la Syrie. Cet angle a été choisi compte tenu de la lente progression que ces mouvements ont commencé à prendre depuis les années 80, culminant avec le rôle massif qu'ils ont joué dans la vague de troubles post-2011 qui a façonné la région du Moyen-Orient et qui semble de propager aujourd'hui en Afrique et jusqu'à un certain point en Europe.

### **Présentation de la thèse :**

La guerre en Syrie et l'émergence de la AVNE s'est inscrite dans une vague de révolutions régionales et d'activisme mondialisé.

#### *Les nouvelles guerres et le conflit syrien :*

Celle-ci tombent dans le cadre des théories de la Nouvelle Guerre liées à la mondialisation, à l'érosion des frontières, au fort sentiment d'identité ethnique ou sectaire et aux grands mouvements de réfugiés. Ces facteurs ont été exacerbés par des États régionaux instables et à des intérêts géopolitiques opposés.

La mondialisation signifiait que les chaînes de télévision telles qu'Al-Jazeera, ainsi que les médias sociaux tels que Facebook ou Twitter pouvaient façonner et influencer les nouveaux conflits en diffusant des images en direct et des informations concernant les troubles politiques et la répression sévère qui en résulte. Ces événements ont entraîné la création d'un tumulte similaire dans toute la région, avec le ralliement d'activistes et de militants, qui à son tour a conduit à un effet de contagion, propagé de la Tunisie où le printemps arabe a commencé à la Libye et à l'Égypte et enfin à la Syrie.

Les griefs que ce soit en Syrie, en Libye et ailleurs étaient toujours les mêmes, plus de liberté, plus d'emplois et moins de répression. Le Moyen-Orient souffrait d'un boom démographique au niveau de la jeunesse, d'économies en déclin et de services publics défaillants. Les États autocratiques n'avaient tout simplement pas la possibilité de pouvoir mettre en œuvre leurs politiques répressives sans conséquences, car le contrat social qu'ils offraient s'érodait lentement.

Pourtant, les troubles en Syrie ne se limitaient pas à une transition pacifique ou à un coup d'État politique comme dans d'autres pays comme l'Égypte.

La Syrie avait après tout une position géographique et une composition unique. Au nord, elle était reliée à la Turquie et offrait une porte d'entrée vers l'Europe. À l'est, son désert s'étendait jusqu'en Irak, qui représentait une voie de transit essentielle pour Téhéran. La Syrie était considérée comme faisant partie de l'Axe de résistance s'étendant de l'Iran au Liban.

L'Iran considérait ainsi la Syrie non seulement comme un partenaire essentiel de sa coalition mais comme un pont terrestre la reliant à son mandataire libanais. Au sud, la Syrie avait un accès direct au conflit israélo-arabe à travers le Golan occupé, et à la Jordanie au sud-est. C'était le seul avant-poste naval russe sur la mer Méditerranée. Les pays du Golfe regardaient la relation entre la Syrie et l'Iran avec méfiance et voulaient rompre l'alliance entre eux. Les enjeux en Syrie étaient donc importants pour les puissances régionales et internationales. En outre, la composition du régime était unique car elle reposait sur un système politique étroitement lié, soutenu par de multiples services de renseignement qui se surveillaient et se faisaient concurrence. Le corps des officiers militaires était également dominé dans une large mesure par les compatriotes alaouites d'Assad.

La Syrie était également située au milieu d'un système de conflits. Le Liban voisin était aux prises depuis 2005 avec des conflits intestins alors que la rivalité politique opposait une coalition soutenue par l'Occident (14 mars) à une alliance pro-iranienne et syrienne (8 mars) dirigée par le Hezbollah. Le gouvernement irakien dirigé par les chiites avait été aux prises avec une insurrection djihadiste, d'abord sous la forme d'Al-Qaïda en Irak, puis de l'État

islamique d'Irak (EII), le prédécesseur immédiat de l'EI. Au nord, la Turquie avait été conjurer l'insurrection du Parti des travailleurs kurdes (PKK), une organisation que le régime d'Assad avait utilisée dans les années 1980 et 1990 pour faire pression sur Ankara.

Tous ces conflits antérieurs et en cours auront des répercussions en Syrie, qui sombra dans l'instabilité. Les griefs de subsistance, la politique et les questions d'identité ont exacerbé la montée d'une insurrection militante et la fragmentation du pays.

La guerre a d'abord été motivée par les revendications politiques et économiques d'un mouvement de protestation rural et privé de ses droits qui s'est rapidement transformé en une insurrection armée. Alors que la composition essentiellement sunnite de ce mouvement de protestation et d'insurrection n'était pas nécessairement au premier plan dès le départ, l'identité communautaire et ethnique finit par devenir primordiale dans le conflit syrien, en particulier dans le sens des Arabes sunnites contre les Arabes alaouites et des Arabes sunnites contre les Kurdes.

La nature multidimensionnelle du conflit combinée à l'enchevêtrement régional n'a pas été sans conséquences graves pour la Syrie et dans une plus large mesure la région, car elle a permis diverses expansions transnationales de la VNSA.

Tout d'abord, et dès 2012, le Hezbollah a commencé à intervenir pour soutenir le régime d'Assad, combattant aux côtés des milices irakiennes pro-iraniennes, dont certaines formeront plus tard des éléments clés des Forces de mobilisation populaire qui constituent officiellement une partie des forces armées irakiennes.

Deuxièmement, les pays du Golfe ont rejoint la mêlée. Ils ont financé de manière variable l'Armée syrienne libre ainsi qu'une vague de factions mettant l'accent sur une identité plus islamique, comme le Salafi Jaysh Islam basé dans la Ghouta orientale et Ahrar al-Sham, qui était sans doute la faction salafiste la plus forte pendant un certain temps en 2012-2013. Période.

Troisièmement, des éléments syriens du PKK ont formé les YPG, qui formeront plus tard l'épine dorsale des FDS. Ce dernier, soutenu plus tard par la Coalition internationale étrangère dirigée par les États-Unis, a joué un rôle déterminant dans la guerre contre l'État islamique, une organisation terroriste née des cendres d'Al-Qaïda en Irak.

L'EI a profité du chaos généralisé que pour s'étendre de l'Irak à la Syrie, s'emparer de vastes étendues de territoire dans les deux pays et déclarer son « Califat ».

L'émergence de ces nouveaux acteurs s'inscrivait dans ce que Catarruza et Sintès considéraient comme un arc de pauvreté allant de l'Europe du Sud-Est à l'Asie du Sud-Est en passant par le Moyen-Orient. Dans cet arc de la pauvreté, le chômage, les inégalités



horizontales, la pauvreté, les changements sociétaux rapides combinés aux facteurs de stress économiques ont souvent conduit à des conflits insolubles également appelés guerres civiles. La Syrie, qui avait de faibles indicateurs de développement humain et bon nombre de ces caractéristiques, se situait dans cet arc. Malheureusement, la Syrie était également entourée de pays considérés comme des États défaillants, tels que l'Irak et le Liban, en proie à un développement inégal, à d'importantes populations de réfugiés et de personnes déplacées à l'intérieur du pays, à des pressions démographiques et à une violence intercommunautaire endémique, à des interventions internationales et régionales et à des services défaillants et la présence de l'État.

Ces facteurs ouvriraient la voie aux « Nouvelles Guerres » de Marie Kaldor, l'un des grands principes autour desquels s'articule cette thèse. Dans de nouvelles guerres, l'État affaibli perdrait son monopole sur la violence, qui était en partie approprié par des groupes armés locaux et étrangers. La nouvelle guerre civile en Syrie a balayé les guerres interétatiques qui avaient caractérisé la période 1960-2000 au Moyen-Orient et qui s'étaient déroulées sur le modèle de Clausewitz.

Selon Kaldor, Clausewitz a défini la guerre comme un acte de violence destiné à contraindre l'adversaire d'un pays à accomplir la volonté dudit pays. Comme l'a souligné Kaldor, au moment où cette définition a été formulée, les opposants étaient généralement « des États et la volonté d'un État pouvait être clairement définie ».

En Syrie, tous les indicateurs indiquaient la fin de ces guerres interétatiques classiques et l'émergence de ce que l'on appelait les guerres intraétatiques, également appelées guerres informelles, postmodernes ou nouvelles guerres. Elles sont marquées par une privatisation de la violence, et distinguent violence d'État et violence privée. Elles ont également été qualifiées de guerres hybrides en raison du brouillage des frontières entre acteurs étatiques et non étatiques. Ils impliquaient plusieurs types de guerre comme la guerre conventionnelle et la contre-insurrection. Cela signifiait que d'abord la violence était en partie le résultat d'un phénomène de mondialisation rapide qui a conduit à la marginalisation de certaines populations. Deuxièmement, nous avons également assisté, dans cette forme particulière de conflit, à l'externalisation de la violence de l'État vers les milices, qu'elles soient loyalistes ou insurrectionnelles. En outre, ces conflits ont conduit à une interconnexion accrue des milices avec le crime organisé, que ce soit dans le cas de l'EI qui s'est appuyé sur le vol, le racket, la contrebande, la confiscation et la fiscalité pour lever des fonds, ou le Hezbollah, qui a longtemps été accusé d'être impliqué dans diverses entreprises illicites allant du trafic de drogue à la contrefaçon de monnaie et au blanchiment d'argent. Les diasporas se sont de plus

en plus impliquées plus spécifiquement dans le cas de l'opposition syrienne ainsi que des Kurdes syriens. Enfin, la politique est devenue plus définie selon les identités des groupes religieux et ethniques.

La guerre prit également un autre aspect défendu par Kaldor, ce dernier centré autour du concept de la barbarie. Pour combattre l'insurrection, le régime en Syrie s'est appuyé sur une combinaison de bombardements aveugles, assiégeant des zones urbaines où se trouvaient des populations, et déclenchant des déplacements à grande échelle et des changements démographiques. Cette violence généralisée a permis aux différents acteurs armés non étatiques d'étendre leur influence et d'implanter leurs idéologies parmi les bases de soutien populaires nouvellement acquises. Entre-temps, l'État a faibli malgré le contrôle des villes les plus importantes tout au long de la guerre

Plus important encore, le conflit civil en Syrie a également conduit à une normalisation du rôle de la AVNE en tant qu'outils d'influence géopolitique réussis.

Ainsi, le conflit civil en Syrie a également conduit à une normalisation du rôle des AVNE en tant qu'outils géopolitiques d'influence réussis et à leur institutionnalisation en Syrie même ainsi que dans les pays voisins tels que l'Irak et le Liban où ces acteurs ont été utilisés pour refléter la priorité de leurs différents bailleurs de fonds régionaux. Leur utilisation en Syrie a ensuite conduit à la réplication du modèle par les Turcs en Libye et par l'Iran au Yémen. Ils se propagent aujourd'hui en Afrique qui a son tour comme en 2011 est agitée par une vague d'instabilité.

Le choix de l'auteur d'étudier le Hezbollah, l'État islamique et les FDS était d'abord basé sur le fait qu'ils étaient les acteurs les plus homogènes et les plus puissants de la guerre en Syrie. L'auteur a également eu accès aux combattants de ces groupes ou à des documents open source les décrivant avec soin. L'auteur, est spécialiste du Hezbollah qu'il a étudié l'organisation pendant des années, L'auteur considère l'EI et les FDS comme des équivalents régionaux du parti en termes d'organisation et de motivation militaires. Les trois groupes avaient également des liens clairs avec des puissances étrangères telles que les États-Unis et l'Iran. L'exception était l'EI, qui n'aurait néanmoins jamais pu atteindre sa taille sans les années 2014, sans la politique laisser-faire intentionnels de la Turquie.

### *Nouvelles guerres en Syrie un nouvel outil géopolitique ?*

Diverses puissances régionales et internationales se sont divisées autour de la question syrienne, avec des objectifs divers sinon contradictoires. Les États-Unis voulaient minimiser l'intervention directe et se concentraient principalement sur le recul de l'EI en Syrie et en Irak.

La Russie avait appris la leçon de la Libye, car elle a été mise à l'écart du conflit là-bas, et a cherché à restaurer son lustre impérialiste tout en maintenant son accès à la Méditerranée et en exerçant une influence sur la Turquie, un membre majeur de l'OTAN. Les pays du Golfe ont mené une guerre froide avec l'Iran pour la domination de la région - quelque chose également recherché par la Turquie.

L'utilisation de la AVNE a permis aux pouvoirs d'éviter une intervention directe et de minimiser les pertes humaines et économiques. Le soutien américain aux YPG et la formation des FDS dominés par le groupe militant ont conduit à l'affaiblissement du contrôle territorial de l'État islamique et à la capture par les FDS de vastes étendues du nord-est de la Syrie, tout en minimisant les pertes américaines par rapport aux milliers de morts en Irak et en Afghanistan. Guerres. La politique américaine a été confrontée à une guerre russe à faible coût en Syrie qui s'élevait à moins de 2 milliards de dollars par an pour Moscou, combinant des attaques aériennes, un petit engagement terrestre russe et le renforcement des milices locales. Les pays du Golfe et la Turquie ont soutenu des groupes d'opposition armés au lieu d'envoyer leurs propres troupes directes, bien que les calculs de la Turquie aient changé à partir de 2016 et que le pays compte maintenant des milliers de soldats dans le nord et le nord-ouest de la Syrie. Les différents acteurs régionaux pensaient que le sort de la Syrie définirait les nouveaux dirigeants du Moyen-Orient.

Au cœur de la lutte pour la primauté au Moyen-Orient se trouvait l'utilisation d'une guerre à faible coût en s'appuyant sur divers AVNE. Selon à qui vous avez parlé, ces AVNE étaient des terroristes, des combattants de la liberté ou des « moudjahidines ». Idéologiquement, les principaux AVNE relevait des étiquettes islamistes et gauchistes. Alors que le Hezbollah et l'État islamique s'étaient appuyés respectivement sur de forts récits djihadistes chiites et sunnites pour recruter et motiver leurs combattants, le PYD a adopté une « démocratie » dominée par un parti unique idéologiquement inspirée par le PKK. Pourtant, le PKK et l'EI aspiraient à créer une meilleure société « idéale ». Ces modèles ont également affecté les structures de ces organisations en Syrie. L'EI et le PYD ont tous deux formé des structures étatiques. L'État islamique a mis en place un califat avec divers "diwans" (départements/ministères) et une armée apparemment conventionnelle comprenant des divisions, des brigades et des bataillons. Le PYD a créé une « administration autonome » basée sur l'idée d'une future Syrie fédérale. Le Hezbollah, d'autre part, opérait comme une armée hybride à l'avant-garde de l'effort militaire de l'Iran en Syrie et était également en partie responsable de la création du LDF, un réseau de milices travaillant avec le Corps des gardiens de la révolution islamique d'Iran et le Hezbollah, tout en étant également lié à l'État syrien.

Le Hezbollah et l'État islamique différaient dans leurs approches du financement. L'État islamique avait adopté une approche gouvernementale basée sur les «diwans» qui lui permettait de générer des revenus de diverses manières, notamment les ventes de pétrole, la contrebande et l'excavation d'antiquités, les confiscations, les taxes, les frais et les amendes. Le Hezbollah s'appuyait sur des dons massifs de l'Iran, qui représentaient l'essentiel de son budget, mais dépendaient (aujourd'hui de plus en plus) également des revenus générés par des sources licites et illicites, notamment le blanchiment d'argent et l'argent de la drogue, ainsi que des investissements dans diverses entreprises commerciales et commerciales menant à l'Afrique.

La dimension financière a été l'un des aspects qui a défini la territorialisation de VNSA. D'une part, il a affecté la forme et la forme qu'il a prises en Syrie : une forme d'État complète pour l'EI, une région autonome pour le PYD et une force militaire offensive pour le Hezbollah déployée aux côtés de l'armée syrienne et disposant de ses propres bases à Qalamoun, Homs et Alep. Tout en construisant une infrastructure dans le sud et l'est de la Syrie. Le conflit en Syrie a également influé sur la territorialisation de ces groupes dans leurs pays d'origine.

La victoire de l'axe syro-russe-iranien a permis au Hezbollah d'étendre son contrôle sur le Liban, passant de l'État dans l'État au semi-État pour finalement prendre le contrôle de l'État. La montée de l'État islamique et sa chute consécutive ont entraîné une perte de territoire dans son pays d'origine, l'Irak et la Syrie, tandis que les factions des Forces de mobilisation populaire (PMU en anglais) ont considérablement étendu leur influence en Irak. Le Hezbollah et l'État islamique sont devenus des acteurs régionaux malgré leurs destins différents. Le Hezbollah a étendu ses activités en Irak et s'est impliqué au Yémen, tandis que l'État islamique s'est développé en une marque djihadiste mondiale avec un centre en Irak-Syrie et un réseau de « provinces » s'étendant temporairement du moins de l'Afrique de l'Ouest aux Philippines.

En fin de compte, ce que l'évolution et le développement de ces acteurs spécifiques des AVNE en Syrie ont montré, c'est que leur survie à long terme était soit liée à l'appui des pays voisins (entraînant la facilitation du flux de combattants et d'armes vers les acteurs locaux), soit au soutien qu'ils pourraient de bailleurs de fonds régionaux et internationaux. Le défi ultime sera, comme dans le cas du Hezbollah, de savoir s'il est capable de gouverner à long terme.

Pourquoi la Syrie est-elle importante dans ce débat ? Parce qu'il a finalement cristallisé l'émergence des AVNE et leur militarisation et leur utilisation comme extension géopolitique par les pays qui y mènent des guerres par procuration à faible coût.

L'institutionnalisation à long terme de certains de ces VNSA annonce une nouvelle phase dans l'avenir de la Syrie, du Levant et de la région élargie du Moyen-Orient. Il propose un modèle militaire qui, en raison du coût élevé, non seulement matériel mais humain sur les pays puissants, lié à l'évolution de la technologie militaire, est et pourrait être copié ailleurs dans le monde.

## **La méthode et les théories**

L'expansion transnationale des acteurs armés non étatiques violents dans la guerre en Syrie est basée sur une méthode qualitative inductive. Cela signifie qu'une grande partie de la recherche a été construite sur des documents, des livres, des articles et des enquêtes de terrain open source aux États-Unis, au Liban, en Syrie, en Turquie et en Irak ainsi qu'en Jordanie. L'auteur s'est également appuyé sur des sources directes, à travers des entretiens avec des membres des milices syriennes, du Hezbollah, de la communauté djihadiste, des réfugiés syriens, des milices irakiennes, des experts, des banquiers et des économistes ainsi que des responsables de l'armée irakienne et libanaise dans des entretiens officiels et officieux. Cela a permis au chercheur de fonder sa théorie sur diverses sources primaires et secondaires.

La principale question de recherche à laquelle cette thèse cherche à répondre à partir du conflit syrien est de savoir si la VNSAA survivra à long terme en raison des intérêts géopolitiques des États étrangers et de la prévalence des États défailants dans la région ? Je tente de répondre à cette question en examinant la guerre syrienne et l'émergence de la VNSAA transnationale depuis le début des théories géopolitiques, de la nouvelle guerre et du terrorisme.

### *Géopolitique :*

Dans son ouvrage *Géographie Politique et Géopolitique : Une Grammaire de L'Espace Politique*, Stéphane Rozière établit une nette distinction entre géographie politique et géopolitique. Pour Rozière, la géographie politique s'est construite autour de l'espace comme cadre. Celle-ci était « constituée de territoires délimités par des frontières, reliés par des réseaux, formant des lignes politiques fondamentales et régis par des pôles. Territoires, lignes et pôles formaient une géométrie fondamentale de l'espace politique ». Bien que cette thèse ait examiné dans le premier chapitre la Syrie à travers le prisme de la géographie politique, elle se concentre principalement sur l'importance géopolitique de la Syrie et sa position au Levant et sur les intérêts géopolitiques internationaux qui façonneront finalement le conflit et contribueront à l'émergence de la AVNE.

Pour Rozière, et contrairement à la géographie politique, la géopolitique envisage « l'espace comme un enjeu (politique) ». "Dans cette perspective", dit-il, "l'espace n'a pas d'intérêt pour ce qu'il est tel qu'il est en géographie classique ou politique (géographie) mais pour ce qu'il représente".

De plus, la Syrie est tombée dans la région du Levant, ou « Proche orient », dans leur ouvrage « Géopolitique de Moyen Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord », Tancred Jossier, Florian Louis et Frédéric Pichet, disent le Levant, où la Syrie se situait comme déjà condamnée compte tenu de sa pluralité, de son instabilité et de sa recherche d'unité. Cela était aggravé, croyaient-ils, par le fait qu'il s'agissait d'une région très convoitée.

Les auteurs pensent que le Levant joue un rôle capital non seulement en reliant le cœur de trois continents mais aussi en étant l'épine dorsale de l'Eurasie.

Outre la géopolitique syrienne et la géopolitique internationale et régionale, une approche intéressante portera sur la géopolitique des conflits Cattaruzza, Pierre Sintès, Géopolitique des conflits, et une autre sur la géopolitique du terrorisme Dasque, Jean-Michel, Géopolitique Du Terrorisme Par DASQUE, JEAN-MICHEL.

La partie géopolitique internationale de cette thèse, tente de comprendre les motivations des acteurs internationaux en Syrie. Tous les acteurs, que ce soit la Turquie, l'Iran, l'Arabie saoudite et d'autres, ont vu dans la déstabilisation de la Syrie une attaque contre le statu quo et un changement pour modifier l'équilibre des pouvoirs dans la région. Cela a également montré à bien des égards comment ils considéraient leur rôle en tant que pays, leurs dirigeants religieux (l'Iran contre l'Arabie saoudite ainsi que la Turquie) ainsi que des pays riches en ressources qui voulaient maintenir le pouvoir qu'ils avaient dans la région. « L'Iran éternel, shiite, persien et puissance polaire a toujours affirmé son identité entre les mondes arabes, les Turcs, les Indiens et les Européens », disait Bernard Hourcade dans son livre Géopolitique de l'Iran.

La lutte entre l'Occident et la Russie sur la Syrie n'est pas sans lien avec les changements géopolitiques observés depuis l'époque de la Russie soviétique et sa version moderne. Dans son livre Géopolitique La Longue Histoire D'aujourd'hui, Yves Lacoste se penche sur la nostalgie de la Russie pour la Grande Russie et comment elle façonne les ambitions géopolitiques, en partie liées à l'eurasisme et à une Grande Russie

*New War Theories :*

Outre la géopolitique, une prémisse majeure de cette thèse est les nouvelles théories de la guerre, développées par Mary Kaldor dans son livre *New and Old Wars*.

L'étude des conflits est courante dans le monde occidental. Il explore le type de conflits, locaux, nationaux et internationaux. Il aborde également ses dimensions politiques, sociales et psychologiques. Cependant, les conflits modernes sont de moins en moins tranchés face à la menace d'une guerre mondiale, et de plus en plus imbriqués dans leur définition, c'est pourquoi l'auteur s'est tant appuyé sur les théories de Kaldor. Kaldor croyait qu'au cours de la dernière décennie du XXe siècle, un nouveau type de violence organisée a éclaté d'abord en Europe de l'Est, puis en Afrique. Alors que ces guerres étaient des guerres internes, elles incluaient également des connexions transnationales. Dans leur livre *Nouvelles Guerres, Comprendre Les Conflits du XXe Siècle*, Bertrand Badie et Dominique Vidal ont supposé qu'après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les deux principales superpuissances - à savoir les États-Unis et l'Union soviétique - ont commencé à s'appuyer davantage sur les guerres par procuration dans les pays pauvres. Le cadre de *New Wars* est un paradigme essentiel pour identifier le type de conflit qui s'est déroulé en Syrie et identifie plus précisément les schémas d'évolution des AVNE là-bas ainsi que les différentes dynamiques qui s'y rapportent.

#### *Terrorisme :*

Le terrorisme réside au cœur de l'étude du AVNE en Syrie, les acteurs étudiés dans cette thèse ayant eu recours, à des niveaux de violence faibles ou extrêmes pour étendre leur projet ou atteindre leurs objectifs. Bien sûr, le terrorisme de l'EI n'est pas discutable, étant donné la propension de l'organisation à afficher publiquement et sans précédent la terreur comme arme de choix. Cependant, lorsqu'il s'agit d'autres acteurs armés non étatiques tels que les YPG et le Hezbollah, la connexion terroriste se fait via des bailleurs de fonds, historiques ou ponctuels. L'angle de la terreur de VNSAA sera exploré sur la base des travaux de Martha Crenshaw et Louise Richardson.

## **Le structure de la thèse :**

Le plan est construit autour de quatre parties.

### *Partie 1 : Le conflit syrien et l'émergence d'acteurs armés violents non étatiques*

Cette partie aborde le conflit syrien et l'émergence des VNSAA et est constitué de deux chapitres : l'un sur le conflit syrien et l'autre sur l'émergence des AVNE en Syrie.

Pendant la phase de guerre froide, le monde arabe a vu l'émergence d'ASVN qui reflétaient la lutte aux niveaux international et régional : ces acteurs comprennent

l'Organisation de libération de la Palestine (OLP), al-Qaïda, le Hezbollah et le Hamas. En 1964, l'OLP a été fondée lors d'un sommet organisé au Caire, en Égypte. Avant de se transformer en acteur étatique, l'OLP s'est engagée dans diverses activités terroristes néfastes. Al-Qaïda a fait surface plus de 20 ans plus tard, vers la fin de la guerre soviéto-afghane de 1979-1989 en Afghanistan, au cours de laquelle les États-Unis et l'Arabie saoudite ont soutenu les insurgés musulmans contre l'Union soviétique et son soutien au gouvernement communiste afghan. Al-Qaïda a été fondée par le Saoudien Oussama Ben Laden et dirigée par le prédicateur palestinien Abdullah Azzam. C'est devenu une organisation mondiale menant le Jihad contre ceux qu'ils considéraient comme les ennemis de l'Islam.

Au cours de la même décennie, une organisation djihadiste chiite a émergé au Liban sous les auspices du Corps des Gardiens de la révolution islamique iranien. Ce groupe – le Hezbollah – s'est initialement concentré sur la lutte contre l'occupation israélienne du Liban. En 1987, une autre VNSAA apparaît : le Hamas, en Cisjordanie et dans la bande de Gaza. Le groupe – une émanation des Frères musulmans – croyait en la création d'un État islamique indépendant dans la Palestine historique et s'opposait à la laïcité de l'OLP et à son acquiescement à la cession des territoires palestiniens.

Cependant, c'est lors du Printemps arabe que toute l'importance des VNSAA a été révélée. Les années qui ont suivi le début des soulèvements arabes en 2011 ont été témoins de ce qui semble être une extraordinaire prolifération des acteurs non étatiques au Moyen-Orient, ce qui s'accompagne d'une augmentation conséquente de leur importance politique à travers la région.

La définition des acteurs non étatiques englobe une diversité d'organisations et de mouvements. Il comprend la société civile et le secteur non gouvernemental florissant qui a pris une grande importance dans le monde arabe depuis la fin de la guerre froide. Il comprend un éventail d'acteurs islamistes, y compris des organisations traditionnelles, telles qu'Al-Nahda en Tunisie, les Frères musulmans en Égypte, le Parti de la justice et du développement au Maroc, ainsi que des groupes salafistes, qui ont émergé dans la région, de la Tunisie au Yémen. Il comprend également des mouvements islamistes violents, comme Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, actif dans la région égyptienne du Sinaï depuis 2011 et devenue la « province » du Sinaï de l'État islamique en 2014, al-Murabitoun, le groupe dirigé par des islamistes algériens, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, qui a fusionné avec al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique, un ensemble de groupes apparus en Syrie depuis 2011, et le mouvement chiite zaydi « Houthi » qui a pris le contrôle de la capitale yéménite, Sanaa, fin 2014. Dans le cadre de ces VNSAA, l'attention internationale la plus importante ces dernières années s'est portée sur l'EI.



L'émergence des VNSAA a été la plus importante en Syrie, en partie parce que le conflit syrien a été pendant un certain temps le conflit le plus intense de la région et en partie parce qu'il s'agissait probablement de la première guerre civile à être retransmise en temps réel sur les réseaux sociaux. Les troubles syriens de 2011, qui se sont transformés en un véritable conflit à la fin de la même année, ont été marqués par la violence, l'effusion de sang, le sectarisme et de lourdes interventions indirectes et directes régionales et internationales. Depuis 2011, plus d'un demi-million de personnes ont été tuées dans la guerre. La guerre a également été marquée par de vastes interventions régionales et internationales, l'Occident, les pays arabes et la Turquie soutenant l'opposition tandis que la Russie et l'Iran soutenaient le régime d'Assad. La perte du monopole gouvernemental sur la violence s'est accompagnée de l'émergence d'une vague de AVNE.

Les AVNE constituent encore un domaine de recherche peu étudié et peu exploré malgré l'existence d'une littérature croissante sur le sujet, en particulier sur l'État islamique, ces dernières années. Face au conflit syrien qui dure depuis six ans (à l'époque), les AVNE sont devenues un sujet important à la fois dans le domaine de la sécurité des conflits et dans les relations internationales

Alors que l'accent a été mis sur les AVNE locales, les universitaires se sont moins intéressés aux VNSAA transnationales, ou aux AVNE ayant des liens avec l'étranger, les deux types étant présents dans le conflit syrien.

La guerre civile syrienne a donné naissance à une large génération de AVNE parmi lesquels l'État islamique et les YPG sont les plus visibles en termes de spatialité, de réseaux de socialisation développés, de nouvelles formes de souveraineté remettant en question la légitimité de l'État-nation traditionnel.

Outre l'EI et le group hybride YPG-SDF, la guerre syrienne a provoqué la métamorphose des acteurs locaux en acteurs transnationaux tels que le Hezbollah et les Forces de mobilisation populaire irakiennes.

La question qui sera abordée dans cette section est la suivante : quelles ont été les causes profondes de l'expansion transnationale des VNSAA en Syrie ? Comment cette expansion était-elle liée à la nature du conflit et dans quelle mesure était-elle liée aux voisins de la Syrie, l'Irak, le Liban et la Turquie, et aux manipulations par le régime d'Assad de certaines des AVNE comme outil de politique étrangère ?

*Partie 2 : Le contexte géopolitique instable et le Nouvelles Guerres régionales*

La deuxième partie est intitulée États faibles dans un contexte régional fragile et est subdivisée en trois sous-sections, à savoir les États en faillite et la prémisse des nouvelles guerres, puis les nouvelles guerres en Syrie et enfin la géopolitique des acteurs internationaux. Dans cette section, j'essaie de comprendre si les nouvelles guerres constitueront les nouvelles formes de guerre qui prévaudront à l'avenir au Moyen-Orient et ailleurs

La guerre en Syrie a confirmé l'évolution des tendances internationales, notamment les conflits régionaux. Le concept de guerre a considérablement évolué depuis les années 1900, lorsque les guerres telles que comprises et décrites par le stratège militaire Carl Von Clausewitz se déroulaient principalement entre des États modernes de capacités égales, au sein du système Westphalien. Pour Clausewitz, les guerres visaient à garantir des objectifs militaires et politiques spécifiques et reposaient sur une trinité efficace entre le peuple, l'armée et le gouvernement. Clausewitz pensait qu'en fin de compte, la guerre était un choix politique très éloigné de la dynamique sociale, qu'elle était centrée sur le combat et qu'elle impliquait des ennemis unifiés.

La Seconde Guerre mondiale a marqué une rupture nette avec le système conflictuel militaire et politique précédent, les puissances européennes ayant pris conscience que les conflits majeurs ne devaient pas rester dans leur paysage, explique Bertrand Badie dans son chapitre Guerres d'hier et d'aujourd'hui publié dans le livre Nouvelles Guerres : Comprendre les conflits du XXI siècle. La Seconde Guerre mondiale a restructuré le système politique dans le cadre d'une compétition idéologique et géopolitique entre l'Est et l'Ouest et entre les États-Unis et la Russie. L'avènement des armes nucléaires et la destruction mutuelle assurée ont fait des conflits directs et meurtriers un jeu à somme nulle et un choix irrationnel pour les superpuissances, ce qui a accru les guerres indirectes ou par procuration.

« Tout en restant dans l'imaginaire de la guerre froide, les conflits sont passés de la scène des puissants et des riches à celle des pauvres », explique Badie. Selon Kaldor, cela était également dû à l'érosion et à la désintégration de l'État. Cela a frappé les pays en développement où la corruption et la fragilité de l'État étaient monnaie courante.

La multiplication des guerres indirectes dans des pays éloignés pour les raisons évoquées ci-dessus a non seulement éloigné les conflits des centres politiques internationaux, mais également via le recours à des forces par procuration. Cela a minimisé la menace d'une escalade entre superpuissances. Pourtant, les objectifs et les alliances restaient clairs, les pays considéraient la scène géopolitique mondiale à travers l'optique noir et blanc de l'ennemi juré ou de l'allié fidèle, tandis que les intérêts nationaux étaient définis par un objet tangible.

D'autres experts sont parvenus à des conclusions similaires. « Un changement remarquable s'est produit dans les conflits armés et les guerres civiles depuis la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Jusqu'alors, et pendant deux siècles, la plupart des conflits mortels majeurs opposaient des États souverains, à la principale exception près la conquête coloniale et la résistance coloniale. A la fin de la dernière Guerre mondiale, les métropoles européennes sont confrontées à la résistance de leurs colonies. La vague de guerres coloniales s'amplifie puis retombe dans les années 1970. C'était la guerre froide et, des années 1960 aux années 1980, les grandes puissances - en particulier les États-Unis et l'Union soviétique - et les anciennes puissances coloniales étaient fréquemment impliquées dans des guerres civiles postcoloniales... Mais ensuite, des guerres civiles sans tierces parties l'intervention militaire directe a progressivement pris la première place dans les conflits mortels majeurs », déclarent Charles Tilly et Sydney Tarrow dans *Contentious Politics*.

Après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les conflits armés ont été classés en trois types. Il y a celles qui prennent la forme de conflits extra-systémiques entre un État et un groupe non étatique, situés en dehors de son territoire, comme ce fut le cas des guerres coloniales. Deuxièmement, il y avait des conflits internes qui opposaient le pouvoir de l'État et ses opposants nationaux sans interférence des autres États. Enfin, il existe des conflits internationaux intraétatiques, y compris l'intervention militaire d'autres États. « C'est dans la troisième catégorie que l'on trouve les cas les plus purs de guerre civile », disent Tilly et Tarrow, qui sont de plus en plus répandus aujourd'hui.

En substance, les guerres coloniales ont disparu pour la plupart dans la phase post-1975, avec une fluctuation irrégulière des guerres interétatiques et une augmentation marquée de la catégorie des guerres civiles internationalisées, tendance qui prédomine depuis les années 1980. En termes de fréquence absolue, le nombre de guerres civiles représente certainement une grande partie des guerres de la dernière décennie, dit Tilly.

Un autre facteur, qui pourrait être attribué aux guerres par procuration, était enraciné dans la lente évolution de l'ordre militaire et géopolitique. Cette dernière a encore changé avec l'effondrement de l'Union soviétique et la menace d'un apaisement de la guerre froide, influençant par la suite la nature des conflits dans le monde en développement. Pendant une courte période au moins, on a cru qu'il n'y aurait plus de conflits idéologiques majeurs analogues à la lutte contre le fascisme lors de la Seconde Guerre mondiale et à la dichotomie capitalisme/communisme de la guerre froide, dans laquelle la « démocratie libérale » devenait le résultat final reconnu, point final de l'évolution de la société humaine. Même si des facteurs tels que la religion et le nationalisme pourraient empêcher la réalisation de certains aspects du

projet démocratique libéral, ils ne pourraient pas lui poser un défi analogue aux luttes idéologiques de la Seconde Guerre mondiale ou de la Guerre froide, selon Francis Fukuyama.

Les arguments de Fukuyama étaient plus nuancés que ne l'imaginaient de nombreux critiques, mais il ne fait aucun doute qu'ils ont contribué à un sentiment de complaisance dans lequel il y aurait désormais un ordre mondial unipolaire et où la démocratie libérale aurait triomphé.

Mais très vite, cette complaisance a été brisée par de nouvelles alliances autoritaires menaçant la suprématie américaine et prenant forme entre des puissances telles que la Chine, la Russie, la Corée du Nord ainsi que l'Iran. Si le statut de superpuissance des États-Unis demeure, il est néanmoins remis en question par ces nouvelles alliances qui, collectivement, perturbent l'ordre régional international et aboutissent à une fragmentation du système politique. Le monde ne semble plus unipolaire mais tend vers l'apolarité. Cela rendait essentiellement la guerre par procuration attrayante, dans la mesure où le conflit opposait désormais des pays dotés de forces militaires différentes ainsi que de nouvelles priorités militaires et diplomatiques telles que le déplacement des États-Unis vers l'Extrême-Orient.

L'incertitude générée par l'émergence d'un système apolaire a rendu les relations politiques moins gérables ou moins prévisibles. Un autre problème était lié à la difficulté d'évaluer les risques et l'inimitié, les menaces devenant plus difficiles à définir, les intérêts et les relations devenant plus ponctuels que jamais durables.

Les tendances sécuritaires, sociales et économiques mondialisées ont exacerbé le sentiment d'incertitude, le pouvoir s'éloignant d'une direction politique centralisée et orientée vers l'État. Les forces du marché ont modifié le système politique et réduit l'efficacité de la guerre classique tout en enhardissant les AVNE qui sont devenues des alliés de choix pour beaucoup. Les événements ne se limitent plus à une seule zone géographique. De tels exemples incluent le djihadisme mondial et la menace d'attentats majeurs non seulement dans des zones reculées mais également sur le sol américain, comme en témoignent les attentats du 11 septembre. En outre, d'autres défis sont apparus, tels que les flux migratoires transnationaux massifs, la crise financière de 2008 et le Printemps arabe, qui ont déclenché une perturbation généralisée de l'autorité de l'État en Afrique et au Moyen-Orient et ont eu des répercussions dans tout l'Occident. Les références classiques modernes telles que les valeurs internationales d'éthique et de droits de l'homme, les institutions, organisations et autorités internationales ont été de plus en plus minées par la confusion généralisée et ont conduit à l'autonomisation de petits acteurs non étatiques.

Ces facteurs d'attraction et de répulsion ont à nouveau conduit à une redéfinition de la nature de la guerre, plus particulièrement au Moyen-Orient, avec la prédominance des guerres intraétatiques, au lendemain du Printemps arabe, marqué par l'intervention étrangère. Cette section abordera donc la question de savoir si de nouvelles guerres seront la nouvelle forme de conflit dans la prochaine phase pour la région arabe et ailleurs dans le monde. Cette question est abordée dans le premier chapitre en examinant les facteurs qui ont ouvert la voie à de nouvelles guerres, depuis les changements dans les systèmes économiques et politiques jusqu'à la contagion des États défailants dans le voisinage syrien. Le concept de Nouvelle Guerre est ensuite examiné en détail dans le deuxième chapitre de cette section. Dans le troisième chapitre, nous examinons la montée d'une multiplicité d'acteurs géopolitiques et leurs approches transactionnelles de la politique étrangère, enhardissant les AVNE qui étaient de plus en plus perçues comme des outils géopolitiques efficaces et peu coûteux dans le contexte de la nouvelle guerre syrienne.

### Partie 3 : Les outils de puissance, le rôle des acteurs non étatiques et la question terroriste

Dans une troisième partie, nous aborderons les outils des puissances internationales, l'utilisation du AVNE et la question du terrorisme. Nous étudierons dans un premier chapitre la question du terrorisme au Liban, en Turquie et en Irak, dans un deuxième chapitre nous nous pencherons sur l'angle idéologique, à savoir le djihadisme et l'approche "démocratique" de gauche adoptée comme système politique par le PYD-YPG puis le SDF. Un troisième chapitre étudiera les structures militaires et les approches du AVNE et un quatrième les approches de financement du Hezbollah et de l'ISIS. La principale question étudiée ici est de savoir comment fonctionnent les AVNE et comment survivent-elles sur le long terme ?

Dans le chapitre précédent, nous avons tenté de répondre à la question de savoir si de nouvelles guerres devenaient plus répandues au Moyen-Orient, en raison de la montée des tensions ethniques et religieuses dans le contexte d'un monde de plus en plus interconnecté, de changements de pouvoir et de nouvelles stratégies géopolitiques. Ce qui conduit à un recours accru à la guerre de substitution. Dans cette section, nous nous intéressons cependant davantage aux sources de pouvoir des AVNE dans un monde en évolution.

Comment les acteurs armés violents non étatiques opèrent-ils, survivent-ils et acquièrent-ils la longévité ? Dans le premier chapitre, nous examinerons les AVNE du point de vue du terrorisme, en examinant les différentes définitions du terrorisme ainsi que les caractéristiques du terrorisme, depuis ses moteurs jusqu'à ses objectifs. Ces théories peuvent-elles être adaptées aux Nouvelles Guerres ? Nous tenterons de faire la différence entre le

terrorisme et la résistance et examinerons l'évolution du terrorisme de l'ancien au nouveau. Enfin, nous tenterons de voir comment les AVNE que nous étudions s'inscrivent dans les modèles académiques.

Dans un deuxième chapitre, nous examinerons comment l'AVNE utilise la politique identitaire et à quelles idéologies elle recourt en Syrie, qu'il s'agisse du Jihad sunnite et chiite soutenu respectivement par l'État islamique, le Hezbollah et, dans une moindre mesure, les forces de mobilisation populaire irakiennes. Comment le large attrait du Jihad syrien s'est-il traduit sur le terrain ? Comment l'idéologie se traduit-elle au niveau du SDF ? Nous verrons enfin comment leurs approches s'inscrivent dans le concept de Nouvelles guerres et comment celles-ci ont été utilisées comme outil géopolitique. Nous comparerons également leurs approches.

Dans un troisième chapitre, nous examinerons la guerre hybride utilisée par les AVNE pour équilibrer le pouvoir contre des superpuissances régionales ou superpuissances telles que la Syrie, l'Iran, la Turquie, les États-Unis ou la Russie. Nous examinerons également comment la nécessité de la guerre a affecté la relation de ces AVNE avec un sponsor ou inversement ou a forcé un État à choisir un mandataire. Nous examinerons les structures et approches militaires des AVNE transnationales en Syrie et leur recours à la guerre hybride ainsi que l'évolution de leurs techniques de combat en Syrie, principalement du Hezbollah, passant à l'EI et enfin aux FDS ainsi que les différences entre eux.

La question que nous tentons dans cette partie est de répondre à la question de savoir comment la AVNE partage des points communs et des différences ainsi que des termes tactiques en termes de questions militaires.

#### Partie 4 : La territorialisation opportuniste de AVNE

Une quatrième partie abordera la question de la territorialisation : Cette section comprend deux chapitres. Un premier étudiera l'évolution du contrôle territorial des AVNE, un second l'impact de l'expansion translationnelle des AVNE notamment en Irak et au Liban. Dans cette section, la principale question qui m'intéresse est de savoir comment la AVNE s'étend de manière transitoire et comment cette expansion et cette acquisition territoriale ont-elles un impact sur leur pays d'origine ?

L'effondrement de la Syrie a donné lieu à une forte concurrence entre les États et les acteurs non étatiques, chacun tentant d'étendre son influence sur le territoire de ce pays déchiré par la guerre. Le système syrien fortement centralisé et autoritaire, qui est resté tel malgré une réforme mise en place par un vaste réseau de municipalités après 2004, n'a pas laissé beaucoup

de latitude aux aspirations ethniques, religieuses, rurales ou urbanisées, ainsi qu'aux aspirations tribales des habitants, ses citoyens. La révolution de 2011 a changé la donne à bien des égards, avec la « libanisation » du conflit, expression utilisée par Stéphane Rozière dans son livre Géographie politique et Géopolitique. « On peut parler d'implosion de l'État, de désintégration d'un État lors d'une guerre civile. Contrairement à la balkanisation, l'État primaire n'implose pas en de nouveaux États mais en de nouvelles entités sans légitimité qui exercent un pouvoir d'État de facto sur le territoire qu'elles contrôlent, explique Rozière. Dans cette quatrième et dernière section de cette thèse, nous examinerons la stratégie choisie par les ANV pour étendre et contrôler le territoire dans une perspective de géographie politique. Quelles ont été leurs priorités dans leur territorialisation ? Comment tentent-ils de mettre en œuvre et de financer ces stratégies en fonction de leurs objectifs ? Comment ces facteurs s'inscrivent-ils dans la théorie de la Nouvelle Guerre ? La question spécifique à laquelle nous tentons de répondre dans cette section est de savoir comment ces choix impactent l'ASVN et leur permettent de maintenir leur contrôle et leur expansion territoriale, ou au contraire, les rendent-ils plus vulnérables ?

Dans le premier chapitre, nous examinerons les approches de capture du territoire, d'expansion et de gouvernance des AVNE. Quelles ont été les principales priorités territoriales de chaque AVNE ? Quels outils ont-ils utilisés pour acquérir et entretenir un territoire ?

Dans le deuxième chapitre, nous étudierons en détail les approches de financement de l'EI, du Hezbollah et des FDS, qui leur permettent de se maintenir au pouvoir. Pour ISIS, nous examinerons la structure de l'organisation financière, ses sources de revenus (notamment le pétrole), les mesures de confiscation, les taxes, les frais et amendes, les dons et les investissements. Quant au Hezbollah, nous examinons sa dépendance à l'égard de l'Iran, ses échanges illicites, les différentes régions dans lesquelles il opère et la corruption croissante à laquelle il est confronté. Pour le SDF, nous examinerons leurs principales sources de revenus et leur dépendance à l'égard des États-Unis.

## **Note au lecteur :**

Beaucoup de choses ont changé depuis les recherches et la rédaction de cette thèse, comme l'enquête de terrain en Syrie, dans les derniers jours de l'État islamique, en 2019, quelques mois avant la chute de la ville de Baghouz.

**Attention : la thèse ayant été menée en pleine guerre avec des combattants de différents groupes jihadistes en Syrie, en Jordanie, ainsi que des combattants du Hezbollah, de nombreuses sources ont dû rester anonymes pour protéger leur sécurité et celle de l'auteur.**



# **Part 1: The Syrian conflict and the emergence of violent non-state armed actors**

## Introduction

During the Cold War phase, the Arab world saw the emergence of VNSAAs that reflected the struggle at the international and regional level: these actors include the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Hamas. In 1964<sup>22</sup>, the PLO was founded at a summit taking place in Cairo, Egypt. The organization's initial aims were to consolidate the efforts of Palestinian groups to create a liberated Palestine in Israel. Before morphing into a state actor, the PLO engaged in various nefarious terrorist activities. Al-Qaeda surfaced more than 20 years later towards the end of the 1979-1989 Soviet-Afghan War in Afghanistan, in which the United States and Saudi Arabia backed Muslim insurgents against the Soviet Union and its support for the communist Afghan government. Al-Qaeda was founded by the Saudi Osama Bin Laden and guided by Palestinian preacher Abdullah Azzam. It became a global organization waging Jihad against those they considered to be the enemies of Islam.

In the same decade, a Shi'i jihadist organization emerged in Lebanon under the auspices of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. This group- Hezbollah- focused initially on fighting the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. In 1987<sup>23</sup> another VNSAA appeared: Hamas, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The group- an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood- believed in the creation of an independent Islamic state in historical Palestine and opposed the secularism of the PLO and its acquiescence to ceding Palestinian territories.

However, it was during the Arab Spring that the full importance of VNSAAs came to light. Vincent Durac, in his paper "The Role of Non-State Actors in Arab Countries after the Arab Uprising" argued<sup>24</sup> that "the years since the onset of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, have witnessed what appears to be an extraordinary proliferation of non-state actors in the Middle East, matched by the consequent increase in their significance for political dynamics across the region."

The definition of non-state actors embraces a diversity of organizations and movements. It includes civil society and the flourishing non-governmental sector that has assumed great importance in the Arab world since the end of the Cold War. It includes an array of Islamist actors, including mainstream organizations, such as Al-Nahda in Tunisia, the

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22 History.com Editors, "PLO " *HISTORY*, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/plo>.

23 « Hamas | Definition, History, Ideology, & Facts », Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hamas>.

24 Vincent Durac, « The role of non-state actors in Arab countries after the Arab uprisings », *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2015 1* (2015): pp. 37-41.

Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Party of Justice and Development in Morocco as well as Salafi groups, which have emerged across the region from Tunisia to Yemen. It also includes violent Islamist movements, such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which has been active in the Sinai region of Egypt since 2011 and became the Sinai “province” of ISIS in 2014, al-Murabitoun, the group led by Algerian Islamist, Mokhtar Belmokhtar that merged into al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, an array of groups in Syria that have emerged since 2011, and the Shi’i Zaydi ‘Houthi’ movement that took control of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa in late 2014. Undoubtedly among these VNSAAs, the most significant focus of international attention in recent years has been on ISIS.

The emergence of VNSAAs has been most prominent in Syria, partly because the Syrian conflict was for a time the most intense conflict in the region and partly because it was probably the first civil war to be broadcast in real time over social media. The Syrian unrest of 2011 which morphed into a full-blown conflict by the end of that same year has been marked by violence, bloodshed, sectarianism, and heavy regional and international indirect and direct intervention. Since 2011, over half a million people have been killed in the war<sup>25</sup>. The war has also been marked by extensive regional and international interventions, with the West, Arab countries, and Turkey supporting the opposition while Russia and Iran backed the Assad regime. The loss of the government monopoly on violence was accompanied by the emergence of a flurry of VNSAAs.

“VNSAAs are still an understudied and weakly explored field of research despite the existence of a growing literature on the topic, particularly on ISIS, in recent years. In the face of the (at the time) 6-year-old Syrian conflict, VNSAAs have emerged as an important topic in both the conflict security field and international relations due to their changing nature, hybrid military strategies, and shifting geopolitics vis-a-vis state authority and neighboring states,” says Ozden Oktav, Emel Parlar Dal and Ali Murat Kurdsun<sup>26</sup>.

While much focus has been on local VNSAAs, less academic attention has been on transnational VNSAAs, or VNSAAs with foreign linkages, with both types being present in the Syrian conflict.

“The Syrian civil war gave birth to a wide generation of VNSAAs among which ISIS and the YPG are the most visible in terms of their spatiality, developed socialization

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25 "Death Toll in Syria Falls in 2018," Deutsche Welle, December 31, 2018, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/death-toll-in-syria-falls-in-2018/a-46910498>.

26 Ali Murat Kurdsun, Emel Parlar Dal, Özden Zeynep Oktav (eds.), *Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War*,

networks, new forms of sovereignty challenging the legitimacy of the traditional nation-state and new security threats and violence”, say the aforementioned authors.<sup>27</sup>

Besides ISIS and the YPG-SDF hybrid, the Syrian war caused the metamorphosis of local actors into transnational ones such as Hezbollah and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces. The question that will be addressed in this section is what were the root causes of the transnational expansion of VNSAAs in Syria? How was this expansion linked to the nature of the conflict and to what extent was it connected with Syria’s neighbors Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey, and to Assad’s regime manipulations of some of VNSAAs as a foreign policy tool?

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<sup>27</sup> Ali Murat Kursun, Emel Parlar Dal, Özden Zeynep Oktav (eds.), *Violent Non-State Actors and the Syrian Civil War*,

## Chapter 1: The root of evil, the Syrian war

On December 17, 2010, the immolation of a random Tunisian street vendor and university graduate named Mohammed Bouazizi, catalyzed change and violence, starting in Tunisia and spreading to the Middle East and Africa<sup>28</sup>. Feeling humiliated, Bouazizi set himself on fire after market inspectors confiscated some of his merchandise. His ensuing death triggered an unprecedented wave of anger in the country and became symbolic of the rampant repression and corruption of the autocratic system. The resulting escalation triggered the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and led to the resignation of the old dictatorial president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled for more than 20 years.

Activists in other countries in the region were inspired by the regime change in Tunisia where the first democratic elections were held for the Constituent Assembly in October 2011. Nationwide protests erupted across the Arab world in the ensuing months. October 2011 was another eventful month elsewhere in Africa. That month, another dictator, Libyan Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown, more than four decades after he took power and after ten months of protests and civil war. Gaddafi's execution by opposition fighters was videotaped for the world to see<sup>29</sup>. Egypt- a country of historical importance in regional politics- witnessed massive demonstrations in the wake of the Tunisian revolution, which led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak and the election of Muslim Brotherhood member Mohamad Morsi as President in 2012<sup>30</sup>.

This wave of unrest spread to Syria. In this chapter, we will look at what were the root causes of VNSAA expansion in Syria. How were these causes related to the global context, and what were the local dynamics at play?

### **I - The Arab Spring: spreads from Africa to the Levant and Gulf countries:**

January 2011 saw significant unrest in countries traditionally seen as bastions of stability. This unrest was broadcast on international television stations, one of the most influential being Al-Jazeera.

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28 "Mohamed Bouazizi | Tunisian Street Vendor and Protester," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohamed-Bouazizi>.

29 "Libya Revolt of 2011," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 20, 2019 <https://www.britannica.com/event/Libya-Revolt-of-2011>.

30 "Hosni Mubarak: Biography," consulté le 20 février 2019, <https://www.biography.com/people/hosni-mubarak-37061>.

According to Mary Kaldor<sup>31</sup>, several factors linked to globalization could explain the spread of new wars that followed the regional unrest in certain countries: most notably, the spread of political mobilization through the use of electronic media. “The effects of television, radio, and videos cannot be overestimated. The use of mobiles and or the internet highly contributed to the creation of political networks”, said Kaldor.

In Jordan, protestors took to the streets demanding the government to curb inflation and unemployment rates and called on the country's Prime Minister Samir Rifai to step down<sup>32</sup>. Thousands of oppositionists from Jordan's trade unions, the Islamic Action Front (Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood), and leftist organizations gathered in the capital, denouncing the government's unpopular policies and carrying banners reading: "Send the corrupt guys to court"<sup>33</sup>. The pro-democracy movement was at the time a mix of tribal Jordanians, leftists, and Islamic Action Front followers, as I witnessed in Amman. Rumors abounded in the Jordanian capital of misspent public money on the heels of three corruption scandals – namely, allegations surrounding the state-owned National Resources Investment and Development Corporation (Mawared), the illegal licensing of a Dead Sea casino, and the Jordan Petroleum Refinery.

However, these protests in Jordan did not entirely witness the same dramatic changes seen in places like Tunisia and Libya. “Unfortunately the protests failed to garner momentum: the opposition is fragmented, different groups have too many different grievances,” activist Tareq Zureikat told me in an interview in Amman in 2012<sup>34</sup>.

In late January 2011 thousands of Yemeni protesters<sup>35</sup> led by opposition groups gathered in Sanaa and several other Yemeni cities to call on President Ali Abdallah Salih to resign after three decades of autocratic rule. The protesters criticized rampant corruption and poverty. The protests slowly escalated into violence as the regime's repression grew.

In February, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned. The resignation of an autocrat ruling over the most populous Arab countries was transmitted on TV around the world and contributed to the acceleration of the revolutionary wave around the region.

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31 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*

32 "Jordan's king dismisses cabinet," The Washington Post, February 1, 2011 accessed May 15, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/jordans-king-dismisses-cabinet/2011/02/01/ABpQe0Q\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/jordans-king-dismisses-cabinet/2011/02/01/ABpQe0Q_story.html).

33 « Thousands protest in Jordan », al-Jazeera, January 28, 2011, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/01/2011128125157509196.html>.

34 Interview with activist Tarek Zureikat, by Mona Alami April 2012, Amman, Jordan ( for IPS).

35 "Yemen Uprising of 2011–12," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Yemen-Uprising-of-2011-2012>.

In Bahrain, the tiny Gulf monarchy became caught up in regional unrest with demonstrations taking place daily in the villages spread around (the capital) Manama “mostly at night to avoid the scrutiny of the police,” said activist Yehia Hadid<sup>36</sup>, who spoke to me in Lebanon in 2012. March 2012 witnessed one of the largest demonstrations on the island to date, with news reports stating that it stretched for more than a mile and comprised tens of thousands of people, a large number for a population at the time of around 1,260,000, half of whom were non-nationals. This protest, like others before it, triggered the intervention of the riot police using batons and shields in an attempt to break up the crowds. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported by June 2012 that over 40 people<sup>37</sup> had been killed since the beginning of the uprising. In addition, HRW reported serious abuses by security forces, underlining that some five people died under torture. In Bahrain religious frictions based on sectarian identity rose.

The globalization of unrest is reminiscent of Kaldor’s words. “The goals of the new wars are identity politics... I argue that in the context of globalization, ideological and territorial cleavages of an earlier era have increasingly by an emerging political cleavage by cosmopolitanism ... and the political of a particular identity,” said Kaldor. Modernism versus a return to the roots.

The premises of the new wars were ethnicity, religion, modernity, communitarianism, and fractured society. All these factors fueled local wars, in which regional players chose to play a role. A civil war with transnational connections was in the making, according to Kaldor’s definition<sup>38</sup>. But where in the region?

Syria was the perfect experiment in the brewing regional Arab Spring storm. It was divided along ethnic and religious lines, had the least resources to buy out its population, and was a center point for regional ambitions.

Nonetheless one could not separate the Syrian new war from the regional crises that were common in various countries: massive youth populations, economic factors, global warming, scarce resources, and higher population expectations.

Like other countries where the Arab Spring took place, living standards were deteriorating significantly, in the face of a new mass of educated youth.

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36 Interview with Yehia Hadid, by Mona Alami, June 2012, Beirut ( for USAToday)

37 "World Report 2012: Bahrain," Human Rights Watch, accessed June 9, 2023: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2012/country-chapters/bahrain>.

38 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*

## A -The Arab Spring: Root causes shared by most Arab countries

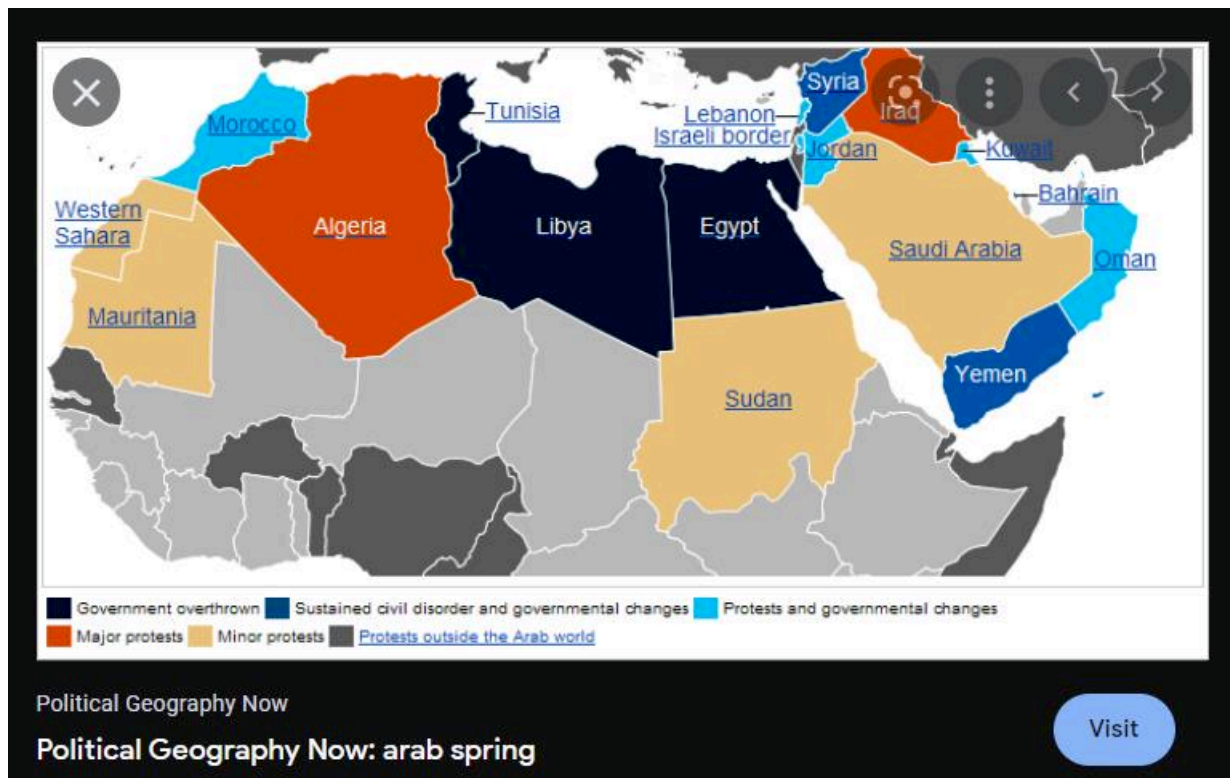


Figure 3: Political Geography of The Arab Spring

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While Arab dictatorships and monarchies dealt mostly with the upheaval from a security angle, little attention was given to the root causes at the heart of the regional instability: namely, population trends, limited growth, and challenges posed by climate change. In other words, a youthful population with limited prospects on account of low economic growth was the perfect recruitment terrain for regional VNSAAs.

The CIA predicted the trend as early as 2001. It issued a document<sup>40</sup>, looking at population trends around 2020 and its impact on international geopolitics and concluded: “The failure to adequately integrate large youth populations in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa is likely to perpetuate the cycle of political instability, ethnic wars, revolutions, and antiregime activities”.

39 “Political Geography Now: The Arab Spring,” Political Geography Now, accessed May 5, 2022: <https://www.polgeonow.com/search/label/arab%20spring>.

40 *Long-Term Global Demographic Trends, Reshaping the Geopolitical Landscape*, CIA, July 2001



According to another paper published in 2014 by the United Nations UNFPA, and entitled “Population and Sustainable Development in the Post-2015 Agenda,”<sup>41</sup> larger trends in population were marked by continued rapid population growth, population aging, urbanization, and migration. When these significant changes are not addressed by government policies, they can lead to potential threats to security and stability, as seen in the past few years.

According to the UNFPA report, population aging represented a significant achievement of social and economic development. However, most Middle East countries continued to have youthful populations. “Some countries, which have taken measures to lower fertility levels are now in a position to realize a demographic dividend, provided that the relatively large number of people of working age can find productive and remunerative employment. This is for example the case for Tunisia and Morocco, but also for Turkey and Iran”, said Michael Herrmann, the author of the UNFPA report in an interview with me<sup>42</sup>.

That is, those countries that reined in high fertility rates while still having a young population of working age had the chance to utilize a demographic dividend that could lead to development. However, this window of opportunity for development had to be dovetailed by investments in the creation of new jobs and the education and health of children and youth. Little of this happened in the region.

Worse was the situation of other regional powers such as Egypt as well as Sudan or Saudi Arabia, which did not manage to rein in their fertility levels. As an example, Egypt’s fertility levels reached 3 between 2005 and 2010 while Sudan’s were at 4.8.

“In most Arab countries, the youth are unable to find jobs, economic growth is often low or erratic and does not create sufficient employment opportunities to absorb the thousands of young people that enter the labor markets every day. This means that ambitious, energetic, and dynamic young people, who would normally use their energy to build a career, establish families, and pursue their dreams, are finding themselves marginalized and left behind. The situation is even more difficult in countries such as Egypt, where high unemployment and weak economic development coincide with high fertility levels and a large number of dependents. This trend contributes to social problems that the region is facing,” explained Herrmann. The 2001 CIA report also underlined the danger presented by

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41 *Population and Sustainable Development in the Post-2015 Agenda*, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), January 1, 2014. Accessed May 5, 2022: <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/population-and-sustainable-development-post-2015-agenda>

42 Interview with Michael Herman, by Mona Alami, February 2014

the inability of youth to find jobs. “Unemployed youth provide exceptional fodder for radical movements and terrorist organizations, particularly in the Middle East,” according to the CIA report.

Besides their explosive demographic rates, developing countries in Africa and Asia were also experiencing rapid urban population growth that was fueled by continued rural-urban migration. Such has been the case in Syria, where, as of 2011, about two-thirds of the population lived in cities. High urbanization generally leads to environmental and economic inefficiencies. Environmental degradation is a by-product of this trend with least developed countries experiencing the highest rates of deforestation, placing strong pressures on their natural resources and environment.

Demographic factors accounted for aggravated tensions. The widening youth bulge in the developing world could explain political, economic, and social turmoil in the post-2011 phase. Another dimension was the ethnic sectarian rivalry prevailing in some Arab countries with the CIA report adding “that Iraq and other countries in the Middle East are artificial, and their ethnic groups are dynamic. This will create a more fractious society where ethnic identities are still very relevant”.

According to Syria expert and author Charles Lister<sup>43</sup>, despite the increase in Syrian GDP, the gap between rich and poor widened under the presidency of President Bashar al-Assad while salaries stagnated under his liberalizing reforms. “About 11% of the Syrian population lived with less than 2 dollars per day,” emphasized Syrian economist Jihad Yazigi in an interview with me<sup>44</sup>.

Economic liberalization had also damaged the manufacturing sector, and prices were rising for fuel and water in particular. This reflected negatively first on the middle class and to a greater extent on the farming communities.

In a nutshell, Assad had created his conundrum by making economic promises that he could not meet. While opening up the country and liberalizing the economy, he also implemented educational reforms that gave rise to a better-educated class of youth. As Huntington says it in *His Clash of Civilizations*, shifts in literacy, education, and urbanization created a socially mobilized population that was more powerful than its predecessors.

## **B- Another variable, global warming**

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43 Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*

44 Interview with Jihad Yazigi, March 2011, Damascus, Syria.

In the five years preceding the Syrian conflict, elevated temperatures and climate change plagued Syria, in particular between 2008 and 2010.<sup>45</sup> The country's drought was worsened by diminishing groundwater levels, which, according to Lister<sup>46</sup>, were the result of the state's mismanagement of resources and overambitious farming development projects. Average levels of rainfall declined to 66% of the long-term average in the 2007-2008 phase, with crop yield dropping by 32% in irrigated areas and by 79% in areas dependent on rainfall<sup>47</sup>. The government also cancelled some important subsidies resulting in a sharp increase in fuel and fertilizers prices<sup>48</sup>.

A Science Daily article quoting Francesca de Châtel underlined that "it was not the drought per se, but rather the government's failure to respond to the ensuing humanitarian crisis that formed one of the triggers of the uprising, feeding a discontent that had long been simmering in rural areas."

The scientist says that the situation facing Syria at the time is "the culmination of 50 years of sustained mismanagement of water and land resources." The "relentless drive to increase agricultural output and expand irrigated agriculture" blinded policymakers to the limits of the country's resources; overgrazing caused rapid desertification; the cancellation of subsidies for diesel and fertilizer as part of a botched transition to a social-market economy increased rural poverty; and countless families abandoned their farms for the cities in search of work. This was worsened by modernization in farming areas, which contributed to the rural exodus to urban towns according to Fabrice Balanche

This conflation of factors linked to drought triggered in 2009 the migration of more than 800,000 Syrian farmers who were forced off their lands and moved into impoverished and overcrowded cities such as Daraa, which may explain why the revolution started there<sup>49</sup>. Mismanagement of water reserves and farmland as well as high rates of deforestation also placed strong pressures on the wider region's natural resources and environment.

Humanity's ecological footprint is already 1.5 times larger than the ability of the planet to supply natural resources<sup>50</sup> and services, and the failure of regional governments to

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45 "Did five years of drought lead to two years of revolution in Syria?" Science Daily, February 26, 2014. Accessed May 5, 2022 (<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/02/140226074927.htm>)

46 Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Arnold, David, "Drought Called a Factor in Syria's Uprising," Voice of America, August 20, 2013. Accessed May 5, 2022: <https://www.voanews.com/a/drought-called-factor-in-syria-uprising/1733068.html>.

50 *Population and Sustainable Development in the Post-2015 Agenda*, UNFPA.

prepare, or respond to this threat was likely to exacerbate social and ethnic tensions whether in Syria or elsewhere in the region.

## **II-The Arab Spring spreads to Syria, between terror, terrorism and geography**

After decades of eerie calm, the regional wave of protests that set the region ablaze reached Syria in February 2011. Protestors held candlelight vigils in Damascus, showing their support for the Egyptian revolution. On February 16, 2011, a teenager from Deraa, in South Syria called Naief Abazid wrote on the town's wall "It's your turn, Doctor Bashar Assad," reported the Globe and Mail newspaper<sup>51</sup>. Abazid and 22 other children were arrested and tortured.

Punctual gatherings escalated and one month later in March peaceful demonstrations were staged in the Syrian capital, responding to calls on Facebook demanding greater freedom in the country, which had been under emergency law since 1963. Under emergency law – which strips citizens of their basic civil rights – demonstrations were largely prohibited and violators strictly punished, essentially making Syria an authoritarian country.

"It was just extraordinary to be able to call for freedom in the heart of Damascus, and we were ready to risk facing the brutality of the intelligence services," says Farhan, a Syrian activist who spoke to me at the time in Lebanon<sup>52</sup>. The protest movement, which started on Facebook as a day of rage, morphed into a movement called the March 15 Intifada.

The protests gained momentum in cities such as Aleppo, Qamishli and Banyas, and Deraa- the last of these being an area where the regime believed it enjoyed widespread support. It was also the hometown of several members of the political class such as then vice president Farouk al-Sharaa. "We always expected that if there were problems they would start in the traditional Islamist hotbeds in the north such as Aleppo and Hama and the Kurdish areas in the northeast," stated Andrew Tabler, a researcher for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy<sup>53</sup>. Angry crowds set fire to the headquarters of the ruling Baath party as well as two phone company branches, among which was Syriatel, a company then owned by Rami Makhoulf, the cousin and business manager of current President Bashar al-Assad. Makhoulf is under US sanctions for public corruption.

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51 McKinnon, Mark, "The graffiti kids: How an act of teenage rebellion sparked the Syrian war," *Globe And Mail*, December 2, 2016. Accessed May 5, 2022: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-the-graffiti-kids-how-an-act-of-teenage-rebellion-sparked-the-syrian/>.

52 Interview with Farhan ( his name has been changed to preserve his anonymity), by Mona Alami, July 2011, Tripoli Lebanon

53 Interview with Andrew Tabler, by Mona Alami, March 2011, ( for USA Today)

Repression, accusations of treason, detention, torture, and humiliation: key in the government response to demonstration, and in fueling sectarian feelings.

As repression mounted from the Assad regime, Sunni religious identity eventually united most of the protestors, facing what they saw as a ruthless Alawite system that only favored its own.

The regime defended itself by relying on a dual strategy based on increasing the level of repression and accusing the protestors of working with Syria's enemies such as Israel. In several visits to Syria in March, the author could see policemen and members of the Mukhabarat (the Syrian intelligence services) dressed in civilian clothes, keeping a watchful eye on the Seven Seas Square, which would be the scene a few hours later of a massive rally in support of President Bashar Assad, as tens of thousands of pro-regime demonstrators poured into the streets.

According to Omar Idilbi, a spokesman for the Local Coordination Committees,<sup>54</sup> which helped organize and document the protests, initial pro-democracy demonstrations resulted in the detention of over 12,000 people. The violent repression and use of torture only fueled further people's anger.

A representative case is that of Farhan, a Syrian protestor who was interviewed by me and was apprehended on March 29 during the first speech made by President Bashar al-Assad. Assad accused protestors of fueling chaos in the country under the pretext of reform, adding that saboteurs were trying to undermine and divide Syria and push for an Israeli agenda.

"The three members of the intelligence service who dragged me out of my Damascus apartment told my father I was an Israeli agent," recalls the young man. He explains that he attracted the attention of the secret police by participating in multiple demonstrations, including the earlier ones in support of the Egyptian revolution in February.

In a country where political opinion is largely not a matter of free choice, backing the 'Arab Spring' was tantamount to an act of treason.

Another protestor, Rabih, who was incarcerated for three weeks, shared a similar story with me. The 35-year-old was arrested in early March and thrown in a six-by-six-meter cell with 40 other people. "I was tortured after I denied accusations of conspiring against the state," recalls Rabih.

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Omar Idilbi, by Mona Alami, July 2011

HRW's report<sup>55</sup> on Syria's "Torture Archipelago" underlined at the time the regime's actions. The report was based on more than 200 interviews conducted by HRW since the beginning of the uprising. Former detainees and defectors identified the locations, agencies responsible, torture methods used, and, in many cases, the commanders in charge of the 27 detention facilities run by the Syrian intelligence agencies, according to HRW.

"Although it is very difficult to estimate it, the actual number is likely much higher and varying between 50,000 and 65,000 people," said lawyer and activist Nabil Halabi, head of the Lebanese Institute for Democracy and Human Rights in Beirut <sup>56</sup>.

According to the HRW report, detainees were subjected to several torture techniques, including prolonged beatings; slapping or kicking, often with objects such as batons, sticks, braided cables, whips, or rifle butts; being held in painful stress positions for prolonged periods; being electrically shocked; being burned with acid; being sexually assaulted or humiliated; having their fingernails pulled off; and having cigarettes stubbed out on their bodies. The most popular practices seemed to be the *dulab* ("tire") technique (putting a detainee in a tire to beat him or her); the *falaqa*, beating on the soles of the feet; the *basat al-reeh*, in which electric wires are attached to the victim's nipples or genitals; and the *shabeh*, whereby the victim is hung by shackles or hooks attached to his wrists or feet for long periods.

Besides the physical torture, the regime resorted to divisive narratives, saying it was opposing extremists. Both Farhan and Rabih claim their captors threatened their families with violence because of their religious backgrounds – an indication of how the uprising mostly pitted members of the minority Alawite regime against the majority Sunni Arab opposition. Farhan, also a Sunni from the city of Raqqa, explained his captor "promised" he would erase the city from the Syrian map. The town, which is located on the Euphrates River, is of great symbolic and historic importance to Syrian Muslims, as it was the capital of the Abbasid Empire under Caliph Harun al-Rashid, and it also later became the *de facto* capital of the Islamic State in Syria.

The latter example put forth the opposition between the center and the periphery, the center being Damascus where the regime was established. Many of the protests and subsequent armed insurrections took place in areas such as the suburbs and rural areas around

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55 "Torture Archipelago: Arbitrary Arrests, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in Syria's Underground Prisons since March 2011," Human Rights Watch, July 3, 2012. Accessed May 15, 2022: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/07/03/torture-archipelago/arbitrary-arrests-torture-and-enforced-disappearances-syrias>.

56 Interview with Nabil Halabi, by Mona Alami, July 2012, Beirut, Lebanon.

Damascus, in the North, and to the East. According to Frédéric Lasserre, Emmanuel Gonon, and Éric Mottet in their book *Manuel de Géopolitique*,<sup>57</sup> the opposition was between political and economic centers such as Damascus or Aleppo, where wealth is heavily concentrated, and outlying areas that were marginalized politically and economically. This could apply for example to areas such as the suburbs of Ghouta, Raqqa, or Banyas.

### **A-Syrian exceptionalism?**

While geography, the social and economic divide contributed to factors that led to the war in Syria. However, the regime's policies partly paved the way for terrorism in Syria. According to a paper entitled "TERRORIST MINDSETS: destructive effects of victimization and humiliation" by Sverre Varvin<sup>58</sup>, humiliation is a key factor in becoming a terrorist, a path that many in Syria ended up taking. In the words of the researcher: "Terrorist mindset may develop in individuals and groups in different contexts; in various terrorist groups (fundamentalist, political, vigilant, etc.), as state-organized violence or in the context of organized military or paramilitary activity. Humiliation and traumatization of groups or nations are seen as producing preconditions for the development of terrorist mindsets". Fear of radicalization among non-Muslim communities meant that the president enjoyed a level of support within his Alawite community and other minorities as well as in large urban areas, where many believed the regime was the only line of defense against Sunni fundamentalism. This only exacerbated the religious cleavage as unrest continued.

In general, as noted, the protests and later the conflict were shaped by social and sectarian factors. According to Syria expert Fabrice Balanche, the armed opposition only comprised the Sunni Arab majority population, more specifically among disaffected social groups such as the rural poor, while religious minorities and upper- and middle-class areas generally remained passive<sup>59</sup>, which falls within Kaldor's theory of modernism versus communitarianism and rejection of globalization<sup>60</sup>. In interviews conducted by me in Damascus in 2011, many Syrians seemed to appreciate the fact that their country was less subservient to US interests than other Arab regimes (in terms of foreign policy).

"There is also fear of the possible 'Lebanization' of the country if unrest prevails in Syria," pointed out journalist Talal Al-Atrache<sup>61</sup>.

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57 Frédéric Lasserre, Emmanuel Gonon and Éric Mottet, *Manuel de Géopolitique*, (Armand Colin, 2020).

58 Sverre Varvin, "TERRORIST MINDSETS: destructive effects of victimisation and humiliation," *Psyke & Logos* 24, n° 1 (2003): 13.

59 Fabrice Balanche, "Géographie de la révolte syrienne," *Outre-Terre* (no. 29, 2011/3), pp. 437-458. .

60 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

61 Interview with Talal Atrache, June 2011, by Mona Alami, Damascus

## **B - The militarization and radicalization of the protests.**

Lebanization is what occurred. After April, the protest movement extended to other areas such as Deir al-Zour and militarization on both sides of the divide took place. Pro-government “shabiha” (ghosts in Arabic, which refers to regime mercenaries) began to become active<sup>62</sup>, according to Baron. The opposition created the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) at the end of April and by July, Syrian army defectors coalesced around the Free Syrian Army, led initially by Riad Assad<sup>63</sup>. “After months of discussion part of the opposition ended up forming on August 23 2011 in Istanbul the Syrian National Council (SNC) comprising 140 members, of whom only half resided in Syria,” says Baron. The SNC was influenced by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and was plagued by Qatar and Saudi competition for influence<sup>64</sup>. By the end of 2011, the protests had turned into a full-fledged war.

“Most people believe in peaceful demonstrations, however, as the number of dead and missing mounted, some started considering a military option as a viable solution,” said Amer, a Syrian activist who was interviewed by me in Beirut<sup>65</sup>.

This testimony was confirmed at the time by Abu Ali, a member of the LCC who became an armed fighter. “A few hundred of us have taken refuge on the borders separating Syria from Turkey. We want to fight and are trying to buy weapons locally, but they are both expensive and difficult to find. No official faction – whether in Beirut or Turkey – has yet agreed to endorse our cause and provide us with military aid,” he stated during a phone interview<sup>66</sup>. The FSA had claimed responsibility for several military operations in 2011<sup>67</sup>.

More worrisome was the slow radicalization of the rebellion, heavily influenced by jihadist clerics from inside and outside Syria. For Jean Michel Dasque, it was easy to move from a resistance movement to a terrorist one<sup>68</sup>. “It is uneasy to distinguish clandestine terrorists’ movements from other clandestine entities such as resistance and liberation, guerillas and revolutionary movements”, said Dasque.

His words resonated in the evolution of the Arab Spring movement. In nearby Jordan, Jihadist-Salafists, emboldened by the Arab Spring staged several demonstrations, the largest

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62 Xavier Baron, *Histoire de la Syrie : 1918 à nos jours* (Editions Tallandier, 2014).

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Interview with Amer, by Mona Alami, November 2011, Beirut Lebanon.

66 Interview with opposition member, Abou Ali, by Mona Alami, Beirut Lebanon, 2012.

67 Charles Lister, "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand," *Brookings* Institution, November 22, 2016. Accessed May 15, 2022: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-free-syrian-army-a-decentralized-insurgent-brand/>.

68 Jean-Michel Dasque, *Géopolitique du Terrorisme* (Ellipses, 2013).



of which was on April 15 in the city of Zarqa and drew around 350 Salafi protesters. Salafism broadly speaking is a movement that calls for a purer and more radical interpretation of Islam following the precepts of al-Salaf al-Saleh, “the righteous predecessors”. Salafi Jihadists, the more extreme branch of the movement, believed religious war was the only means to establish an Islamic state and an Islamic obligation<sup>69</sup>. By February 2012, Jordanian Jihadist-Salafist Sheikh Abu Mohamad Tahawi<sup>70</sup> released a fatwa calling for jihad in Syria. “I called for any man able to go for Jihad in Syria; it is the responsibility of any good Muslim to stop the bloodshed perpetrated by the Nusayri regime,” the sheikh told me. The term “Nusayri” is now generally considered derogatory when used by Sunnis to refer to Alawites, though historically it was the term Alawites used to refer to themselves. “The Alawite and Shiite coalition is currently the biggest threat to Sunnis, even more than the Israelis,” Tahawi stressed<sup>71</sup>.

Many Jordanian Salafi jihadists responded to Sheikh Tahawi’s call. According to Tamer Smadi<sup>72</sup>, a Jordanian journalist specializing in the jihadist movement, a group of over 30 Jihadists tried to smuggle into Syria in 2011. All but seven were caught by Jordanian intelligence services, among whom was Abu Anas Sahabi, an explosives specialist. In April, three bomb blasts targeted Syrian security offices in the heart of Damascus, leaving 70 people dead. The government, headed by President Bashar Assad, blamed al-Qaeda for the ‘terrorist’ attacks, although at the time, there was no clear indication of the group’s involvement with the uprising.

“Bashar [Assad] and his regime accused al-Qaeda for the bombings, though the evidence points to the government,” said blogger Nasir al-Qaeda (supporter of al-Qaeda) in a fiery piece advocating the group’s participation in the Syrian revolution and denouncing the Assad regime.

According to the blogger, al-Qaeda had previously taken a “balanced stance” on the pro-democracy movements in the Arab world but did not directly participate in the events. Most Islamic fundamentalists, like al-Qaeda, showed empathy for those protesting against oppression, without condoning calls for democracy, which they viewed as heresy that contradicts their radical Islamic beliefs.

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69 Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, (Oxford University Press, 2016).

70 « Deteriorating health of salafist leader in Jordanian prisons », Arabi21, May 7, 2018. Accessed May 5, 2022: <https://arabi21.com/story/1091925/الأردن-في-سجون-السلفي-من-التيار-السلفي-في-سجون-الأردن>.

71 Interview with Sheilh Tahawi, by Mona Alami, Jordan, July 2012.

72 Interview with Tamer Smadi, by Mona Alami, Amman, Jordan , 2012.

“I ask God Almighty to guide our brothers in Syria to take revenge on Bashar [Assad],” wrote Nasser al-Qaeda at the time.

Others in the radical Islamic community, such as cleric Sheikh Abu Mundhir Shinqiti, opted for a bolder stance by issuing a religious decree, or fatwa, allowing Muslims to participate in peaceful demonstrations.

“We can participate in demonstrations, even if protestors ask for democracy because a free system might pave the way for the application of the law of God. The role of the Salafi Jihadist is not confined to arms, but includes the support of those in the right, whether through peaceful or military means,” he said. Sheikh Shinqiti also encouraged militants to protest, adding that any death during peaceful demonstrations would be considered ‘martyrdom,’ which is the greatest of all deeds for Salafi Jihadists.

In July 2012, al-Qaeda praised Syrian protesters trying to topple Bashar Assad, with the group’s leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, portraying the uprising as an Islamic battle against US and Israeli interests. In an interview with the author, Salafi cleric Sheikh Omar Bakri underlined that the bulk of bloggers commenting on the issue were not, in fact, Syrian, but from Saudi Arabia, Mauritania, and Yemen<sup>73</sup>. Slowly the Syrian upraise seemed to gather international support within the jihadist community.

By June 2013, all bets were off. A congress of Sunni Muslim clerics issued a call to holy war on the Assad regime<sup>74</sup>.

### **C- The regime threatens a regional conflict:**

The militarization and more importantly the radicalization of the Syrian conflict fed the narrative of Syrian exceptionalism defended by President Assad and his close circle, in an international context marked by the war on terror and an American administration traumatized by the failed experiences of the 2003 Iraq war and the 2011 Libyan intervention<sup>75</sup>. In an interview in May 2011, Rami Makhlouf, a Syrian tycoon and the cousin of President Assad stated at the time<sup>76</sup>: “We will not go out, leave on our boat... “We will sit here. We call it a fight until the end.” “They should know when we suffer, we will not suffer alone.” He also warned the alternative would lead to war at home and perhaps abroad

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73 Interview with Sheikh Omar Bakri, by Mona Alami, July 2012, Tripoli, Lebanon,

74 "Sunni Clerics Call for Jihad against Syria's Assad, Allies," *Reuters*, June 13, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-sunnis-jihad-idUSBRE95C16U20130613>.

75 "Obama's Syria legacy: Measured diplomacy, strategic explosion," *BBC News*, January 13, 2017 (accessed March 5, 2019): <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38297343>.

76 Anthony Shadid, "Syrian Elite to Fight Protests to 'the End'," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2011, accessed March 5, 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/world/middleeast/11makhlouf.html>.

because of “Salafists”. “We won’t accept it,” he said. “People will fight against them. Do you know what this means? It means catastrophe. And we have a lot of fighters.”

The repression and torture by the Assad regime, faced by a wave of radicalization and the approach of Syrian exceptionalism on which was built the dehumanization of the adversary (in this case for the majority Sunni Arab population), provided fertile grounds for VNSAAs to expand to Syria

### **III - Syria, history and geopolitical position make it vulnerable to foreign involvement**

Syrian exceptionalism was also bolstered by the country belonging to the Near East which had its strategic importance. The Near East is defined by Tancrede Jossieran, Florian Louis and Frederic Pichon <sup>77</sup>as the countries situated at the East of the Turkish strait and having direct access to the Mediterranean from Turkey in the North to Egypt in the South. It includes the Levant and oriental countries which were under the French Mandate. According to Jossieran, Louis, and Pichon, the Near East is a region very much coveted “due to its position at the intersection of three continents and the geological resources it has”. The authors also believe that the Near East geopolitics can only be understood from the prism of external powers.

In addition to its position in the Near East, Syria also has a specific geographic location that is a strategic corridor for many countries in the region and to the West. Situated on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea in southwest Asia and to the north of the Arabian Peninsula in the Middle East, its border is linked with Turkey in the North, Lebanon, and Israel in the Southwest, Iraq in the east and southeast, and Jordan in the south and southeast. This endows its potential geographical importance as it overlooks two major conflict zones: one in Iraq and another in Israel.

The Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 <sup>78</sup>and subsequent agreements that led to the delineation of Syria’s borders created uneven layouts for Syria, spread over 185,180 square kilometers of deserts, plains, and mountains. It is divided into a coastal zone with a narrow, double mountain belt in the West and a much larger eastern plateau. This western belt is mainly inhabited by minorities (in particular, the Alawites), while the Sunnis resided in urban centers and lived in the southeast with the Druze minority along the borders with Jordan and Iraq. While Sunni communities were influenced by the Jordan-Iraq neighborhood, it also

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<sup>77</sup> Jossieran, Pichon, et Louis, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l’Afrique du Nord*.

<sup>78</sup> James Barr, *A Line in the Sand*, (London: Simon & Schuster Ltd, 2012).

gave the Assad regime leverage in impacting Arab conflicts: more specifically in the post-2003 phase of the US invasion of Iraq. The connection to Israel and Lebanon in the south also meant that Syria had direct access to the Arab-Israeli conflict whether in Palestine or Lebanon.

In addition, Syria could be labeled as a cleft country. These countries have big enough cultural groupings that put them at risk of disintegration, situated as they are on fault lines.

Syria's complex geographical neighborhood and sectarian fabric also resulted in high vulnerability owing to a lack of national cohesion inherited from the Ottoman Empire. At the time the differences between the subjects were not based on ethnic but religious criteria, according to Balanche in his thesis *Les Alaouites, l'espace et le pouvoir dans la région côtière syrienne : une intégration nationale ambiguë*<sup>79</sup>. The millet system recognized a certain internal autonomy of the Christian and Jewish communities, under the direction of their spiritual authorities. Muslims, however, whether they were Sunni, Twelver Shi'ite, or Ismaili, all belonged to the Umma (Believers' Community), that is, to the Muslim millet. The heterodox Muslim sects - Druze, Yezidi, and Alawite - had no legal recognition and did not belong to Muslim millet, because of their doctrines and practices deemed heretical by the ulema," underlined Balanche. The sectarian social distinction was pursued under the French mandate, which favored minorities whether in Lebanon or Syria. "This confessional system, modernized under the French Mandate, became the basis of the political institutions of Syria and Lebanon. In 1953, it was abolished in Syria by President Chichakli, unlike Lebanon where it persists. But even though denominational communities no longer had official status in Syria, people still refer to it and the Hafez El Assad regime uses its resources to stay in power," remarked Balanche. Hafez was behind the coup in 1970, which ushered in the rule of an Alawite-led regime over Syria.

The recourse of political elites to pan-Arab or pan-Islamic references did not favor the creation of a nation-state as political practices were based on subnational or transnational structures, more specifically in the post-1966 phase. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February of that year and before Assad's coup, a putsch was led by General Selim Hatoum who was a member of the Druze minority<sup>80</sup>. Salah Bitar, one of the founders of the original Baath Part, believed that the neo-Baath phase that resulted from the coup put an end to the original sense of the Baath as

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79 Fabrice Balanche, "Les Alaouites, l'espace et le pouvoir dans la région côtière syrienne : une intégration nationale ambiguë," (phdthesis, Université François Rabelais - Tours, 2000), <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00011981/document>.

80 Baron, *Histoire de la Syrie*.

an Arab awakening<sup>81</sup>, replaced instead by a sectarian Baath that would pave the way for the coup d'état led by Hafez Assad and hence confirm the strong religious markings of the new Syria, dominated by an Alawite military elite. According to Balanche, the secretive community represented 10 to 15% of the total Syrian population, while the Sunnis over 70 percent of the population.

Thus, the Syrian social and geographical fabric proved to be both a weakness and strength in the ongoing conflict system because of regional and local specificities. According to Jossieran, Louis, and Pichon <sup>82</sup>, “the unequaled interest that triggers the Middle East with all world powers is an asset and a weakness. An asset because it immunizes it against the indifference that prevails for other regions... a weakness because foreign interventions in the Middle East are never totally disinterested”.

The multi-ethnic and religious nature of the country and its many porous borders combined with the country's geographical importance facilitated regional conflagrations. The mere existence of these minorities and the rise of extremism also fueled the debate around minority protection, thus benefiting the Assad regime. Geography also served the regime as Syria's location at the crossroad between the Arab world and Europe from the east and the north meant that what happened in Syria, did not remain there. Western fears of terrorism expansion and refugee invasion resulting from the Syrian conflict contributed to the lack of an international consensus and decisiveness as to what to do about Syria. Syria's gateway nature also emboldened its allies, namely Iran, which viewed the survival of the regime of President Bashar Assad as essential to its regional foreign policy.

#### **IV - Syria amid geopolitical rivalries.**

Unlike his son, Assad's father Hafez the savvy pragmatist played on alliances depending on his interests- supporting Iran in the Iran-Iraq war of the eighties while supporting the US- Iran's enemy- in its repelling of Saddam's invasion of Kuwait <sup>83</sup>. President Hafez Assad had mixed feelings toward Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah. Assad, who had a secular Baathist background, viewed the Islamic revolution and its support of the Shia jihadist organization with suspicion. In Lebanon, Assad favored Hezbollah's mother organization Amal; the two groups were competing for hegemony over the Shi'i

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81 Ibid.

82 Jossieran, Pichon, et Louis, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord*.

83 Paul Iddon, « A History of Iraq-Syria Relations », alaraby, November 8, 2018. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2018/11/8/a-history-of-iraq-syria-relations>.

community at the time. While Amal was essentially supported by Syria, it was the Iranians, and more specifically the Revolutionary Guards, that were funding and training Hezbollah. “By 1987 Syria’s direct intervention in Lebanon and its fear of Iran’s growing power in Lebanon led to direct armed clashes between Hezbollah and Syrian troops, “ according to <sup>84</sup>Stanford Mapping Militant organization website. “ Yet, in the nineties, Syria and Hezbollah’s relations evolved as the organization proved itself as an efficient movement in the war against Israel. Assad also saw that the Israeli peace process was not going far, and believed that he could use Hezbollah as a necessary tool.

#### **A - Syria: a strategic gateway for Iran.**

With his nascent presidency, Bashar Assad did not have the same luxury. Bashar Assad chose at the onset of his coming to power to strengthen his rule by gaining local and Arab credibility by relying on the successes of the Iran-backed “resistance” in the region and its appealing narrative. This drew Damascus inexorably toward Tehran. The Axis of Resistance refers to the anti-western and anti-Israeli alliance led by Iran, including Syria and VNSAAs such as Hezbollah and more recent acquisitions such as factions within the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces and the Yemeni Houthis, two violent non-state actors.

Syria’s adherence to the “resistance axis” started in 2000, a year that witnessed significant geostrategic and political changes in both Syria and Lebanon. In April 2000, increased casualties incurred by the Israeli army in Lebanon and denounced by the Israeli population triggered a swift retreat of Israel from South Lebanon. The end of the occupation left Iran and Syria with a conundrum: how to justify the continuation of the war on Israel with the retreat of the IDF? A few months later in June, President Hafez Assad died after a long sickness and was quickly succeeded by his son Bashar. “Bashar al-Assad did not have the political legitimacy his father enjoyed; he thus needed to capitalize on Hezbollah’s victories against Israel, “said Hezbollah expert Ali Amine in an interview with me<sup>85</sup>. Bashar al-Assad’s first foray with VNSAAs was thus with Hezbollah. The 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, which received Syria’s complete support, also strengthened the young president’s relationship with the militant group. In 2010<sup>86</sup> the relationship between Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria was officialized by the tripartite meeting between Assad, Iran’s President Ahmandinejad, and Hassan Nasrallah in Damascus. “This meeting heralded the

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84 "Hezbollah," Mapping Militant Organizations. Accessed March 9, 2019: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/81?highlight=hezbollah>.

85 Interview with Ali Amine, Beirut, 2013.

86 “Assad hosts Nasrallah, Ahmadinejad for three-way meeting,” Haaretz, February 26, 2010 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/assad-hosts-nasrallah-ahmadinejad-for-3-way-meet-1.263814>

strategic alliance between the three factions,” points out a pro-Hezbollah expert who spoke on condition of anonymity<sup>87</sup>.

The Iranian alliance linked Damascus, Tehran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Hamas. This new front provided Iran with strategic depth in the Eastern Mediterranean and allowed it to increase its leeway against the United States by avoiding its isolation and by guaranteeing it an effective means of influencing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The possibility of a regime overthrow in Syria in 2011 therefore directly undermined Iran's interests in the Mediterranean and threatened its leverage over the Arab-Israeli conflict, as a regime unfavorable to Tehran could effectively block the supply of weapons to Hezbollah. As in Lebanon during the years of civil war (1975-1989), Iran used Syria as a new front in the regional struggle. Iran's support for its Syrian ally through Hezbollah's involvement in the war there in 2013 was not only motivated by security reasons but also to prevent a victory for Sunni rebels, which could reverse Tehran's successes in the Levant that had been realized through the establishment of systems it could exploit in Iraq and Lebanon following the elimination of Saddam's regime in 2003 and the hegemonic rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

### **B-Gulf countries calculations in Syria**

On the other side of the divide, Iran's rivals, the Gulf countries viewed the toppling of Tehran's ally as a major strategic goal. The Syrian uprising offered Saudi Arabia a new opportunity to counter Iranian regional influence. A Sunni-led regime in Damascus would allow Riyadh to fragment the axis of resistance and recover from the losses it had faced elsewhere in the region, such as in Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood had come to power, Yemen where the Iranian-allied Houthis had been emboldened by the revolution and finally in Lebanon and Iraq, where Tehran had cemented its influence thanks respectively to its alliances with Hezbollah and the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki.

According to Gulf expert Frederic Wehrey<sup>88</sup>, there were “several other reasons for Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian war, all with high stakes for Riyadh's regional standing and domestic security”. According to the expert, Saudi Arabia wanted to blunt the rise of transnational al-Qaeda-affiliated groups and the Muslim Brotherhood which could threaten the kingdom. Elsewhere in the Gulf, the interests of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain were also aligned with those of Saudi Arabia.

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87 Interview with a pro-Hezbollah expert, Beirut, by Mona Alami, 2014.

88 Frederic Wehrey, "Gulf Calculations in the Syrian Conflict," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 9, 2014. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/09/gulf-calculations-in-syrian-conflict-pub-55865>.

However, the main driver for most Gulf countries' support of the opposition including Saudi Arabia's rival Qatar was that the war, as Wehrey rightly mentioned, had become "sectarianized," and the conflict very much perceived by Sunni Arabs as a slaughter of Sunnis at the hand of a Shi'i-linked regime.

"Among the smaller Gulf states, Qatar's interests in Syria reflect a more complex mix of geostrategic, economic, and domestic concerns as well as the personal ambitions of its leaders. Before 2011, Doha had enjoyed relatively good relations with Assad. Given the fact that Qatar shares its primary source of wealth—the South Pars/North Dome gas field—with Iran, it sought to maintain cordial relations with Tehran's lone Arab ally, Syria. Qatari investors had also parked millions in Syria's real estate sector. Despite these once-friendly ties, Qatar intervened in the conflict to project its influence in the region by backing what it perceived to be the strongest contender for influence in Syria: the Muslim Brotherhood," explains Wehrey. Qatar was known to have provided a sanctuary for the Muslim Brotherhood clerics such as Youssef Qardawi.

Gulf countries' foreign policy in Syria relied on a combination of military support for armed opposition factions and diplomacy. It was driven by the monarchs' close entourages' and heavily influenced by charities and tribal figures. By 2014, Saudi Syria policy toward Syria increasingly aligned with that of the U.S., and saw an increase in Saudi cooperation with the CIA on the training and equipping of Syrian opposition fighters.

In April 2014, the kingdom's point man on Syria, then intelligence chief Bandar bin Sultan, was removed from his post. His replacement with a longtime U.S. counterterrorism ally and former Ministry of Interior chief, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef was widely seen as signaling a new phase in Saudi-U.S. cooperation against jihadist extremism. Saudi efforts were nonetheless challenged by funds trickling into Syria from religious associations and private individuals to radical actors. Wehrey remarks that "though Riyadh and the UAE eventually clamped down on this, first by closing operations at home and then pressuring neighboring Kuwait to tighten its anti-terror finance laws in 2013 to end its role as a clearing house for such funds, huge amounts had already found their way to Syria". Saudi Arabia's perception of the threat of jihadism was due to its Afghan experience, and fear of a blowback in Saudi a country with a large 32 million population.

Qatar, meanwhile emerged at the forefront of the Gulf's support to Syrian opposition. As an example, Qatar in Syria had heavily invested in the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups like Ahrar al-Sham. Ahrar al-Sham played a key role in tinging the anti-Assad revolt



with an Islamist and Salafi character. Syrian sources told me<sup>89</sup> that aid given to Ahrar al-Sham was then smuggled to al-Qaeda offshoot Jabhat Nusra.

In December 2013, the US Treasury designated<sup>90</sup> a Qatari businessman, named Abdul Rahman al-Nuaimi, as a "global terrorist". The US accused him of funneling money to "al-Qaeda's representative in Syria", namely Abu Khalid al-Suri, who helped found Ahrar al-Sham. Nuaimi was also accused at the time by the US treasury of having provided al-Qaeda in Iraq large as much as \$2 million per month. Mr Nuaimi denied the allegations. Qatar's seemingly aggressive policy was rooted in its economic social and geopolitical reality. Qatar unlike other Arab countries was not worried about a radical backlash, being one of the countries with the highest income per capita and a small population.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey set up an operations room that was responsible for organizing military operations in Syria's north but its operations were impeded by Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Qatar.

### **C-Turkey's dangerous policies**

Like Qatar, Turkey looked to Muslim Brotherhood affiliates at first, before its intelligence arm, MIT, started to work more closely with Islamist groups once they had formed, such as the Aleppo-based Liwa al-Tawheed and later Ahrar al-Sham. In addition, Turkey's policy went further, as Ankara had an open border policy that allowed foreign fighters to cross into Syria freely via border towns such as Gaziantep or Sanliurfa, which became hotbeds for extremist organizations. It was Turkey's actions that contributed to the rise of the Islamic State in the first place in addition to other factors such as the Syrian civil war and the government of former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's repressive policies towards Sunni Arabs in Iraq. In 2013 alone<sup>91</sup>, some 30,000 militants crossed through Turkish soil into Syria. There are many more examples of Turkey's lax policies towards ISIS fighters in 2013-2014, as ISIS fighters used Turkish territory as a logistics hub.

### **D-U.S and Russia change of policy**

At the international level, the reactions of the United States and Russia were at opposite ends of the spectrum. Syria had long been a source of *ennui* for the United States, which passed in 2003 the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act

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89 Interview with a member of the Syrian opposition, by Mona Alami, July 2015, Beirut Lebanon.

90 David Blair and Richard Spencer, "How Qatar Is Funding the Rise of Islamist Extremists," Daily Telegraph September 20, 2014. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/11110931/How-Qatar-is-funding-the-rise-of-Islamist-extremists.html>.

91 Ahmet Yayla and Colin Clarke, "Turkey's Double ISIS Standard," Foreign Policy, April 12, 2018. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/12/turkeys-double-isis-standard/>.

(SALSRA)<sup>92</sup>. The resolution aimed at ending Syria's support of terrorism in Lebanon, stopping its alleged development of WMDs, ceasing its illegal importation of Iraqi oil and shipments of military items to anti-US forces in Iraq and to Hezbollah in Lebanon as well as preventing anti-U.S. Iraqi factions from finding sanctuary in Syria. However, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama which was in power at the time of the Syrian conflict favored a toned-down foreign policy based on several principles and contrasting with his predecessor George Bush. First, the U.S. was to share the burden of international leadership with its allies, which resulted in an a-polar world and the end of the U.S. hegemony at the geopolitical level. Another principle was to engage in dialogue with enemy countries such as Cuba and Iran. Finally, the strategic retreat from the Middle East was to be accompanied by a pivot toward Asia. In this frame of mind, Syria was not necessarily a priority for Washington except from the angle of the War on Terror, and the leadership of the Syria policy dossier was effectively ceded to Russia. US disengagement from the Middle East and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)<sup>93</sup> helped embolden Iran regionally and more specifically in Syria.

Moscow had much more at stake in Syria than the U.S. when it militarily intervened in the Syrian conflict at the end of September 2015. At the time, the rebels' spring offensive near Idlib made it seem possible that the rebels would penetrate deep into Latakia, the bastion of the Assad regime, which made Russia uncomfortable. Russia's deployment in Syria fulfilled several objectives: such as consolidating Assad's control over key territories that were at risk of rebel advances in the north, and effectively turning the tide of the war to make Assad's remaining in power a *fait accompli* for the foreseeable future. This is why the Russian military intervention initially focused on the rebels in the north instead of ISIS to the east.

For Russian President Vladimir Putin, Syria's potential fall into the orbit of the U.S. and Europe at the onset of the revolution was a red line not to be crossed, given Moscow's cold war against the West. In addition, Russia saw the rise of a Syrian state where Islamist groups influenced a direct threat. Russian intervention in Syria in 2015 also allowed it to expand its presence there with one base in Humeimim and two on the coast as well as five

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92 David Schenker, "The Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 7, 2006. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-syria-accountability-and-lebanese-sovereignty-restoration-act-of-2003-t>.

93 "Nuclear Agreement - EEAS - European External Action Service - European Commission," EEAS - European External Action Service, May 2018. Accessed March 9, 2019: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/32286/Nuclear Agreement](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/32286/Nuclear%20Agreement).

military observation points, according to a map published at the time by Turkish-Syrian think tank Omran Dirasat and shown to the author. These bases enhanced the Russian presence on the Mediterranean, a region they perceived as falling under Western influence while securing a military point further east by Iraq's borders. In addition, by actively participating in rebuilding and operating Syrian oil and gas infrastructure, and venturing into various economic endeavors, Russian intervention in Syria has allowed it to restore its international influence.

## **V. Conclusion**

Globalization illustrated common problems shared by Arab countries, especially large youthful populations who were educated and had high expectations, global warming, which constricted the resources of countries, and technological advances. These factors were all conducive to the crisis in Syria. Assad's repressive policies that often took the form of a religious humiliation of its population, combined with the support of foreign powers that often tied affiliation to religious identity, led to the metamorphosis of a resistance movement into religious extremist movements, and the rise of identity politics.

Those trends were also exacerbated by the growing prominence of regional television that transmitted 24/7 scenes of protests and wars. This emboldened populations as well as their expatriate counterparts located in regional countries. It also enhanced their support for the militant movements through a channel of financial aid that poured into Syria. Nearby terrorist movements also capitalized on the unrest to turn militants to their side, as al-Qaeda in Iraq did. Syria's unique coveted geopolitical position amid a Levant fragmented along ethnic and religious lines as well as its alignment with Russia and Iran meant that Syria's fate would not follow that of Tunisia or Jordan. Syria was perceived as a protective wall against Western and Arab ambitions. Once turned it could affect regional balance significantly, something that was feared by both Moscow and Tehran.

All these factors explain why the Syria case was an exceptional one.

## **Chapter 2: Non-state actors in Syria: The repercussions on Lebanon and Iraq, two failed states, the rise of AQL, Hezbollah and Kurds on the regional scene.**

### **I. Introduction**

In their book *Géopolitique des Conflits*, Amael Cataruzza and Pierre Sintès underlined the existence of endemic conflicts<sup>94</sup> zones, identifying three conflict zones in particular: “A first one is sketched around tropical Africa, a second appears in the Eurasian “crisis arc”, which extends from Southeast Europe and the Caucasus to Southeast Asia through the Middle East. Finally, a third zone to a lesser extent in Latin America”.

The war in Syria fell within the Eurasian conflict zone and at a micro level within the Levant triangle, which we will label the Levant conflict system. This system of conflicts attaches the Syrian-specific dynamics to neighboring ones, which resulted in significant spillover effects between Syria and other countries.

What was particular about this war is that the spillover effect was not only from Syria to neighboring countries but was the accumulation of years of spillovers from neighboring countries to Syria. Several common factors brought about this system of conflict: first a political struggle framed as a religious one between Sunni and Shi’a (more specifically in Lebanon and Iraq), secondly discriminatory practices and ethnic rivalry (the latter experienced in Iraq and Turkey) and finally the rise to power VNSAAs in these countries that could be used by regional powers when it suited them.

This fluidity in conflict dynamics could be attributed to the complex ethnic and sectarian makeup of the Levant. Syria like other countries in the Levant was demarcated by artificial lines partially influenced by the Sykes-Picot agreement, which initially followed the line from Acre on the Mediterranean coast to Kirkuk near Iran to divide the area into two regions, one to the north falling under French protection and one to the south under British protection<sup>95</sup>.

In the words of Marina Ottawa, in a paper published by the American think tank the Wilson Center: “The first of a long series of agreements that defined the post-Ottoman Levant was one reached by a British and a French diplomat, Mark Sykes and Francois

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94 Cataruzza and Sintès, *Géopolitique des Conflits*.

95 Barr, *A Line in the Sand*.

Georges-Picot, in 1916... Very little of the Sykes-Picot agreement was implemented, and the borders that were eventually established bear almost no resemblance to the lines drawn—in exquisite imperial fashion—by the two diplomats whose main concern was to decide how Britain and France would divide among themselves the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire. Paradoxically, it is the failure of the agreement that makes it relevant to understanding the forces currently threatening the disintegration of Levant states and possibly reconfiguring the region”<sup>96</sup>.

The Arab perception of the Sykes-Picot agreement was that it disregarded ethnic realities such as the grievances of Kurds spread between Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well as Arab nationalism and religious sensitivities. Such public perception, when combined with discriminatory policies in these various countries and the highly integrated networks that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring and more specifically in Syria, could explain the swift creation or expansion of transnational VNSAAs in the Syrian conflict.

The question that I would like to answer in this chapter is What was the system of conflict that fed the Syrian war? How did this system of conflict lead to the emergence of VNSAAs and what were their relations with the Syrian state? What does the prevalence of this larger system of conflict facilitate the VNSAAs expansionary operations?

## **II - Syria’s bad neighborhood and conflict system**

Nearly 20 years before Mary Kaldor wrote her book *New Wars, Old Wars*, another academic Samuel Huntington, wrote another, called the *Clash of Civilizations*<sup>97</sup>. It is noteworthy, that Huntington’s book could serve as an introduction to Kaldor’s work. This is because Huntington identified communal identity and religion as a factor in mobilizing the masses. Huntington also pointed to wars along fault lines, which he believed were not only between groups (communal or not) but also larger cultural entities. Kaldor believed as well that the diaspora could mobilize to fuel new wars. Syria was another fault line war.

### **A - Hezbollah from resistance movement to regional VNSAA**

Some 21 years separated the end of the Lebanese conflict, which was solved by the Taef Accords in 1989, from the onset of the Syrian Arab Spring in 2011. The Taef Agreement<sup>98</sup>

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96 Marina Ottaway, “Learning from Sykes-Picot,” Wilson Center, Fall 2015, accessed March 13, 2019: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/learning-sykes-picot>.

97 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, new edition, 2011).

98 Hassan Krayem, “The Lebanese Civil War and the Taif Agreement,” *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World: Selected Essays*, ed. Paul Salem (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1997). Accessed here on March 9, 2019: [https://www.academia.edu/28597258/THE\\_LEBANESE\\_CIVIL\\_WAR\\_AND\\_THE\\_TAIIF\\_AGREEMENT](https://www.academia.edu/28597258/THE_LEBANESE_CIVIL_WAR_AND_THE_TAIIF_AGREEMENT).

was the document that provided the basis for the ending of the civil war, which erupted in 1975 as a result of internal and regional developments and Palestinian militias' use of Lebanon as a launch pad against Israel. This led to the breakdown of the state's authority and a bloody civil war. The only party that was allowed after Taef to keep its weapons, on Syria's demand, was Hezbollah, which had risen to prominence by fighting Israel as well as giving downtrodden Shiites a sense of pride and full belonging to the country.

While we will not look at the intricacies of the sectarian war that tore Lebanon apart and resulted in over 100,000 deaths and in which Syria played king-maker, we will nonetheless study two important dynamics that influenced directly or indirectly the Syrian conflict. Firstly, the end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, and secondly, the rise of Hezbollah and eventually the tug of war that pitted a pro-western and Arab coalition (March 14), against a pro-Syrian and Iran coalition led by Hezbollah and dubbed March 8. This dynamic ultimately shaped the Lebanese militant's group expansion into Syria to aid the Assad regime.

### ***i-The end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon and its political and economic repercussions on Damascus***

On February 14, 2005, the assassination of Rafic Hariri, a former Prime Minister who died along with 22 other people in a massive truck bomb blast, sparked what was to be known as the Cedar Revolution. The assassination initially attributed to Syria led to massive anti-Syrian demonstrations<sup>99</sup> on February 21. Some 20,000 people marched from outside the St Georges Hotel, where Hariri died, to Martyrs' Square in central Beirut. The protests culminated with a massive turnout of over one million on March 14<sup>100</sup>. The March 14 demonstration forced Syria to withdraw on April 2005 its troops from Lebanon. The Syrian regime, known for its pragmatism and resilience on the geopolitical scene, emerged vindicated at the international level but more importantly humiliated internally. Worse was the economic impact of the military retreat on the Syrian black economy. In his book *Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon*<sup>101</sup>, economist Marwan Iskandar studied in detail the economics of the Lebanese occupation and the revenue stream the regime secured from its legal and illegal revenue activities in Lebanon, which provides an idea of the opportunity cost that the withdrawal from Lebanon represented for Damascus. Iskandar estimated for example

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99 Eyal Zisser, "Lebanon-the Cedar Revolution-Between Continuity and Change," Orient-Hamburg, 2006. Accessed here on March 13, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/302338/Lebanon-the\\_Cedar\\_Revolution-Between\\_Continuity\\_and\\_Change](https://www.academia.edu/302338/Lebanon-the_Cedar_Revolution-Between_Continuity_and_Change).

100 Hazem Saghieh, "Lebanon's "14 March": From Protest to Leadership," openDemocracy, April 1, 2008. Accessed May 5, 2022: [https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/lebanon\\_from\\_protest\\_to\\_leadership/](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/lebanon_from_protest_to_leadership/).

101 Marwan Iskandar, *Rafiq Hariri and the Fate of Lebanon*, (London: Saqi Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2006).

that Syria generated about 200 million dollars per year between 1988 and 1991 from illegal taxes on transit, about 100 million USD from overpricing of fuel taxes, 250 million USD from benefits on public contracts, about 100 million USD per year extracted from the telecom sector and Casino du Liban, and over 100 million USD from payments from the Bank Madina high officials,<sup>102</sup>. Withdrawal from Lebanon thus meant a significant economic loss for the Assad regime and the informal economy that maintained the social contract between the regime and the Syrian population. In addition, it stripped significant revenues from the Syrian fighting force deployed there – over 35,000 Syrian soldiers were deployed in Lebanon before they were forced to retreat. These soldiers used to send back hard currency to Syria<sup>103</sup>.

### ***ii-The rise of Hezbollah and its alliance with Syria***

Another event that shaped the events in Syria during the war there, was the significant support it received from Hezbollah. The roots of the Lebanese militant group date back to 1969, when the Cairo Agreement<sup>104</sup>, sanctioned Palestinian militancy against Israel on the country's southern front.<sup>105</sup> One Shiite group, Amal, founded by charismatic leader Sayed Musa Sadr, spearheaded the war effort with the Palestinians against Israel until 1982. "Sadr had coined his slogan about the alliance of 'those deprived in their homeland (Lebanese Shiites) with those deprived of their homeland (Palestinians)', says Fawaz Traboulsi<sup>106</sup> in his book *A History of Modern Lebanon*.

That year the organization splintered when its new leader, now speaker of the house, Nabih Berri decided not to challenge Israel's advance into Lebanon; a decision that was contested by the party's Islamic branch. The latter formation merged with other Shiite militants from South Lebanon and the Lebanese Bakaa and was trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRCG) forces which had been sent by Iran to stop the Israeli expansion. "Lebanon's era of resistance started in 1984," explained a Hezbollah commander interviewed by me, speaking on condition of anonymity<sup>107</sup>. Hezbollah split off from Amal as a result and its founding was marked by two major events: the emergence of a politico-military command structure, and the Manifesto of the Nine, which called for jihad against

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102 The Bank al-Madina had been involved in a money laundering scandal in Lebanon, which also highlighted the systematic racketeering of large amounts to Syrian political and security figures according to Iskandar.

103 Jamie Etheridge, "Lebanon Calls for End of Syrian Occupation," ABC News, January 6, 2006. Accessed on March 9, 2019: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=82323&page=1>.

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106 Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, (Pluto Press, 2012, second edition).

107 Hezbollah commander speaking on condition of anonymity, by Mona Alami, Beirut, September 2017

Israel, emphasized Islam as the movement's doctrine and declared the signatories' adherence to Iran's Supreme Leader.

The modern Lebanese state lumbered post-war with the 1989 Taif Agreement, which divided power equally between Christians and Muslims, consecrated Syrian tutelage over the country, and recognized Hezbollah as the lone resistance movement that was allowed to preserve its military arsenal<sup>108</sup>, while other factions such as the Kataeb, Lebanese Forces, and Amal, among many others, were forced to disarm. The accords underlined Syrian intentions to keep Lebanon as a trump card in future peace negotiations with Israel.

“Basically Hezbollah, with the backing of Iran, was handed a monopoly over Lebanese resistance against Israel,” says Ali Amine, a Lebanese journalist and a fierce Hezbollah critic<sup>109</sup>.

The relationship between Hezbollah and the Lebanese state with Syrian support further solidified when it participated in Lebanon's first post-civil war election in 1992. With the organization officially included in the Lebanese political system, experts hailed the “Lebanization” of Hezbollah, which was now believed to be more locally focused, with analysts believing that with time Hezbollah would abandon its broader regional agenda. “Hezbollah was the only protection Lebanese Shi'a had against Israel, as the Lebanese state failed to protect the Southern population against the onslaught.” a Lebanese army officer<sup>110</sup> close to the organization and speaking on condition of anonymity told me. Hezbollah pursued its fight against the Israeli occupation until the year 2000. By then, the high number of deaths among the Israeli military in Lebanon had increased to the point that it triggered strong opposition within Israeli society and led to the swift withdrawal of Israel from south Lebanon in May 2000.

Syrian influence over Lebanon did not stop there, and Damascus backed by Hezbollah and pro-Syrian factions, moved to amend the Lebanese constitution to extend the term of then-president Emile Lahoud. The amendment was dovetailed by U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559<sup>111</sup>, which was adopted in 2004. It called for the withdrawal of all foreign armies from Lebanon, in a clear reference to Syrian occupation, and for the disarming of all

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108 Nolan Kraszkiewicz, *Hezbollah from Lebanonization to democratization*, University of Oklahoma, April 28, 2011. Accessed March 9, 2019:

[http://www.academia.edu/2649718/Hezbollah\\_From\\_Lebanonization\\_to\\_Democratization](http://www.academia.edu/2649718/Hezbollah_From_Lebanonization_to_Democratization)

109 Amine Ali, interview by Mona Alami, Beirut, July 2017

110 Interview with Lebanese army officer, by Mona Alami September 2017

111 “Resolution 1559 and the failure to disarm Hezbollah,” American Center for Law and Justice, June 15, 2011. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://aclj.org/united-nations/aclj-analyzes-un-resolution-1559-2004-the-failure-to-disarm-hezbollah>



Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias including Hezbollah. Analysts such as Ali Hamade who spoke to me in 2008<sup>112</sup> believed that Rafic Hariri was indirectly involved in Resolution 1559, which ultimately may have caused his demise. The Cedar revolution following the killing of Hariri and the resulting retreat of Syria forced Hezbollah to delve more into Lebanese politics in a confrontation between the March 14 and March 8 coalitions. This new challenge brought Damascus and Dahieh even closer: after all, Hezbollah needed Damascus as much as Damascus needed Hezbollah, with both political players feeling besieged by the Arab and Western powers and Hezbollah reliant on Damascus transiting precious weapons from Tehran<sup>113</sup>.

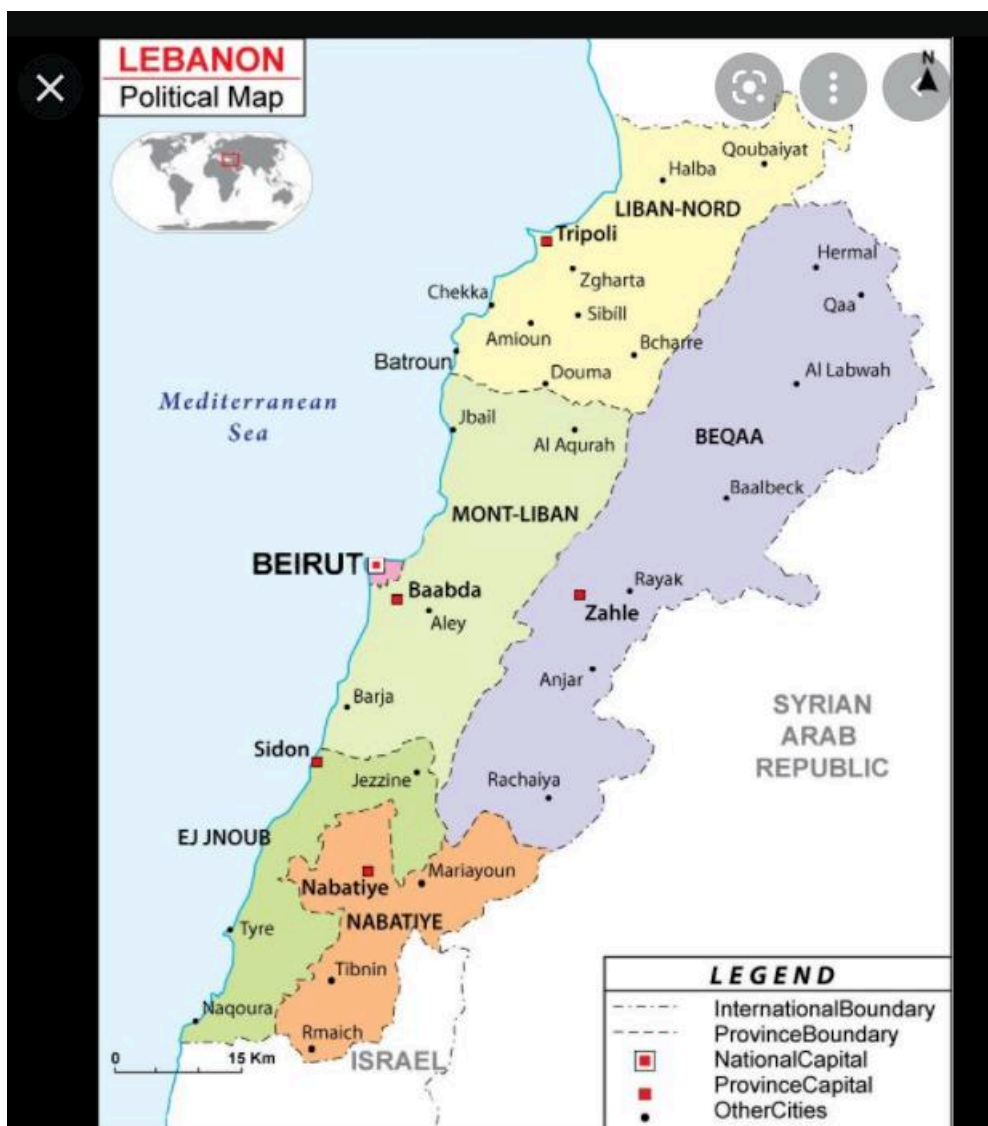


Figure 4: Political Map of Lebanon

112 Interview with Ali Hamadeh, by Mona Alami, Beirut, 2007.

113 Dominic Evans, Oliver Holmes, "Israel strikes Syria, says targeting Hezbollah arms," Reuters, May 5, 2013. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-blasts/israel-strikes-syria-says-targeting-hezbollah-arms-idUSBRE94400020130505>.

Source: Research Gate, Map of Lebanon

## **B - The Iraqi war and the emergence of a new conflict on Syria's Eastern side**

On March 19 2003<sup>114</sup>, the United States, along with coalition forces primarily from the United Kingdom, launched the war on Iraq. President Bush and his advisors built much of their case for war on the idea that Iraq, under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). In June 2004, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was put in place by the US administration after Saddam's ouster transferred power to the Iraqi Interim Government, which was followed by the first parliamentary election in 2005 of a 275-member Iraqi National Assembly. While no WMDs were found in Iraq, the Iraqi conflict impacted other countries significantly. Millions of refugees moved to neighboring states including Syria where about 1.2 million people found refuge<sup>115</sup>. Two dynamics took precedence in Iraq that would eventually shape regional security and political frameworks there. First, the fall of Saddam led to the formation of a new sectarian-based political system, similar in many ways to that of Lebanon and where Shi'i allies of Iran and Kurdish politicians were empowered. Secondly, the war in Iraq attracted thousands of jihadists the world over, which would pave the way for al-Qaeda in Iraq first and then the creation of ISIS.

### ***i-Debaathification and Sunni Marginalization***

The first order of the CPA in May 2003<sup>116</sup> was Order 1, also known as the "De-Baathification of Iraqi Society." The order aimed to eliminate senior party members from civil service, and banned them from access to the private sector. "Basically millions of Iraqi Sunnis found themselves without a job and on the fringe of society, the injustice created a feeling of resentment," said Mouayed Jouaysch in an interview with me<sup>117</sup>. In her book, *Irak, La Revanche de l'histoire*, Myriam Benraad described Order 1 as a "blind purge"<sup>118</sup>. Benraad believed that De-Ba'athification not only divided Iraqis but also opened the way to the marginalization of Sunni Arabs, who were hit hard by the policy. She estimated that in the Sunni neighborhoods and provinces of the country, more than 50% of the workforce had lost

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114 History.com Editors, "War in Iraq Begins," HISTORY, accessed March 13, 2019: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/war-in-iraq-begins>.

115 Ashraf Al-Khalidi, Sophia Hoffmann, and Victor Tanner, *Iraqi refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A field-based snapshot* (Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, 2007).

116 Myriam Benraad, *Irak, la revanche de l'histoire : De l'occupation étrangère à l'Etat islamique, (Vendémiaire, 2015)*.

117 Interview with Iraqi expert Mouayaed Jouaych, by mOna Alami, March 2017, Erbil.

118 Benraad, *Irak, la revanche de l'histoire : De l'occupation étrangère à l'Etat islamique*,

their jobs. “Debaathification is experienced as an identity persecution, a collective punishment for crimes that Sunnis do not necessarily feel responsible for. It is assimilated to a confessional purification ...” added the author.

### *ii-The onset of Jihad*

Saddam Hussein had already paved the way for the future implosion of Iraq with his sectarian policies and his Faith campaign in the wake of the First Gulf War. After the 1991 Iraqi defeat in Kuwait and the launch of an international coalition in Iraq, Hussein drifted away from secularism and began encouraging a greater Islamization of society. The war against Iran in the eighties and the Kuwait war had already created a return to religion in Iraqi society, on which Hussein further built, retreating to its Sunni tribal base. “The defeat of Iraqi armed forces meant for many in Iraq that something was also very wrong with the ruling party and its ideology, and very right with Khomeini’s Islamism. Suddenly, some 60 years after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, when the last Sword of Islam was broken, the Iraqis began again to identify Islam with power,” says Amatzia Baram in a paper for the Wilson Center<sup>119</sup>.

Relations between religious leaders and the Baath increased with security officials often sponsoring networks of mosques. Salafism began to attract some sections of the population, exhausted by years of war,<sup>120</sup> though the regime cracked down on hardline Salafis and sectarian agitators deemed to be “Wahhabis.” An example of this is leading Islamic State figure Abu Ali al-Anbari, who was already preaching against Shi’a in the mixed Sunni-Shi’a Turkmen city of Tel Afar. His agitation against the Shi’a and Baath attracted the ire of the Iraqi authorities.

In his book *Geopolitique Du Terrorisme*, Jean Michel Dasque<sup>121</sup> underlined that early into the American occupation of Iraq, the most active faction was the one founded by Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian national and the father of a small fundamentalist group founded in 2001, in Herat in western Afghanistan and known as the Tawhid wal Jihad. After the collapse of the Taliban state, he retreated to Iran and then to northern Iraq where he cooperated with Sunni organizations, especially with Ansar al Sunna, according to Dasque. On October 17, 2004, he gave allegiance to Osama bin Laden and integrated his organization

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119 Amatzia, Baram, “From Militant Secularism to Islamism: The Iraqi Ba’th Regime 1968-2003,” Wilson Center, October 2011. Accessed March 9, 2019:

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/From%20Militant%20Secularism%20to%20Islamism.pdf>

120 Benraad, *Irak, la revanche de l’histoire : De l’occupation étrangère à l’Etat islamique*

121 Dasque, *Géopolitique du Terrorisme*.

into al-Qaeda's network. Zarqawi joined the ranks of his fighters and participated with other Sunni groups in the war against the American forces. He made extensive use of suicide bombings and car bombings and was known for his fierce hatred of Shi'a, whom he denounced as apostates and wished to provoke into all-out sectarian war. This sectarian war reached its most acute phase with the destruction of the golden dome of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra in 2006. The sectarianism of violence caused a sharp increase in the number of deaths. As an example, the number of deaths for the month of October 2006 was considered at the time as the highest monthly death toll since the beginning of the war<sup>122</sup>.

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122 Benraad, *Irak, la revanche de l'histoire : De l'occupation étrangère à l'Etat islamique*

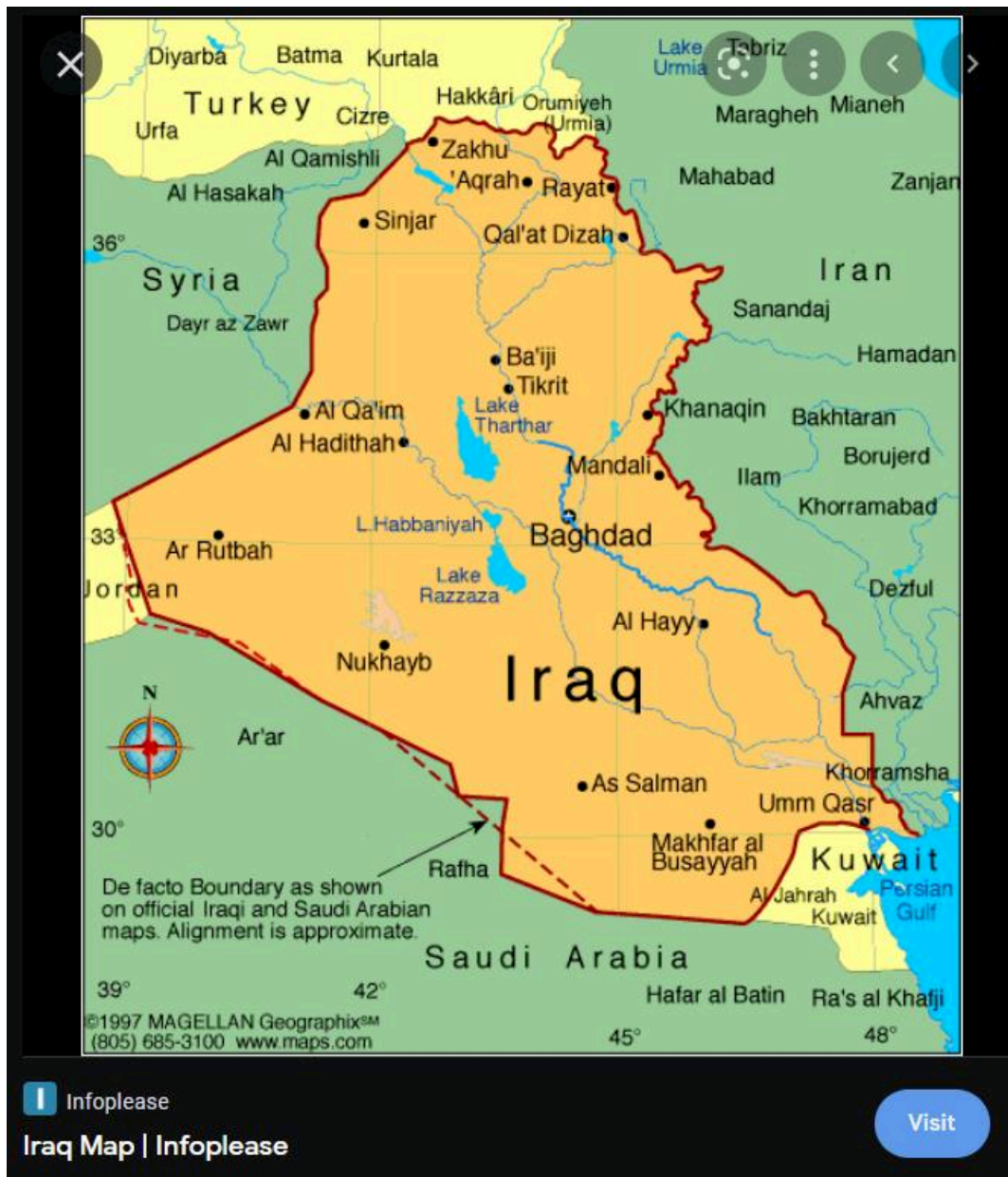


Figure 5: Map of Iraq

### C - Turkey's conflict with the PKK

For decades now Turkey has imposed a policy of marginalization and forced assimilation on Kurdish regions. In the 1970s<sup>123</sup>, the Kurdish regions were significantly underdeveloped compared with the rest of Turkey. They had the highest illiteracy rates, and their per capita income was the lowest in the country. Industrial infrastructure was nearly non-existent while road works were done essentially to facilitate the access of the military

123 Cemal Ozkahraman, "Failure of Peace Talks between Turkey and the PKK: Victim of Traditional Turkish Policy or of Geopolitical Shifts in the Middle East?," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 4, n° 1 (March 1, 2017), pp. 50-66. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798916681332>.

into the region. Turkey is currently home to the largest Kurdish population in the world, estimated at 14 million people. Turkey's repression of the Kurds has known periods of uptick and quiet<sup>124</sup>.

In the late 1970s, the PKK was founded based on a Marxist-Leninist ideology<sup>125</sup>. In 1984, The PKK formally began its struggle for Kurdish independence, the insurgency has since claimed over 40,000 lives.

Dasque<sup>126</sup> underlined that the organization launched its armed struggle against the government of Ankara by increasing the number of guerilla operations targeting government installations and military targets, besides launching terrorist attacks. The group concentrated its attacks on “village protectors”, Kurdish nationals cooperating with the authorities, army detachments, and gendarmerie posts. The PKK also sometimes resorted to suicide bombings. Although it led its main operations in the eastern and southern provinces of Anatolia, it was also active in other areas, including Istanbul and Ankara, and it attacked diplomatic missions and Turkish representations abroad, with armed rebellion lasting until 1999.

After the Gulf War, the Turkish military became wary the US would support the Kurds in Iraq. The creation of Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) and a no-fly zone led to a power vacuum in the region and provided the PKK with a haven<sup>127</sup> in Iraq. Turkey believed that one of the consequences of the Gulf War was the creation of a semi-autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq.

According to Dasque “At the peak of its power in the mid-1990s, the PKK had nearly 20,000 members, including a non-negligible proportion of women”. The group had a budget of 500 million USD derived from financial aid provided by its sympathizers, businessmen, and Kurdish organizations, membership, as well as revenue from criminal activity such as trafficking and extortion. However, in 1999, the group was significantly weakened after the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan in Kenya with the help of US intelligence, following his expulsion from Syria in 1998. Öcalan’s imprisonment led the PKK to adopt a low profile and partially withdraw into Northern Iraq. However, with the Second Iraq War and the American occupation of Iraq leading to the formation of a Kurdish autonomous region in

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124 "The State of the Turkish-Kurdish Conflict," *Center for American Progress* (blog), August 12, 2019. Accessed May 5, 2022: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/state-turkish-kurdish-conflict/>.

125 "Who Are Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Rebels?," BBC News, November 4, 2016. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100>.

126 Dasque, *Géopolitique du Terrorisme*.

127 Funda Keskin Ata, "Turkey's Trans-Border Operations in Northern Iraq: Before and After the Invasion of Iraq," *Research Journal of International Studies*, Issue 8 (November 2008). Accessed March 9, 2019: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237440476\\_Turkey's\\_Trans-Border\\_Operations\\_in\\_Northern\\_Iraq\\_Before\\_and\\_After\\_the\\_Invasion\\_of\\_Iraq](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237440476_Turkey's_Trans-Border_Operations_in_Northern_Iraq_Before_and_After_the_Invasion_of_Iraq).

northern Iraq, Turkey's fears were revived once again. Turkey's angst was that the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq would give new life to the Kurdish quest for independence and a larger alliance between the various Kurdish separatist movements in the region.

Turkey fears that an independent Kurdistan emerging from the Iraq conflict would embolden separatist aspirations within its Kurdish population, which is why even as Turkey has developed extensive economic ties with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) based out of Erbil and has even accepted oil exports from the Kurdistan region outside of Baghdad's oversight, Turkey has stopped short of backing any call for independence, as illustrated in its stance against the KDP's unilateral independence referendum of 2017.

The ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK lasted until 2004. The fighting only intensified after this point as Ankara targeted the group's positions in Iraq. By 2008, Turkey conducted several cross-border operations against PKK camps, with precision strikes based partly on intelligence provided by the U.S.<sup>128</sup>.

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128 Karen Kaya, "A Different War on Terrorism: The U.S., Turkey, and the PKK," *Small Wars Journal*, May 2, 2012. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/a-different-war-on-terrorism-the-us-turkey-and-the-pkk>.

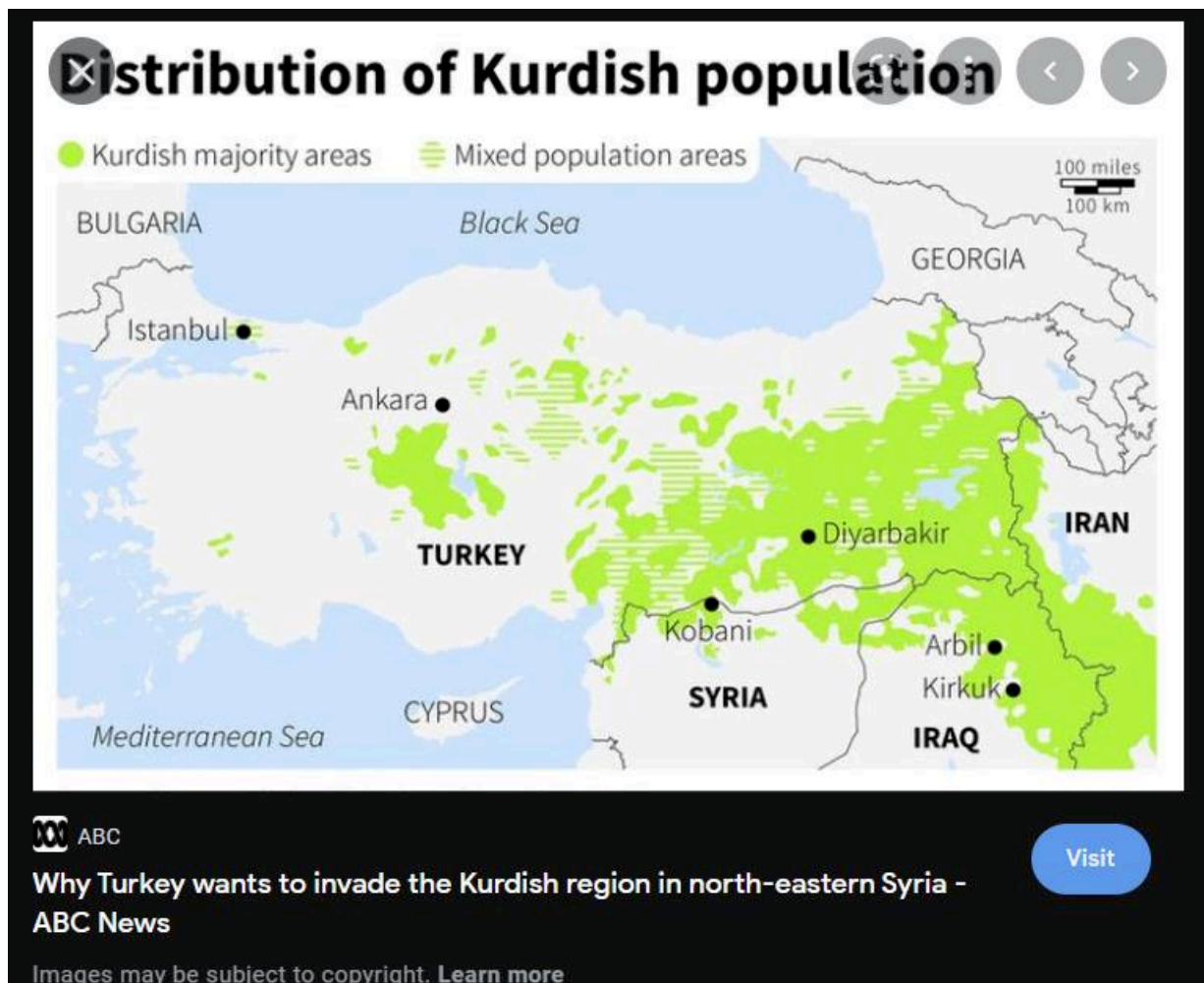


Figure 6: Distribution of Kurdish Population

## II - Syria’s manipulation of neighboring VNSAAs to project regional influence.

Under Hafez al-Assad, the father of current president Bashar, Syria nurtured strong relations with regional VNSAAs. The use of such groups allowed Syria to challenge other governments in their territories. The relation between Syria and the PKK, Hezbollah, or the Jihadists of al-Qaeda took many forms from political protection to military and financial support as well as providing safe havens. In turn, these groups became assets for the regime as the latter provided them with geographical depth that enabled them to challenge the authority of other states.

The regime favored the use of VNSAAs actors for other reasons such as evading accountability. The Syrian regime’s ties to jihadists smuggled into Iraq, to Hezbollah’s activity in Lebanon against the Israeli occupation, as well as to the PKK, were surrounded by a screen of smoke. Were these actors directly backed by the Assad regime, could their actions



be attributed to Syrian support and orders or were they acting through their resources and initiatives? Muddy and unclear ties between the Syrian regime and these groups would blur the overall image and create doubt as to who was ultimately responsible for the violence whether it was directed against state institutions, other religious communities, or civilian targets. Syria could thus use VNSAAs as a foreign policy tool while curbing its exposure to international sanctions and reprimand.

### **A - Syria's alliance with Hezbollah**

As stated in the first chapter President Hafez al-Assad did not have a natural inclination toward Hezbollah and favored instead the Amal party. Yet, in the 1990s, Syria and Hezbollah's relations evolved as the organization proved itself to be successful in the war against Israel, explains a researcher affiliated with the organization who spoke on condition of anonymity<sup>129</sup>. "Assad also saw that the Israeli peace process was not going far and that Hezbollah had become a necessary ally" adds the expert. However, the year 2000 ushered significant geostrategic and political changes in both Syria and Lebanon with the end of the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Hafez died in that same year. The two events led to a strong alliance between the young president and the militant organization which was crystallized by the earlier mentioned Tripartite alliance between President Bashar Assad, Hezbollah, and Iran<sup>130</sup>.

The alliance between Syria and Hezbollah and indirectly Iran only grew with American pressure on Syria with the Syria Accountability Act of 2003. The Syria Accountability Act<sup>131</sup> called on Syria to stop supporting so-called terrorist organizations (namely Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and Lebanese Hezbollah), end its acquisition of alleged WMDs, and withdraw its troops from Lebanon, the latter taking place in 2005. By losing its backer, Hezbollah felt it needed to consolidate power over the system. A string of assassinations started targeting March 14 figures. At the time the anti-Syrian and Iranian majority comprised the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), Christian Lebanese Forces, and Kataeb as well as the Future movement headed by Saad Hariri, son of slain prime minister Hariri, while the Syrian and Iranian-backed opposition, was dominated by the Shia Amal and Hezbollah movements allied to the Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). In 2008, the government decided that Brigadier-General Wafic Shoucair, who was allegedly

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129 Interview with a pro-Hezbollah expert on condition of anonymity

130 "Assad hosts Nasrallah, Ahmadinejad for three-way meeting," Haaretz.

131 "Aoun urges US to adopt Syria Accountability Act," Daily Star (Lebanon), September 19, 2003. Accessed March 19, 2019: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2003/Sep-19/43256-aoun-urges-us-to-adopt-syria-accountability-act.ashx>.

closely tied to Hezbollah, would be removed from his post as head of airport security. The government dubbed Hezbollah's private communication network as illegal and unconstitutional. Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah's answer was quick and stern. "A war was declared against us," said Nasrallah, comparing decisions taken by the cabinet against Hezbollah to a declaration of war launched on behalf of the United States and Israel. Hordes of Hezbollah members took over the city in a few hours in on May 7, 2008. Hezbollah's coup sent Arab capitals into a frenzy and resulted on May 23 in the brokering of the Doha agreement,<sup>132</sup> leading to the formation of a consensual government and the allocation to the March 8 coalition of veto power, thus increasing the power of Iranian and Syrian Lebanese allies in the pre-2011 phase.



Figure 7: Friendship Poster of Bashar Al-Assad And Hassan Nasrallah

### B-Syria's alliance with the PKK

The PKK was established in 1978 in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, deemed at the time a Damascus protectorate, according to an article published by the Washington Institute and

<sup>132</sup> "Lebanon Rivals Agree Crisis Deal," BBC News, May 21, 2008. Accessed March 9, 2019: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7411835.stm>.

authored by Turkey expert Soner Cagaptay<sup>133</sup>. Links between Syria and the PKK were reinforced by the party's initial Marxist ideology. In the official release of the "Proclamation of Independence of PKK", the PKK stated that its primary objective was to foster a communist revolution in Turkey, inspired by the ideas of Marxism. The Marxist inclinations of the new group meant that the PKK enjoyed the patronage of the Soviet Union, which only fostered stronger relations between Moscow and Damascus. As a result, and at Moscow's behest, not only did Syria provide military training and weapons to the PKK but it also allowed the group to use its northern border to launch attacks on Turkey. Syria gave the PKK financial support not only in Syria and Lebanon but also in northern Iraq where the organization had training camps. In addition, the Syrian regime provided the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan with sanctuary in Syria. In 1996 the situation escalated with Turkey accusing Syria of committing aggression.

Syria's relentless support for the PKK was motivated by geopolitical calculations. Through the PKK, Syria sought leverage over Turkey on two important dossiers: namely disagreement over water resources of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and the Syrian claim over the Turkish Hatay province (Liwa Iskanderun).

With these goals in mind, Syria supported Kurdish Syrians' affiliation with the PKK. According to Cagatay "an estimated 20 to 30 percent of the PKK's nearly 5,000 militant members are thought to be Syrian Kurds. The PKK enjoys stronger support in the Kurdish areas of northwestern Syria near Aleppo, in Afrin...which abuts the Turkish border"<sup>134</sup>. To end Syrian support to the PKK, Turkey first attempted a diplomatic approach before threatening to embark on a military campaign against Syria. In the first phase, Ankara met with Damascus to persuade it to end its PKK policy. The Syrians denied they were sheltering the PKK, even though Ocalan<sup>135</sup> was openly giving interviews from Syria to international media. In 1996, Turkey stated it was allowed under Article 51 of the UN Charter to resort to self-defense and that any normalization of relations could only be accomplished by Syria's ending its support for the PKK and turning Ocalan over to Turkish authorities. To ramp up pressure on Damascus, Turkey signed a "Military Cooperation and Training Agreement" with Israel, Damascus's arch-enemy. Turkey then threatened to invade Syria unless Damascus

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133 Soner Cagaptay, "Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 5, 2012. Accessed March 14, 2019: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-and-turkey-the-pkk-dimension>.

134 Ibid.

135 "Abdullah Öcalan | Biography & Facts," Britannica. Accessed May 5, 2022: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abdullah-Ocalan>.

curbed PKK activity in its territory. In a show of force, Ankara amassed a large number of troops on the Syrian border. Under threat of conflict and fearing Turkey's rapprochement with Israel, Syria finally capitulated. The result was the Adana Agreement<sup>136</sup>, in which Syria recognized the PKK as a terrorist organization and agreed to end all assistance to it. The Assad regime also kicked Ocalan out of the country, and the latter was later arrested in 1999 in Kenya.

### **C - Syria's relation with Iraqi Jihadists.**

The Assad family backed by its intelligence services has long used jihadists in their regional game. The Assad regime has a long track record of working with foreign terrorist organizations inside Syria to accomplish a range of objectives: ensuring regime survival by turning militancy outward as well as projecting influence beyond its border at a minimal economic and human cost while avoiding accountability for its action. With the disappearance of the structure of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 from Syria, after the massacre of the city of Hama, Salafi Jihadists started slowly gaining a foothold in Syria. In late 1999 a jihadist ambush resulted in four days of clashes and prompted a nationwide crackdown, prompting the arrest of 1200 suspected militants and their supporters. Following the 9/11 attacks, Bashar offered his government's assistance in the War on Terror. "The Syrian government decided then to infiltrate Jihadist networks to turn members into collaborators which were used in Lebanon, Iraq, and even Jordan," explains, a former Syrian security official who spoke to me<sup>137</sup>. This technique was similar to the one used against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and 1980s and inside Lebanon against Syrian opponents. Syrian officials have even bragged about how they achieved this, given the jihadi infrastructure that ran through Syrian territory

In an attempt to destabilize the American project in Iraq, the Assad regime made Syria the principal point of entry for foreign jihadists hoping to join the Iraqi insurgency. The regime was wary of a possible onslaught by the US, with American president George W. Bush unofficially placing Syria in the Axis of Evil<sup>138</sup> in the wake of 9/11,

In 2002, a network was uncovered in Jordan that targeted Lawrence Foley, a U.S. Agency for International Development official based in Amman, Jordan. The Jordanian government tied the network to Zarqawi. The network also aimed at conducting further

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136 Sinem Cengiz, "Why is the 1998 Adana pact between Turkey and Syria back in the news?," Arab News, January 25, 2019. Accessed March 19, 2019: <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1441931>.

137 Interview with former Syrian security officer, by Mona Alami, July 2013, Lebanon

138 "Syria and the New Axis of Evil," The Washington Times, September 29, 2003 (accessed March 19, 2019): <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2003/sep/29/20030929-090653-2022r/>.

attacks against "foreign embassies, Jordanian officials, and some diplomatic personnel. The operatives were trained in Syria, supplied with weapons, and instructed to return to Jordan to identify a target for the attack. In addition, Syria gave refuge and refused to extradite Suleiman Khaled Darwish, Zarqawi's second-in-command and, reportedly, a liaison between Al-Qaeda and Syrian military intelligence<sup>139</sup>.

According to an article published by Ghaith Abdul Ahad in the Guardian newspaper<sup>140</sup> in 2005, the call to jihad was openly encouraged by the Syrian government. "Intelligence services arranged for buses to ferry fighters, speeded up the issuing of documentation and even gave prospective jihadis a discount on passport fees," pointed out the journalist. The most important agent was undoubtedly Abu al-Qaaqaa, a cleric from Aleppo. In 2002, according to Abdul Ahad, Abu al-Qaaqaa's group was organizing anti-American "festivals" twice a week as well as recruitment drives inside Damascus. In addition, when Abu al-Qaaqaa was killed in 2007, his funeral was attended by members of the Syrian parliament along with thousands of Islamists.

According to counter-terrorism expert Matt Levitt,<sup>141</sup> transcripts of operatives' conversations analyzed in an Italian investigation showed a detailed picture of coordinators in Syria working with the movement of recruits and money between cells in Europe and training camps in northern Iraq run by the jihadist group Ansar al-Islam. Syrian cell leaders facilitated travel for recruits and provided them with funding, while European members gave false travel documents to recruit new members and monitored their travel. Recruits for the Iraq War spent time in Aleppo and Damascus. The expert added that the investigation revealed that operatives in Europe who worked for Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi acted on the instructions of his lieutenants in and around Damascus and Aleppo. These men included Muhammad Majid who was described as the "gatekeeper in Syria for volunteers intent on reaching Iraq".

In 2007, the U.S. Treasury Department also designated, according to Levitt<sup>142</sup> seven individuals, all based in Syria, for providing financial and operational support to the Iraqi insurgency. These individuals comprised one member of AQI while the remaining six were officials representing the Iraqi wing of the Syrian Baath Party.

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139 Ryan Mauro, "Has Damascus Stopped Supporting Terrorists?," *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2009, pp. 61-7. Accessed March 18, 2019: <https://www.meforum.org/2406/damascus-supporting-terrorists>.

140 Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "The Road from Syria, on the Trail of Iraq's Insurgents," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2005. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jun/08/iraq-al-qaida>.

141 Matt Levitt, "Terrorist "Frenemies," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 16, 2015. Consulted March 18, 2019: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/terrorist-frenemies>.

142 Matthew Levitt, "Syria's Financial Support for Jihad," *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter 2010), pp. 39-48. Accessed here on March 9, 2019: <https://www.meforum.org/2579/syria-financial-support-jihad>.

In 2008<sup>143</sup>, the U.S. Treasury Department released a collection of documents labeled as the Sinjar records, which disclosed details of 700 foreign nationals who entered Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007. The Sinjar documents uncovered four facilitators operating from Syria including the "Abu Ghadiyah" network, named for its leader Badran Turki Hisham al-Mazidih, known as Abu Ghadiyah. The network "obtained false passports for foreign terrorists, provided passports, weapons, guides, safe houses, and allowances to foreign terrorists in Syria and those preparing to cross the border into Iraq. Funds received by Mazidih facilitated the travel of AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq] foreign fighters and supported insurgent activity in Iraq," according to Levit.

Syria's long-standing policy of supporting terrorist networks provided dangerous militants with strong connections and logistical infrastructures. In 2011, these networks and connections allowed these radical elements to infiltrate once again Syria. To that extent Assad has been fighting an enemy he helped create. Radical movements nurtured by Assad were bound to see the Syrian war as a great opportunity to conquer territory or have a say in the country's future.

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143 Ibid.

### III-Regime fragilities in the Levant system of conflicts.

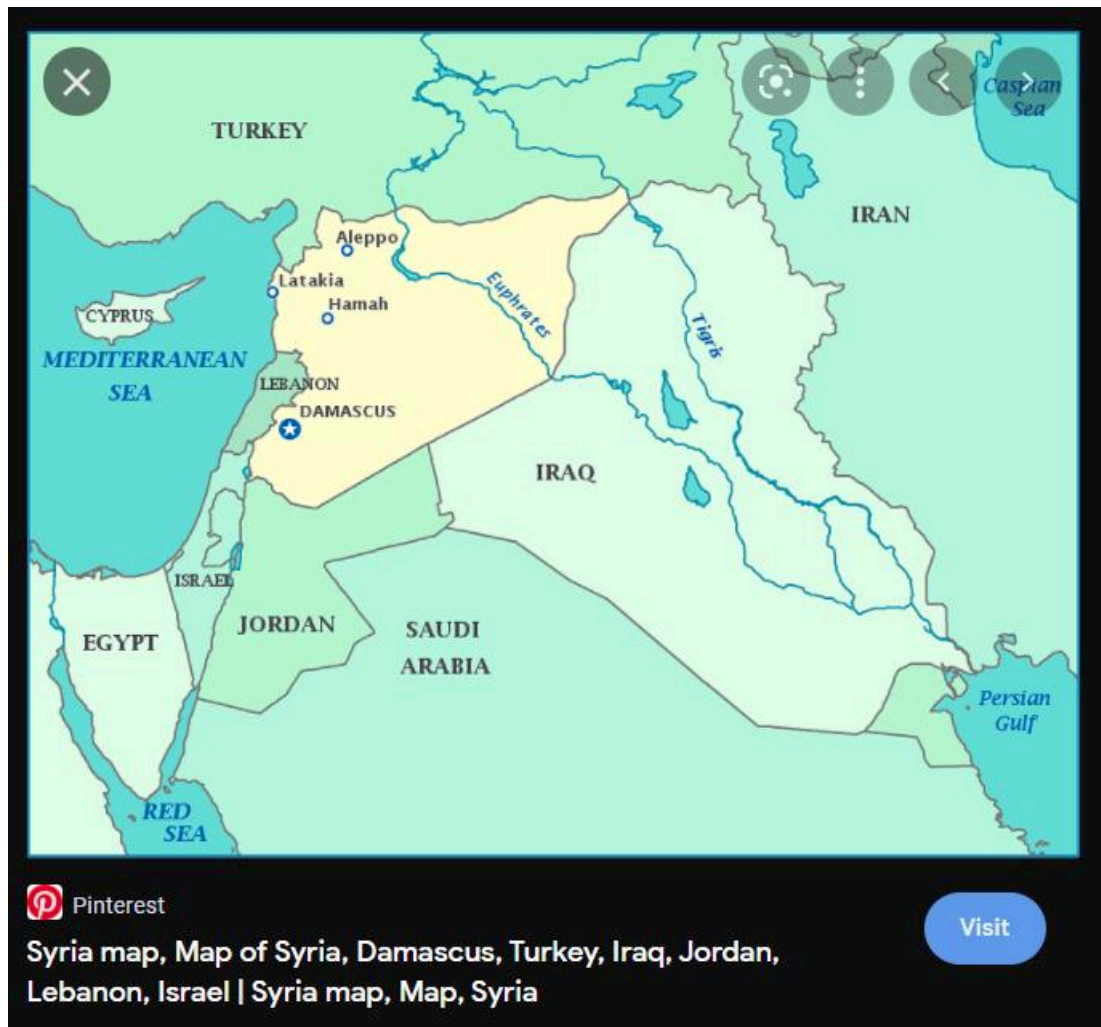


Figure 8: Map of Syria

Syria's geographic location bordering countries with a long history of conflict created vulnerabilities within the regime, which, combined with the Arab Spring dynamics, led to the 2011 revolution. In this section we will first look at the nature of the regimes that surrounded Syria, what type of conflicts were they facing, and how this impacted Syria's "mortal conflict"?

#### A - Nature of Levant regimes

First, as seen before, Syria is surrounded by countries that vary in levels of democracy and competence, factors which significantly contributed to the rise of insurgency there. As Charles Tilly and Sydney Tarrow argued in their book<sup>144</sup> *Contentious Politics*, the most important variables that matter in conflict politics are the capabilities of the state and the

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144 Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, second edition, 2015).

country's democracy level. A country's capability according to the two authors reflects the measure in which the state's action impacts its population, its territory, and its repartition of resources. Among such examples is the capability of the country to levy taxes, distribute aid, and control natural resources. Democracy is measured by the protection of political and civil rights. The more undemocratic a country is and the lower its capabilities, the more prone it is to ethnic and religious wars as well as civil wars.

In Syria's immediate system of conflict, three countries were facing ethnic and religious wars or tensions, as seen previously in our overview of Iraq Lebanon, and Turkey. Iraq- a nascent democracy ruled by sectarian elites- shared both features of undemocratic systems and weak capabilities, if we follow Tilly and Tarrow's matrix. The rise to power of the Shi'i community, the flow of foreign fighters into the country, and the marginalization of the Sunni community were all conducive to a war between Sunni jihadists and Shi'i militias. In this framework both Sunnis and Shiites were linked to pan-Islamic movements, on one side Al-Qaeda and then ISIS, and on the other groups adhering to the Islamic revolutionary ideals of Iran.

Unlike Iraq, Turkey in the early 2000s belonged to the classification of democratic regimes with strong capability, however, its repressive policy toward the Kurdish ethnicity made it a mixed regime, viewed by Tilly and Tarrow as both democratic and undemocratic, which exposed Turkey to the ethnic insurgency of the PKK. Turkey has faced an on-and-off insurgency, phases of calm being explained by the state's engagement in a peace process (more specifically in the wake of the Helsinki summit of the European Council in December 1999, which accepted Turkey as a candidate for full membership)<sup>145</sup> followed by a greater representation of Kurdish parties into the system. However, the war in Syria and the establishment of a Syrian autonomous region there destroyed peace talks once again.

Unlike Syria and Iraq, Lebanon's weak democracy was not facing a religious war but religious tensions in the post-2000 phase, which pitted Sunnis against Shi'i Hezbollah and resulted in a paralysis of state institutions and clashes between Hezbollah and Sunni and Druze militants, as well as several rounds of clashes with Jihadists in the phase before 2008.

These ethnic and religious wars are generally rooted in the negative policy of states toward specific ethnic or religious communities. While Lebanon did not face a sectarian war in the 2000 phase, the weak democracy saw the rise of Hezbollah and its growing clout in the

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145 Ozkahraman, « Failure of Peace Talks between Turkey and the PKK ».



country despite the opposition of over half of the Lebanese population<sup>146</sup>, owing to Iran's exploitation of Shi'i grievances resulting from years of indifference against the Israeli occupation of Shi'i areas in south Lebanon and discriminatory practices against the community.

### **B - Distant ethnicity, Distant nationalism**

Another layer that can be added to the Syrian system of conflict is the transnational nature of the militant networks that appeared in these countries. Tilly and Tarrow first applied the concept of "distant nationalism" to the Palestinian issue, underlining that generations of Palestinians exiled abroad still identified with Palestinian nationalism. This concept can also be applied to our system of conflict through the diaspora mobilization that Kaldor has repeatedly mentioned<sup>147</sup>.

In Turkey, the PKK managed to develop in the 70s, a political-military organization that was capable of transcending regional differences, which morphed later into a broader organization that appealed to and could mobilize Kurds outside of Turkey, which led to the support and empowerment of Syrian Kurds' federative ambitions.

The war in Iraq exacerbated a pan-Islamic identity that was born decades earlier in Afghanistan. The pan-Islamic identity and movement projected a new form of allegiance and citizenship, through the concept of Umma, a broader interpretation of the Islamic nation. This resulted in an actionable Muslim Sunni community, which challenged the classical authority of the nation-state. This challenge came about in Syria in the post-2011 phase.

A similar dynamic was taking place in Lebanon, where Hezbollah's perceived credo was the belief in Islam and the wider sense, the establishment of an Islamic state, as well as the duty of Jihad and finally the doctrine of absolute Wilayat Al-Faqih- the loyalty to the guardianship of the jurist (i.e. the Supreme Leader in Tehran)- in the words of Hezbollah's deputy secretary general Naim Qassem<sup>148</sup>, author of *Hezbollah: the Story from Within*. Hezbollah also espoused Iran's proclaimed defense of oppressed peoples around the world, mostly in areas it perceived as being under American and Israeli dominance, which accounted for the Lebanese organization's training and support in the post-2003 phase for Iraqi Shi'i

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146 "Views of Hezbollah," Pew Research Center, June 30, 2014. Accessed March 18, 2019; <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/01/concerns-about-islamic-extremism-on-the-rise-in-middle-east/pg-2014-07-01-islamic-extremism-06/>.

147 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

148 « Hizbullah (Hezbollah): The Story from Within: Naim Qassem: 9780863566998: Amazon.com: Books », consulté le 18 mars 2019, <https://www.amazon.com/Hizbullah-Hezbollah-Within-Naim-Qassem/dp/0863566995>.

militants. By 2007, the U.S. military acknowledged<sup>149</sup> that Hezbollah was training Iraqi militants in Iran. This followed the arrest of Lebanese senior militants in Iraq in March 2007, including a Hezbollah veteran called Ali Mussa Daqduq. Hezbollah could thus not remain idle following 2011 when its arch-ally, Syria in the resistance axis was the target of what it considered to be a Western and Israeli conspiracy.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Within this system, the Syrian revolution could only be a “mortal conflict”<sup>150</sup>. The mortal conflict fitted Tilly’s and Tarrow’s two-dimensional requirements: namely, the enormity of the interests at stake in Syria and the allocation of immense resources to military efforts. This dual requirement not only applied to local players but also immediate regional players such as Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon’s Iranian ally, which viewed the conflict in Syria as an existential security threat.

These regional dynamics and interests conflated and fed the conflict mechanisms: namely when it came to diffusion of conflict which not only spread from one Syrian region to another but across the borders, spilling into Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey via VNSAAs. Sunni jihadists conducted increased attacks while Shi’i militants from Iraq and Lebanon came to the defense of religious pilgrimage sites in Syria, and Syrian PKK members worked on the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous area that will be studied in future chapters.

Tilly and Tarrow’s other mechanism is one of “frontier activation,” which means a hardening between groups of an us-versus-them mentality, which not only applied to Syria but to neighboring countries where communities were divided around the Syrian issue. The authors’ final mechanism is “foreign certification”: i.e. the endorsement and support of foreign powers. These factors are what made the Syrian conflict so mortal and empowered the VNSAAs who were an obvious ally for regional powers aiming at positioning themselves in the Syrian war.

This means that non-state armed actors became prominent players in this complex conflict system. Not only did they thrive on the weaknesses of the system but they fed the conflicts on account of the controversy they triggered in their home countries, whether ethnic or religious, and the backing they enjoyed from regional powers (which we will study in detail the next section ) and their control over violence, at the expense of the state. VNSAAs are thus an integral part of the Levant conflict system dominated by new protracted wars.

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149 « Hezbollah Training Iraqis in Iran: U.S. Military », *Reuters*, 5 mai 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-iran-hezbollah-idUSL0540478820080505>.  
150 Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*.

## Conclusion

In this complex framework, the light foothold favored by countries such as the United States in the Syrian conflict, geopolitical realities, and military traditions of certain countries such as Russia and Iran translated into the heavy use of VNSAAs by regional and international players. For Iran, Hezbollah was the first natural choice given the proximity of Lebanon to Syria and the masterful insurgency and counter-insurgency techniques the group had developed in Lebanon and Iraq. The Popular Mobilization Forces were a later foray that could allow Tehran to deploy a large number of fighters in Syria. Washington's reticence to be directly involved in the war led to the CIA program of support for the mostly Sunni insurgency then a partnership with the YPG and the formation of the SDF to focus on the priority of countering ISIS. Russia's policy of implementing a frozen conflicts policy, which was employed mostly in countries near Russia that were susceptible to westernization and had large Russian minorities, was expanded to Syria. Russia's successful foray in Syria was thus copied from approaches in states such as Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine. "These states were in the process of moving away from the Russian sphere of Europe and the U.S. Another common factor is the lack of geopolitical alternatives for Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova. No other major power had the regional presence or desire to challenge Russia's primacy with the threat of force,"<sup>151</sup> says Andrew Sprague in his paper on the Russian frozen conflict. Given Russian familiarity with non-state separatist groups in countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and others, its experience in these countries was also used to develop counter-insurgency techniques in Syria. This was done alongside diplomatic tools that served to derail the concept of a political transition outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 on Syria. Gulf countries had the financial luxury to get involved in Syria, but a desire to avoid direct deployment of troops meant providing support to armed groups ranging from the FSA to Islamist organizations. VNSAAs had thus become the foreign policy weapon of choice for all these countries.

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151 Andrew Sprague, "Russian Meddling In Its Near Abroad: The Use of Frozen Conflicts as a Foreign Policy Tool," Institut Barcelona: Estudis Internacionals (2015-2016). Accessed March 9, 2019: [https://www.ibe.org/ibe\\_studentpaper28\\_71440.pdf](https://www.ibe.org/ibe_studentpaper28_71440.pdf)

## **Part 2: The unstable geopolitical context and Regional New Wars**

## Part 2 Introduction

The war in Syria confirmed changing international trends like regional conflicts. The concept of war has significantly evolved since the 1900s, when wars as understood and described by military strategist Carl Von Clausewitz took place mostly between modern states of equal capabilities<sup>152</sup>, within the Westphalian system<sup>153</sup>. For Clausewitz, wars aimed at securing specific military and political objectives and relied on an efficient trinity between people, military, and government<sup>154</sup>. Clausewitz believed that ultimately war was a political choice far removed from social dynamics, was combat-centric and involved unified enemies.

However, the Second World War marked a clear break from the previous military and political conflict system, as European powers became more aware that major conflicts should not remain part of their landscape, explains Bertrand Badie in his chapter *Guerres d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* published in the book *Nouvelles Guerres: Comprendre les conflits du XXI siècle*<sup>155</sup>. The Second World War restructured the political system within the framework of an ideological and geopolitical competition between East and West and the United States and Russia. The advent of nuclear weapons and mutually assured destruction made deadly and direct conflicts a zero-sum game and an irrational choice for superpowers, which increased indirect or proxy wars.

« While remaining in the imaginary of the Cold War, conflicts moved from the scene of powerful and rich to the poor, » says Badie<sup>156</sup>. This was also due according to Kaldor to the erosion and the disintegration of the state<sup>157</sup>. This plagued developing countries where corruption and state fragility were common.

The multiplication of indirect wars in far countries for the above-cited reasons not only moved conflict away from international centers of politics but also via the use of proxy forces. This minimized the threat of escalation between superpowers. Yet objectives and alliances remained clear, countries viewed the world geopolitical scene via the black-and-

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152 Bertrand Badie and Dominique Vidal, *Nouvelles Guerres: L'État Du Monde 2015*, (Le Découverte, 2014)

153 The Modern international system of sovereign states.

154 Emile Simpson, "Clausewitz's Theory of War and Victory in Contemporary Conflict," *U.S. Army War College Quarterly*, Volume 47 No. 4 (Winter 2017). Accessed 19 March, 2019:

<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3100&context=parameters>

155 Badie and Vidal, *Nouvelles Guerres: L'État Du Monde 2015*

156

Ibid.

157 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*

white optics of arch enemy or faithful ally, while national interests were defined by a tangible object.

Other experts reached similar conclusions. “A remarkable change has occurred in armed conflicts and civil wars since the end of the Second World War. Until then, and for two centuries, most major mortal conflicts had set sovereign states against each other, with the main exception being colonial conquest and colonial resistance. At the end of the last World War, the European metropolises were confronted with the resistance of their colonies. The wave of colonial wars swelled and then fell back in the 1970s. It was the Cold War and from the 1960s to the 1980s the major powers- especially the United States and the Soviet Union- and the former colonial powers were frequently involved in post-colonial civil wars ... But then civil wars without third-party direct military intervention gradually took the first place in major mortal conflicts,” says Charles Tilly and Sydney Tarrow, in *Contentious Politics*<sup>158</sup>.

After the Second World War, armed conflicts were classified into three types<sup>159</sup>. There were those which took the form of extra-systemic conflict between a state and a non-state group, located outside its territory, as was the case of colonial wars. Secondly, there were internal conflicts that opposed state power and domestic opponents without interference from other states. Finally, there are international intra-state conflicts including military intervention of other states. “It is in the third category that we find the most pure cases of civil war,” says Tilly and Tarrow, which are increasingly prevalent nowadays.

In essence, colonial wars disappeared for the most part in the post-1975 phase, with an irregular fluctuation in inter-state wars and a marked increase in the category of internationalized civil wars, a trend that has predominated since the 1980s. In terms of absolute frequency, the number of civil wars has certainly accounted for much of the wars in the last decade, says Tilly.<sup>160</sup>

Another factor, which could be attributed proxy wars was rooted in the slow change of the military and geopolitical order. The latter changed once again with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the threat of the Cold War subsiding, subsequently influencing the nature of conflict in the developing world. For a short time at least, it was believed that there would be no more major ideological conflicts analogous to the struggle against fascism in the Second World War and the Cold War dichotomy of capitalism versus communism<sup>161</sup>, in which

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158 Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*

159 Ibid.

160 Ibid.

161 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (Free Press, 2006 (new edition))

“liberal democracy” became the recognized final end point of the evolution of human society. Although factors like religion and nationalism might prevent the realization of aspects of the liberal democratic project, they could not pose a challenge to it analogous to the ideological struggles of the Second World War or Cold War, according to Francis Fukuyama.<sup>162</sup>

Fukuyama’s arguments were more nuanced than many critics appreciated, but there is no doubt they contributed to a sense of complacency in which there would now be a unipolar world order and liberal democracy had triumphed.

Soon enough though, that complacency was broken by new authoritarian alliances threatening U.S supremacy and taking shape between powers such as China, Russia and North Korea as well as Iran. While the United States’ super power status remained, it was nonetheless challenged by these new alliances that collectively disrupted the international regional order and resulted in a fragmentation of the political system. The world now no longer seems unipolar but trends towards apolarity. This in essence made proxy war appealing as conflict now pitted countries with different military strength as well as new military and diplomatic priorities such as the shift of the U.S toward the Far East.

The resulting uncertainty generated by the emergence of an apolar system, made political relations less manageable or predictable. Another problem was linked to the difficulty in risk and enmity assessment, as threats became harder to define, with interests and relations becoming more punctual than ever lasting.

Globalized security, social and economic trends exacerbated the feeling of uncertainty, with power shifting away from centralized state-oriented political leadership. Market forces changed the political system and reduced the efficiency of classical warfare while emboldening VNSAs that became allies of choice for many. Events were no longer limited to one geographical area. Such examples include global jihadism and the threat of major attacks not only in remote locations but also on U.S. home soil as embodied by the 9/11 attacks. In addition, other challenges emerged such as massive transnational migration streams, the financial crisis of 2008, and the Arab Spring, which triggered the widespread disruption of state authority across Africa and the Middle East, and had rippling effects throughout the West. Classical modern references such as international ethical and human rights values, international institutions, organizations, and authorities were increasingly

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162 For a layman’s summary of Fukuyama’s arguments and how they were arguably misunderstood, see, Matthew Continetti, “Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ Was Misunderstood by Critics,” National Review, August 7, 2019 (<https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/08/francis-fukuyama-book-the-end-of-history-misunderstood-by-critics/>)

undermined by the generalized confusion and led to the empowerment of smaller non-state actors.

These pull and push factors resulted again in a redefinition of the nature of war, more specifically in the Middle East with the prevalence of intra-state war, in the wake of the Arab Spring, marked by foreign intervention. This section will thus address the question of whether new wars will be the new form of conflict in the next phase for the Arab region and elsewhere in the world. This question is addressed in the first chapter by looking at factors that paved the way to new wars from shifts in economic and political systems to the contagion of failing states in the Syrian neighborhood. The New War concept is then looked at in detail in the second chapter of this section. In the third chapter, we examine the rise of a multiplicity of geopolitical actors and their transactional approaches to foreign policy, emboldening VNSAs that were increasingly perceived as low-cost and efficient geopolitical tools in the New War Syria context.



## Chapter 1: Failed States, the premise of New Wars?

Since 2011, three civil wars have taken place in the Arab region engulfing Syria (with spillover in Iraq) Yemen, and Libya. These wars witnessed the rise to prominence of transnational VNSAs, with some working as proxies for foreign countries, making the regional military and political landscape far more complex than during the cold war era.

Several factors have given rise to the changing war framework. In the past decade, the region has faced numerous political and economic shocks. Iraq has been battling terrorism and struggling with a fragile system of power-sharing between various ethnic and religious groups. Syria struggled with waves of Iraqi refugees while opening up economically, which raised population expectations and resulted in an uneven income distribution. Lebanon has been torn by instability and as in Iraq faced a struggle for power between religious sects. Generally, political and economic insecurity has contributed to the states' capabilities erosion and made it thus vulnerable to even more conflict.

In this chapter, we will look at the rise of conflict in what we will label as a crisis crescent, where economic under-development has been dovetailed by the failure of nation-state. These two features undoubtedly apply to the Syrian case and its direct neighborhood.

In a first section we will examine the crisis crescent in the regional pre- Arab Spring context, which is defined by an arc of poverty<sup>163</sup> (and more specifically transient poverty)<sup>164</sup>, economic shocks and diminishing states' capability, as well as horizontal inequality and unemployment. In a second section we will look at the impact of neighborhood of state fragility on Syria. Damascus found itself facing enormous demographic pressures and multiple waves of refugees, in a context of highly securitized intelligence and military apparatuses and fractionalized elites. We will finally conclude by establishing how these factors paved the way to the "New Wars" plaguing the wider region and Syria in particular.

### **I- Economic and Social roots to the Middle Eastern Crisis Crescent:**

According to geopolitical expert professor Jacques Solpesa- referring in his paper *Des conflits intraétatiques* to<sup>165</sup> a December 2006 publication prepared by the International Peace

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163 Cattaruzza and Sintès, *Géopolitique des Conflits*.

164 Transient poverty is perceived as fluctuation in a household income around the poverty line, in opposition with chronic poverty. Rafael Perez Ribas and Ana Flávia Machado, "Distinguishing Chronic Poverty from Transient Poverty in Brazil: Developing a Model for Pseudo-Panel Data," International Poverty Centre (April 2007). Accessed March 20, 2019: <https://ipcig.org/sites/default/files/pub/en/IPCWorkingPaper36.pdf>

165 Jacques Solpesa, "Des conflits intraétatiques," Le blog géopolitique de Jacques Soppelsa, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://geopol-soppelsa.over-blog.com/article-11925129.html>.

Research Institute of Oslo- of "the hundred or so countries affected by armed conflict during the last three decades of the twentieth century, 87 were in developing countries and 36 in low-income countries". Thus, wars over the later phase of last century and early in the 21s appear to take place mostly in developing or under-developed countries, where states are facing large economic challenges. The Levant was included in the category of developing and under-developed countries.

Another comparison pointing to the prevalence of conflict in developing countries was also established by political scientist Dr Jack Goldston. Goldston model uses few variables and a simple specification based on the Polity components, which leads the author to conclude that political institutions are the most important predictors of the onset of political instability. Goldston also underlined that while Europe had 15 unstable episodes in the 1955 to 2003 phase (amounting to 10.6% of total conflictual events) the most unstable region during the same period was noticeably that of sub-Saharan Africa, which experienced 49 episodes of instability, which represented 34.8% of the world's total, followed by the Near East and South Asia with 32 (22.7%) episodes, Latin America and the Caribbean with 19 (13.5%), and East Asia with 18 (12.8%)<sup>166</sup>.

The Middle East conflict crescent is closely linked to a poverty arc as some experts linked the index of human development and the geographical distribution of conflicts in the world. For some experts, the correlation with the 1970-2010 United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) seems evident, since most areas of conflict are concentrated in poorest areas. Of course, these dynamics alone do not start wars. Political grievances and conflict proneness are most likely to lead to conflict whether in the form of terrorism or civil war when poverty and inequality are combined with repression, which applies to the Syrian scenario.

HDI is broadly defined by a population's life expectancy, per capita income and access to education<sup>167</sup>. In 2010, prior to the revolution Syria had an HDI of 0.672.<sup>168</sup> At the regional level, Iraq's HDI was at 0.636<sup>169</sup> and while Lebanon was in the high category of HDI countries in 2010 at 0.766.<sup>170</sup>

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166 Jack A. Goldstone et al., "A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (n.d.): pp. 190–208.

167 Jeni Klugman, "Human Development Report, The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development," November 2010, 238.

168 "Syrian Arabic Republic" profile in UNDP's Human Development Report 2020 (<https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/SYR.pdf>)

169 "Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update, Iraq," UNDP, 2018, [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr\\_theme/country-notes/IRQ.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/IRQ.pdf).

170 <https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/LBN.pdf>

While medium to high human development were prevalent in Syria and its neighborhood in the pre 2011 revolution, the basic HDI did not assess issues such as inequality, environmental stress and political freedom and human rights. For these reasons revised versions of HDI have been issued that take into account these factors, and it follows that were they taken into account for Syria and its neighborhood, these countries would have scored lower than their basic HDI ratings in 2010.

These elements in the backdrop of economic state vulnerability, horizontal inequality and unemployment can be perceived as facilitating factors in the bad neighborhood framework.

#### **A- Poverty and state vulnerability:**

Low per capita income and poverty levels across a country are often correlated by experts with civil war, with ailing social services and poverty accused of fueling and sustaining conflict. However, some such as Conflict expert Jonathan Goodhand did not completely agree with the previous statement. He specified<sup>171</sup> in his paper *Violent Conflict, Poverty and Chronic Poverty* that modern conflicts are multi-causal with a range of short-term and long-term factors coming into play and it is difficult to give relative weighting to the different 'risk factors' but still admitted that "uneven development processes lead to inequality, exclusion and poverty". New marginalized sections of the population, abandoned by a state with reduced social capabilities, are thus more inclined to turn to organized banditry and VNSAs as a mean to survive.

#### ***i- From poverty and vulnerability to violent mobilization***

As previously seen, Goodhand argued that while chronic poverty is not a cause for conflict, it nonetheless leads to greater grievances, when it is combined with uneven development processes and inequality. Goodhand also focuses on the issue of transient poverty as a factor of violent mobilization. "Relative rather than absolute poverty appears to be more critical in terms of building up grievances, which lead to conflict. The anxious class on the verge of poverty may be more likely to turn to violence," says Goodhand<sup>172</sup>.

Interestingly, Jordanian jihadi expert Dr Hassan Abou Haniya told the author that a number of jihadists arrested in the wake of the Syria war had come from middle income family, which had fallen into poverty in recent years<sup>173</sup>. According to Goodhand, when growing grievances

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171 Jonathan Goodhand, "Violent Conflict, Poverty and Chronic Poverty," Chronic Poverty Research Centre Working Paper No. 6, May 1, 2001. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1754535>.

172 Jonathan Goodhand, "Enduring Disorder and Persistent Poverty: A Review of the Linkages Between War and Chronic Poverty," *World Development* 31, no. 3 (2003), pp. 629–46.

173 Interview with Hassan Abu Haniya, by Mona Alami in June 2018.

coincides with ethnic, religious, language or regional boundaries they increase “a society’s predisposition for violent conflict”<sup>174</sup>.

The United Nations <sup>175</sup> defines income poverty as when a family's income fails to meet an established threshold that differs across countries. Conversely absolute poverty measures poverty in relation to the amount of money necessary to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter.

Oxford economist Paul Collier argues that civil war is overwhelmingly a phenomenon of low-income countries <sup>176</sup>. “Higher per capita income reduces the duration of civil war and the probability of its occurrence. These effects are very powerful. At the mean of other variables, the probability of civil war is 0.63 if the country has half mean income<sup>177</sup> but only 0.15 if the country has double mean income. Similarly, the predicted duration of civil war is much shorter if income is higher,” he explains in his paper “On Economic Causes of Civil War.”

If we look at poverty levels in the region prior to the Arab Spring, the picture is quite bleak.

Syria was positioned as a lower middle-income country with a GDP per capita of \$1360.70 and a poverty headcount ratio of 28.2% of the population relative to 2011 purchasing power parity<sup>178</sup>. Other countries in the neighborhood were also in bad shape as an example, Iraq poverty levels were at 23% for that same year<sup>179</sup> while Lebanon was at around 30% for the same phase<sup>180</sup>.

Strong economic growth estimated per year for Syria did not keep up with population growth, while the agricultural sector, which employed 20% of the population prior to 2011 witnessed a 25% decline<sup>181</sup>. Syria may have not have suffered from absolute poverty, but it was faced with hordes of more educated youth who had seen their country’s liberalization as

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174 Goodhand, “Violent Conflict, Poverty and Chronic Poverty.”

175 , “Poverty | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,” UNESCO, accessed March 20, 2019, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/international-migration/glossary/poverty/>.

176 Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “On Economic Causes of Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 50, no. 4 (1998): pp. 563–73.

177 Mean income is total income divided by number of residents in a specific area.

178 “Data for Lower Middle Income, Syrian Arab Republic | Data,” World Bank, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=XN-SY>.

179 “Poverty Estimates and Trends in Iraq: 2007-2012,” World Bank, 2012 [file:///C:/Users/VAIO/Downloads/Iraq\\_Poverty\\_Methodology\\_Note\\_Final.pdf](file:///C:/Users/VAIO/Downloads/Iraq_Poverty_Methodology_Note_Final.pdf)

180 Maral Toutelian et al., “Poverty, Growth and Income Distribution in Lebanon,” *UNDP*, 2008, p. 30.

181 Lahcen Achy, “Syria: Economic Hardship Feeds Social Unrest,” Carnegie Middle East Center, March 31, 2011 accessed July 29, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2011/03/31/syria-economic-hardship-feeds-social-unrest-pub-43355>.

a boon to improve their situation, which never happened due to a confluence of factors as regional economics and political instability only worsened the Levant countries situation.

With poverty alone not being a cause for war, it leaves the country more exposed to external shocks. A conclusion that appears to have motivated some Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, in the post-2011 phase to launch a \$37 billion benefits program in an apparent bid to insulate the world's top oil exporter from an Arab protest wave<sup>182</sup>. Confident of its exceptionalism, the Syrian regime of Assad, which also lacked other Arab countries' wealth, could not match the spending efforts of the GCC. He issued a decree in April 2011 stipulating an increase in salaries for state workers and employees,<sup>183</sup> but this would not quell the unrest.

Syria's series of unfortunate events may have started with the political upheaval worsened by international and regional economic shocks and receding state capabilities.

### ***ii-Economic shocks***

Sudden economic changes can lead to a mobilization of communities sharing common grievances. Arab protests have been linked to the multiplication of economic shocks, such as the 2008 economic crisis combined with a spike in global food prices, followed by another increase in food price by 40% over an eight months period in 2010 that led to dramatic food inflation<sup>184</sup>. This came in the context of a global financial crisis that eroded wealth across the globe.

As a result, prices of commodities rose. In addition, the post-2008 phase witnessed a significant increase in the global price of food, resulting first from low global food stocks, due to drought in Australia, production lows in several other areas and an increase in biofuel production in North America<sup>185</sup>. This trend was only worsened by the U.S Federal Reserves quantitative easing measures, which led to an increase in the U.S dollar money supply and inflation. Concomitantly, in the pre-2011 Syria witnessed heavy drought leading to a sharp

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182 "Saudi King Back Home, Orders \$37 Billion in Handouts," Reuters, February 23, 2011. Accessed March 20, 2019: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-king/saudi-king-back-home-orders-37-billion-in-handouts-idUSTRE71M22V20110223>.

183 "President al-Assad Issues Legislative Decree Amending Decree No. 40 on Salaries," SANA, April 1, 2011, <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/travail/docs/2265/Legislative%20Decree%20No.%2044.pdf>

184 Andrew Lilico, "How the Fed Triggered the Arab Spring Uprisings in Two Easy Graphs," The Telegraph, May 4, 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/8492078/How-the-Fed-triggered-the-Arab-Spring-uprisings-in-two-easy-graphs.html>.

185 Aled Jones, "Food Security: How Drought and Rising Prices Led to Conflict in Syria," The Conversation, January 26, 2017. Accessed March 20, 2019: <http://theconversation.com/food-security-how-drought-and-rising-prices-led-to-conflict-in-syria-71539>.

farming production and water decline, upsetting the situation in rural areas and causing mass exodus to poor city suburbs, plagued by unemployment<sup>186</sup>.

### *iii- State capability*

Such shocks can significantly destabilize any country when it is combined with regressing state capacities such as in the case of Syria. Generally good resource governance and adequate social welfare spending- particularly on education and healthcare- reduce the risk of war. Hafez al-Assad, in keeping with his Baathist ideology, was a fervent supporter of a socialist economic approach, and provided various forms of social welfare to Syrian citizens from healthcare, to education, subsidized food, and utilities. More importantly, he also maintained a low profile when it came to appearances of wealth. However, with Bashar Assad's accession to the presidency in 2000, Syria moved away from the socialist and heavily interventionist economic model toward liberalization of the economy. This approach benefited elites more than the wider population despite the recording of economic growth over 5% per year in the five years prior to 2011.<sup>187</sup> elite wealth could see in lavish houses and expensive cars told a taxi driver to the author in Damascus, who underscored it had "never been the case in the time of Hafez Assad"<sup>188</sup>. The social contract that prevailed in the 1980s and 1990s -- in which the state guaranteed jobs to college graduates and offered free public services and cheap food for its population -- no longer held, says Lahcen Achy, in a 2011 paper for Carnegie<sup>189</sup>. Government expenditures earmarked for education, public employment, and pensions declined considerably, creating new marginalized populations, with a lower opportunity cost for violent mobilization<sup>190</sup>. This trend was more pronounced in the country's peripheral areas with an ambiguous relationship from Deraa to Deir Zour.

Generally, Syria like other countries in the region struggled in the pre- 2011 phase with state deficit. For geopolitical experts Tancrede Jossieran, Florian Louis, and Frederic Pichon<sup>191</sup>, the state's disengagement and economic liberalization policies of little benefit to the wider population are generally unfavorable to the state, as it strips the government of and offers opposing movements the opportunity to replace the state's social networks.

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186 Kennedy, Charles, "How Climate Change Caused the Syrian Revolution," OilPrice.com, March 23, 2013. Accessed September 5, 2022, <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/How-Climate-Change-Caused-the-Syrian-Revolution.html>.

187 Achy, "Syria: Economic Hardship Feeds Social Unrest."

188 Interview with anonymous source taxi driver in June 2011, Damascus Syria, by Mona Alami.

189 Achy, "Syria."

190 Goodhand, "Violent Conflict, Poverty and Chronic Poverty."

191 Jossieran, Louis and Pichon, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), p 73

In a paper for Chatham House<sup>192</sup>, David Butter emphasized that the decrease in subsidies on fuel and food by the government of president Bashar Assad, triggered economic grievances, including popular resentment at market-oriented reforms.” Although they were not a determining factor, increased poverty and inequality alongside the rise of a new wealthy business elite made for a combustible mix,” he analyzed.

### **B-Horizontal inequality and conflict**

One important hypothesis concerning the causes of violent conflict focuses on the presence of major horizontal inequalities between religiously or sectarian defined groups. These inequalities have several dimensions such as economic, social, political and cultural status and have to be distinguished from vertical inequality which measures inequality among individuals or households, across distinct cultural groups.

In his paper “Horizontal inequalities as a cause of conflict”<sup>193</sup>, Frances Stewart subdivides horizontal inequalities into economic inequalities in the form of income levels and employment opportunities, social inequalities in the form of access to state services (such as education, health care and housing, as well as in educational and health status), and political inequalities in the form of distribution of political opportunities and power among groups, including control over institutions such as the presidency, the cabinet, parliamentary assemblies, the bureaucracy, local and regional governments, the army and the police. Stewart concludes that when cultural differences coincide with economic and political differences between groups, this can cause deep resentment that may lead to violent struggles. However, researcher Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi disputes the theory arguing that countries such as Argentina had high level of inequality that did not lead to strife<sup>194</sup>. Although I do believe that horizontal inequality can on the contrary lead to violence as it linked to a particular group.

“Any type of horizontal inequality can provide an incentive for political mobilization, but political inequalities (that is, political exclusion) are most likely to motivate group leaders to instigate a rebellion, as can be seen, for example, in the recent case of Kenya. By contrast, economic and social inequalities, as well as inequalities in cultural status, are more likely to motivate the mass of the population. Cultural status inequalities bind groups together and

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192 David Butter, “Syria’s Economy Picking up the Pieces,” Chatham House, June 2015.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/document/20150623SyriaEconomyButter.pdf>.

193 Frances Stewart, “Horizontal Inequalities as a Cause of Conflict,” Center for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity. Accessed June 11, 2013:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08b0e40f0b64974000936/CRISE-Overview-1.pdf>

194 Interview Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, September 2022

thereby increase the salience of identity difference,” says Stewart. Goodhand appears to share similar views<sup>195</sup>, pointing to the importance of “extreme horizontal inequalities, as a source of grievance which is used by leaders to mobilize followers and to legitimate violent actions”.

Inequality is extremely prevalent in the Levant region and in Syria more specifically. The Fund For Peace Indicator<sup>196</sup> put inequality in 2011 at 9.0 in Iraq, at 7.8 in Syria, at 6.8 in Lebanon, and 6.9 in Jordan. The higher the figure, the greater the inequality. As an example, in comparison, economic inequality in Argentina in 2011 was at 6.0. Jossieran, Louis and Pichon underline that the rise of the Assad regime was largely in favor of Alawites and in general translated into the hegemony of the (Alawite Mountain) over the Sunni plains<sup>197</sup>. This translated into political dominance as well as a hegemony of Alawites in the military apparatus, which also propped up their entourage, and consequently under Bashar Assad on the main economic resources of the country. The trend was only aggravated during the war.

### **C- Unemployment as a factor of instability?**

The notion that unemployment is a strong probable cause or motivating factor for instability has dominated the debate among international development agencies as well as political elites.

A research paper by the African Development Bank on youth employment and instability demonstrates that “youth unemployment is significantly associated with an increase in political instability”<sup>198</sup>.

The New York Times’ Thomas Friedman has reported<sup>199</sup> that Jordan’s King Abdullah told a group of U.S. military visitors that “what keeps him up at night is just one thing — and it’s not ISIS or Al Qaeda. It’s the fact that 300,000 Jordanians are unemployed and 87 percent of them are between the ages of 18 and 39, prime working years”.

Economist Paul Collier’s has argued that unemployed young men have a low opportunity cost for engaging in violence and joining armed groups<sup>200</sup>. Therefore, high unemployment among the youth population is one factor that could predict the occurrence of civil war. In Collier’s papers on post-conflict reconstruction, he argues that the economic

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195 Goodhand, “Violent Conflict, Poverty and Chronic Poverty.”

196 “Fragile States Index,” The Fund for Peace,” accessed March 26, 2019, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>

197 Jossieran, Louis and Pichon, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l’Afrique du Nord* p 151

198 Therese F Azeng and Thierry U Yogo, “Youth Unemployment and Political Instability in Selected Developing Countries,” African Development Bank Group, May 2013 (accessed:

[https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Working\\_Paper\\_171\\_-\\_Youth\\_Unemployment\\_and\\_Political\\_Instability\\_in\\_Selected\\_Developing\\_Countries.pdf](https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Working_Paper_171_-_Youth_Unemployment_and_Political_Instability_in_Selected_Developing_Countries.pdf))

199 Thomas L. Friedman, “Beware the Mideast’s Falling Pillars,”

200 Collier and Hoeffler, “On Economic Causes of Civil War.”



growth rate is the single most (statistically) influential variable in determining whether a country returns to war within a few years of a peace settlement. According to Josseran, Louis and Pichon<sup>201</sup>, the Middle East has the highest unemployment rate in the world, more specifically in the under 30-years-old tranche. They underline as well that about 40 percent of the Middle east population earns less than 2 \$ a day, adding that the majority of unemployed Arabs are educated, with 30 to 40 percent having followed university courses. As of 2010, Syrian youth unemployment was at 17%, according to official census data but could have been much higher at 20% and rising to 35% in 2011. In Jordan it amounted to nearly 30% in 2010<sup>202</sup> and in Iraq at 17%<sup>203</sup>.

While unemployment is never alone a cause of conflict, it does facilitate participation in terrorist organizations and insurgencies, or in criminal enterprise in the backdrop of ethnic and sectarian particularities and enlarged identities such as those found in Syria.

## **II-Syria and a neighborhood of State fragility**

As we previously saw, Syria and its immediate neighbors fell in the pre-2011 phase within a crescent of economic underdevelopment. This crescent of underdevelopment was superimposed on crisis zones where the state is faltering.

Geopolitical expert Amael Cattaruzza's and Pierre Sintès<sup>204</sup> have identified three zones of crisis. "A first one is defined around tropical Africa, a second appears in the Eurasian arc of crisis that extends from south-east Europe and the Caucasus to south-east Asia, going through the Middle East; finally, a third zone is marked in a lesser measure in Latin America", say Cattaruzza and Sintès. If one looks at these areas today, many are in upheaval. Protests, and state failure plague the Levant, Eastern Europe is plagued by a major conflict and Latin America has been dominated as well by state corruption and drug artels.

The Middle East crisis region is thus largely plagued a situation of state fragility and failure. But what makes a state fragile or failed? A country whose government is either unable or unwilling to perform basic functions as well as of maintaining the rule of law is considered to be a failed state. When a country's population is exposed to extreme poverty, to high levels of violence and when institutions are weak, corrupt and paralyzed, the state is fragile. State fragility is generally combined with a lack of trust between the political elite

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201 Josseran, Louis ad Pichn, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord*.

202 "Jordan - Youth Unemployment Rate 2007-2017 | Statistic," Statista, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812127/youth-unemployment-rate-in-jordan/>.

203 "Iraq - Youth Unemployment Rate 2007-2017 | Statistic," Statista, accessed March 26, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812116/youth-unemployment-rate-in-iraq/>.

204 Cattaruzza and Sintès, *Géopolitique des conflits*.

and the population. Fragile states often face peripheral conflict, which makes them further fragile.

In the words of USAID “fragile states refer to a broad range of failing, failed, and recovering states that are unable or unwilling to adequately assure the provision of security and basic services to significant portion of their populations and where the legitimacy of the governments is in question”<sup>205</sup>.

Among the features associated with fragile states: they face slower progress toward the Millennium Development Goals and are plagued by poverty. In addition, they pose a threat for regional and international security, and they have higher economic and human costs for themselves and for neighboring countries<sup>206</sup>.

These specifics all apply to Syria and its neighborhood reality in the pre-2011 phase. As seen in the Fragile state index developed by the Fund for Peace, which placed in 2010 most Levant countries including Syria either on the warning or alert spectrum<sup>207</sup>. As an example, Iraq ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the fragile state index of 178, with 107.3 points (the higher the points, the worse the situation), Lebanon, ranked 34 at 90.9 points, Jordan ranked 90<sup>th</sup> with 77 points and finally Syria ranked 48<sup>th</sup> with 87.9 points. Conversely advanced countries like France had a 34.9 average, while Canada boasted 27.9 for the same period of 2010. However, failure can be total or concentrated to certain border areas.

As an example, Iraq is in a situation of total failure. Turkey, on the contrary is not considered as a failed state but faces, facing instability in peripheral regions facing Kurdish autonomous demands despite a pacification process. Lebanon is in an institutional paralysis. Syria was therefore undoubtedly in the midst of what is known as a “bad neighborhood”, a label attributed to a region where several bordering states are embroiled in armed civil or ethnic conflict and thus identified as failed. Goldstone<sup>208</sup>, identified “bad neighborhood” as an important risk factor for conflict. This is due to fact that failed states were more susceptible to outside intervention and more prone to destabilizing neighboring countries in a number of ways. The most obvious is by being a party to the conflict whether in a direct or indirect form, the latter by supporting rebel groups without deploying a large number troops on the ground- a key aspect of the war paradigm that emerged in Syria in 2011.

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205 , “Selected Definitions and Characteristics of ‘Fragile States’ by Key International Actors”, FSDR/DEVINVEST, 2016, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/documents/terminology/wcms\\_504528.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/terminology/wcms_504528.pdf).

206 Ines Afonso Roque Ferreira, “Defining and Measuring State Fragility: A New Proposal,” Annual Bank Conference on Africa, Berkeley (May 2015). pp. 1-39.

207 “Fragile States Index,” The Fund for Peace.”

208 Goldstone et al., “A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability.”

In this section we look at how failed states indicators of the Fund for Peace<sup>209</sup> apply to Syria and its neighborhood; namely in the form of demographic pressure, fractionalized elites, security apparatus, the presence of refugees and internally displaced people (IDP) and state legitimacy<sup>210</sup>.

### **A- Demographic Pressures**

According to the Fund For Peace Fragile state index<sup>211</sup>, this particular indicator takes into consideration pressures upon the state deriving from the population itself or the environment around it by measuring population pressures related to food supply, access to safe water, and other life-sustaining resources, or health, such as prevalence of disease and epidemics. Other things that are studied are whether the population growth is sustainable or not, how high is infant mortality rate as well as high population growth rates and more specifically “youth bulges,” or extreme divergent rates of population growth among competing communal groups. The indicator also takes into account pressures stemming from natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, floods or drought), and pressures upon the population from environmental hazards and problems with access to food and resources and more importantly water supplies.

The Syrian neighborhood and Syria rated particularly high in 2010. As an example, Iraq rated 8.5, Lebanon at 6.8, and at Jordan 6.8. Syria was at the time is significantly lower at 5.9, but Syria was also witnessing a significant youth bulge. According to Henrik Huitfeldt and Nader Kabbani in a paper initially presented at the Economic Research Forum in Cairo (2005) and drafted in 2006: “Syria experienced high population growth rates during the 1970s and 1980s, of around 3.5 percent per year – the result of a combination of high fertility rates, falling infant mortality rates, and increasing life expectancy. Population growth rates eventually fell to less than 3 percent during the 1990s. As a result, a demographic wave of young people began dominating the overall population. This youth bulge is expected to peak in 2005 and has contributed to high labor force growth rates, of between 5 and 6 percent per year”.<sup>212</sup>

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209 A value close to zero is considered as optimum , in 2010 it was applied to Finland considered as the least failed state. Conversely values close to 10 are the worst, awith Iraq notation around 10 that same year

210 "Fragile States Index, » The Fund for Peace.

211 Ibid.

212 Henrik Huitfeldt and Nader Kabbani, “Return to Education and the Transition from School to Work in Syria,” Twelfth Conference of the Economic Research Forum, February 27, 2006: [https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/m/C12578310056925BC12571D50031A947\\_NOTE6SZCM5.pdf](https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/m/C12578310056925BC12571D50031A947_NOTE6SZCM5.pdf)

## **B- Refugees**

According to the Fund For Peace, the “Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons Indicator” measures the pressure upon states caused by the forced displacement of large communities as a result of social, political, environmental or other causes, measuring displacement within countries, as well as refugee flows into others. The indicator takes into consideration additional pressure that refugees put on public services, the broader humanitarian and security challenges they create for the state where they find refuge and whether the receiving state has the capacity and resources to absorb the added pressure. The indicator also measures internally displaced people and refugees by country of origin, which can result in internal state pressures due to increased violence, environmental factors and health epidemics among many others.

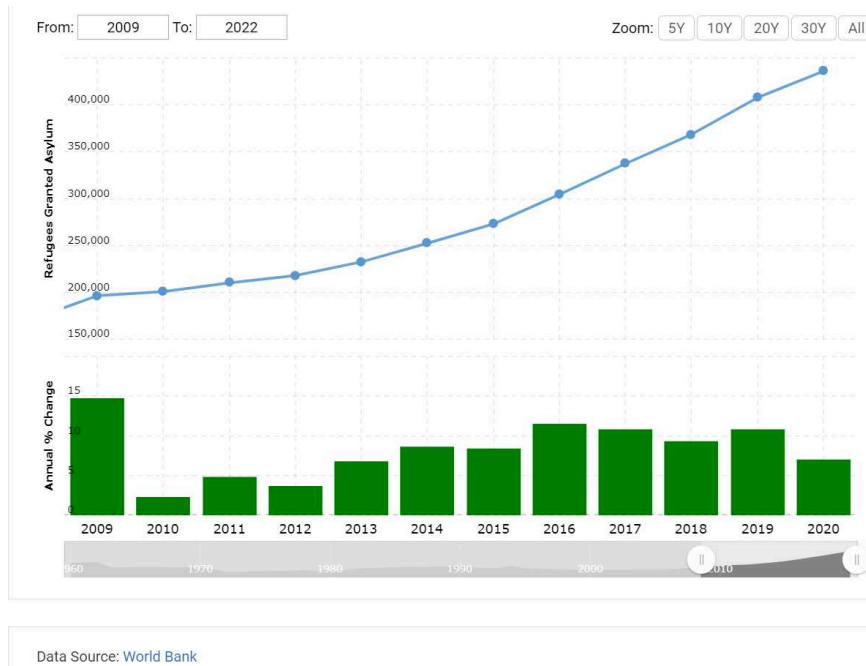
This particular indicator is significantly high for Syria’s neighborhood in 2010 due to the Iraq war and the Palestinian exodus in the wake of the creation of Israel. As an example, Iraq rated at 8.7, Syria at 8.9, Lebanon at 8.9, while Jordan rated a bit lower with 7.9. The region has been exposed to successful refugee waves. From the 2003 Iraq war to Syria and to Lebanon to a lesser extent and from the Lebanon war with Israel to Syria and 2006. According to the UNHCR<sup>213</sup>, by 2009, about 1.1 million people had sought refuge in Syria from Iraq. In addition, Syria has been called home to about half million Palestinians since the 1950s, according to the UNRWA website. Conversely France had less than 200,000 refugees granted asylum by 2009.

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213 “History of UNHCR Syria - UNHCR Syria,” *UNHCR* (blog), October 1, 2022: <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/history-of-unhcr-syria>.

## C- State Legitimacy

Figure 9: Refugees granted asylum in France (2022)



This particular indicator plays a prominent role in explaining the failure of state across Syria's neighborhood. State Legitimacy Indicator evaluates according to the Fund For Peace the openness and representativeness of government and its relationship with citizens. The indicator assesses the population's level of confidence in state institutions and processes, and correlates absence of confidence, to other factors such as public demonstrations, civil disobedience, and the presence of insurgencies. The Fund for Peace<sup>214</sup> State Legitimacy indicator also examines a country's integrity of elections, the nature of political transitions as well as the nature of the government representation. "The indicator takes into account openness of government, specifically the openness of ruling elites to transparency, accountability and political representation, or conversely the levels of corruption, profiteering, and marginalizing, persecuting, or otherwise excluding opposition groups ... and the ability of a state to exercise basic functions that infer a population's confidence in its government and institutions, such as through the ability to collect taxes". Other considerations are the population confidence in the political process, political violence and targeted assassinations, and the exposure to terrorism.

214 "Fragile States Index," The Fund for Peace.

Here again the Syrian neighborhood reflected a poor situation in 2010: Iraq rated at 9, Syria at 8.6, Lebanon at 7.3 while Jordan fared much better at 5.9. The region has thus suffered from a significant legitimacy deficit. For comparison, Luxembourg's score was 2.7 while France's was 1.8.

#### **D- Security Apparatus:**

The Security Apparatus indicator assess the presence of security threats to a state, namely in the form of attacks, conflict deaths, insurgency, coups and bombings. Other indicators taken into account by the Fund For Peace index include the number of homicides and levels of organized crime, the population's confidence in the country's security, the presence of armed resistance and the proliferation of mercenary groups that challenge the state's monopoly on violence. The Fund for Peace Index also assess that "in some instances, the security apparatus may extend beyond traditional military or police forces to include state-sponsored or state-supported private militias that terrorize political opponents, suspected "enemies," or civilians seen to be sympathetic to the opposition". The indicator also takes into account the prevalence of a "deep state", mainly in the form of irregular security forces and secret intelligence that are used to serve the political regime or leader.

As expected at the level of this particular indicator for 2010, Iraq fared worst with 9.5, followed by Lebanon at 8.9, while Syria fared a little better at 7.6, and Jordan had a score of 5.9. Syria's bad neighborhood had relied on multiple and powerful security apparatuses to consolidate power.

#### **E- Fractionalized Elites:**

The Fund For Peace failing state index also believed that factionalized elites play an important role in contributing to state failure. Factionalized elites translate into the fragmentation of state institutions along group lines whether in the form of clan, ethnicity, class, race and religion, as well as rivalry between groups in power. It also takes into consideration whether the military is representative of the larger population, whether there are separatists' movements, if a political reconciliation process exists and whether extreme rhetoric is prevalent. It also studies the reliance of these elites on irredentist nationalistic and communalist narratives, which are often used to bolster those who espouse them in the absence of legitimate and representative leadership that is accepted by the wider population. The Factionalized Elites category also factors in power struggles, political competition, political transitions, and whether resources are in the hands of a few and if elections are credible or not when and if they take place.

The region fares quite badly on this particular indicator in 2010, especially Syria's direct neighborhood with Iraq at 9.6, Lebanon at 8.8, Syria at 7.8 and Jordan at 6.5. In all these countries political elites are deeply divided on the basis of religion, tribal affiliation, international loyalties and ethnicity, which has fragilized the fabric of society. While In Syria, the situation was in no way comparable to its neighboring countries, given the Baath hegemony on the system, tribal, religious and ethnic tensions boiled under the peaceful apparent order.

### **III- Conclusion: Syria and the perfect economic and failed state storm**

Syria faced a perfect storm in the pre- 2011 phase. Moving from a socialist centrally planned system to a market economy, Syria faced worsening economic conditions within certain population groups despite strong growth. Grievances rose.

The fact that the revolution began in the suburbs and rural areas across the country is a strong indicator of the country's ailments in the pre-2011 phase and the failures of the regime's economic and social policies. In his book *Pas de Printemps pour la Syrie*<sup>215</sup>, Francois Burgat underlines the fact that many of the Free Syrian army forces which were involved in the Aleppo battles were mostly from small towns such as Maarat, Almadaan that experienced a spectacular population explosion from 1990 to 2010. "It is indeed in these small towns and in the suburbs of the great metropolises that the youth Tsunami experienced its strongest expression. They were the ones who saw the arrival of the baby boomers of the years 1980 and 1990 to adulthood and which during the 2000s hosted most of the rural exodus. During this decade, the working-age workforce grew from 6% to 8% per year. Economic growth allowed only 20% of needed opportunities, with 80% of non-state jobs being informal," says Burgat and Paoli.

Moreover, as we highlighted in earlier chapters, Syria faced both endogenous and exogenous aggravating economic factors. The first was the migrations from the al-Jazira area in 2003 and 2004 where half of the population migrated to the cities of Aleppo and Damascus as a result of the change in public policies, according to Paoli and Burgat. With Assad junior the country moved from a social to a liberalized system. The withdrawal from Lebanon, in the wake of the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri was not only a political defeat for the regime but also an economic challenge as the country provided for a seventh<sup>216</sup> of the Syrian workforce. "In 2006-2007, Syria experienced another shock with the

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215 Francois Burgat and Bruno Paoli, "Pas de Printemps Pour La Syrie," (La Découverte, 2013).

216 Ibid.

arrival of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis following the civil war, that is to say nearly 1.3 million refugees or more than 7% of the Syrian population directly integrated into the social network”, say Burgat and Paoli. In 2008, the economy suffered the shock of the global crisis with a decrease in exports in addition to the competition created by the free trade agreement with Turkey.

As previously stated, poor political and economic indicators do not alone contribute to violence. However, when they are combined with population grievances and undemocratic political systems, they do make countries more vulnerable to conflict.

Grievances have been very prominent in the Levant arc, whether in the form of ethnic or sectarian grievances, which has plagued the Levant. The Fund For Peace showcases grievance as “divisions and schisms between different groups in society – particularly divisions based on social or political characteristics – and their role in access to services or resources, and inclusion in the political process”. Historically, grievances run high within certain groups such as Kurds across the region, who were later joined by Sunnis with the pre-2011 phase whether in Iraq Syria, or even Lebanon, shaping their relation with the central government.

These grievances have been put in numbers by the Fund For Peace under the category of “Group Grievance” in the pre-2011 phase and they did not look good back then. According to the Fund for Peace failed state indicator Iraq's grievance indicator rate at 9.3, in Syria grievances were at 8.3, Lebanon at 9, and Jordan at 6.9.

A high level of grievances in a country undermines the state’s legitimacy and weakens its control over power or increases the possibility for it to be challenged, especially if a state has weak capability to address these grievances or is not willing because of its nature.

Poverty and high unemployment require more regime intervention, but when a certain country is also plagued by declining economic growth, this will translate into lack of state capacity. Low income and growth not only affect the state capacity and its ability to mediate between competing interests but it also increases opportunity costs for any present insurgent group, while making it more attractive for any future rebellion.

State nature thus plays an important role as it defines its capability or willingness to negotiate with new marginalized and aggrieved groups.

“Polity characterizes regimes along three dimensions: the degree of openness and electoral competitiveness in the recruitment of the chief executive (Executive Recruitment); the degree of institutional constraints on the authority of that chief executive (Executive Constraints); and the degree to which political competition is unrestricted, institutionalized,



and cooperative rather than repressed or factionalized (Political Competition),” notes Jack Goldstone in his paper, *Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory*<sup>217</sup>. Goldstone believed that certain types of regimes were thus far more vulnerable than others, especially grey systems in which regimes were neither democratic or perfectly autocratic, which were more prone to conflict. This meant that weak democracies in which checks on the executive authority were limited or absent, or where electoral regimes adopted winner-take-all competition could be as much as 30 times as likely to experience instability as perfect democracies<sup>218</sup>. In addition, autocracies with some political forms of competition were found to be eight times as vulnerable as closed autocracies<sup>219</sup>. Quoting French social analyst Alexis de Tocqueville, Goldstone warned that the most dangerous time for autocracies arose when they first set out on the path to reform. Political autocracies were most vulnerable when they introduced partial democratic procedures, without truly creating institutions to guarantee meaningful political competition.

This was the case in most countries in the Levant. The war in Iraq had introduced a weak democracy where sectarian groups vied for power and where institutions had limited checks and balances. Lebanon had been another weak democracy for decades and suffered from similar deficits. The authoritarian regime of Assad had witnessed a wave of liberalization that had reformed at least at the economic level the system while giving hope of political liberalization which was epitomized by the Damascus Spring of the post 2000<sup>220</sup>. While it is true that Levant states were liberalizing, state biases toward certain ethnic or religious groups and uneven development translated into a reconfiguration of wealth and the exclusion of other groups of society.

These converging dynamics from the shifting nature of the state to its economic and social failings would lead to what we witnessed in 2011 the emergence of New Wars, more markedly in Syria. For Bertrand Badie, “these new wars refer first of all to situations of acute social crisis experienced by the societies concerned. Far from being an inter-state competition they derive from a failure of the state, of its weakness, of its inability to assert itself, of its lack of legitimacy, of its inability to cope with social decomposition. While it was in Europe an extension of political action, it appears here as the result of a strong political deficit.

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217 Jack A. Goldstone, “Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, January 1, 2001), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1531902>.

218 “Political Instability Task Force: New Findings,” Wilson Center, February 4, 2005, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/political-instability-task-force-new-findings>.

219 Ibid.

220 Talal EL-ATRACHE and Richard LABÉVIERE, *Quand la Syrie s'éveillera...* (Perrin, 2011).

Hence the proliferation of the social referents that inhabit it and intervene as substitutes: tribal, ethnic, religious or clientelist ties. But to these is added the banal effect of a dramatic human insecurity: in the face of this failure of politics, too often, an anomic society is found suffering from a social contract that is not well developed and in which ethnic divisions define antagonism”<sup>221</sup>.

Syria was faltering under the impact of globalization. Service provisions declined, wars and terror were plaguing its immediate neighbor Iraq, and sectarianism was not only political but economic, with the rise of a new predatory economic class that would use its regime connection to advance its interests, youth expectations which had risen among the youth had not been met. When the Arab Spring rippled across the region, Syria’s exceptionalism did not last long.

For Mary Kaldor<sup>222</sup>, the Assad regime clearly showed many of the characteristics of a weak state, with economic sanctions imposed by the west taking their toll, combined with an increasing inability of the government to rely on the army to impose peace. For the professor the Syrian war was ultimately a New War.

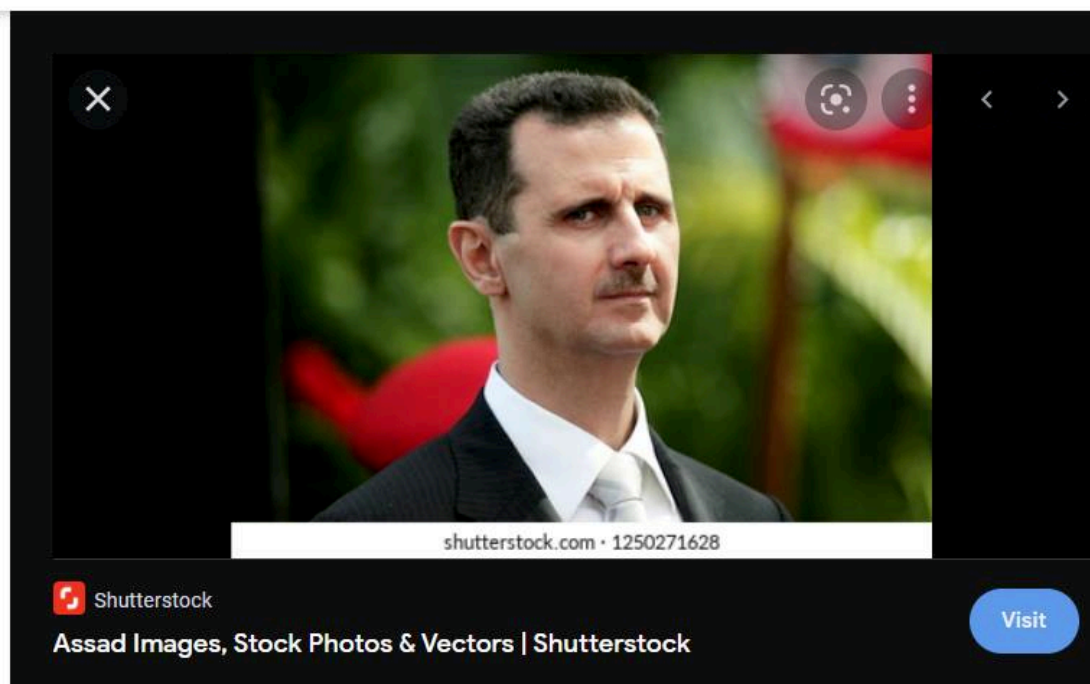


Figure 10: Bashar Al Assad

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221 Badie and Vidal, *Nouvelles Guerres*

222 Mary Kaldor, “What to Do about Syria’s New War?,” openDemocracy, February 12, 2012, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/what-to-do-about-syrias-new-war/>.

## Chapter 2: The Theory of New Wars Applied to Syria

In 1998 Mary Kaldor argued in her book, *New and Old Wars*, Organized Violence in a Global Era<sup>223</sup> that a new type of organized violence had developed, one that was mostly prevalent at the time in regions such as Africa and Eastern Europe. Kaldor described this wave of violence as new wars, which she linked to the wave of globalization the world was experiencing. Kaldor used the term new war, to distinguish such wars from “prevailing perceptions of war drawn from an earlier era”. This new type of violence was foremost political even though these new wars blurred distinctions between conflict, organized crime, and systematic violations of human rights. These wars also could be labeled as hybrid wars, because they obscured the lines between the realm of public and private, state and non-state, formal and informal, and more importantly was comprised of conventional warfare, counter-insurgency, terrorism and civil war elements.

“In most of the literature, the new wars are described as internal or civil wars or else as low-intensity conflicts. Yet although more of these wars are localized, they involve a myriad of transnational connections, so that the distinction between internal and external, between aggressions (attacks from abroad) and repression (attacks from inside a country), or even between local and global are difficult to sustain. Some authors describe the new wars as privatized or informal wars, yet, while the privatization of violence is an important element of these wars, in practice, the distinction between what is private and what is public, state and non-state, informal and formal, what is done for economic, and what is done for political motives cannot be easily applied,” said Kaldor in her book<sup>224</sup>. New wars were also based along lines of religion, language, ethnicity and rigid forms of nationalism.

Figures releases by the Stockholm Peace Research institute appear to confirm Kaldor’s conclusions. It seems that over the 2001 to 2011 phase, internal wars also known as intra-state wars represented 85% of all conflicts in most years<sup>225</sup>.

The question that we will attempt to answer in this chapter is in what way does Syria fit the New War Paradigm that Kaldor puts forth?

In a first sub-section we will attempt to define identify New Wars’ main features. In a second section we will be looking at how the Syrian war fits the New War theory. In a third

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223 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

224 Ibid.

225 Badie and Vidal , *Nouvelles Guerres*

section we look into how the New War converges with the war of Barbarism developed by Robert Kaplan in his theory of the Coming Anarchy<sup>226</sup>.

## I- New Wars

Mary Kaldor, Bertrand Badie and others academics have distinguished New Wars from regular civil wars, by identifying several features. One first feature is that ‘New Wars’ theory has been significantly correlated with the concept of globalization and its impact on contemporary international politics and economy, and contribution to the emergence of conflicts systems. Kaldor underlines that globalization is not only a primary cause of New Wars, but ironically one of its features.

Authoritarian regimes undergoing economic liberalization are more vulnerable to globalization by-products, because of the growing rift it creates between the haves and the haves-not. Faced with globalization’s by-products namely downward economic pressure- such as changing labor market conditions, declining social protection, and increasing inequality in wages<sup>227</sup> - autocratic leaders losing legitimacy increasingly resort to identity politics to justify their authoritarian policies and to mobilize political support, by increasing fear and insecurity of specific groups or simply to find easy scapegoats. This leads to a greater polarization of a country’s society and fragments its fabric.

Identity politics, which are “movements which mobilize around ethnic, racial or religious identity for the purpose of claiming state power”<sup>228</sup>, are an essential element of new wars and are fragmenting and backward-looking, explains Kaldor in her book.

Globalization generally comes hand-in-hand with new forms of communication technologies. The growing use of these technologies also exacerbate the globalization phenomena, because it allows for a faster and wider diffusion of narratives and counter-narratives dominated by group interests and among a population that that becomes as a result increasingly fractionalized.

In new wars, violence is generally blind and indiscriminate and climbs with the growth of irregular troops while the state loses -willingly or unwillingly- its monopoly on violence. In new wars, the state’s monopoly on violence is diverted to fighting units that are

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226 Robert D. Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” *The Atlantic*, February 1, 1994, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/>.

227 Snezhana Hristova, “Local Economic Development in the Era of Globalization: The Case of Republic of Macedonia,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, April 5, 2013), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2245571>.

228 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

private or public<sup>229</sup>, generally lacking military discipline or clear coherent hierarchies, often operating without objectives and responsible for multiple humanitarian exactions.

Besides the chaotic landscape that emerges from these new wars, the state's behavior becomes more disorderly as it prioritizes repression of any opposition and does not care about securing popular support. This prioritization of the security aspect over the popular aspect, translates into intentional civilian targeting, ethnic or sectarian cleansing, by relying on starvation, indiscriminate bombings of hospitals, schools, water resources and food markets to provoke demographic change. This latter angle will nonetheless be addressed in the third section of this chapter, on the war of barbarism

State and non-state blind violence in New Wars results in large waves of refugees, which lead on the longer term in the creation of a mobilized diaspora. This diaspora contributes in some cases in providing financial assistance to an insurgency, which is often backed by international governments. This results in an internationalization of the conflict and the spillover of identity politics, foreign fighters and illegal circuits of trade.

#### **A- Globalization and its impact on nation-states.**

The onset of globalization has put an end to what Kaldor characterized as virtual cultures, often rooted in the concept of nationality and of nation-state that was promoted by intellectuals. Globalization fragmented these binding and virtually cohesive cultures, which relied for the most part on sets of beliefs and traditions impregnated by the country's history, myths and geography<sup>230</sup>. Globalization ushered the global village phenomena, with the rise of media and communication that connected people, independently of their geographic location. The global village concept also exacerbated in some cases horizontal cultures, which were internationally and linked and based on religion or ethnicity or any other general beliefs. Kaldor argued that on one hand the process created inclusive transnational networks of people and excluded and atomized on the other hand large numbers of people, which she believed belonged to the vast majority<sup>231</sup>. "This globalization exacerbates identities because of the alienation it creates in society," says Kaldor.

Another byproduct of globalization resides in the exacerbation of ideological influences. History has shown that ideological influences can wreak havoc across the world with the spread of new ideas. We have seen how the Atlantic anti-monarchy Revolutions

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229 Ibid.

230 Roland Robertson and Kathleen E. White, *Globalization: Global Membership and Participation* (Taylor & Francis, 2003).

231 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

expanded from America to Europe in the 1700s; the anti-colonial revolutions of the 1950s and beyond, the communist revolutions after the Second World War, the Arab nationalist revolutions of the 1950s, and the Islamic revolutions of the post 1979 phase that radically changed the political systems in Iran, Sudan and Afghanistan<sup>232</sup>. While the latter contagion took years and decades to expand from one country to another, it took a few months for the Arab Spring to embrace Tunisia, Bahrain, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Mass communication and social media allowed for the near instant mobilization of Arab crowds.

### **B- Identity politics.**

Kaldor identifies two dynamics by which globalization creates marginalized classes. One is a top-down approach, which results in political elites disconnecting from the popular base and relying heavily on prejudicial policies. A second is a bottom-up approach, which results from population insecurities caused by the growing economic exclusion and the creation of a parallel economy. Whether top-down or bottom-up in nature, these two dynamics undermine the principle of the nation state and lead to an erosion of the trust between population and their political elites<sup>233</sup>. Such dynamics have been observed in former Yugoslavia as well as in African countries. As an example, former Yugoslavian states<sup>234</sup> were united by the political monopoly exercised by communism. The end of the communist rule with the breakdown of the Soviet Union led to the eruption of nationalist identities such as Serbs, Croats and Bosnians in particular engaged in vicious strife.

Kaldor adds that globalization has another pervasive effect. It breaks up what she labels “Vertical Cultures” based on the nation-state, generated by intellectuals, journalists, and circulated through publications and education. Globalization eroded the virtual cultures around the world, replaced by horizontal cultures, from brand names like Coca Cola to media outlets like Al-Jazeera and the spread of the English language as well as social media.

In addition, in the Middle East and Africa<sup>235</sup>, the end of the Cold War, and the post-colonial phase led to a decline in politically driven aid while reducing the intervention of state, which was also dovetailed by pressure for democratization. Political elites resorted to identity politics or populist policies to legitimize their clinging to power. The end of socialist economy and the introduction of neo-liberal policies increased income disparity, the monopoly of certain factions over resources and growing unemployment in the backdrop of

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232 Goldstone, “Toward a Fourth Generation of Revolutionary Theory.”

233 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

234 “Balkans War: A Brief Guide,” BBC, March 18, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17632399>.

235 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

swift urbanization. The state also resorted to outsourcing of state services to religious institutions, which led to the rise of new types of sectarian networks and reference points.

Stephane Roziere<sup>236</sup> appears to concur with Kaldor's conclusions on globalization, which is marked by an identity deficit with its internationalized networks. He underlines as well that "the border that we want to protect does not have anymore a military dimension but aims at protecting the identity of the people it encompasses". This rising need to protect a virtual religious, ethnic or tribal identity can often lead to a balkanization or an implosion of the state.

The disintegration of the modern state led to the rise of new economic elites and profiteering communities contributing to a greater sense of insecurity in societies and in turn to a privatization of the monopoly on violence.

### **C- Privatization of military forces.**

In the chapter 'Ni guerre ni paix , guerres sans fin, désordre ordonné' Laurent Gayer<sup>237</sup>, underlines that another feature of New Wars is when the state deliberately starts sharing with private armed groups, the exercise of coercion, whether this sharing on the monopoly of violence happens with paramilitaries , or jihadists, criminal organizations or violent political parties. Far from being dysfunctional, explains Gayer, this sharing of sovereignty has allowed states to outsource certain responsibilities for a lower cost whether in its financial or political form and more specifically when the outsourced violence is illegitimate and in the form of societal control, the crackdown on the opposition, diplomatic missions, or economic responsibilities. This does not always result in the disintegration of the state. A prominent example is Turkey's reliance on private militias to fight the Kurdish PKK<sup>238</sup>

Another dynamic in the 'militiazation' of regular forces". is highlighted by Marielle Debos in "Milices et sous traitance de l'insecurité"<sup>239</sup>. The de-institutionalization process- which undermines the functioning modes based on hierarchy and bureaucracy- progressively transforms sections of the armed forces that generate much of their revenues not from their allegiance to the state but from resources confiscated to society or stolen from civilians," says Debos. This contributes to new societal insecurities and generates new economic networks,

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236 Rozière, *Géographie Politique et Géopolitique: Une Grammaire de L'Espace Politique*

237 Badie and Vidal, "Nouvelles Guerres -."

238 Ibid.

239 Ibid.

something that has happened in African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo<sup>240</sup>.

Thus, according to Kaldor, military and paramilitary factions specific to New Wars comprise regular armed forces, paramilitary groups, self-defense units, foreign mercenaries and regular foreign troops. Some paramilitaries<sup>241</sup> can also include redundant or defecting soldiers, while self-defense units are mostly composed of local people who choose to defend their regions. Foreign mercenaries have come to play an important new role in modern new wars. Foreign contractors are sometimes paid by the state and are thus motivated by money, and they co-exist with those driven ideologically as we saw in the pre- 2011 context in the war of Afghanistan or Iraq. In New Wars, the use of child soldiers in conflict becomes more frequent as has been the case in Africa namely in the infamous army of Charles Taylor.<sup>242</sup> Moreover this proliferation of militias contributes to the rise of a militarized society, which blurs the distinction between peace and war, as war becomes a permanent fixture of society<sup>243</sup>.

#### **D- New War and the globalized war economy.**

New Wars and the disintegration of the state is accompanied by a failure to control territory. This leads naturally to a vicious cycle. The failing state falls further as it loses grip on territory and is thus unable to conduct basic tasks that allows it to secure a constant revenue stream such as raising taxes, essential for its self-sufficiency<sup>244</sup>. In this context where the state is increasingly reliant on irregular forces to extend control, incumbent governments often actively encourage militias to pillage populations that are considered as supporting the opposition, or racketeer local populations and businesses by asking for protection money or by taxing commercial cars on checkpoints. To survive, militias have to rely on such predatory measures in addition to sponsorship of foreign states or on the support of a loyal diaspora. A typical example is best illustrated by the financial support provided by the Kurdish international community to the PKK movement. Other types of financing in the form of foreign government assistance can be specifically applied to for example the Kurdish insurgency in Iraq by Iran under the Shah, and at the later stage by the U.S.<sup>245</sup>, as well as Iranian assistance to Shi'i paramilitaries in the post 2003 phase in Iraq.

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240 Ibid

241 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

242 Mats Utas, *Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War*, (Uppsala University Press, 2003).

243 Badie and Vidal, *Nouvelles Guerres*

244 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

245 Michael M. Gunter, "Foreign Influences on the Kurdish Insurgency in Iraq," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 12, no. 4 (September 9, 1992).



These elements that mark the New War phenomena generally result in a never-ending cycle of decline and violence, whereby the failed state fails further and is further exposed to violence, a scenario that took place in the 2011 phase in Syria.

## **II – New Wars in Syria:**

When the conflict broke out in 2011 in Syria, it fitted in many ways Kaldor's New War theories whether in its causes or its consequences. The protests were linked to a larger Arab regional movement that denounced failing autocratic systems that had all witnessed in recent years an erosion of the social contract. Minute by minute coverage of the revolutionary movement was covered by regional and international media as well as activists who used social media to communicate with the world. In Libya, Bahrain, Egypt, Syria and Tunisia, protestors appeared to share the same grievances, and united in their revolt. Governments struggling to contain the movement resorted as well to identity politics to counter what appeared to seem a united front of revolutionaries. As their grip on security institutions faltered, more and more pro-regime militants took to street, beating or shooting protestors, as was the case in Syria with the Shabiha. Alongside the outsourcing of the monopoly of violence to local actors, there was the rise of foreign paramilitaries. With violence engulfing Syria, an informal war economy emerged as well, further dividing the country.

### **A- Failing Syrian state in a globalized era**

In *Désintégration institutionnelle et désintégration sociale, quels facteurs belligènes*' Frederic Ramel<sup>246</sup> underlined that state structure can fail because of vulnerability to top down and bottom-up dynamics, emphasizing that the key variable being the incapacity of the state and in this case an autocratic state to honor the social contract that it derived part of its power from. Such features applied to Syria where top-down pressures resulted from the state's failure and bottom-up pressures from an increasingly marginalized population. Ramel argued that for the state to be granted monopoly of legitimate physical coercion, it had to meet its security and social missions. The first mission consists in ensuring the security and social welfare of the population in its territory through suitable means, starting with military and police institutions respectful of the rule of law. While the Assad regime was capable of acting as guarantor of security in the pre 2011 phase, its capability to provide economically and socially for a growing youthful population started to lack, even with its post-2000 liberalization policies, as seen in the previous chapter. In his book *Baath et Islam en Syrie*,

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246 Badie and Vidal, *Nouvelles Guerres*

Thomas Pierret<sup>247</sup> noted that at the end of the 90s, the Syrian government was no longer capable of fulfilling its social obligations vis-a-vis a rapidly growing population; of which 30.1 percent lived under the poverty level. “In order to limit the partially destabilizing effects of this pauperization, the regime liberalized its policies regarding the charitable sector that witnessed an unprecedented boom in the history of Baathist Syria,” elaborates Pierret<sup>248</sup>, underlining that of the hundred or so organizations that operated in Damascus alone, 80% were Muslim Sunni.

The capacity of the state to ensure a fair redistribution wealth, to meet the population demands by beefing up public services, which are part of the conception of the welfare state, were thus in significant decline. When living conditions failed to improve, and when basic needs were not satisfied, regional grievances for better living conditions, employment, justice and equality found an echo in Syrian society.<sup>249</sup> Yet, Ramel’s bottom approach also applied to the events witnessed in Syria. Ramel believed that the bottom-up approach is linked to the exclusion of certain groups based on religion and ethnicity. This agreed with Kaldor statement that due to the identity factor, “New wars were a throwback to the past”. This was also the case of Syria where the Sunni population, more specifically its rural population<sup>250</sup>, felt sidelined by the Alawites in the military and economic sectors as well as in terms of government investments in the various provinces. As an example, Alawites disproportionately held the most sensitive positions in the armed forces. Air defense force was led mainly by Alawite officers<sup>251</sup>, preventing the pilots from making a play for power. Bashar's brother, brigadier general Maher al-Assad was the commander of the Republican Guard as well as the army's elite Fourth Armored Division. Asaf Shawkat, Assad’s brother-in-law was the head of Military Intelligence and later a deputy minister of defense until his death July 2012. This marginalization was particularly harsh against the Kurds, of whom 300,000 had been denied citizenship until April 2011<sup>252</sup>.

Another important element, highlighted by Syrian expert Fabrice Balanche, focused on the rural/ urban divide. Balanche noticed that protests started in Deraa, moving to the Damascus suburbs, Homs, Hama, and smaller cities such as cities such as Rastan or

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247 Thomas Pierret, “Baas et Islam En Syrie - Pierret Thomas (PUF, October 2011)

248 Ibid.

249 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

250 Balanche, “Géographie de La Révolte Syrienne,”

251 Zoltan Barany, “Why Most Syrian Officers Remain Loyal to Assad,” Doha Institute, 2013.

252 “Syrian President Grants Citizenship to Kurds,” The Telegraph, April 7, 2011,

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8435041/Syrian-president-grants-citizenship-to-Kurds.html>.

Talbisseh, as well as the rural areas around Aleppo<sup>253</sup>. A closer geographic analysis of the protests showed that they were taking place mostly in peripheral areas abandoned either politically or economically by the state. In urban areas, economic liberalization increased the rift between rich and poor, the latter left out in the large overpopulated suburbs such as Ghouta. Rural areas at the time of the revolution were facing many challenges from the youth boom that translated in diminished revenues for farmers families, to the closing of the illegal water wells by the government and water-management policies that favored large urban areas<sup>254</sup>. Balanche's thesis corresponds to that of Kaldor<sup>255</sup> who theorizes that globalization leads to income disparities across regions that leave populations marginalized, thus creating divisions within the social fabric.

This reality reflected the lack of social cohesion and exclusion of certain groups and thus explained the revolt. Following Ramel's logic, bottom-up pressures tended to generate conflictual, individual or collective, transient or more durable situations that applied to the Syrian case.

To survive, the regime increasingly relied on the intelligence services and elites' forces such as the Republican Guard, while the phenomena of Shabiha (the Arabic word for ghosts, who designated regime supporters who were responsible for massive acts of violence), rose. More specifically, the regime felt it could no longer trust Sunni soldiers to crack down on their brethren.

## **B- Creating Identity narratives**

Kaldor<sup>256</sup> rightly stated that new wars were a claim to power on the basis of identity, which clearly too place initially in Syria. Feeling increasingly cornered, the regime resorted to a sectarian playbook that had allowed it to successfully maintain control over Lebanon for nearly 30 years. The Assad regime worked on polarizing the population. First as seen in the first chapter it resorted to systematic mistreatment, torture and humiliation of mostly Sunni protestors in order to create a radicalization backlash and thus strengthen the religious narratives on both sides of the divide. It also released a number of radical Islamists from its prisons. As an example, in May 2011 at least 260 prisoners were released from the Saydnaya military prison in Damascus countryside<sup>257</sup>. Some of these radicals went to become involved

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253 Balanche, "Géographie de La Révolte Syrienne,"

254 Ibid,

255 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars* p77.

256 Ibid.

257 Hakim Khatib, "Assad-and-the-Rise-of-ISIS," Orient-news.net, October 2017, [https://orient-news.net/en/news\\_show/133225/0/Assad-and-the-rise-of-ISIS](https://orient-news.net/en/news_show/133225/0/Assad-and-the-rise-of-ISIS).

in leading the most prominent jihadist and Salafi organizations. Examples include Hassan Aboud (Ahrar Al-Sham), Zahran Alloush (Jaysh Al-Islam) and Amru Al-Absi (ISIS),<sup>258</sup> which allowed for president Assad to accuse the opposition of being “takfiri terrorists”<sup>259</sup>.

Many of the shabiha deployed in majority Sunni areas by the regime to crush rebellion were members of President Assad’s community. Exactions, they committed such as the 2012 Houla massacre of 108 people, gave the impression that the Alawites were indiscriminately supporting the regime<sup>260</sup>. Identity politics were systematically applied throughout the course of the war as the regime labeled tagged its opponents as ‘terrorists’ or ‘foreign elements’ threatening the Syrian nation and claiming that it was protecting Syrian minorities whether religious such as Shi’a, Christians, Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, or ethnic namely Palestinians, Kurds and Circassians.

### **C- Outsourcing violence and the rise of paramilitary**

The revolution created a massive manpower problem for the regime. Soldiers defected because they identified with protestors, or because they refused to fight outside their regions. Others deserted and evaded the draft, fearing long and harsh terms of mandatory and reserve service. Prior to the war, the Syrian army boasted around 300,000 soldiers, composed primarily of mandatorily conscripted youths. This number dwindled down by 2015 to less than 100,000<sup>261</sup>. Massive human losses and mistrust prevailing within the military situation before 2015 forced the regime to rely on loyalists who progressively formed their own factions.

The regime solved the problem by outsourcing part of its security to militias allowing people to fight in local areas and for deserters to sort out their military status. Large formations<sup>262</sup> such as the National Defense Forces (NDF), the Local Defense Forces (LDF) and a number of paramilitaries linked to various intelligence services emerged within the Syrian security landscape. The NDF was created by merging of local Popular Committees while the LDF, which was considered part of the Syrian armed forces, fell under the

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258“Abu al-Athir al-Absi: from Saydnaya to the American lists,” al-Akhbar October 22, 2014 <https://al-akhbar.com/Syria/40072>

259 “Bashar Al-Assad’s Opera House Speech, January 6, 2013,” Carnegie Middle East Center, January 6, 2013, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/50513?lang=en>.

260 Harriet Alexander, “The Shabiha: Inside Assad’s Death Squads,” The Telegraph, June 2, 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9307411/The-Shabiha-Inside-Assads-death-squads.html>.

261 Abdulrahman al-Masri, “The Fifth Corps and the State of the Syrian Army,” Syria Deeply, January 11, 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/01/11/analysis-the-fifth-corps-and-the-state-of-the-syrian-army>.

262 Aron Lund, “Who Are the Pro-Assad Militias?,” Carnegie Middle East Center, March 2, 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215>.

leadership of Iran and Hezbollah, according to interviews conducted by the author with pro-regime militias<sup>263</sup>. These paramilitary forces are again one characteristic of New wars. Kaldor taking the example of Bosnia, underlines that for most of the paramilitary group the motivation is mostly economic,

In 2016, Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi<sup>264</sup> divided the pro-regime militias according to their backing, from those sponsored by Iran and Hezbollah, to ones affiliated with the al-Bustan Association financed by the president's cousin Ramy Makhlouf, to Christian militias and others affiliated with the Republican Guard and various other security institutions. Many of these groups were later involved in illicit trades of antiquities, drugs, or oil<sup>265</sup>.

Facing the paramilitary was a fragmented insurgency. At the onset of the revolution, the most prominent political and military organization was the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, supported by the Syrian National Council, the Local Co-ordination Committees and the Free Syrian Army created at the end of July 2011 among army defectors who decided to support protesting civilians. Yet the increase in violence and internationalization of the conflict resulted in a flurry of Islamic and more radical organizations. By 2016, the rebel landscape had become concentrated in Syria's southern and northern country-sides, and the Damascus Ghouta suburb as well as Aleppo city. In the South, the region was dominated by the Free Syrian Army factions regrouped under the Jabhat Janubiya ("Southern Front") label. Some 49 factions claimed membership to the Southern Front<sup>266</sup> comprised some 30,000 fighters spread across the southern governorates of Quneitra, Daraa, and Sweida, as well as in and around Damascus. Located 75 km from Southern Quneitra, the Eastern Ghouta was one of the most important areas under rebel control, given its proximity to Syria's center of power Damascus. The region was home to two major factions: the Salafi Jaysh al-Islam (JAI) and Faylaq al-Rahman (an Islamist group affiliated to the FSA) as well as other groups such as Ahrar Sham Jaysh al-Fustat. The first two groups boasting some 20,000 fighters according to an insurgent source. In Aleppo, the eastern half of the city was controlled<sup>267</sup> by rebel groups while the western half was controlled by regime forces. The surrounding rural region was nearly entirely under the

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263 Interview with commander in pro-regime militias ( off the record), by Mona Alami, December 2018, Beirut Lebanon

264 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Bibliography: Pro-Assad Militias," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, August 2016, accessed April 4, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2016/08/bibliography-pro-assad-militias>.

265 Alexander, "The Shabiha."

266 Aron Lund, "Does the 'Southern Front' Exist?," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 21, 2014, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55054?lang=en>.

267 Aron Lund, "Who Is Laying Siege to Whom in Aleppo?," Carnegie Middle East Center, August 8, 2016, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64274>.

control of opposition factions, namely Islamist-dominated coalition of Sunni Arab rebel factions in the west and southwest. However, the northwest pocket of Afrin was in the hands of the YPG and the northeast in the hands of ISIS.

Aleppo was also home at the time to a flurry of various rebel factions, mostly belonging to the FSA alongside Islamist brigades. The creation of the Fateh Aleppo Operations Room allowed for a certain level of consolidation with over 15 factions included in the room, such as al-Sham Front, the Movement of Nur al-Din Zanki, the Safwa brigades, Faylaq al-Sham, Fastaqim Kama Umirt, the Dawn of the Caliphate Brigades, and Battalion 16 among many others. Some of these groups are affiliated to the Turkish MOM operating center. According to Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, Jaysh al-Fateh (JAF), which emerged in Idlib in March 2015, had between 12,000-15,000 fighters and was led by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham<sup>268</sup>. Soon after it was formed, Jaysh Al-Fateh took control of the Idlib, and thus Ahrar Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra became the biggest players there.

Syria's north was undoubtedly the country's most complex region "This is largely due to the negative role played by Turkey which allowed the transfer of foreign fighters into the country," said one insurgent on condition of anonymity. The presence of ISIS also forced some of the insurgents to fight on multiple fronts.

Northern Syria's complex picture was also the result of the fact that many backers of the Syrian factions had rival agendas. "The US failed us repeatedly, and went back on its word to support us," says colonel Hassan Hamadeh from the 101 brigade<sup>269</sup>. "The initial competition for US backing and the diverging agendas of Turkey and Saudi Arabia triggered rivalry among groups, which was also complicated by the US vetting process," explains researcher Osama Abi Zeid. The dominance of more radical groups in the North were also linked to donations from Gulf countries.

#### **D- The Syrian international conflict and the rise of international fighting networks**

The internationalization of the conflict was marked by the involvement of Shia and Sunni fighters in the Syrian struggle, again a typical characteristic of new wars.

Before entering the crux of the matter, it is interesting to note that all of the VNSA fighting in Syria integrated foreign fighters to their corps. This was most seen in ISIS which branded itself around the idea of a caliphate to attract Muslim from around the world, or Hezbollah, which was mostly comprised of Lebanese. Even the SDF at some point had the

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268 Interview with Wladimir Van Wligenbur by Mona Alami, for Al-Monitor, September 2016

269 Interview with colonel Hassan Hamadeh, by Mona Alami, September 2016

support of foreign fighters or Kurdish peshmergas to rebuke the attacks on Kurdish areas. This foreign element falls within Kaldor framework of New wars<sup>270</sup>. Unlike mercenaries' foreign fighters she says in her book *New and Old Wars*, foreign fighters may not be attracted by money. She goes on to give the example of the Moujahedeen in Afghanistan. "Since the war on terror jihadist have joined the fight against the west in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen," she added. It was now the time of Syria...

First, Jihadists from the world over crossed from Turkey in droves, Shi'i from Iraq and Lebanon in the early onset of 2012 and later Afghani and Pakistan fighters joined the government's side.

Second, in 2013, Michael Knights, an expert from the Washington institute, underlined that between 800 to 2000 Shi'i Iraqi fighters were in Syria. "As the war in Syria drags on, external actors may play an increasingly important role in tipping the balance through material support and sponsorship of individual armed units," explained Knights in a report for WINEP<sup>271</sup> in 2013. One of the most significant groups at the time was the Damascus-based Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, which was founded by Hussein Ajeeb Jazza (originally from Nubl in Aleppo) and 'Ahmad Kayara,' who was originally from Iraq and lived in Syria before the war.<sup>272</sup>

Third, other Iraqi-led groups emerged out of the original Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, such as Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar and Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib. Some of the better-known Iraqi groups like Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah deployed fighters to Syria with IRGC support, initially under the umbrella of the "Haydari Force."<sup>273</sup> Iraqi militias were often deployed in Syria with the tacit agreement of the Maliki's regime.

"One cannot understand the role of Shi'a in Syria without looking at the relation between Sunnis and Shi'a and the narrative binding them. There is a Sunni phobia resulting from a confrontational (Shi'i) narrative that is prevailing today," observed Lebanese Shi'i activist Lokman Slim, who was assassinated in 2021<sup>274</sup>. Sources close to Hezbollah estimated

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270 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

271 Michael Knights, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria," June 27, 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-role-of-iraqi-shiite-militias-in-syria>.

272 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas and the Republican Guard," [aymennjawad.org](http://aymennjawad.org), March 29, 2018 <https://aymennjawad.org/2018/03/liwa-abu-al-fadl-al-abbas-and-the-republican-guard>

273 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Haydari Force in Syria: A Story from 2013," [aymennjawad.org](http://aymennjawad.org), April 23, 2019 <https://aymennjawad.org/2019/04/the-haydari-force-in-syria-a-story-from-2013>

274 Interview by Mona Alami with Lokman Slim, May 2014, Beirut, Lebanon.

around 2014<sup>275</sup> that about 5000 or more were deployed there. Hezbollah is the main Iranian proxy deployed in Syria

Another example of Iran's meticulous planning of the military effort was illustrated by, Lebanese newspaper published in English the Daily Star<sup>276</sup>. The paper reported in February this year that European mercenaries were "being recruited with the help of Hezbollah to join Bashar Assad's forces in the war in Syria". These fighters have professional military experience and have fought in Chechnya. The sources quoted by the paper confirmed that these Eastern European fighters wore Hezbollah military uniforms as well as yellow bands on their heads to show their loyalty.

The other main bulks of foreign fighters were in the form of Sunni Jihadists joining ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.

According to the best estimates, at least 5000 foreign fighters were in Syria by December 2013<sup>277</sup>, a figure that grew to 31,000 by 2016. The growing success of jihadi groups in Syria appealed to tens of thousands of recruits from the Arab world and elsewhere. These numbers included thousands from Europe, among whom were several hundred French citizens. Alain Marsaud, a French MP and former anti-terrorism judge believed<sup>278</sup> there were two types of French jihadists fighting in conflicts abroad. "Some are dual nationals and others are new converts. These people are for the most part living on the margins of French society and feel rejected," highlighted Marsaud. Atchouel underlined that this new generation of jihadists were for the most part delinquents and small-time criminal offenders before leaving France on their missions.

The Syria war thus epitomized after all the polarization of Muslim identities and the greater clash between the Sunni and Shiite Jihads.

### **E- The Syrian war economy**

By 2013, things were not looking good for Syria's economy. The systematic bombing and fighting led to a contraction in 2021, with the country's GDP contracting by 32%, while unemployment levels soared to the staggering figure of 50%, according to Syrian economist Jihad Yazigi,<sup>279</sup> author of the Syria Report.

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275 Interview with Hezbollah source, by Mona Alami, May 2014

276 Antoine Ghattas Saab, "Hezbollah Channels European Mercenaries to Syria," Daily Star, February 21, 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Feb-21/248012-hezbollah-channels-european-mercenaries-to-syria.ashx>.

277 Thomas Hegghammer, "Syria's Foreign Fighters," Foreign Policy," December 9, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/09/syrias-foreign-fighters/>.

278 Interview with Alain Marsaud, by Mona Alami, November 2013, Paris France

279 Interview with Jihad Yazigi, by Mona Alami, October 2013



Hit hard, Syria's oil sector was practically at a standstill with the energy infrastructure severely damaged. Crude oil production at 380,000 bpd prior to the conflict had fallen to 20,000 bpd, still according to Jihad Yazigi. By mid-2013, much of Syria's oil-rich territory (located mostly on the east and north-east) had fallen out of the hands of the regime. "Depending on where they are located, oil fields are either controlled by the Kurdish PYD in the northeast or by various Islamist and tribal militias (in the eastern region near Deir-el-Zour), which can explain decline in production," said Jihad Yazigi.

While farming areas maintained good production levels in the first two years of the war, they witnessed a sharp decline in 2013 with destruction of crops by the Syrian army as retaliation against local populations supporting the insurgents. resulted in a dwindling agricultural production with that year farming harvest dropping by 50% to 1 million tons<sup>280</sup>.

The industrial sector- the country's backbone concentrated around Damascus and Aleppo- has been largely decimated. According to Byblos bank chief economist, Nassib Ghobril about 75 percent of production facilities in Aleppo<sup>281</sup>, were no longer operable while the Syrian industrial elite had relocated across the region to nearby Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and the UAE.

A disastrous consequence of the war is the country's economic fragmentation. The Syrian regime relied on oil bought from its allies instead of relying on its own production, while in opposition areas traders and farmers are making their purchases in nearby Turkey and no longer have access to much needed subsidies<sup>282</sup>.

The old Syrian trading families were also replaced by smugglers and small traders willing to take more risks. In Turkey, small merchants make regular trips to the Syrian border to sell rebels all sorts of items. Moreover, new trade routes emerged between Turkey's Mediterranean port of Mersin, where goods destined for Syria were repacked, and sent to the borders<sup>283</sup>. The same took place on the Lebanese borders. An underground economy has flourished on all sides with people increasingly adapting to new war needs

The Syrian economic situation worsened by 2015 and 2016. Total economic losses from the start of the conflict in March 2011 to 2016 were estimated at over \$226 billion by

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280 Interview with Jihad Yazigi, by Mona Alami, October 2013

281 Interview with Nassib Ghobril, by Mona Alami, October 2013, Beirut, Lebanon

282 Interview with Jihad Yazigi, by Mona Alami, October 2013

283 Interview with Jihad Yazigi, by Mona Alami, October 2013

the World Bank<sup>284</sup>. According to an interview conducted at the time with Lebanese economist Nassib Ghobril, chief economist at Byblos Bank<sup>285</sup>, a very large number of businesses closed down and went bankrupt, forcing both entrepreneurs and the skilled workers to migrate and relocate their businesses and expertise to other countries. The government continued to increase prices of basic goods including fuel and electricity, which are essential for the manufacturing sector. The manufacturing sector has deteriorated to small workshops with low productivity and lack of competitiveness or scattered industrial establishments that have mutual interests with the armed forces on the ground.

New dynamics also emerged in the country due to the war. During the December 2014 elections at the Aleppo Chamber of Commerce, there were 10 newcomers out of 12 members, and seven out of 12 in Damascus, a phenomenon essentially caused by the exit of the wealthy economic class. “There have been no new elections, but the situation still prevails, with the old economic class losing influence. The old businessmen left Syria and will not be coming back,” explains Syrian economist Jihad Yazigi<sup>286</sup>.

Ghobril explained that several war traders now monopolize internal markets. These traders are protected by the different armed forces and serve their objectives. Generally, people who also benefit in such a context are those close to centers of power who can meet consumer-goods shortages. “This applies to people who made money in the wheat and oil trade between East and regime areas,” underlines Yazigi.

Production and exports were also influenced by the division of Syria into various areas falling under the control of different players — in Syria's case, rebels, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), ISIS and the Syrian regime. According to Yazigi, oil, phosphates and agricultural products such as fruits, vegetables and livestock were coming mostly from the east and northeast of the country. Oil fields were located in the areas of Deir ez-Zor fell under ISIS control<sup>287</sup>.

Kurds reaped the benefits of the hydrocarbon trade with some Syrian oil fields located in the Kurdish-populated regions, such as the Suwaidiyah field, which produced 100,000 barrels per day in 2011<sup>288</sup>. According to Yazigi, in 2015, the PYD currently exported about 20,000 barrels per day from these fields with a monthly revenue of \$10 million.

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284 “Syria War: War Has Cost \$226 Billion to Syria Economy: World Bank - The Economic Times,” The Economic Times, July 10, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/war-has-cost-226-billion-to-syria-economy-world-bank/articleshow/59532701.cms?from=mdr>.

285 Interview with economist Nassib Ghobril, by Mona Alami August 2015,

286 Interview with Jihad Yazigi, by Mona Alami, August 2015.

287 Interview with Jihad Yazigi, by Mona Alami, August 2015

288 Interview with Jihad Yazigi, by Mona Alami, August 2015

These resulted in the emergence of new travel routes with industrial products from Damascus, as the capital replaced Aleppo as an economic center. Agricultural and hydrocarbon products were sent westward, to areas under the control of the regime.

In his chapter *Ni guerre ni paix, guerre sans fin ou desordre ordonnes* Laurent Gayer<sup>289</sup>, says that beyond the apparent chaos, there is a real political economy of chaos that appears, allowing the emergence of new figures power and wealth. This was exactly what took place in Syria.

### **III- New wars and the war of barbarism.**

Kaldor has argued<sup>290</sup> that New Wars combine features of wars - such as organized violence for political ends; crime, in the form of organized violence for private ends; and of human rights violations targeting civilians. In these New Wars academics such as Mark Duffield premised that “widespread human rights abuse is not part of the collateral damage of the New wars, it is organic to how they are fought and their aims realized”<sup>291</sup>.

It is this particular dimension that we are looking at in this section. While in old wars there was a clear distinction between combatants and noncombatants in New wars, combatants are thought to prefer to target civilians. New conflicts are after all aim at is the extent to which the unarmed and civilians are the major, if not the sole, targets of the military campaigns being waged. Kaldor has also claimed there has been a “dramatic increase in the ratio of civilian to military casualties<sup>292</sup>.”

The academic highlighted that while at the beginning of the twentieth century, 85-90 percent of victims in war were military and in World War II, approximately half of all war deaths were civilian, by the late 1990s, the proportions of a hundred years ago have been almost exactly reversed, so that nowadays approximately 80 percent of all casualties in wars were civilian.

Opponents to Kaldor or Duffield such as Erik Melander, Magnus Ober and Jonathan Hall<sup>293</sup>, have discounted new wars feature such as increasing frequency of new wars, and of battle intensity and the targeting of civilians compared to military. “Even a tertiary review of the impact of war on civilians during the Cold War brings into serious doubt the assumption

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289 Badie and Vidal, *Nouvelles Guerres*

290 Mary Kaldor, “In Defence of New Wars,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 1 (March 7, 2013): Art. 4, <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.at>.

291 Erik Melander, Magnus Öberg, and Jonathan Hall, “The ‘New Wars’ Debate Revisited: An Empirical Evaluation of the Atrociousness of ‘New Wars,’” *Uppsala Research Papers* No. 9 (2006), pp. 1-42.

292 Kaldor, “In Defence of New Wars.”

293 Melander, Öberg, and Hall, “The ‘New Wars’ Debate Revisited: An Empirical Evaluation of the Atrociousness of ‘New Wars.’”

made by new wars theorists that the number of civilians killed or displaced in wars is increasing, “Melander, Oberg and Hall have argued.

Yet Melander’s report features statistics up to the end of 90s period that predate lengthy conflicts such as the Iraqi conflict and the Arab Spring phenomena. Melander rightly shows that the number of major wars has decreased and that no great international wars such as Second World War-, with its massive casualty tolls- have taken place. While no war has since had an equal death civil footprint, more localized smaller and perennial wars are taking place. In the report labelled as the Major Recent Trends in Violent Conflict United Nations University Center for Policy Research concluded the following<sup>294</sup>:

“After declining for much of the 1990s, major civil wars have almost tripled in recent years along with the number of battle deaths. UN peace operations are increasingly deployed to situations where there is no peace to keep: roughly two thirds of peacekeepers and almost 90% of SPM personnel are working in peace operations covering countries experiencing high-intensity conflict. With a decline in civil wars ending in military victory, the conflict relapse rate has increased. Conflicts are becoming more intractable and less conducive to traditional political settlements due to three main developments: Organized crime has emerged as a major stress factor that exacerbates state fragility, undermines state legitimacy, especially in post-conflict settings, and often lowers the incentives of armed groups to enter political settlements; The internationalization of civil wars, which tends to make them deadlier and longer; The growing presence of violent extremist Islamist groups in UN mission areas, which complicates peacemaking and fosters a “hunker down and bunker up” mentality among UN peace operations. Some forms of violence against civilian populations in wartime are increasing, posing challenges to the implementation of protection of civilians’ mandates”.

Syria fits within this particular paradigm of new war with the massive casualty toll, high civilian death rate and multiple human rights violations including enforced disappearances and starvation of rebel areas, as well as population displacements.

First, the eight-year war has led to a large number of casualties with about 500,000 deaths in Syria in 2019 <sup>295</sup> . The proliferation of unrestrained militias, meant that civilians were more often targeted. In 2018, British based monitor, the Syrian Observatory for Human

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294 Sebastian von Einsiedel et al., “Major Recent Trends in Violent Conflict,” United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, November 2014

(<https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6114/MajorRecentTrendsInViolentConflict.pdf>)

295 “Death Toll in Syria Falls in 2018 - Syrian Arab Republic,” ReliefWeb, December 31, 2018. Accessed March 1, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/death-toll-syria-falls-2018>.

Rights, estimated that about 511,000 people had been killed in the Syrian war<sup>296</sup>. The Observatory had identified more than 350,000 of those killed, underlining that around 85 percent of the dead were civilians killed by the forces of the Syrian government and its allies, namely Iran and Russia as well as paramilitary forces<sup>297</sup>.

In Syria, massive population killing allowed the central government to use identity to secure political control over territory by polarizing populations and solidifying loyalties around ethnicity and religion. The elimination of opponents who do not subscribe to the regime's narrative, allows to insure as well favorable outcomes in any future fictitious elections.

The elimination of opponents does not only take the form of civilian targeting.” The main method of territorial control... is population displacement, getting rid of all possible opponents” argues Kaldor in her book *New and Old War*. Population exclusion is another tool used by the regime. International media and activist reports and world media have reported deliberate policies used by the Syrian central government relying on ethnic cleansing, rapes, executions, and destroying households and civilian infrastructure, which aimed to alienate the population from the rebels.

Assad's forces have employed mass casualty tactics and illegal weapons to force Syrians into submission. This includes reliance on chemical and biological weapons in spite of resolution 2118 adopted in September 2013 by the United Nations Security Council, which resulted in the destruction of up to 2/3 of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile. The vote came in the wake of several chemical attacks in different parts of the country culminating with the attack on Jobar and Ghouta, where UN inspectors found traces of Sarin and during which more than 1,400 people were killed. Interviewed by the author in 2014, Lebanese military expert Wehbe Katisha underlined that Syria's regime's chemical arsenal, was one the largest in the Middle East and that the central government was resorting “to small punctual attacks using different types of chemicals that are difficult to prove and to investigate<sup>298</sup>.”

A main technique used in New Wars is rendering an area inhabitable, in the words of Kaldor. This can according to the author take place through systematic murder, ethnic cleansing, and rendering an area inhabitable through mines or bombs. In 2016, after its entry

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296 Angus McDowall, “Syrian Observatory Says War Has Killed More than Half a Million,” Reuters, March 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-observatory-says-war-has-killed-more-than-half-a-million-idUSKCN1GO13M>.

297 Ibid.

298 Interview with General Wehbe Katisha, by Mona Alami, April 2014.

into the Syrian war alongside the Assad regime, Russia used thermite or phosphorous warheads,<sup>299</sup> burning at temperatures up to 10 times the boiling point of water, similar to the infamous napalm used in the Vietnam War. It has also used thermobaric explosives that burn at 2200 degrees Celsius, and are known to carry the most destructive force of any known explosive, excluding nuclear weapons.

Indiscriminate bombings have also been the weapon of choice for the Syrian government. It was believed that in Aleppo in 2014, makeshift barrel bombs killed more than 3,000 civilians, which translated to eight deaths every day in one city alone. Residential areas and markets are among the locations that have been targeted in the campaign. "This method is used to force populations who support the revolution to expel rebels for fear of retribution," explains Katisha<sup>300</sup>. The Assad forces have also relied on the use of barrel bombs carried out by helicopters in other areas of Syria.

Chemical attacks and banned weapons have also been used in the Syrian war. In an interview with the Telegraph, Brigadier-General Zaher al-Saket, a former chemical weapons chief in President Bashar al-Assad's reported he believed chemical weapons had been used 34 times in the war in Syria, rather than the 14 occasions cited by international intelligence agencies<sup>301</sup>. The Syrian government which failed to meet a Feb. 5 deadline to move all of its declared chemical substances. "The Assad regime is finding excuses to delay giving up its chemical arsenal, which is the largest in the Middle East," added Katisha at the time.

Syria's has also relied on a policy of hunger games to create more cohesive politically aligned region. Since the onset of the war in Syria, forces loyal to President Bashar Assad have systematically besieged and starved rebel neighborhoods with Assad's hunger games having also been endorsed to a lesser extent by the opposition. As an example, Ghouta stayed under siege since November 2012 to 2018. However, some points of passage remained opened, complemented by a network of tunnels dug by the rebels, allowing weapons and medicine to trickle into the Damascus Suburbs. "The siege has tightened significantly in the last three months with tunnels being closed down by regime forces," explained at the time

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299 Anne Barnard, "Syrian Government and Russia Are Accused of Using Napalm-Like Bombs," The New York Times, August 17, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/18/world/middleeast/syria-incendiary-bombs-napalm.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/18/world/middleeast/syria-incendiary-bombs-napalm.html?_r=0).

300 Interview with General Wehbe Katisha, by Mona Alami, April 2014

301 Richard Spencer, "Assad Ordered Me to Gas My People, but I Could Not Do It," The Telegraph, September 21, 2013 (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10325193/Syria-Assad-regime-ordered-me-to-gas-people-but-I-could-not-do-it.html>)

Wael Alwan, spokesperson for the Free Syrian Army faction of Faylaq al-Rahman<sup>302</sup>.

Inflation plagued the area, with price of food and medical supplies sky rocketing.

Other areas around Syria faced the same fate as Ghouta, at one time or the other. Madaya, Daraya, Moadamiya, the Yarmouk Camp, Zabadani in Damascus and al-Waer in Homs, are the more prominent examples of besieged regions, where the population was starved into submission. Moadamiya, was encircled by Assad forces from 2013, to October 2017<sup>303</sup>.

In Homs the epicenter of the revolution, the Al Waer neighborhood is home to about 75,000 people was also government siege from 2013 to 2017, triggering shortages of medicine, and occasionally of food. Images of emaciated children have been emerging from rebel-held Homs. at the time Opposition groups say dozens have died from hunger as animal feed and grass are substituted for food<sup>304</sup>. The opposition relied on similar tactics. In March 2015, rebels captured Idlib city and managed to besiege the towns of Kifraya and al-Fu'ah largely inhabited by the Shi'a<sup>305</sup>. At the time the Army of Conquest and the al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda branch in Syria) imposed a full siege blocking all humanitarian supplies to the towns that lasted until 2018. As a result, the towns became highly reliant on airlifts of supplies.

Besides sieges and starvation, the war has also witnessed an enormous increase in enforced disappearances, arbitrary Arrests, torture, and death in custody. In 2017, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) documented more than 4,252 individual arbitrary arrests, most of them conducted by government forces, it also estimated that by August 2017, over 80,000 individuals had disappeared<sup>306</sup> in Syria.

The regime's systematic targeting of civilian populations has resulted in humanitarian crisis and an enormous number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. As of 2016, at the height of the war, there were according to the UNHCR<sup>307</sup> website, 6.5 million people, including 2.8 million children, displaced within Syria, the biggest internally displaced

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302 Interview with Wael Alwan, , by Mona Alami April 2017.

303 Youssef Sadaki, "Moadamiya: Two Years of Siege and Starvation," Atlantic Council. February 5, 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/muadamiyat-al-sham-two-years-of-siege-and-starvation>.

304 "Rebels Leave Al Waer District under Evacuation Deal," Al Jazeera, March 18, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/rebels-leave-al-waer-district-evacuation-deal-170318094703849.html>.

305 Karim Shaheen, "Syrian Rebels Lift Years-Long Siege of Two Towns after Prisoner Deal," The Guardian," July 19, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/19/syrian-rebels-lift-siege-of-two-towns-after-prisoner-deal>.

306 "World Report 2018: Syria," Human Rights Watch," accessed August 7, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/syria>.

307 "Internally Displaced People - UNHCR Syria," UNHCR (blog), July 7, 2016. Accessed April 5, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/29-internally-displaced-people.html>.

population in the World. “Since 2011, 50 Syrian families have been displaced every hour of every day,” remarked UNHCR at the time. In 2016 as many as 4.8 million had fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, out of which the biggest number is in Lebanon where in 2016, one third of the population comprised Syrian refugees.

The Syrian regime has resorted to a ‘policy of methodical extermination’<sup>308</sup> as described by Stephane Roziere. The author had described a policy of methodical extermination as one made by one people, one actor, “which plans the destruction of a targeted group by violent means”. This policy that can be compared to what the researcher calls the politicide of mass killing and expulsion of people according to their political identity. These have allowed the regime to recreate more homogeneous societies in a form of territorial and societal modeling.

#### **IV-Conclusion**

In an article labeled “What to do about Syria’s new war”<sup>309</sup>, Kaldor argued that the Syrian revolution Syria shared many of the markings that applied to New Wars. “What began as an inspiring non-violent protest is degenerating into something that has all the hallmarks of what I call a ‘new war’. The Assad regime is showing many of the characteristics of a weak state. The economic sanctions imposed by the west are beginning to take their toll. The regime cannot rely on the army. Reportedly it has been unable to call up more than 60% of the reserves. When army units are sent to repress protestors there are usually many defections”<sup>310</sup>.

The Syrian government also became significantly reliant on the foreign assistance of its allies namely Iran and Russia.

Foreign involvement in the Syria war on the side of the regime started with the expansion of Hezbollah there in 2012. The Lebanese militant group started by sending fighters to shore up the crumbling governmental sources and by participating to the famous Qussayr battle in 2013<sup>311</sup>. By 2016, it had taken over border areas such as Qalamoun and has according to media outlets fortified bases in the mountains overlooking Zabadani<sup>312</sup>.

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308Rozière, *Géographie Politique et Géopolitique: Une Grammaire de L'Espace Politique*

309 Kaldor, “What to Do about Syria’s New War?”

310 Ibid.

311 Nicholas Blanford, “The Battle for Qusayr: How the Syrian Regime and Hizb Allah Tipped the Balance,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, August 27, 2013, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-battle-for-qusayr-how-the-syrian-regime-and-hizb-allah-tipped-the-balance/>.

312 “Hezbollah warns the people of Kurum Madaya and begins establishing bases,” Orient News, September 19, 2016, [https://orient-news.net/ar/news\\_show/123293/0/%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%B0%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%85-](https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/123293/0/%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%B0%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%85-)



Hezbollah’s sponsor Iran also had by this date deployed high officers on battle fronts across the countries<sup>313</sup>. By 2017, another of Syria’s allies, Russia, which had entered the Syrian conflict by shipping air-defence systems, tanks, had over 6000 soldiers there and several sprawling bases, specifically the Hmeimim Air Base near the city of Latakia, the naval facility in Tartus, Shayrat, the T4 pumping station in Homs and one in the Syrian desert city of Palmyra<sup>314</sup>. The Assad regime’s foes had also taken liberty with Syrian territory. Since the onset of the revolution, Turkey and Jordan were supporting the budding insurgency, funnelling the military support of Gulf countries. In 2016, the U.S. deployed over 300 military personnel in Kurdish areas in Northern Syria<sup>315</sup>, a number that went up to 2000 in 2019<sup>316</sup>. . By August 2016 the Syrian war took another complex turn at the end of August when Turkish troops crossed the border into the Syrian town of Jarablous in support of a new U.S.-backed offensive against the Islamic State (ISIS)<sup>317</sup>. The operation launched by the Turkish government under the Euphrates Shield banner led to the capture of some 850 km<sup>2</sup> of Syrian territory.

Foreign assistance has been crucial in maintaining the survival of warring Syrian factions, heavily reliant on food and weapons to continue to fight and maintain frontlines. Kaldor saw foreign assistance as essential to new wars adding that “neighboring states often fund particular factions, to assist minorities or because of the presence of large numbers of refugees”<sup>318</sup>. Kaldor also saw foreign involvement motivated by countries desire to assert control over regions historically under their control under its tradition or because of vested military interests, using Russian involvement in former soviet countries as a typical example. Vested military interests and allied interests are what both motivated Russian and Iranian

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<sup>313</sup> “War Fatalities Expose Iranian Army Flow into Syria,” al-Sharq al-Awsat, August 5, 2016, <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/news-middle-east/war-fatalities-expose-iranian-army-flow-syria>.

<sup>314</sup> Diane Shalem, “Russia Builds Four New Air Bases in Syria, Deploys Another 6,000 Troops,” DEBKAfile, February 1, 2018, <https://www.debka.com/russia-builds-four-new-air-bases-syria-deploys-another-6000-troops/>.

<sup>315</sup> Darlene Superville, “250 U.S. Troops Are Deploying to Syria as ISIS Fight Intensifies,” Military Times, April 24, 2016, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2016/04/25/250-u-s-troops-are-deploying-to-syria-as-isis-fight-intensifies/>.

<sup>316</sup> Cameron Glenn, “Timeline: US Policy on ISIS,” Wilson Center, April 27, 2016. Accessed May 5, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-us-policy-isis>.

<sup>317</sup> Erin Cunningham, Liz Sly, and Karen Deyoung, “Turkish Troops Enter Syria to Take on ISIS, Backed by U.S. Warplanes,” The Washington Post, August 24, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-launches-operation-against-islamic-state-held-town-on-border/2016/08/24/4983b9d2-b71a-446e-967e-894bf4b9a845\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.22bd737b1abe](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-launches-operation-against-islamic-state-held-town-on-border/2016/08/24/4983b9d2-b71a-446e-967e-894bf4b9a845_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.22bd737b1abe).

<sup>318</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

involvement in Syria. Refugees and religious identities ironically motivated Gulf and Turkey's investments there.

Interestingly beyond the geopolitical motivations that are at the crux of these countries meddling in the Syrian revolution, and that we will study in length in the next chapter, Syria polarized regional and international identities. Religious referents had already surged in the post-colonial era as underscored by Alhadj Bouba Nouhour in his chapter "Entrepreneurs de violences un referents religieux en Afrique:entre le local et le global"<sup>319</sup>. In Syria, these referents surged and were crystallized by divides such as Sunni vs. Shi'i militancy, east vs. west, secularism vs. Islamism. These identities were not only contributing factors to the revolution, thus fitting her new war theory but also to the emergence of new divisions in the new order.

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319 Badie and Vidal, *Nouvelles Guerres*

## Chapter 3: The Geopolitics of Syria war: International and regional rivalries and its impact on VNSA

In the wake of the Arab revolutions, multiple regional players have entrenched themselves in Syria, which complicates any long-term solution. While Turkey entered the Syrian conflict nominally as part of the U.S. coalition against ISIS, its main priority was to put an end to the expansion of the YPG in northern Syria, which it feared was aiming to connect the different cantons stretching from Hassaka to Afrin in order to form a contiguous Kurdish-ruled territory along the Turkish border. Turkey's ally in the war, the United States has pursued a crisis management policy in Syria primarily focused on the fight on ISIS, which lost its last stronghold in March 2019 in Syria and Iraq,<sup>320</sup> followed by containment of Iran. Conversely Russia's goals in Syria have been much more defined: Moscow has been opposed to a regime change that it worries could lead to a dangerous precedent and fears the political empowerment of Islamists and a possible contagion spreading to its neighbourhood and into Russia. Russia's partner in Syria, Iran is defending more existential interests. The Assad regime is one of the main building blocks in the "resistance" axis: an anti-western rejectionist alliance that has allowed Iran to expand its area of influence from Tehran to Bagdad and Beirut to the west and in Sanaa to the south, something followed with much attention by another of Syria's neighbours: Israel.

This chapter will look at the geopolitical rivalries taking place in Syria and the calculation of international and regional countries.

Already in 2012, Mary Kaldor had<sup>321</sup> rightly predicted that the Arab Spring was sweeping away decades-old authoritarian regimes and that threat the current geopolitical status created unfamiliar and uncomfortable uncertainties for Russia, the US and other players, one that was also playing out in Syria. "On the other hand, the escalating confrontation with Iran over its quest to acquire nuclear weapons appears to be a classic case of old geopolitics. Actors are sorted into an Iran/ Syria/ Hezbollah axis with Russia and China not far behind and an Israel/US axis with Europe not far behind. Should this polarization spill into an open conflict, it would put an end to the Arab Spring's democratic tide, turning the region into a for an old/new cold war between global players. This may be one reason why a

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320 Ben Wedeman, Lauren Said-Moorhouse, "ISIS Has Lost Its Final Stronghold in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces Says," CNN, March 23, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/23/middleeast/isis-caliphate-end-intl/index.html>.

321 Kaldor, "What to Do about Syria's New War?"

series of apparently unrelated developments seem to be moving us inexorably towards this scenario”.

Kaldor’s assessment will lead us to look into the geopolitical calculations of regional and international powers in Syria, in the post 2011 phase.

In a first section we will look at Russian and American strategy change in the region, and more specifically in Syria. Then in a second section we will study the Geopolitics of regional actors namely Gulf countries (with a specific focus on Saudi Arabia), Iran and Turkey. The question that we attempt to answer in this chapter is the following, how do geopolitics play out in new wars and how do they explain the replacement of direct intervention by surrogate warfare or proxy warfare as Kaldor stated it in 2012? Does that mean that proxy warfare will be normalized in the great power competition?

### **I-Russia and the United States, strategy change in Syria**

The end of the Cold War in the 1990s disrupted the balance of power between the U.S and Soviet Union, ushering the world into a phase of instability. After all the rise of a unipolar world put an end to the structured international relations ruled by duality, which reflected significantly on the developing world, which was left in a state of anarchy, as many countries lost the support of the Soviet Union and thus were left to their own devices. This state of anarchy led to a subtle erosion of states’ coercive power by reducing both the willingness and ability of countries to control intra-state violence. Exacerbating this state of anarchy was the adoption of world powers of a ‘securitarian’ mindset driven by the war on terrorism after 9/11. The connection between wars in Iraq and Syria to international terror networks such as ISIS as well as to the rise of attacks in Europe and elsewhere in the world, created fear in the west. Western governments have thus become increasingly wary of a local backlash to their foreign policies, which have been the object of intense national debates. This has reduced their margin for maneuvering.

This new reality has forced western liberal states to adopt precautionary approaches to their foreign policies, mostly shaped by the threats of global terrorism, local insurgency overflowing state’s borders and of refugees instead of principles such as Human rights and democracy, which had structured much of political thinking in the 2000-2011 phase.

Conversely and unlike European states, larger and smaller international powers that had a long-standing enmity with the US and were used to allying to challenge its superpower status, remained politically cohesive, despite their ideological differences. These fresh dynamics help explain American and Russian behavior in Syria.

## **A- Russian calculations: perceived western encroachment and the stabilization of Arab autocracies.**

Russian strategy in the Arab region and more particularly in Syria can be seen through the prism of geography. Historically and to the present day much of Russia has been ice and landlocked<sup>322</sup>. The Arctic Ocean is far away from Russia's population centers, and until recently its ports have been unusable for long stretches of time. Russian access to global maritime routes generally goes through neighboring countries affiliated with the US led NATO coalition (through the Black Sea and the Bosphorus, which is controlled by Turkey; from St. Petersburg, through Danish waters and finally through the Arctic Ocean route via Greenland passing through United Kingdom). Russia's challenging maritime access added to an inadequate internal infrastructure<sup>323</sup> leaves Russia militarily and economically at a disadvantage, which makes its geopolitical position and its internal cohesion fragile.

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322 John Mauldin, "10 Maps That Explain Russia's Strategy," Forbes, February 26, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnmauldin/2016/02/26/10-maps-that-explain-russias-strategy/>.

323 "Russian Infrastructure in the Global Context - EY - Russia," Ernst and Young, accessed August 20, 2019, <https://www.ey.com/ru/en/issues/business-environment/ey-road-to-2030-russian-infrastructure-in-global-context>.



Figure 11: Map of Russia

Source: Britannica

In this context, the expansion of NATO’s footprint in Europe has been perceived as direct encroachment in Moscow’s backyard. Established in 1949 with the signature of the Washington Treaty, NATO was conceived as a mutual defense alliance to counter the threat posed at the time by the Soviet Union. Within NATO, the US holds an unmatched monopoly over modern high intensity warfare tools in all domains whether air, maritime or land. Despite the end of the Soviet Union in the 1990s- NATO’s *raison d’être*- the coalition continued to expand around Europe under the label of projecting stability in the Europe, as well as disaster relief and humanitarian intervention. From 12 members, NATO has grown to 29 members today<sup>324</sup>, which included many countries previously affiliated with the Warsaw Pact, and the former Soviet Union. The Russian perceived threat of encirclement by NATO

324 “Member Countries,” NATO, June 8, 2023, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_52044.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52044.htm).

was only exacerbated by U.S President Obama's September 2014 announcement of a new partnership with Georgia and Moldova. From Estonia, Obama stated: "You lost your independence before; with NATO, you will never lose it again". NATO's new European missile defense system also reached deep into Russia's European theatre. The overthrow of the Ukrainian president in 2014 erupted when 2014, pro-Russia president Viktor Yanukovyc was replaced by pro-West president Petro Poroshenko<sup>325</sup>, triggering a Russian escalation, with the annexation of Crimea and a low intensity civil war. NATO also developed a network of global partners that included countries neighboring or close to Russian territory or access roads such as Mongolia, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan, and Colombia.



Figure 12: Map of Nato Countries

NATO sister initiatives such as the Mediterranean Dialogue also pulled in countries spanning from the Eastern Mediterranean to North Africa such as Morocco, Mauritania,

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325 "Ukraine Crisis: Timeline," BBC News, November 11, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275>.



Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan and Israel<sup>326</sup>. In addition, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative drew in oil rich Gulf monarchies such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and United Arab Emirates by enhancing bilateral security cooperation<sup>327</sup>.

Russian President Vladimir Putin responded to what he perceived as its renewed geopolitical vulnerability with a fresh narrative focused on Russian power and on strengthening relations with countries opposed to the West. Upon his election in 2000 President Putin immediately understood that to consolidate power internally and externally he needed to create a new grand identity for Russia, to compensate for the loss of the communist ideologies and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

“However, defining its vision of itself is an important existential task for a country where modern statehood is still novel and which has only recently emerged from policy goals based on Soviet-era Marxism-Leninism. Branding itself is even more crucial for a country that seeks to play a grand global role but is unwilling to accept Western norms of legitimacy for domestic governance and for international diplomacy,” has argued Agnias Grigas in an article published by Reuters<sup>328</sup>.

Putin’s Russian national identity was constructed on a narrative of Russian greatness and of opposition to an encroaching West, which drove Moscow’s foreign policy and its defense of its sovereignty. Putin was claiming back what he considered as Russia’s rightful place as a major political player in the international system. This policy also allowed Moscow to compensate for its failure to meet the state’s promises of prosperity and stability that have been precariously based on an economy largely dependent on natural resource exports, and exposed to the shocks triggered by oil and gas price decline.

The other dimension to Putin discourse has been its opposition to western hegemony over the world. Putin has successfully promoted a narrative of Russian opposition to the U.S that was rooted in the “siege mentality” experience by the Russian leadership. Russia has positioned itself as a more pragmatic and more decisive in comparison with the alternative Western model of liberal democracies<sup>329</sup> and globalization. More importantly Putin’s narrative has been gaining traction in the backdrop of the 2011 decline of Arab autocracies

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326 Nicola de Santis, “NATO’s Outreach to and Cooperation with Mediterranean Countries through the Mediterranean Dialogue,” IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook, 2010, [https://www.iemed.org/anuari/2010/aarticles/DeSantis\\_NATO\\_en.pdf](https://www.iemed.org/anuari/2010/aarticles/DeSantis_NATO_en.pdf).

327 “NATO - Topic: Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI),” NATO, November 29, 2018, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_52956.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52956.htm).

328 Agnia Grigas, “Commentary: Putin’s next Big Goal – Rebranding Russia,” Reuters, March 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-grigas-putin-commentary/commentary-putins-next-big-goal-rebranding-russia-idUSKBN1GV02P>.

329 Ibid.



many perceived during the Arab Spring to have been replaced by terrorists and Islamists, largely ushering a wave of instability across the world. Putin has thus been able to unite countries and political movements opposed to liberalism, globalization and simple anti-western negationists, arguing that closed sovereign states and autocracies' identity could be a better option than failing democracies.

The Syria war was thus perceived as a personal attack on Russia. First, Syria is a military outpost for Russia which holds several bases among which the Hmeiheim air base, the joint Al-Jarrab base and the Russian naval base on the Mediterranean, mainly Tartous<sup>330</sup>. "The maintenance of the naval base of Tartous, only window onto the Mediterranean of the Russian naval power constitutes an important stake, without being alone essential", say Tancrede Jossieran, Frederic Pichon et Florian Louis<sup>331</sup>. Another consideration for Russia in Syria is economic namely, the presence of possible hydrocarbon roads through Syria. The latter is a crossroad of potential roads linking the Persian Gulf to Europe, according to the three authors of *Geopolitique du Moyen Orient et de Afrique du Nord*.

#### **B- Washington's pivot to Asia, away from the Middle East:**

In November 2011, former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton announced in an article published by *Foreign Policy* that the US was standing at a 'pivot point'<sup>332</sup>, in what was perceived as a Grand Strategy to harness Asian economies and contain China. The US decision was also rooted in an economic element, which was the gradual independence of the US to Arab oil, due to the presence of large deposit of shale oil in America<sup>333</sup>.

This decision was not without grave repercussions on the Middle East, in particular the Persian Gulf, which had been tied to the U.S via Saudi Arabia, which maintained privileged relations with Washington since 1945<sup>334</sup>. Since 1995, the US Fifth Fleet headquartered at Manama, Bahrain has patrolled the Persian Gulf. In a report published by *Future Direction* in 2013 and quoting Rear Admiral Mike Shoemaker, noted that, because of budget cuts, the overall ability of US forces to monitor regional seas and skies had been

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330 "Assad Welcomes New Russian Bases in Syria after Putin Meeting," *Al Jazeera*, March 16, 2023. Accessed June 8, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/16/assad-will-welcome-new-russian-military-bases-in-syria>.

331 Jossieran, Pichon, and Louis, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord*.

332 Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

333 Ava Vered Zieff, "The U.S. Shale Revolution: The Threat to Saudi Arabia and the Future of the U.S.-Saudi 'Special Relationship,'" *Fordham University*, May 21, 2022.

334 "U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 7, 2018. Accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/us-saudi-arabia-relations>.

compromised<sup>335</sup>. This opinion was reinforced by Admiral Jonathan Greenhart, Chief of Naval Operations, who believed that American fleets and bases would be less ready than before and that certain deployments would be cancelled<sup>336</sup>. Gustavo Medialaza<sup>337</sup> the author of the report also argued that as an effect of US defense sequestration of the navy, over \$500 billion funding would be cut over the next ten years, including \$85 billion from the navy in the Persian Gulf (US Fifth Fleet), which would lead to a 55 per cent decrease in the ability to conduct aerial operations in the Persian Gulf and a 33 per cent diminished surge capacity. This new American policy would clearly create significant shifts in the regional geopolitical balance of power.

### U.S. BASES AND TROOP LEVELS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

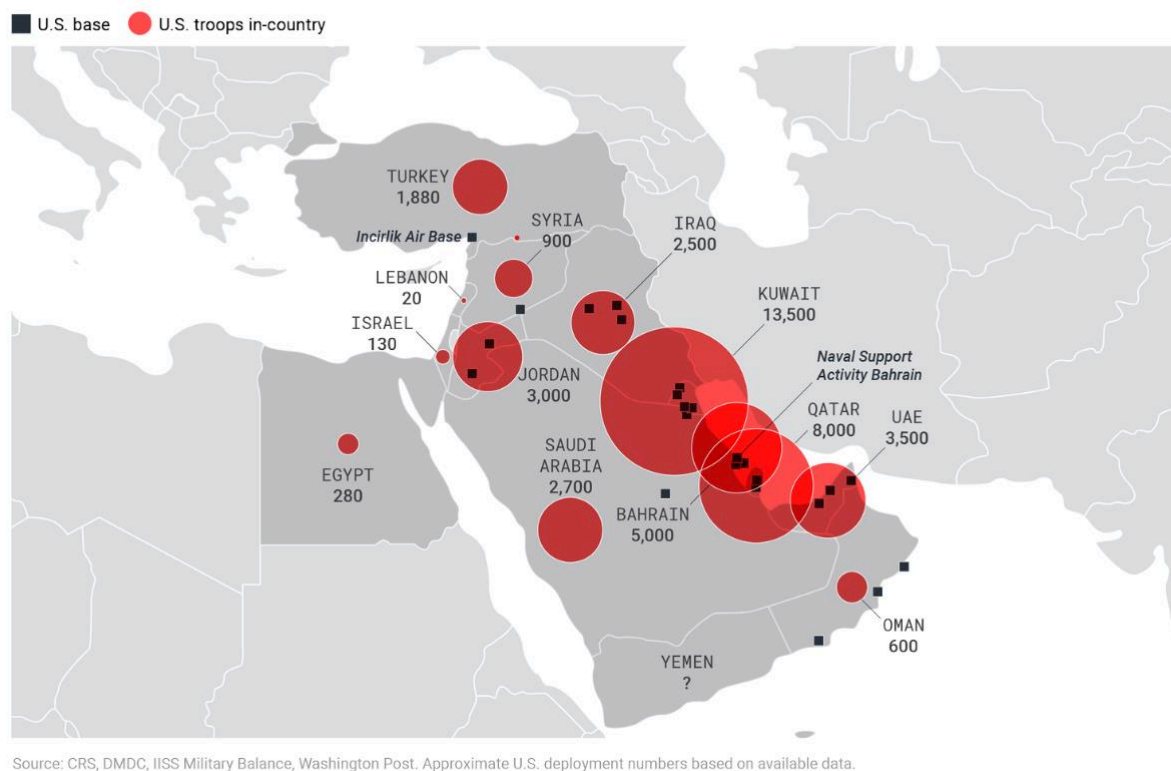


Figure 13: US BASES AND TROOP LEVELS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

2022<sup>338</sup>

335 Gustavo Medialaza, “The US Pivot to Asia: Implications for the Middle East,” *Future Directions International* (blog), September 23, 2013, <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/the-us-pivot-to-asia-implications-for-the-middle-east/>.

336 Ibid.

337 Ibid.

338 Benjamin Denison, “Bases, Logistics and the Problem of Temptation in the Middle East,” *Defense Priorities*, May 12, 2022 (<https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/bases-logistics-and-the-problem-of-temptation-in-the-middle-east>)

In many ways like Russian President Putin, American President Barack Obama's was looking to create a major change in U.S political attitude. Obama wanted to focus away from costly, and politically unpopular wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East, given its weakening importance from an energy perspective, while pivoting toward the economic super power that was East Asia. Obama, who argued on ending the war in Iraq<sup>339</sup>, believed that the invasion of Iraq had been counterproductive. President Obama had after all been a main proponent of limited American military interventions that did not put American lives at risk.

### **C-The Libyan precedent and its impact on Russian and American foreign policy.**

The American and Russian significant shift in foreign policy will be embodied in Moscow's and Washington's management of the Libyan crisis and its aftermath. In the wake of the Libyan revolution, the UN Security Council<sup>340</sup> passed Resolution 1973 in March 2011, allowing for military intervention in Libya. The resolution was thrust by U.S. President Barack Obama, and hardliners such as French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron<sup>341</sup> as pro-democracy protesters had been the target of a crackdown<sup>342</sup> by Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi who had ruled Libya for more than 40 years. Two days after the UN greenlight, NATO countries established a no-fly zone over Libya and started bombing Qaddafi's forces. In October 2011, rebel forces supported by NATO countries shot Qaddafi and took power. The intervention in Libya in 2011 was described at the time as a success and the victory of the liberal camp which promoted the principle of responsibility to protect. The resolution had also been passed without opposition from China and Russia.

However, the Libyan intervention resulted eventually in a massive debacle, with regional and international repercussions, namely a complex civil war marked by foreign interventions and the rise of radical Islamic movements such as ISIS. After Libya, Moscow's political elite felt duped with the overthrow of Qaddafi's regime, which appeared to have

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339 Lauren Carroll, "Obama Reduced Fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan but U.S. Remains Entangled in Both Countries," Miami Herald, January 9, 2017, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article125501474.html>.

340 "NATO and Libya (Archived)," NATO, November 9, 2015. Accessed April 12, 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_71652.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_71652.htm).

341 "Obama Blasts Cameron, Sarkozy for Libya 'Mess,'" France 24, March 11, 2016, <https://www.france24.com/en/20160311-obama-cameron-sarkozy-libya-mess-gaddafi-france-uk>.

342 "Gaddafi Threatens Bloodbath in Libya," ABC News, March 2, 2011, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-03-02/gaddafi-threatens-bloodbath-in-libya/1964900>.

been NATO countries' real objective and a despite a "reset" initiated by Americans toward Russia<sup>343</sup>.

"Putin criticized the United Nations resolution as "flawed and inadequate" and clearly allowing for any country to take measures against a sovereign state under false pretenses.<sup>344</sup>

Putin fears were rooted first in economic and geopolitical concerns. First, Moscow lost an important and wealthy ally, who not only had provided him access to the Mediterranean and to the wider North Africa but also provided him massive economic contracts amounting up around 10 billion dollars<sup>345</sup>. Putin also rightly feared that the revolution's aftermath, Libya would fall under pro-Western influence and that the Arab revolution would create a vacuum filled by extremist factions.

It was only in 2012 that Washington reached similar conclusions in 2012, after the death of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Benghazi, by Ansar al-Sharia extremists<sup>346</sup>. The Libyan fiasco created a debate around the validity and efficiency of foreign US direct intervention. In the 2014-2015 phase, ISIS, which developed out of local Libyan networks that pledged allegiance to the group and the dispatch of some personnel from Iraq and Syria to Libya, gradually imposed itself on areas such as the Mediterranean coastal city of Sirte<sup>347</sup>.

Libya also became divided by internal rivalries. The country was led by a unity government, known as the Government of National Accord, or GNA, which had received UN backing. The GNA shared power with the Tripoli-based General National Congress, closely allied to Islamist fighters<sup>348</sup>. A key rival to both organizations was the House of Representatives (HoR), based in Tobruk, and under the control of Gen. Khalifa Haftar, who was backed by the United Arab Emirates, Russia and Egypt.

The Libyan civil war and the rise of ISIS there, significantly damaged the validity of

*Figure 14: MAP OF LIBYA*

the

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343 Steven Lee Myers, "The Real Story behind Putin's Syria Strikes," POLITICO, October 1, 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-real-story-behind-putins-syria-strikes-medvedev-russia/>.

344 Ibid.

345 Federica Saini Fasanotti, "Russia and Libya: A Brief History of an on-Again-off-Again Friendship," *Brookings* (blog), September 1, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/09/01/russia-and-libya-a-brief-history-of-an-on-again-off-again-friendship/>.

346 Natasha Ezrow, "13 Hours: What Actually Happened at the US Consulate in Benghazi," *The Conversation*, accessed April 12, 2019, <http://theconversation.com/13-hours-what-actually-happened-at-the-us-consulate-in-benghazi-53832>.

347 Jason Ditz, "'Heavy Losses' Claimed as US Warplanes Pound Libyan City of Sirte," *Antiwar.Com*, August 2016, <http://news.antiwar.com/2016/08/01/heavy-losses-claimed-as-us-warplanes-pound-libyan-city-of-sirte/>.

348 "Who Is Khalifa Haftar, Libya's CIA-Linked Rogue General-Turned-Warlord?," *alaraby*, April 10, 2019. Accessed August 30, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/4/10/who-is-khalifa-haftar-libyas-cia-linked-rogue-general-turned-warlord>.

Responsibility To Protect (R2P) that had been the backbone of many countries diplomatic policy. The ethical credibility of R2P was questioned with critics highlighting the abuses the use of force had led to. The controversies regarding Libya also resulted in numerous Security Council deadlocks- namely on Syria- as mistrust mounted between member states, with Russia and China arguing against another intervention under false premise that would encroach on the sovereignty of a recognized state. Russia clearly gained the advantage when Obama failed to enforce red lines after a regime-led chemical attack on the Ghouta area in 2013 killed around 1000 people<sup>349</sup>, while a US no-fly zone initiative over opposition areas in Syria also failed miserably and was effectively replaced<sup>350</sup> by a Russian no-fly zone in favor of the regime

## **II- Geopolitics of regional actors: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey**

The declining post-World War II liberal system and the end of a rule-based international order, discussed in the previous section has not only unsettled relations between Moscow and Washington but also destabilized the Arab region, faced with the Arab Spring many challenges. Since 2011, the US and Europe do not appear interested or capable of preserving a liberal order, while other actors such as Russia are providing the Arab countries with an attractive alternative narrative.

### **A- Iran's calculations:**

Iran's geopolitical calculations have been axed on several principles. First the Islamic Republic is motivated by the belief that it is besieged by hostile Sunni neighbors awash with petrodollars such as Saudi Arabia, or border countries plagued by U.S incursions, namely Iraq and Afghanistan. Tehran notably fears US encroachment in nearby countries would facilitate subversive operations aiming at destabilizing the Islamic Republic. Secondly, Iran is a country proud of its historical heritage and geographical weight, factors that it believes entitles it to spearhead regional politics, by relying on an active Islamic revolutionary discourse and a narrative focused on an opposition to the West and the defense of oppressed populations. Iran has thus countered what it considers as its systemic weakness by relying on an asymmetric form of warfare to fend off its regional and international enemies.

### ***i- A besieged nation:***

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349 , "Syria Chemical Attack: What We Know," *BBC News*, September 24, 2013, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23927399>.

350 "Russian Syria No-Fly Zone Deal Bans U.S.-Led Coalition Aircraft," Associated Press, May 5, 2017, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/05/05/russian\\_syria\\_no-fly\\_zone\\_deal\\_bans\\_us-led\\_coalition\\_aircraft\\_111321.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/05/05/russian_syria_no-fly_zone_deal_bans_us-led_coalition_aircraft_111321.html).

Despite Iran's harsh landscape- the country is surrounded three sides by mountains and on the fourth by the ocean- shielding it geographically against military invasions. The Islamic regime nonetheless worries its population's diversity leaves it exposed to disruptive activities from other countries.



## Iran

Figure 15: MAP OF IRAN

For Bernard Hourcade<sup>351</sup>, Iran's feeling of encirclement by hostile nations has been used as a narrative by the Islamic Republic to mobilize Iranians, more specifically during the Iraq-Iran war that was launched by Saddam against Iran.

Iran has continued relying on this political discourse, moreover as American presence increased in nearby countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran's has been, wary Washington would use its presence there as a launchpad into Iran, to foment ethnic dissent. The US has been accused<sup>352</sup> of attempting to mobilize Kurdish opposition factions in northwestern Iran, of manipulating Arab populations of Khuzestan, and of using Azerbaijan to project dissent among the Iranian Azeris.

351 Bernard Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran. Les défis d'une renaissance* (Armand Colin, 2016), <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01367452>.

352 "The Geopolitics of Iran: Holding the Center of a Mountain Fortress," Stratfor, December 16, 2011, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-iran-holding-center-mountain-fortress>.

Besides US presence in nearby Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran is also surrounded to the south by rival Sunni Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia with which it is competing for leadership in the Islamic world. Iran is also heavily reliant on its sea access on the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz to export its oil. The Strait is extremely vulnerable to naval blockade and is dominated by rival Sunni countries, home to a large American fleet. According to a paper by Chatham House<sup>353</sup>, the US military maintains a physical presence in the Middle East in the form of troop deployments, air bases, or naval port visits amounting to over 40,000 that is reinforced by security cooperation programs with regional countries.

To the east, neighboring Afghanistan, struggling with a decades-long civil war and the plague of Sunni jihadist groups, was governed by pro-western government, and was also home to a large American military presence amounting to over 14,000 military<sup>354</sup>. Also, to its east, Sunni Pakistan is a large beneficiary of Saudi money, in the form of a \$6 Billion package<sup>355</sup> and another \$10 billion investment in refineries in 2018, complemented by a close military cooperation deal between the two countries. Iran has accused Saudi Arabia of fomenting Sunni extremism<sup>356</sup> on its border with Pakistan, which is home to the Balochi people who are primarily Sunni. Besides Saudi Arabia, Pakistan is also a close ally of Iran's nemesis the US.

Iran is thus grappling with two main issues: its national diversity and its fragile economy.

Although a Muslim state with a population that is 60 percent ethnically Persian, Iran comprises a large number of other ethnic groups such as Arabs, Balochis, Azeris, Turkmens and Kurds as well as religious groups such as Sunnis clustered in peripheral areas of the country — the northeast, the northwest and the southeast<sup>357</sup>. Iran fears foreign powers will use this diversity to undermine the central government.

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353 Micah Zenko, "US Military Policy in the Middle East," Chatham House, October 2018. Accessed June 11, 2023 (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-10-18-us-military-policy-middle-east-zenko.pdf>)

354 "US May Trim More than 1,000 Troops from Afghanistan," al-Jazeera, February 16, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/trim-1000-troops-afghanistan-190215174031146.html>.

355 Umer Karim, "New Economic Ties Deepen the Saudi-Pakistani Strategic Partnership," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 28, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-economic-ties-deepen-the-saudi-pakistani-strategic-partnership>.

356 Fatemeh Aman, "Regional Rivalries Threaten Iran-Pakistan Relations," Atlantic Council, November 6, 2018. Accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/regional-rivalries-threaten-iran-pakistan-relations>.

357 Josserean, Pichon, and Louis, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord*. p. 103

Iran other fear is rooted in its economic vulnerabilities. While it boasts the fourth largest crude oil reserves and the third largest gas reserves in the world<sup>358</sup>, and is the 28th largest economy in the world, Iran is lagging behind other countries, with a nominal GDP per capita at \$5157 in 2013, lower than that of Lebanon at \$6983<sup>359</sup> and that of Saudi Arabia at around \$21,395. In addition, about 36% of the Iranian budget is reliant on oil<sup>360</sup>. Iran is also plagued by economic inefficiencies, stemming from economic sanctions, the system's corruption and inconsistent government policies, as well as a massive geography that increases transportation costs. Low GDP per capita, a large population, geography and reliance on oil are among the risk factors linked to the possibility of increased civil violence, highlighted by Professor David Laitin in a conference dubbed Civil Wars and the Arc of State Building<sup>361</sup>. "Iran suffers from grave structural economic weaknesses", underline Tancrede Jossreran, Frederic Pichon and Florian Louis in *Geopolitique du Moyen Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord*<sup>362</sup>. This combined with a young and diverse society exacerbates Tehran's siege mentality.

The Iranian central government main priority is thus to maintain internal social cohesion despite these many challenges. Nationalism and the manipulation of ethnic and religious tensions through proxies in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon have been one in the name of the defense of the oppressed has been a strategy Iran has followed to divert foreign attention, something we will look more in detail in the following section.

"Iran after 1979 has favored the use of the pan Shiite identity, instead of the pan Persian one, relying on non-Iranian Shiite communities in the ethnic sense, such as the Arabic Shiites of Iraq and Lebanon, the Hazara of Afghanistan..." says author Masri Feki in his book *Iran and the Middle East*<sup>363</sup>.

### ***ii- Iran's continuous history and its massive geography position it as a regional leader.***

Iran derives pride from its long-standing continuous history and its population and geographical might. In addition, Iran is the 17th largest country in world, with 1,684,000

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358 EIA, "Country Analysis Executive Summary: Iran," January 7, 2019, 9.

359 "GDP per capita," Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/gdp-per-capita>

360 "Rouhani's budget proposal reverses declining reliance on oil, Al-Monitor, December 2016. Accessed <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/iran-rouhani-cabinet-budget-proposal-2017-1396-oil.html>

361 file:///C:/Users/VAIO/Downloads/Civil%20Wars%20and%20the%20Arc%20of%20State%20Building.pdf

362 Jossreran, Louis and Pichon, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord* p104.

363 Masri Feki, *L'Iran et Le Moyen-Orient : Constats et Enjeux*, (Studyrama, 2010)



square kilometers and the 16th most populous country in the world, with about 70 million people<sup>364</sup>.

The Islamic republic has attempted to differentiate itself by building successively on nationalism, its religious orientation and its fight in the name of the oppressed.

Hourcade believes that nationalism rooted in Persian and Shi'i identity has been one tool in the hands of the Islamic republic to consolidate power, more than the shah regime, as it mobilized the new class issued from the revolution and could rely on the religious network led by supreme leader, which (unlike the shah) enjoys both Islamic and national authority<sup>365</sup>.

The Islamic Republic of Iran regime founded by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is built around the Islamic Revolution concept. The Islamic Revolution promoted Islam as a “comprehensive ideology and system of thought on a par with—and superior to—Western liberalism and Eastern Marxism<sup>366</sup>.” Religious ideology has been an effective soft power tool for Iran to expand regionally, supporting Islamic movements ranging from Hamas to Hezbollah.

Iran has also emphasized in its discourse the idea of defending the oppressed. “Shi'i Iran made of the Palestinian issue its new fighting horse to legitimize its new place in the Islamic world,” says Hourcade<sup>367</sup>. Membership within the non-aligned movement has been another founding tenant of Iran, which allowed it to confront the U.S. by allying with various countries opposing “western imperialism” such as Venezuela, Cuba, Syria, Sudan or Nicaragua<sup>368</sup>.

Tehran has expanded its regional presence by endorsing justified national causes, as argued by Robert Baer in his book “the Devil We Know, Dealing With The New Iranian Superpower”<sup>369</sup>. In the wake of Lebanon's invasion by Israel in the 80s, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps started to train a splinter group of Amal and other Shi'i militants including members of Iraq's Dawa Party. The former gave rise to Hezbollah, Iran's first real successful with proxies. In Iraq, Iran responded to the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) by stepping in and using the fatwa of Ayatollah Ali Sistani to integrate powerful Iranian militias within the Popular Mobilization Forces, thus becoming part of the state apparatus and

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364 “The Geopolitics of Iran,” Stratfor.

365 Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran. Les défis d'une renaissance* p 44.

366 Dr Payam Mohseni, “The Islamic Awakening: Iran's Grand Narrative of the Arab Uprisings,” Middle East Brief, Brandeis University, April 2013, pp. 1-9.

367 Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran. Les défis d'une renaissance* p145.

368 Ibid.

369 Robert Baer, *The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower*, (Crown, 2009),

allocated money in the official state budget<sup>370</sup>. More importantly, these labels have allowed Iran to often hijack justified national causes to build and legitimize loyal proxies, acting later as a conduit to extend influence in these countries.

***iii- Iran reliance on asymmetric warfare is rooted in internal structural weaknesses.***

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has spent billions of dollars on military engagements in Palestine, Lebanon and more recently in Iraq Yemen and Syria, where it supports loyalist paramilitary proxy groups. These are a flexible geopolitical tool for Iran that it can easily deploy depending on its needs. Hezbollah and the PMU as well as Afghani groups in Syria and the Houthis, beefed up by Hezbollah on Saudi's borders.

Israeli security sources stated in 2018 that Tehran earmarked yearly around \$700 million-\$1 billion on Hezbollah and \$100 million on Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad<sup>371</sup>.

The Islamic Jihad, another of Iran's proxies was provided <sup>372</sup> with approximately US \$100 million to US\$150 million annually since 2007. Houthi rebels have also benefited from Iranian aid, mostly in the form of training, strategic advice and military equipment, in an intervention far less costly than Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen. As a result, with little money, Iran has been able to build loyal militias allowing it to project its influence across various areas of the MENA region.

“To fight the Great Satan or to contain its influence, the constant policy of the Islamic republic has consisted of placing itself systematically in front of the US and its allies, using when needed non state organizations (already) existing or created for the occasion,” says Hourcade<sup>373</sup>.

The best illustration, previously mentioned takes place in Lebanon, where Iran was able to fight American and French troops that's to what became in the mid-90s Hezbollah. The 1983 attacks against American and French bases in Beirut which caused several hundred of deaths<sup>374</sup>. In Lebanon Hezbollah has consolidated its power with the election of Hezbollah's ally Michel Aoun as president in October 2016, followed by the establishment of a “Unity Cabinet”, heavily influenced by Hezbollah and its partners. Iran has also solidified its position in Iraq through its clout over the ruling Dawa Party. It has also overseen the

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370 John Hannah, “Iran-Backed Militias Are In Iraq to Stay – Foreign Policy,” Foreign Policy, July 31, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/31/iran-backed-militias-are-in-iraq-to-stay/>.

371 Dan Williams, “Top Israeli general sees increased Iran spending on foreign wars,” Reuters, January 2 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-rallies-israel/top-israeli-general-sees-increased-iran-spending-on-foreign-wars-idUSKBN1ER0Q9>

372 “Financing Terror,” Naame Shaam, December 2015: [http://www.naameshaam.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/FINANCING\\_TERROR\\_Iran\\_Naame\\_Shaam\\_report\\_Dec2015.pdf](http://www.naameshaam.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/FINANCING_TERROR_Iran_Naame_Shaam_report_Dec2015.pdf)

373 Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran. Les défis d'une renaissance*.

374 Ibid.

training of pro-Iranian militias within the officially sanctioned Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and whose leaders occupy important positions in government such as the Badr Organization, which has controlled the Interior Ministry.

*Figure 16: MAP OF SAUDI ARABIA AND THE GULF*

## B- Saudi Arabia and the Gulf:

Situated at the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has an



estimated population of 32 million, which is the 6th largest in the Arab world 40th largest<sup>375</sup> .

The country is plagued by dry desert areas with arable land per person at around 0.1 hectares per person<sup>376</sup>. Its massive hydrocarbon resources, its close proximity to some of the world's busiest maritime traffic lanes, and its position as the custodian of the two holiest sites of Islam (Mecca and Medina) also interplay with its geopolitical calculations.

375 Joseph Shupac, "The Geopolitics of Saudi Arabia," *Future Economics* (blog), June 22, 2016, <https://future-economics.com/2016/06/22/the-geopolitics-of-saudi-arabia/>.

376 "Saudi Arabia - Arable Land," *Index Mundi*, 2018 accessed September 4, 2019, <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/saudi-arabia/arable-land>.

This opinion is further developed by Tancrede Jossieran, Florian Louis and Frederic Pichon<sup>377</sup>. “Saudi Arabia is founded on 4 pillars, the Saud dynasty, the Islamic holy sites, inexhaustible oil, and a strong U.S alliance for some time,” they say. These shaping factors influence Saudi Arabia’s geopolitical perceptions, namely with the country’s increasing and massive political and economic challenges (that will be examined further below), a U.S withdrawal from the region and Shi’i competition for regional leadership.

### ***i-The Saudi Dynasty at a crossroad:***

The House of Saud can trace be traced back to Bedouin chieftain Mani al Muraidi in the 15th century and to the town Diriyah. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, Muraidi's descendant Sheikh Muhammad bin Saud made an alliance with a Muslim Sunni revivalist cleric Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab with the marriage of Muhammad bin Saud’s son, Abdul Aziz to the cleric’s daughter., The Saudi state underwent three iterations, and by 1932 it controlled most of the Arabian Peninsula. The Saudi royal family still rules to this day. The current King Salman has elevated his son Mohammed Bin Salman (known as MBS) to the position of Crown Prince and Defense Minister. MBS has consolidated power by sidelining family members, creating a rift within the royal family. In 2017, Saudi security forces cracked down on members of the business elite and the royal family<sup>378</sup>, holding them hostage Ritz-Carlton hotel in Riyadh, allegedly in an attempt to combat rampant corruption. MBS also clamped down on human rights activists and the Saudi media, with MBS accused of orchestrating the murder of the famous journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a critic of the crown prince<sup>379</sup>. The controversial Yemen war was also spearheaded by Saudi Arabia at the behest of MBS. For Jossieran, Saudi has many weaknesses ranging from its youthful population, the Arab Spring revolutionary phenomena and the stresses of the Yemen war<sup>380</sup>.

### ***ii- Saudi Arabia at an economic cross road:***

Contention also surrounded the crown prince’s ambitious economic reform program deemed necessary. Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia is both the world’s largest oil exporter and has the second largest proven reserves<sup>381</sup>, the country has faced successive deficits given

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377 Jossieran, Pichon, and Louis, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l’Afrique du Nord* p 127.

378 “Mohammed Bin Salman: The Dark Side of Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince,” al-Jazeera, October 20, 2018 accessed April 12, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/mohammed-bin-salman-dark-side-saudi-arabia-crown-prince-181015123719153.html>.

379 “What Happened to Jamal Khashoggi?,” *BBC News*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>.

380 Jossieran, Pichon, and Louis, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l’Afrique du Nord*.

381 “Saudi Arabia - Oil and Gas,” International Trade Administration, accessed September 4, 2019, <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Saudi-Arabia-oil-and-gas>.



drops in oil prices from 2013 to 2019 from \$90 to \$50<sup>382</sup>. Its sovereign wealth fund, once the third largest in the world has dropped from \$736 billion in 2015 to \$500 billion in 2018 due to annual budget deficits. If the situation persists with no economic reforms made, Saudi Arabia could run out of money. This could prove disastrous for a country with a large youth population ( 20 million Saudis are under 35 in 2020)<sup>383</sup>, a heavily subsidized economy and a government budget heavily dependent on oil revenues, To address the country’s political vulnerabilities, the crown prince has promoted a new economic agenda built around the Vision 2030 vision, articulated around the reduction of wasteful energy subsidies, creating alternative sources of government revenues through fee structures and value-added tax, and revamping the face of the country to attract foreign direct investment. In the wake of the 2011 phase, MBS also worked on flexing its muscles in Syria by financing various military groups, which was considered as a failed experiment, due to the lack of cohesion and unity

382 “Historical Crude Oil Prices (Table),” InflationData.com, accessed September 4, 2019, <https://inflationdata.com/articles/inflation-adjusted-prices/historical-crude-oil-prices-table/>.

383 Varun Godinho, “Two-Thirds of Saudi Arabia’s Population Is under the Age of 35,” Gulf Business, August 10, 2010. Accessed May 5, 2022, <https://gulfbusiness.com/two-thirds-of-saudi-arabias-population-is-under-the-age-of-35/>.

and the military failure these groups faced. This experiment was not Saudi's first unfortunate dabble with proxies, with its infamous support of the Islamist Moujahedeen in Afghanistan with American support, again Russian invasion<sup>384</sup>.

### *iii- Iran expansionist policy*

Much of Saudi oil comes from the Eastern region (which comprises cities such as Damam), can thus be considered as the beating heart of the Saudi economy. There is a high concentration of Shia in the region, accounting for around 15% of the population<sup>385</sup>. In addition, there are also Saudi Shi'a who live near the border with Yemen, with families expanding across the border. The concentration of Shi'a on the border with Yemen and in the eastern areas has been a dilemma for the Saudi Government because the cross-border ties exposed the southwest of the country to foreign influence<sup>386</sup>.

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384 Prince Turki Al-Faisal Al-Saud, *The Afghanistan File*, ed. Michael Field (Crows: Arabian Publishing Ltd., 2021).

385 Oaima Al Najjar, "The Saudi Shia: Between an Iranian Rock and a Saudi Hard Place," al-Jazeera May 8, 2019 accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/5/8/the-saudi-shia-between-an-iranian-rock-and-a-saudi-hard-place>

386 Map sources "After the Execution," *The Economist*, March 19, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/03/19/after-the-execution>.





Economist.com

Figure 17: MUSLIM POPULATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Iran 's influence, and its resorting to proxy groups to extend influence have been a source of concern for the Kingdom. Retaining stability along its borders and in oil producing areas is of utmost importance for Riyadh. Iran is seen as a destabilizing power by Riyadh with the Islamic revolution that triggered fears of the spread of a contagion within the GCC.



These fears were exacerbated in 1981 with an aborted coup against the Sunni Khalifa ruling family in Bahrain<sup>387</sup>, as well as the subsequent expansion of Iranian influence in Syria, Lebanon Iraq and Yemen where its proxies dominate the political system.

*iv- The holy sites:*

Besides oil, much of Saudi Arabia's legitimacy comes from its role as custodian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, situated in the Hijaz area. As seen previously much of the house of Saud power has been based on the marriage between the clerics and the ruling family and the latter's proper control and oversight over the religious sites of the Hijaz. Yet MBS' modern vision could be a factor of instability. Fresh reform includes the development of Jeddah, which is close to the Medina and Mecca, as a trader route and a tourist destination. The new Saudi leadership intends to profit from its western coastline location on the Red Sea along the global trading routes and to grow its ports to provide the state with alternative economic revenues besides oil. The ruling family is planning to double the cargo capacity in its main port of Jeddah, and create another port further along the coast, in the King Abdullah Economic City, with the goal of making it the largest in the Middle East<sup>388</sup>. The Saudi leadership is also planning to link its port to a nationwide railway system known as the land bridge project<sup>389</sup>.

*v- A necessary but fragilized alliance with the US.*

U.S. businesses have been involved in Saudi Arabia's oil industry since the early thirties, when Chevron won a sixty-year concession to explore eastern Saudi Arabia<sup>390</sup> before it made its first oil discovery there in 1938. In 1945, U.S President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with Saudi King Abdulaziz aboard the USS *Quincy* in Egypt and consolidated the relation between the two countries to protect American oil interests. U.S.-Saudi military cooperation peaked during the first Gulf War, when in 1991 a U.S.-led coalition expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait. More than half a million U.S. troops flooded into the region. The U.S presence in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf triggered controversy within Saudi conservative

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387 Terry Atlas, "Bahrain Plot Tied to Iran" *chicagotribune.com*, January 7, 1988, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1988-01-07-8803200501-story.html>.

388 Ben Flanagan, "Saudi Port IPO in Pipeline, Says Economic Zone Boss," *Arab News*, February 2, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1445811/business-economy>.

389 "SAR to Float Tenders for the Riyadh-Dammam and the Land Bridge Project - Saudi Gazette," *Saudi Gazette*, March 12, 2018. Accessed September 5, 2019, <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/article/530304/BUSINESS/SAR-to-float-tenders-for-the-Riyadh-Dammam-and-the-Land-Bridge-Project>.

390 "U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations," Council on Foreign Relations.

circles and wider radical networks, partly resulting years later in terror attacks by Osama bin Laden.

Saudi Arabia was at the time of the Arab Spring heavily reliant on the US protection, to maintain the security of the Strait of Bab Mandeb on the red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz on the Persian Gulf. These straits which oversee much of the world's international production are considered as strategic choke points for Saudi revenues. However, new technologies creating a shift in the hydrocarbon market and political changes have reduced American dependence on Saudi oil and increased Saudi fears of Iran. This has led to Saudi diversification of its relations, greater and improved ties with Russia and China.

### **C-Turkey: return to the Middle East and Modern Islam non interventionism**

In their book,<sup>391</sup> Jossieran, Louis and Pichon compare Turkey to Janus- the roman god of transition, with two faces<sup>392</sup>: a country, caught between “tradition and modernity”.

Jossieran, Louis and Pichon are correct in their assessment of Turkey's geopolitical position, even more in this particular phase marked by changes in the regional world order. Turkey's geopolitical calculations are aligned with president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's evolving vision of the new Turkey. Erdogan's vision is first rooted in its neo-imperialistic perception of its country's importance, nonetheless constrained by economic realities placed by countries such as Russia. A second axis of this vision, one rooted in change in the regional landscape in the post 2011 phase, is safeguarding Turkey's security interests, one heavily influencing what Erdogan perceived as the Kurdish threat and NATO's receding role.

#### ***i-Erdogan's quest for Islamic leadership and the return to neo imperialism:***

Much of Turkey's current policy is linked to the history of its incumbent leader president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Brought to power in 1994, when he was elected as Istanbul's mayor, Erdogan became Turkey's prime minister in 2003 and president in 2014. Erdogan consolidated his grip on power in 2017, when he won a referendum that significantly increased his powers<sup>393</sup>.

“Benefiting from a prosperous and diversified economy founded on bases much more solid than most its neighbors, Turkey seems to have the means to its strong ambitions and it does not attempt to hide that,” says Jossieran, Louis and Pichon.

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391 Jossieran, Pichon, and Louis, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord*.

392 Rodrigo Ximénez de Rada, *Historia Romanorum*, Chapter 1.

393 “Erdogan: Turkey's Pugnacious President,” *BBC News*, June 24, 2019, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13746679>.

It was foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu who introduced Turkey's "Strategic Depth" concept, which was inherited from an activist foreign policy in the region first introduced by Prime Minister and President Turgut Ozal<sup>394</sup>. The Strategic Depth doctrine premised that Turkey, as a result of its Ottoman legacy, possesses great geographical depth. For Davotuglu, Turkey's geographical position right at the center of many geopolitical areas of influence called for an activist engagement with all regional systems in the Turkey's neighborhood<sup>395</sup>. However, initially in the 2000 phase Turkey's activism was centered on the diplomatic arena with Turkey taking a prominent role in conflict mediation such as the Israeli Palestinian conflict, while following a policy of zero problems with its neighbors<sup>396</sup>. Ankara's activism clearly broke away from Atatürk's isolationism and his maxim of 'Peace at Home, Peace Abroad'<sup>397</sup>. According to expert Soner Cagaptay,<sup>398</sup> Turkey's involvement in the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring contributed to the neo-imperialist pivot in Turkish foreign policy with involvement in the Arab uprisings.

Josseran, Louis and Pichon<sup>399</sup> underline that Turkey's young generation that grew up with Erdogan was brought up with strong Islamic traditions and the memory of Ottoman empire, two nexuses that Erdogan built around its new imperialist vision and which translated into its policy in the aftermath of the Arab spring.

Since his premiership, Erdogan has worked on making the new Turkey great again. First Erdogan broke with Turkish alignment with the West when he believed that U.S. policies conflicted with Turkey's security interests and did not respect the importance of the country in the NATO alliance.

Erdogan's neo-imperialist prism translated into the Turkish perception of the Arab Spring as an opportunity to reassert Turkish influence over a region the Ottoman Empire had ruled for hundreds of years. Erdogan believed that his Justice and Development Party (AKP) could serve as the model for neighboring countries democratic transition. This shift in policy moved Turkey from a policy of zero problem with its neighbors to zero neighbors without problems as Turkey reinforced its intention to become a key player in the new regional

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394 Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 6 (November 1, 2006): 945–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200600923526>.

395 Ibid.

396 Ahmet Davutoglu, "Policy of Zero Problems with Our Neighbors," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 21, 2013 accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/zero-problems-in-a-new-era.en.mfa>

397 Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy."

398 Soner Cagaptay, "Making Turkey Great Again," Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, Volume 43:1 (Winter 2019).

399 Josseran, Pichon, and Louis, *Géopolitique du Moyen-Orient et de l'Afrique du Nord*.

political and strategic environment. As an example, Erdogan was heavily critical of Bashar al-Assad, his former ally, and supported the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Tunisia and elsewhere as it believed Islamic activism could become the new facet of its regional engagement. Political Islam was one conduit allowing Erdogan to project influence in the region that remained united to by religion despite ethnic differences.

Turkey's drive for regional Islamic leadership has increasingly put it at odds with other countries. Turkey will always remain suspicious of any Iranian ambitions for geopolitical expansion in on its southern border. Despite coordination in the framework of the Syrian war through the Syrian MOC, Turkey became increasingly odds with Saudi Arabia, first because of support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which the kingdom perceives as an enemy, and later because of its support of Qatar in the internal Gulf feud. The crisis between Saudi Arabia and Turkey reached a turning point with the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The support for Islamic movement in the larger sense and the Muslim Brotherhood in the more specific sense has partially shaped Turkey's geopolitical rivalries and alliances.

***ii-Turkish security interests shape its geopolitical calculations***

Turkey has been affected significantly more than other countries in the region by the Arab Spring as the political and territorial order in its immediate neighborhood was revised, creating many challenges for Ankara. Turkey's main security considerations have been to avoid a spillover of the Syria war into its country and maintain internal order.



Figure 18: MAP OF TURKEY

The Syria war thus placed Turkey in a conundrum because it has fulfilled Turkey’s worst anxieties. Chaos in Syria brought the threat of ‘terrorism’, one extensively used and manipulated by Turkey. But more importantly, it allowed for the revival of the Kurdish question, by allowing Syrian Kurds to create an autonomous region on Turkey’s border, a phenomenon that stirred Ankara’s fears. The fact that the YPG has gained control over areas flush with Syria’s resources that potentially provide an economic foundation for a Kurdish autonomous entity was perceived by the Turkish military and civilian decision makers as a direct threat to the stability of the Turkish state. Turkey increasingly expressed vocal and material support to the Turkmen minority, which according to Ankara became the subject of ethnic cleansing at the hands of the Kurds<sup>400</sup>. It also used its leverage with the opposition to move them away from the conflict and use them as a buffer in the fight against the Kurds.

400 Ali Badirkhan and Jadaliyya, “The Reality of Ethnic Cleansing and Kurdish State in Syria,” Jadaliyya, August 25, 2015, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32395>.

Kurdish autonomy, concomitant with US shifting interests in the backdrop of European divisions around the Syrian issue, compounded Ankara's fears. For decades, Turkey's has been used to the advantage of American global security umbrella since the end of the Cold War. Turkey and the US have been NATO allies since 1952<sup>401</sup>.

The war in Syria highlighted the differences in Turkish and American perceptions of threats in this region which hindered their ability to cooperate more effectively. The US shift to leading from behind and reliance on the Kurdish-led YPG at the expense of the Arab mainstream and Islamic opposition were seen as direct threat by Ankara.

Turkey's relationship with the EU and its predecessor organizations dating back to 1959 (when it applied to become an associate member of the European Economic Community) did not mean it could count on a stronger ally in term of the Syrian file<sup>402</sup>. Since 2011, the EU foreign policy has been clearly marked by a leadership deficiency in regard to Syria. That combined with the Turkey's growing distance from the goal of EU membership accession<sup>403</sup> pushed Ankara for a more pragmatic interpretation of the Syrian war and a review of its relations with Russia and Iran who had become main players in its direct backyard and supporting the Assad regime.

After the debacle of the Turkish downing of a Russian plane in 2015<sup>404</sup>, Russia and Turkey started cooperating in Syria as Turkey's status as part of the transatlantic community became in doubt in the backdrop of tensions between Turkey and West. Both Russia and Turkey are known to have directly opposed interests in Syria through supporting different sides in the civil war. But in Syria, Turkey had no choice but to work with Russia in order to protect its security interests, particularly vis-à-vis the PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurdish YPG militia.

Turkey came to understand that unlike the Us and Europe, Russia was the only serious interlocutor in Syria. Russia also could contain Iran presence there and establish red lines.

Economic calculations also impacted Turkey's pragmatic approach to Russia. Turkey is also Russia's second largest market for gas, after Germany. Turkey is significantly

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401 "Turkey's Relation with NATO," Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed September 6, 2019, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/nato.en.mfa>.

402 "Timeline: Turkey and the EU | World News | The Guardian," December 13, 2002 accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/dec/13/turkey.eu3>.

403 Murat Sofuglu and Melis Alemdar, "Why Has Turkey Grown Distant from Its EU Membership Goal?," TRT Magazine, 2018. <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/why-has-turkey-grown-distant-from-its-eu-membership-goal-21662>.

404 Karim Shahin, William Borger and Shaun Walker, "Putin Condemns Turkey after Russian Warplane Downed near Syria Border," The Guardian, November 24, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/24/turkey-shoots-down-jet-near-border-with-syria>.

dependent on Russian natural gas, which was estimated at 51.8% of Turkey's gas imports in 2017<sup>405</sup>. Turkey has also brokered a deal to procure the Russian S-400 missile defense system, a move which has drawn rebuke from its NATO allies.

In Syria, Turkey has also overcome its animosity with Iran, through participating in the three-way Astana process alongside Russia. Hourcade<sup>406</sup> believes that Iran and Turkey are rivals for regional power because of their large population, their social development, their economic resources and their history. In addition to problems rooted in Ankara's relation with NATO and the Baku Tbilisi- Ceyhan pipeline<sup>407</sup> that marginalizes Iran, Turkey and Iran are at opposing ends in terms of support for the PKK and the Azerbaijan issue<sup>408</sup>.

While at the onset of the 21 centuries, Turkey had both a western and eastern side, it appears increasingly turned to its eastern side, away from the West. Like the US, Erdogan sees foreign affairs through a transactional, balance of power lens. Under Erdogan, Turkey has also copied the internalization of its warfare to proxies. After facilitating the passage of Jihadists in Syria, in what was labelled the Jihadists highway, which greatly emboldened ISIS, Turkey allowed for the domination of the 'reformed' Jihadi Nusra front in the Idlib. More recently, it has left the takeover of Kurdish areas in Syria to the Syrian National Army, trained, equipped and financed by the Turks<sup>409</sup>. Furthermore, it has even relied on its Syrian military proxies to expand its influence in Libya, where several thousand Syrian fighters fled in by Ankara were reported to have been enlisted to support the Libyan Government of the national accord<sup>410</sup>.

### III- Conclusion

"At the onset of the 21st century, the Middle East is characterized by the absence of a dominant power capable to impose its influence to the majority of regional countries," is the accurate prediction of Josserson, Louis and Pichon.

The US retreat and new transactional policy in the Middle East have created a power vacuum in the region that Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran are competing to fill. The resulting state of uncertainty has resulted in unclear regional relation and increased tensions. These

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405 Muhsin Tiryakuglu,, "Turkey Hits Record Gas Consumption and Imports in 2017," Anadolu February 21, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/turkey/turkey-hits-record-gas-consumption-and-imports-in-2017/18943>.

406 Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran. Les défis d'une renaissance*.

407 Ibid.

408 Masri Feki, *L'Iran et Le Moyen-Orient : Constats et Enjeux*.), p 86.

409 Elizabeth Tsurkov, "The Gangs of Northern Syria: Life Under Turkey's Proxies," New Lines Institute, December 7, 2022, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/syria/the-gangs-of-northern-syria-life-under-turkeys-proxies/>.

410 "Libya: Syrian Mercenaries Played a Key Role in Recent Tripoli Clashes," Syrians for Truth and Justice (blog), September 14, 2022 <https://stj-sy.org/en/libya-syrian-mercenaries-played-a-key-role-in-recent-tripoli-clashes/>

regional countries cannot count on military and diplomatic assistance previously provided by allied super powers, that firstly insured that states were propped up when needed and secondly provided the economic and political stability from which they derived their legitimacy.

These regional power houses now rely on their own geopolitical strengths to vie for preeminence. All of these countries believe that their geography, population, financial means and history, give them sufficient legitimacy to spearhead the region. Yet none of these countries appears to have achieved dominance until now, their rivalry and the changes to political system only resulting in further chaos in countries considered fault lines such as Syria. This lack of leadership has also resulted in what Feki calls a regional bipolarity pitting Gulf countries against Iran. Syria has borne the brunt of the war of bipolarity, one that Iran appears to have largely won with the support of Russia.



## Conclusion

At the onset of this section, we pondered on whether new wars would be normalized in this new phase of Middle East history. We looked at local and regional factors that led to the emergence of intrastate conflict in Syria as well as to how the Syrian insurgency fit Kaldor's New War paradigm, describing as well the use by interventional actors of local proxies. We ended this second section by looking at the new geopolitical realities as well as the geopolitical calculations of international and regional powers in Syria and their increasing reticence for direct intervention

As we have seen in the first and second chapter of this section, failing states within fragile regional systems are more vulnerable to intrastate wars. In addition, the international liberal order has been destabilized with the rise of an apolar world where democracies are falling victim to apathy and populism, where authoritarian narratives are advancing and where transnational actors are becoming preeminent. As a result, isolationism, realism and transnationalism appear to be increasingly prevailing both at the regional and international foreign policy level.

Social media and instant communication have changed political thinking in democratic countries, where governments overcome by populist movements are less inclined to expend their citizenry blood and money, because of obvious political cost. The political cost we are mentioning here is the costs for policymakers to commit to a crisis in the face of public opinion, which has been mostly negative of late, especially that population are increasingly opposed to intervention because of the human cost attached to it.

In the new apolar system, very much like in old medieval times, no player can alone dominate an increasingly anarchic political and security environment. The Second World War and the challenges posed by coalition of states to hegemonic super powers such as the US, had already rendered the concept of total war as obsolete because mutually assured destruction made the matter unthinkable whether morally or financially. In the new political order, the global distribution of power makes it challenging for any one single actor to have hegemony over the international foreign policy landscape.

In addition, the apolarity of the world has also reduced stakes and the urgency of crisis as well as created shifts in state's security perception, because of the evolution on international threats. Security interests are no more defined by traditional enmity and

decreased the legitimacy of intervention, with the explosion of terrorism with diffuse foreign linkages or intrastate wars.

For all these reasons, resorting to surrogate warfare appears to be the increasingly becoming the rational option for both larger and smaller powers. The privatization of security through surrogate warfare provides after all, the ideal means for states to fulfil its security function and thereby stay relevant in an a-polar, globalized world, while limiting the burden of war.

Surrogate warfare thus allows for the partial or total externalization, of the operational and tactical burden of warfare to a surrogate with the principal intent of minimizing the burden of warfare for its own taxpayers, soldiers and ultimately its policymakers.

The war in Syria illustrates this new normal. While the war on ISIS has been globalized-as it has united a coalition of countries, from the US, Germany and France to Saudi Arabia Jordan and a reluctant Turkey united against a pseudo-state entity- the operational effort at the local level in both Syria and Iraq has been very much left to surrogates.

Since the war broke out and ISIS took over large swaths of Iraq and Syria, the US has been reluctant to intervene directly with large numbers of its own troops, preferring instead to arming, training, and providing air support to local partners with the narrow military goal of defeating ISIS. A failed effort in 2014 consisted of a \$500 million Pentagon program to produce anti-ISIS Arab rebel forces. This fielded no more than 60 fighters who were quickly decimated by Jabhat al-Nusra<sup>411</sup>. The Obama administration eventually scrapped that program and deepened its reliance on the YPG, who had successfully defended Kobane with intense coalition air support against a six-month ISIS siege. In October 2015, the YPG established the SDF, an umbrella organization led and dominated by the YPG and incorporating Arab and Syriac groups. SDF leaders were soon coordinating with the U.S. military on a regular basis, and arming the group proved to be most consequential in rolling back IS, with the liberation of the group's last bastion of al-Baghuz al-Fawqani in Deir az-

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411 Paul McLeary, "The Pentagon Just Spent \$41 Million to Train 'Four or Five' Syrian Fighters," Foreign Policy, September 16, 2015. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/16/pentagon-just-spent-41-million-to-train-four-or-five-syrian-fighters/>

Zour in March 2019<sup>412</sup>. By 2019, the SDF claimed to have lost more than 11,000 fighters in that war on ISIS<sup>413</sup>.

As seen in previous chapters, the US alliance with the Kurds was not the only proxy game in Syria. Iran has utilized a range of foreign proxies in Syria, alongside its building a resistance movement there, inspired by its successful Iraqi and Lebanese endeavors. Proxy operations in Syria remain to this date largely led by the Quds force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps deployment and were comprised of over 2,000 soldiers<sup>414</sup>, a number that included commanders and consultants operating alongside other forces in the pro-Assad coalition. Iran also helped build the National Defense Forces (NDF) with the help of its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah. The NDF has since become one of the most important ‘auxiliary’ forces of the Syrian army, operating centers in various Syrian provinces and towns though not officially regarded as part of the Syrian armed forces. Iranian attention shifted away from the NDF to Local Defense Forces (LDF), which on paper registered more than 88,723 personnel in 2017<sup>415</sup>. The nucleus of the LDF goes back to 2012 and its main epicenter was and remains the Aleppo area. The formations of the LDF include many ‘Syrian Hezbollah’ and ‘Syrian Islamic Resistance’ style units and include recruits who have converted to Shi’i Islam. Examples include the Baqir Brigade, the 313 Force and the Sayyida Ruqayya Brigade.

After supporting various opposition groups through the MOM, Turkey has built a surrogate in the Euphrates shield area it remains in control of. In 2016, Turkish forces, backed by Syrian rebel groups, launched Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria aiming at fighting the Islamic State in a first phase but more importantly at curbing the influence of Syrian Kurdish troops led by the People’s Protection Units (YPG), considered as a terrorist organization<sup>416</sup>. According to Syria expert Haid Haid, the Euphrates Shield operations room manages its extensive array of armed allies, estimated to number around 6,700 fighters,<sup>1</sup> Turkey used to manage and coordinate between the various factions. As an

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412 Aris Roussinos, “Inside the Fall of the Islamic State,” *Foreign Policy*, March 29, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/29/inside-the-fall-of-the-islamic-state/>.

413 Wladimir Van Wligenburg, “SDF Says over 11,000 of Its Forces Killed in Fight against the Islamic State,” *Kurdistan 24*, March 23, 2019, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/0dafa596-6536-49d7-8e23-e52821742ae9>.

414 Ian Black, “Iran Ramps up Troop Deployment in Syria in Run-up to ‘Anti-Rebel Offensive’,” *The Guardian*, October 14, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/14/iran-troop-deployment-syria-anti-rebel-offensive-revolutionary-guards-assad>.

415 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Administrative Decisions on the Local Defence Forces,” [aymennjawad.org](http://aymennjawad.org), May 2017, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/05/administrative-decisions-on-local-defence-forces>

416 Haid Haid, “Turkey’s Gradual Efforts to Professionalize Syrian Allies,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 2, 2018. Accessed April 17, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77637>.

example, Ankara helped coordinate a meeting between the opposition government and 33 rebel groups in the Euphrates Shield region in October 2017. Each of the rebel groups in attendance signed at the time, a document agreeing to unite their factions into three army corps as a precursor to a complete merger with the national army, he explains.

The Syria war appears to confirm the evolution of the burden of war, with the increasing prevalence of surrogate warfare, Surrogates are, too liberal states that are constrained by factors such as accountability, an efficient mean to transfer or externalize the operational risks from the serviceman to the surrogate thereby indirectly allowing the sovereign to externalize the political costs of war. For smaller powers with limited means, it also allows, when used properly, for massive projection of power, while evading direct international confrontation that could prove costly.

Proxy wars finally allows to avoid heads on collusion between greater powers while providing them the ability to deal with their foreign policy and security demands, in the complex globalized context of the new millennium.

“We are seeing the return of proxy wars in great power competition,” concludes Stephen Tankel<sup>417</sup>.

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417 Interview with Stephen Tanker, senior fellow at the Center for New American Security, by Mona Alami, September 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.

## **Part 3: The tools of power: role of non-state actors and the terrorist issue**

## Introduction

In the previous chapter we attempted to answer the question as to whether new wars were becoming more prevalent in the Middle East, because of the rise in ethnic and religious tensions in the backdrop of an increasingly interconnected world, power shifts and new geopolitical strategies, thus resulting in a greater reliance on surrogate warfare. In this section, we are however more interested in looking at the sources of power of VNSAs in a changing world.

How do violent non-state armed actors operate, survive, and acquire longevity? In the first chapter we will look at VNSAs from a terrorism perspective, looking into the various definitions of terrorism as well as features of terrorism from drivers to objectives. Can these theories be adapted to New Wars? We will attempt to differentiate between terrorism and resistance and look at the evolution of terrorism from old to new. Finally, we will attempt to see how the VNSAs we are studying fit into academic models.

In a second chapter, we will be looking at how VNSA make use of identity politics and what ideologies do they resort to in Syria whether the Sunni and Shi'i Jihad endorsed respectively by ISIS, Hezbollah and to a lesser extent the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces. How did the wide appeal of the Syrian Jihad translate on the ground? How does ideology translate at the level of the SDF? We will finally look at how their approaches fall within the concept of New wars and how was it used as a geopolitical tool. We will also compare and contrast their approaches.

In a third chapter, we will look at the hybrid warfare used by VNSAs to balance power against regional or superpowers such as Syria, Iran, Turkey, the US, or Russia. We will also look at how war necessity affected these VNSAs relation with a sponsor or the opposite or forced a state to pick a proxy. We will look at the military structures and approaches of transnational VNSAs in Syria and their use of hybrid warfare as well as the evolution of their fighting techniques in Syria mainly of Hezbollah, moving to ISIS and finally to the SDF as well as the differences in warring styles.

The question we attempt in this part is to answer the question on how VNSAA share commonalities and differences as well as terms of tactics in terms of military issues.

## Chapter 1: The terrorist question in Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey

The world has witnessed since September 2001, a phase of heightened terrorism activity. The 9/11 terror attacks created a tectonic shift in the military perception of warfare, with a non-state actor namely Al-Qaeda succeeding in targeting the heart of America's political and economic might with the flattening of the World Trade Center and the targeting of the Pentagon, which triggered the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The American War on Terror continued over the next decade or so, followed by the Arab Spring that only further empowered VNSA and resulted in their multiplication across the Arab region and across the religious divide. The weakening of regional states during the Arab Spring allowed for these VNSAs to play a more prominent role in local and regional politics.

Firstly, the rise of ISIS was concomitant with the Arab Spring in 2011. In February<sup>418</sup> that year, a day of rage organized on the 25<sup>th</sup> in various Iraqi regions ended with many protesters killed in clashes with security forces.<sup>419</sup> These protests were driven by familiar grievances of dissatisfaction with corruption and poor-quality services. By December 2012<sup>420</sup>, protests escalated and became more sectarian with thousands of Sunnis demonstrating to end the perceived marginalization of their sect by Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's Shi'i-led government. Events went in a more militant direction as armed groups escalated their activities after the Iraqi Security Forces killed civilians while attempting to clear a protest camp in Hawija in April 2013<sup>421</sup>. ISIS became more powerful and rode a wave of Sunni discontent in its takeovers of Fallujah and Mosul, spanning January to June 2014. Another group also used the Arab Spring to increase its geographical foothold: namely, Hezbollah, which expanded into nearby Syria. Hezbollah, an organization that dated back to the 80s, was able to increase its regional involvement with the rise of revolutions in the region and the destabilizing effect it had on countries such as Syria and Iraq as well as Yemen. In these countries, Hezbollah deployed its experts and fighters to advise and shore up failing regimes or like in the case of Yemen to assist the insurgency.

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418 Jack Healy and Michael S. Schmidt, "Protests Across Iraq Turn Violent," *The New York Times*, February 25, 2011, sec. Middle East, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/world/middleeast/26iraq.html>.

419 "Protestors killed in Iraqi 'day of rage,'" BBC News, February 25, 2011 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12576613>

420 "Iraq Sunni Protests against Maliki," *BBC News*, December 28, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20860647>.

421 "Many Dead in Iraq Protest Clashes," *BBC News*, April 23, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22261422>.

The autumn of 2014 was similarly an inflection point for the PKK, a Kurdish organization in Turkey that was fighting initially for an independent state, and later for autonomy within Turkey. By January 2015, The Syrian Kurdish YPG, which is linked to the Turkish PKK, expelled ISIS out of Kobani<sup>422</sup>. Of course, neither the PKK nor Hezbollah-groups known for their pragmatism, their widespread support within their communities and regional appeal- can in any way compare to ISIS' narrow support base in extremist communities across the world and its reliance on indiscriminate carnage as a tool of war.

Yet, both ISIS -at least initially- and Hezbollah as well as the PKK –were resistance groups, that resorted to violence and rooted their power in the support of ethnic and religious groups, which prompts the question, what is a terror organization and how can we differentiate between terror and resistance?

We will attempt to answer this question in a first sub-section, which looks into the various academic definitions of terrorism. A second one will be detailing the main drivers of terrorism namely grievances, lack of political participation and state coercion, as well as the methods used by terrorist and finally their main objectives. A third sub-section will be looking at terrorism from the angles of resistance and revolution, as well as new and old terrorism. A fourth will look into the various stages of jihadism from the Salafi perspective: the 'far jihad,' (exemplified in events like 9/11) and the 'near jihad' that followed the Arab Spring. Finally, we will be looking at how these frameworks fit the various VNSAs under study in this particular case.

## **I- Defining Terrorism and its characteristics**

There are several definitions to terrorism. "Terrorism is a form of violence that is primarily designed to influence an audience. Its execution depends on concealment, surprise, stealth conspiracy and deception. Terrorism is not spontaneous, nor does it involve mass participation. The act itself communicates a threat to people who identify with the victims. The choice of time, place and victim, is meant to shock, frighten or outrage. Psychological impact is central to both the aspirations of its users and its effectiveness. It is an asset to those who challenge authority, in part because it maximizes effect while minimizing effort. Its inherent transgressions make it attractive to those out of power, who see in the disorder the path to future gains and who often wish to do away with the norms they violate", says Martha Crenshaw<sup>423</sup> in her book *Explaining Terrorism: causes processes and consequences*. Terror is

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422 Katherine Wilkens, "A Kurdish Alamo: Five Reasons the Battle for Kobane Matters," Carnegie Middle East Center, October 10, 2014, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/56905?lang=en>.

423 Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*



thus a form of process<sup>424</sup>, which is spurred by the threat of violence, causing an emotional reaction and then producing social effects. Besides the inspirational dimension, terror acts, because of the indiscriminate violence they involve, can be also defined by organizational goals, ranging from the destabilization of government institutions to triggering civil dissent with violence<sup>425</sup>. Terrorism is also labeled as such when it is conducted by non-state armed actors, per the US State Department's classification<sup>426</sup>. However, terrorism remains above all a technique and not a social movement, although it can be the favored approach of a group. This makes fighting it often an elusive task, as highlighted by Louise Richardson who has denounced the weakness of the argument of the war on terror<sup>427</sup>. Its principle victims are generally civilians who are labeled as legitimate targets because of their cooperation or their "tacit assent" to a perceived enemy state. How can one fight a technique, a mean used by an organization that resorts to it because it is faced with a situation of "power imbalance", as highlighted by Hezbollah's deputy secretary Naim Qassem<sup>428</sup>? All these theories are deeply relevant; however, another element should be added While conducting interviews with Jihadists, the author noticed that many who went and fought in Syria with Jihadists groups all shared one two sentiments: the feeling of shame, and the sentiment that their current situation could not be changed. The only path for them was this the path for Jihad.

### **A- How to explain terrorism**

'Terrorism is caused by the lethal triple cocktail of personal disaffection, an enabling society, and a legitimizing ideology"', says Louise Richardson in her book, *What Terrorists want: Understanding the enemy, containing the threat*<sup>429</sup>. The terrorism act is generally triggered by a sense of alienation from society and the prevailing status and a strong desire to change it. For Richardson, terrorism needs conditions in which people feel unfairly treated and leaders to make sense of these conditions, to organize a group and make it effective. Terrorism requires an all-encompassing philosophy, namely in the form of a religion or secular ideology to legitimize its violent action, to recruit fresh adherents, and mobilize them for action. A complicit society is essential in ensuring the survival of terrorist organizations. In many ways terror organization are cult like, according to what the author has been able to observe. Whether in Hezbollah or in ISIS. The leader is never wrong and the purpose of the

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424 Ibid.

425 Dasque, *Géopolitique Du Terrorisme*

426 Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*.

427 Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*

428 Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah (Hezbollah): The Story from Within* (Saqi Books, 2005).

429 Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*.

act has a much greater dimension, even at the cost of life. The three components necessary to foster the sustainability of terrorists' movements, namely personal disaffection, enabling society and legitimizing ideology, applies to the various VNSA or VNSA linked organizations in Syria the PKK emergence was largely linked to the denial of Kurdish identity in the phase prior to 2000 as well as abusive measures by Turkish forces<sup>430</sup>. At its beginning, the PKK promoted an anti-capitalist, anti-western Marxist-Leninist ideology that appealed to its popular base. Similarly, Hezbollah could not have survived without the support of its Shi'i popular base, perceiving the group as the only barrier against Israeli expansion into South Lebanon. Hezbollah's strong Islamic ideology successfully combined the victimhood of the Islamic Shi'i Creed, the southern Lebanese people's struggle against Israel and the state marginalization of southern Shiites<sup>431432</sup>.

## **B- Terrorism drivers**

Drivers feature both push and pull factors, which respectively refer to external conditions and internal individual motivation. They are essential to the radicalization process.

### ***i-Push factors***

Push factors are considered as contributors to the emergence of terror activity. They generally include a large range of triggers such as absent or limited economic opportunities, social discrimination, as well as the weakness of the political regime, generally plagued by poor governance or in situations of continuous conflict.

In 2017, a UNDP report showed that economic factors<sup>433</sup>, often inspired the violent acts of individuals who felt alienated from their environment, because of their economic exclusion. As an example, unemployment facilitates the recruitment effort of terror organizations, which are often perceived as legitimate employers in developing countries. While the core nucleus of organizations such as Hezbollah, the PKK and ISIS did not join the organization for financial reasons, its wider recruitment drive was facilitated by the stable pay they offered,<sup>434</sup>. Other potential perks could include health insurance and subsidizing of accommodation or free housing. Unemployment within elite circles may be an even stronger

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430 Paul K. Davis et al., "Public Support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey," in *Understanding and Influencing Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism* (RAND Corporation, 2012), 99–118, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1122osd.12>.

431 Ibid.

432 Interview with a Hezbollah commander, by Mona Alami, December 2018, Beirut, Lebanon

433 "Journey To Extremism," UNDP (2016) <https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>.

434 Emily Canal, "ISIS Halves Fighters' Salaries Following Losses Of Territory, Oil And Cash," *Forbes*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilycanal/2016/01/20/isis-halves-fighters-salaries-following-losses-of-territory-oil-and-cash/#7bd95e5e7292>.

driver of extremism. Research has shown that a number of high-profile terrorists are considered to be highly educated individuals, or ones belonging to upper middle-class families. As an example, a 2016 World Bank Study<sup>435</sup> based on leaked personnel files found that more than a quarter of ISIS foreign recruits had at least a university degree, while conversely only 15 per cent of the cases examined had not finished secondary school. The study also showed that Isis recruits were generally single and young and had low access to resources or employment opportunities. It also showed that would-be suicide bombers were more likely to have experienced unemployment. Marginalization and discrimination may take many different forms and are often premised on a wide range of factors besides economic exclusion. Marginalization and discrimination have proven to be strong drivers toward extremism, as seen in the Iraqi Sunni insurgency, or ISIS' solid implantation in Sinai. In Iraq, the De-Baathification pushed many qualified former Baathist to join the insurgency. ISIS was able to build in its foreign wilayat such as Sinai, on people's disaffection and widespread crackdown from the Cairo government<sup>436</sup>. In Lebanon, Shi'a representing the backbone of Hezbollah were deprived of basic services such as roads, hospitals, schools or running water<sup>437</sup>. In the 70s, Shiite cleric Sayed Musa Sadr denounced the fact that there was one teacher for every 387 students<sup>438</sup> in the South. The exclusion of factions within a certain society from access to political positions, public services or absent governance in specific regions that have a separate ethnic or religious color may further fuel people's resentment and allow for the deep sense of injustice they may experience to mobilize them.

Disenfranchisement from the societies in countries, where the civic space is shrinking and freedom of expression constrained may foster violent behavior. Generally, when a state hardens its position toward aggrieved groups by disrespecting basic human rights, it generally triggers a backlash that can be utilized by terrorist groups. When poor governance is additionally combined with repressive policies and practices which violate human rights and the rule of law, resorting to violent extremism becomes more appealing.

Terror organizations tend to exploit state repression to legitimize their violent actions and strengthen their control over their popular base. For Crenshaw when governments use

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435 Bethan Mc Kernan, "Secret Isis Files Reveal Fighters Are Relatively Educated and Well-off but Unemployed," *The Independent*, October 7, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-secret-files-fighters-soldiers-who-are-they-educated-wealthy-unemployed-a7350366.html>.

436 "Egyptian Security Forces and ISIS-Affiliate Abuses in North Sinai," *Human Rights Watch* May 28, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/28/if-you-are-afraid-your-lives-leave-sinai/egyptian-security-forces-and-isis>.

437 Ali Abdallah Fadlallah, *Hezbollah Change of Discourse* (Dar Al-Mahajja al-Baydaa, 2016).

438 Ibid.

unexpected or disproportionate force against certain groups, this acts as a catalyst to terrorism<sup>439</sup>. The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (also known as TAK, which is the PKK youth branch), has often claimed that its urban bombings were acts of revenge for the “state’s attacks against the Kurdish people and Öcalan”<sup>440</sup>. Terror organizations feed on violence and thus thrive in countries that face long conflicts. Generally, the vacuum resulting from a weakened state offers terror organization with the opportunity to seize territory and resources, further bolstering their ideological message. The Syrian and Afghanistan examples, epitomized by the rise of ISIS and al-Qaeda linked organizations, are a case in point. The weakening of the power of the central government in Syria only allowed for the expansion of ISIS in the country as well as the establishment of an autonomous region under the control of the PYD, closely linked to the PKK. Thus, terrorism is only exacerbated by regime weakness capability to protect and respond effectively.

The nature of the ruling regime and the challenges it may face do not alone define the appeal of terrorism. Certain societies that are prone to violence often equate violence with courage, namely in countries such as Iraq, Yemen or Afghanistan or Lebanon. “We do not fear death as we are born to die in war,” says a Hezbollah interviewed by the author.<sup>441</sup> Besides valuing violence, such societies are also heavily influenced by family and clan relations that also play a primary role in the expansion of terror like organized crime, according to Dasque<sup>442</sup>. For the author, the Asabiya factor was a main contributor to the spread of terror. We will see in the next chapter how ISIS has relied on tribal dynamics and Assabiya to insure allegiance of powerful tribes. The presence of leaders in ISIS in Deir az-Zor from the Bakir and Albu Azaddeen tribes of the Egaidat confederation encouraged hundreds of youth from these tribes to join ISIS, according to a CNAS report from 2017<sup>443</sup>. Other external factors that can be included in push elements: the spread of communication that has facilitated the circulation of terror ideology and indoctrination of individuals. Dasque points to the fact that unlike the past when revolutionaries and anarchist met at conferences, today propaganda takes place via books and online chat rooms<sup>444</sup>. The phenomenon of social media has significantly exacerbated the propagation of ideas. In the words of Middle East

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439 Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*.

440 Davis et al., “Public Support for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey.”

441 Interview with a Hezbollah fighter, by Mona Alami, Dahieh, December 2018.

442 Dasque, *Géopolitique Du Terrorisme*

443 Nicolas Heras, Bassam Barabandi and Nidal Betare, “Deir Azzour Tribal Mapping Project | Center for a New American Security,” October 2, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/deir-azzour-tribal-mapping-project>.

444 Dasque, Jean-Michel, *Géopolitique Du Terrorisme*

Studies Professor Gilles Kepel, without the internet and the world-wide web there would be no Al-Qaeda<sup>445</sup>. ISIS has proven to be a savvy user of social media, marketing at the international level its hate message and terror narrative, through flooding social media, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr with violent images. These images have been appealing to ordinary users and mainstream news organizations, making the media an unintentional but very effective partner. ISIS has used Telegram channels to circulate the productions of its Amaq news agency and Bayan radio programs. ISIS also made an efficient use of twitter, through the dissemination of its content via unofficial accounts<sup>446</sup>. During the battle for Mosul in 2014, ISIS accounts generated over 44,000 tweets and even hijacked trending hashtags related to the World Cup in Brazil<sup>447</sup>. The most powerful documentary released by ISIS was the *Flames Of War*. The widely circulated video featured heroic jihadists presented as glowing angels, as well as gruesome footage including bombings, cold blooded executions ,roadside explosions, gun battles and dead bodies. The video, which aims at creating fear in ISIS enemy, shows many similarities with *Triumph Of The Will* produced by Nazi Germany.

### ***ii-Pull factors***

Pull factors include individual motivations and radicalization processes such as individual backgrounds and motivations, collective grievances; social networks and ideologies.

Personal motivations and backgrounds play an essential role in the indoctrination process. Richardson's explains why some resort to violence with what she calls "the three Rs" of revenge, renown, and reaction: hence targeting those who have inflicted pain on or oppressed family members, while gaining glory in the process and forcing the enemy either to concede or retaliate, which will further fuel the cause of the group. Richardson's argument may be backed by the UNDP Journey to Extremism in Africa findings<sup>448</sup>, which showed that large majority of violent extremists ( around 71 percent) pointed to 'government action', namely in the form of including 'killing of a family member or friend' or 'arrest of a family member or friend', as the incident that prompted them to join. Grievances are at the heart of

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445 "Al Qaeda's New Front," PBS, January 25, 2005, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/interviews/kepel.html>.

446 Clara Pellerin, "Communicating Terror, an Estimation of ISIS Communication Strategy," Spring 2016, [https://www.sciencespo.fr/kuwait-program/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/KSP\\_Paper\\_Award\\_Spring\\_2016\\_PELLERIN\\_Clara.pdf](https://www.sciencespo.fr/kuwait-program/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/KSP_Paper_Award_Spring_2016_PELLERIN_Clara.pdf).

447 Ibid.

448 "Journey To Extremism," UNDP (2016)

the radicalization process. Militants generally have low level of trust in government authorities who they accuse of being corrupt and defending elite interests. Corruption can in turn increase perceptions of injustice that, contribute to collective grievances. People who are vulnerable to radicalization show a significantly lower degree of confidence in the capabilities of democratic institutions for change<sup>449</sup>. This absence of confidence in the system legitimizes violent action perceived as justified because it can rectify prevalent inequalities. “The first condition considered as a direct cause of terrorism is the existence of concrete grievances among an identifiable subgroup of a larger population such as an ethnic minority discriminated against by a majority” says Crenshaw<sup>450</sup>. Generally, groups that resort to terror, do so to redress what they perceive as a grievance or injustice that is committed against them, with the actual perception often being more important than real deprivation or marginalization of the individual or the group, argues the expert. One dimension of grievances is the lack of political participation whereby a regime denies a certain group access to power, which was previously discussed in the push factors. Terrorism is even more prevalent in the case of elite disaffection<sup>451</sup>. As an example, the Turkish government’s suppression of publications and political movements calling for the protection of Kurdish identity and the group’s rights made it easier for the PKK to legitimize the use of violence<sup>452</sup>. One of the main Kurdish grievances according to Ocalan was the Turkish state’s colonialist policies against Kurds<sup>453</sup>. Grievances against a perceived injustice, turned into a feeling of humiliation and victimization are known as one of the most powerful motivators a person can have. In her case study of the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict, the victimization, or more correctly the perceived victimization of the Bosnian allowed them to mobilize in force against their fellow Muslims.

Social networks are essential elements to terrorism, with exposure to the influence of family members and friends playing a major role in contributing to joining terrorist organizations. One example provided by Crenshaw<sup>454</sup>, is that of Yezid Zafad, a terrorist who was influenced by his wife to join Islamic Jamaa in Indonesia. Marc Sageman<sup>455</sup> notes that 68 percent of radicalized individuals he interviewed said that friendship played a decisive

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449 Ibid.

450 Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*.

451 Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*.

452 Davis et al., “Public Support for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey.”

453 Ibid.

454 Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*.

455 Ibid.

role in their personal process. A good illustration is the case of the Hajj Deeb family, which the author of this thesis has followed in Lebanon. In 2013, a Swedish national from Lebanese origin blew himself in a suicide bombing at a military barrage in Kalaat al Hosn, in the Syrian area of Homs. Two of the Jihadists cousins died in Tell Kalah Syria, and his uncle Saddam was the infamous member of Lebanese terrorist organization Fateh Islam<sup>456</sup>. Friendship inside prisons can also account for prison radicalization. The penal world exacerbates group dynamics such as friendly relations and group animosity as well as a sense of injustice that are essentially conducive to spreading violent ideologies. Harsh treatment in detention facilities can play a powerful role in the recruitment into terrorist organizations. Factors often cited include poor prison conditions, widespread violence and institutional corruption and criminal activity, which can all serve as motivators for detained persons to seek the protection of violent extremist groups. Research conducted by the author on the Lebanese prison of Roumieh, showed that the Lebanese justice and prison system widely contributed to radicalizing a generation of young individuals through indefinite detention without trial, and the imprisonment of impressionable recruits with hardened extremists. Radicals acquire the loyalty of fresh convicts by befriending them or offering them protection, whether from other inmates or prison authorities, who fear them and often provide them with special privileges. Thus, the imprisonment of minors or young Islamists with more experienced extremists who provided them with protection also facilitated the recruitment process of radical organizations. “No distinction is made between inmates’ background, who are all placed together in Roumieh’s B building,” says lawyer Mohammad Sabloukh<sup>457</sup>. Whether in families, social groups or in prison, radicalized people have a strong need of belonging. Terrorism remains a group activity and implies a strong feeling of belonging, according Crenshaw.

Group dynamics are thus essential to understand the appeal of terror organizations with some groups sometimes operating as cults. ISIS understanding of social dynamics allowed it to reach out to over foreign 35,000 fighters, convincing them to join its caliphate<sup>458</sup>. By imposing a strict dress code on its members and manipulating its members to feel like a chosen elite, ISIS was able to strip western recruits of their traditional beliefs and old identities. Ultimately it was the removal of critical thinking and the isolation of the group

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456 Interview with Abou Abdel Nasser hajj Deeb, by Mona Alami August 2013, Tripoli Lebanon.

457 Interview with lawyer Mohammad Sabloukh, by Mona Alami, August 2014, Lebanon.

458 Paul D. Shinkman, “ISIS By the Numbers in 2017,” US News, December 27, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-12-27/isis-by-the-numbers-in-2017>.

members that reinforces dependence with the cult. In Iraq and Syria sources report<sup>459</sup> that western jihadists resided in separate areas, rarely mingling with the local population. Cults also tend to be built around the group's megalomaniacal aim of the accomplishment of a greater good and of purification of society. Such was the case of Khaled Sharouf, an Australian man of Lebanese descent, who shocked the world by posting pictures of himself and his children holding severed heads. Previously a drug addict and petty criminal, Sharouf became a notorious member of ISIS and its poster child of a Western jihadists' generation fighting the "enemies of Islam."<sup>460</sup> In addition to group dynamics, ideology is at the heart of the terrorism process, ideology also encompassing religion according to Dasque. Ideological terrorists from Latin America were influenced for the most by the texts of Karl Marx, Mao Tse Toung or Che Guevara<sup>461</sup>. Religious ideology is nonetheless perceived as a stronger catalyst for terror narratives. We have seen the powerful appeal of thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb and their rejection of foreign influence on the Jihadist community<sup>462</sup>. ISIS ideology has been built around the idea of a utopian caliphate widely circulated via upbeat documentaries boasting of the "happy life of Jihadists" in the Islamic State such as "Eid Greetings from the Land of Khilafah,"<sup>463</sup>. The latter documentary which was filmed in Syria, features Isis fighters from Europe and Asia speaking on how ecstatic they are to be away from the "land of Kufr" and "humiliation", now residing in a land ruled by the Shari'a. The documentary ends with a man carrying children calling for jihadis to "come to Sham" where it is "a bounty to live" while another from South Africa adds that "there is no safer place to live when Allah is with you". Besides ideology, macro-narratives are also essential to the terrorism process<sup>464</sup>. An important feature of terrorism is that it provides an alternate interpretation of reality independent of current events, attempting to link events to one another by reaching back into history or forward into the future, explains Crenshaw<sup>465</sup>. An example of this is the constant jihadist invocation of "Crusaders" in describing the efforts of Western countries and

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459 Interview in March with an activist from Mosul, Erbil, Iraq.

460 Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop, "Khaled Sharrouf: The Australian radical fighting for Islamic State in Iraq and SYira," ABC News, August 14, 2014 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-14/khaled-sharrouf-the-australian-radical-fighting-in-iraq/5671974>

461 Dasque, *Géopolitique Du Terrorisme*

462 Dasque, *Géopolitique Du Terrorisme*

463 Charlie Winter, "Totalitarian Insurgency: Evaluating the Islamic State's In-Theater Propaganda Operations," U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons, April 2017 (<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=ciwag-case-studies>).

464 Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*.

465 Ibid.



other Christian governments to fight jihadism, and the IS exploitation of narratives about a future apocalyptic clash in Dabiq.

### **C- The phases of Jihad**

In His book *Jihad*, Gille Kepel highlights three stages of Sunni Jihad. The first stage of Jihadism, from 1979 to 1997, took place against the Soviets in Afghanistan. It was effective against Russia in Afghanistan, but was dovetailed by other phases of insurgencies in other places such as Algeria, Chechnya, and Egypt. The second phase of Jihad was then centered on the 'far enemy' epitomized by the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Abou Sayaf a Jordanian Jihadist who spoke to the author in Jordan explained to the author that the logic behind was that jihadists had concluded it was time to bring the fight to the United States, which would lead for change in Arab countries where the US had built military bases. The 9/11 event allowed jihadists to create a powerful narrative around the idea of a Sunni giant that once awakened could bring the U.S to its knees, Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad told the author.

For Kepel, the third phase of Jihadism was born under the aegis of Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Abu Musab al-Suri had worked in London as the spokesperson for the Algerian Armed Islamic Group before disavowing it. He wrote a massive tome called the Global Islamic Resistance Call. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi independently developed a form of jihad that was mostly sectarian. He was far more focused on killing Shias than westerners, targeting the perceived apostates before the original disbelievers: something that remains a guiding principle of ISIS today.

## **II- Objectives and the terror debate**

When one looks at the global scene and more specifically the local Arab scene, VNSAs are increasingly prominent, whether through spectacular terror acts or growing territorial gains. Despite similar approaches, not all groups are equal in their strategies and objectives, some being more pragmatic than others on the larger terror spectrum. This relative pragmatism is generally derived from VNSAs objectives and tactics

Crenshaw<sup>466</sup> looks into the rationality of the terrorism process. Rationality applies at both the individual and collective levels, as well as of that of the tactical and strategic levels, while opposing short term and long-term approaches. First, rationality at the level of the individual and the collective often differs. For Robert Nalbandov<sup>467</sup> author of the *Irrational Rationality of Terrorism*. rational behavior for one actor with a certain value system may be

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466 Ibid.

467 Robert Nalbandov, "Irrational Rationality of Terrorism," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 4 (December 2013): 92–102, <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.6.4.5>.

irrational for other actors under the same circumstances because of their very different value system. Two factors may shape behavior and thus define its rational or irrational nature. One is identity, another is religion. Religious believers thus are generally perceived as more ideological and as having more extreme value-systems than secular people <sup>468</sup>. As an example, the choice of the afterlife is defined by how a person “chooses” to live in sin or in righteousness in certain religions. Hezbollah’s former spiritual leader Mohamad Hussein Fadlallah rejected the distinction between suicide and martyrdom. “There is no difference between dying with a gun in your hand or exploding yourself.” What is the difference between setting out for battle knowing you will die after killing ten and setting out to the field to kill ten and knowing you will die while killing them?” he said<sup>469</sup>. Rationality can also be defined from the objective perspective. The PKK until recently, sought to create an independent Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey and parts of neighboring countries inhabited by Kurds, considered as a relatively rational objective for many Kurds around the world. Yet it relied on guerrilla warfare that included kidnappings of foreign tourists, suicide bombings, and attacks on Turks in Europe. Equally, Al-Qaeda’s objective, through the 9/11 attacks was to realize specific political concessions, such as the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Saudi Arabia. The same can be said of Hezbollah whose main goal was to defeating an occupying Israeli force via a war of attrition. At the other end of the rational spectrum are ISIS objectives which are much more ambitious and difficult to realize. For example, the group repeatedly talked about ideas of conquering ‘Rome’ and the whole world. In 2014, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the Islamic State’s chief spokesman, called on Muslims in Western countries such as France and Canada to find an infidel and “smash his head with a rock,” poison him, run him over with a car, or “destroy his crops<sup>470</sup>.” Besides their rationality, terrorists’ objectives can also be defined depending on whether they are proximate or immediate. VNSA terror activity’s purported immediate<sup>471</sup> objective is international recognition, which helps the group develop its transnational activity. One common objective is to trigger a counter reaction, hoping that a backlash would reinforce the group’s popular support, a tactic that has been used both by the PKK and ISIS. However long-term strategic

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468 Nalbandov.

469 Matt Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God*, (Georgetown University Press, 2015, revised edition).

470 Thomas F. Lynch III, “The Impact of ISIS on Global Salafism and South Asian Jihad - by Thomas F. Lynch III,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, August 15, 2015. Accessed April 30, 2019:

<http://www.hudson.org/research/11608-the-impact-of-isis-on-global-salafism-and-south-asian-jihad>.

471 Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*.

objectives vary widely from one VNSA to another: for the PKK its main aim is to discredit the government, and increase insecurity, for Hezbollah it was demoralizing its enemies, and for ISIS it is exacerbate sectarian and ethnic tension to increase the appeal of the caliphate and spur wider recruitment. Sometimes terrorism is not only the fulfillment of an objective, but the use of what is perceived as limited window of opportunity ( such as a war going on in a country that could provide the group with access to power or territorial gain as was the case in Syria for ISIS and PKK-linked PYD) or the failure of other means to achieve political empowerment . *A- Dimensions of terrorism*

The debate around terrorism has intensified of late with the multiplicity of VNSAs using terror to achieve long or short-term goals. This debate is generally framed around the dimension of terrorism, whether revolutionary, resistant, old or new. For Crenshaw<sup>472</sup>, terrorism as a technique can be part of a revolutionary strategy. The revolutionary movement deliberately targets specific groups from which the regime the group opposes derives its power. Algeria's National Liberation Front (FLN) adhered to Crenshaw's definition of revolutionary terrorism as it aimed to seize power through changing political behavior of targeted groups. Similarly, Hezbollah's revolutionary dimension was epitomized by the adherence to the doctrine of absolute Wilayat al-Faqih instead of loyalty to the Lebanese state, because the jurist was considered the successor of the prophet and the imam<sup>473</sup>. Resistance groups may perpetrate violence in the same way that terror groups do, using irregular/asymmetric/guerrilla means that are available to it. While theatrics are one way to create fear, their goals are generally much more specific such as the liberation of land from an invading state. Dasque<sup>474</sup> summarizes it by resorting to infamous expression what may be terrorism to one person may be resistance to another. Yet Dasque differentiates between groups using terror to fight a tyrannical regime, and hence considered as resistant, from terrorism targeting a democratic regime. This example applies to Hezbollah. While the group has used terror to achieve specific goals , it has until 2000 been framed as a movement fighting foreign occupation of Lebanese soil. Another debate Crenshaw looks into<sup>475</sup>, is the one that surrounds new and old terrorism, which differentiates movements born before ( old ) and after the Cold War ( new) . "New" terrorists claim goals that are perceived as non-

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472 Martha Crenshaw, "'New' versus 'Old' Terrorism," *Palestine-Israel Journal* (Vol. 10, No. 1 2003). Accessed March 9, 2019: <http://pij.org/articles/80>.

473 Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah (Hezbollah): The Story from Within*

474 Dasque, *Géopolitique Du Terrorisme*.

475 Martha Crenshaw, "'New' versus 'Old' Terrorism."

negotiable, and respect no red lines. In addition, goals of new terrorists are mostly religious<sup>476</sup> and more recently, associated with apocalyptic beliefs and a Manichean interpretation of the world, typically illustrated by ISIS. Thus "new" terrorists are willing to sacrifice any number of their members in support of their goals. The goals of the "new" terrorists, are also transnational in reach. New terrorism also relies heavily on suicide terrorism, not only because it creates much more of a buzz because of the fear it instigates, but also because it tends to be more efficient as on average a suicide attack claims over four times as many victims as a non-suicide attack<sup>477</sup>. "Old" terrorism goals are thought to be generally more limited and negotiable, which means that political compromise could be reached. Unlike, new terrorism, terror was use as a tactic and was not viewed as a goal in itself, which makes old terrorists as more pragmatic. Old terrorist groups are also generally more selective, because they think that targeted attacks are more strategic than the deaths of ordinary citizens. This means old terror group focus on hard targets such as high-level government officials <sup>478</sup>. As an example, recent terrorist attacks attributed to Hezbollah have all focused on political and security targets from Lebanese Prime minister Rafiq Hariri, to Wissam Eid the main investigator of his case. Contrary to groups such as ISIS, old terrorist groups are mostly ethnically or ideologically limited circles of supporters and strived to achieve benefits for these groups only<sup>479</sup>, because of specificity of their strategic objectives. Since most of them were advocating for social justice for their respective groups, their supporters would, naturally, came from these very communities. Traditional terrorist group PKK mostly comprised ethnic Kurds who were often unmarried, especially unmarried women. This tradition was taken up by the PYD elements in the SDF . Most members of Hezbollah are from the Shi'i Lebanese community.

#### **IV. Conclusion:**

The debate between Resistance and terror, revolution and terror as well as old and new terror remains murky, as most VNSA in Syria have used at one point in time or other violent theatrics to scare the enemy, Violence that more often targets deliberately civilians regardless of the group nature.

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476 Ibid.

477 Bruce Hoffmann, "The Logic of Suicide Terrorism," The Atlantic Monthly Group, 2003. Accessed November 4, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1187/index2.html>.

478 Nalbandov, "Irrational Rationality of Terrorism."

479 albandov, "Irrational Rationality of Terrorism."

Despite their modern pragmatism, the PKK and Hezbollah have previously resorted to indiscriminate attacks often involving civilians. For the PKK, violence against civilians was acceptable and continues to be so. Öcalan said, “Let’s kill and become the authority” following the PKK’s attack on Pınarcık Village in 1987, in which 30 people, including 16 children, several women, and village guards, were killed<sup>480</sup>. A similar practice has also been used by the YPG, engaging in attacks involving car bombs and mortars in Afrin and other parts of north Aleppo countryside<sup>481</sup>. In the 80s, over 96 kidnappings took place in Lebanon, of which 51 were claimed by Hezbollah linked organization<sup>482</sup>. In 1983, Hezbollah operatives alongside Iraqi militants orchestrated 7 coordinated bombings in Kuwait and in 1988 Kuwait Airways flight 422 carrying 11 passengers was hijacked by Hezbollah. The organization has also killed or attempted to kill civilians such as Israeli tourists in Cyprus<sup>483</sup>, Sinai<sup>484</sup> and Burgas<sup>485</sup>. Similarly, the PKK has also raided villages and small towns. In 1993<sup>486</sup>, the PKK was behind a wave of coordinated attacks involving firebombs and vandalism on Turkish diplomatic and commercial offices in six West European countries. Unlike the PKK and its affiliate as well as Hezbollah’s indiscriminate but focused operations, ISIS terror has a genocidal dimension, as it has been responsible for killing 2,000 to 5,500 Yazidi people, and kidnapping over 7,000 Yazidi people, as well as triggering the displacement of tens of thousands<sup>487</sup>. However, ISIS also shares some of the techniques initially boasted by groups such as the PKK and Hezbollah. Before ISIS, Hezbollah was one the first groups to resort to suicide attacks. Besides the suicide attacks targeting US and French interests in 1983, Hezbollah member Ali Safiedine killed 6 Israeli soldiers by driving his explosive laden car into their vehicles in 1984<sup>488</sup>. Hezbollah justified these attacks on the basis of nationalism

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480 Davis et al., “Public Support for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey.”

481 “8 Civilians Killed, 14 Injured in Suspected YPG Attack in Syria’s Afrin,” Daily Sabah, October 31, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2019/10/31/4-civilians-killed-11-injured-in-suspected-ypg-attack-in-syrias-afrin>.

482 Levitt, *Hezbollah*.

483 “Cyprus Police Foil Planned Hezbollah Attacks against Israeli Targets in Europe,” Haaretz, May 29, 2015. Accessed November 23, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/planned-hezbollah-attacks-against-israeli-targets-in-europe-foiled-1.5367617>.

484 “Egypt: Hezbollah Targeted Israeli Tourists in Sinai,” *Haaretz*, April 12, 2009, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5036190>.

485 “Cyprus Police Foil Planned Hezbollah Attacks against Israeli Targets in Europe,” Haaretz.

486 “Inside the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK),” Council on Foreign Relations, October 9, 2007. Accessed April 29, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/background/inside-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk>.

487 Nikita Malik, “Surviving Islamic State: The Plight Of The Yazidi Community,” *Forbes*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nikitamalik/2018/09/18/surviving-islamic-state-the-plight-of-the-yazidi-community/>.

488 Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, (Random House, 2011).

and religion, but unlike ISIS, used martyrdom only in specific cases as they perceived it to be haram (sinful) when wasteful. Crenshaw has argued that ISIS new terror such as the one propagated by ISIS shares many similarities with European anarchists of the late 19th century, who sought to overthrow all government and assassinated eight different heads of state in the process<sup>489</sup>. ISIS could also be compared to other revolutionary groups such as the Sendero Luminoso, which wished to establish a Maoist regime in Peru, or Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) that aimed at establish a Basque state that would include parts of both France and Spain. However, what distinguishes ISIS from all these groups are the global nature of its goals and purpose, which ultimately caused its demise.

More applicable to ISIS is the debate between the radicalization of Islam argued by Kepel and the Islamization of radicalism argued by Roy. As we saw in previous sections; Kepel saw the first wave as the “Afghan jihadism in the 1980s, while the attacks of 9/11 against the World Trade Center in New York and against the Pentagon testified to the apotheosis of second-generation terrorism, while third-generation terrorism would be close and would function in a reticular manner. “This rhizome jihadism, consisting in going under the radar of the enemy and turning against him his own adopted or natural children, is constructed in opposition to the centralist, almost Leninist model implemented by Bin Laden”, in the words of Frederic Boily in *Le débat entre Gilles Kepel et Olivier Roy. Anatomie d’un désaccord*<sup>490</sup>. Ideology thus provides most ISIS thinkers, strategists and followers a road map and indoctrination process. Yet, where Roy might be right is in the small number of original atheists and converts from other communities who joined ISIS from the West . In this small segment of recruits, who had never been exposed to Islam, or to the appeal of an Islamic nostalgia, it was Islamization of radicalism that came to the fore, as Roy argued. ISIS martyrdom is also not irrational at all levels. While individual suicide attackers can be considered as irrational, the leadership has not used them haphazardly<sup>491</sup>. The willing martyrdom of thousands of its members allowed ISIS not only to attain reach their goal of gaining control over territory and transforming political system of their home country. Other labeling when it comes to the old and new debate adds to the confusion. ISIS a new terror group shares some of the features that have been also adopted by old groups such as its transnational nature. ISIS transnational nature is seen through its wide recruitment drive

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489 Crenshaw, “‘New’ versus ‘Old’ Terrorism.”

490 Frédéric Boily, “Le débat entre Gilles Kepel et Olivier Roy. Anatomie d’un désaccord,” *Frontières* 31, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066194ar>.

491 Nalbandov, “Irrational Rationality of Terrorism.”

of Muslims. It has franchised its terror endeavor by allowing lone wolves from disparate backgrounds to commit terrorist attacks on behalf of the organization.

Despite being an old group, Hezbollah shares some of the transnationality of new groups. The Arab spring has allowed for Hezbollah to operate at a regional level. In Syria, it deployed over thousands of fighters in support of the regime Bashar Assad. It has sent fighters to assist the war on ISIS in Iraq, and has dozens of advisers embedded with the Yemeni Houthis. In Venezuela, sources close to its fighters underlined it operates training centers there, in support of the Maduro government. The transnationality of Hezbollah was also clearly stated in the open letter of 1985, which illustrated the organizational political and military program<sup>492</sup>. Hezbollah was viewed as an open organization concerned with the problems and interests of the Islamic Umma. This transnationality meant also that Hezbollah rejected state borders very much like ISIS did later<sup>493</sup>. This confusion can partly be accountable to the factor of time in the evolution of terror organizations. VNSAs like any other human made entities tend to evolve. The Turkish military crackdown and the February 1999 capture of the PKK's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, led the group to renounce armed struggle and reconstitute itself as a political party as well as moving away from an independent state to embracing an autonomous region. This pragmatism is epitomized by the formation of Syrian Kurdish autonomous region basically conceived according to Ocalan's vision. Similarly, Hezbollah has moved from a fanatical organization that segregated from Christians and believed in the establishment of an Islamic country in Lebanon to a group represented in the Lebanese parliament and ministries, strongly allied to Christian parties it previously denounced.

When terrorist groups engage in peace or are political victorious, they tend to abandon their terrorist aspect. It is unclear if with time, ISIS would have followed a similar path, ISIS remained unique unlike any other group in that it aimed at achieving an absolute, unrealistic and global victory. Unlike other organizations, such as Hezbollah and the PKK, its leaders not just aimed to change the system or claim power in countries where they operated, but they wanted to destroy it completely and replace it with a new world order.

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492 Fadlallah, *Hezbollah Change of Discourse*.

493 Fadlallah, *Hezbollah Change of Discourse*..

## Chapter 2: Jihad in Syria

“The historian Edmond Burke was one of the first people to realize that if a group of people wished to challenge the ideology of the establishment which may itself once have been revolutionary, they will have to develop a counter-revolutionary ideology of their own. This was the position of some of the most discontented, Jews, Christians and Muslims by the 1960s,” says Karen Armstrong in her book *the Battle For God*.<sup>494</sup> Fifty years later, the saying applied again in Syria. In the fight for power their VNSA such as ISIS, Hezbollah, and the PYD-SDF to a counter ideology to mobilize their power base. In a country where Baathism had been tantamount to the national religion, the first two VNSAs resorted to sectarian ideology to appeal to their audiences, the third an ethnic based leftist ‘democracy’ that adapted to both its original and circumstantial sponsors (the PKK and the US) in the typical framework of new wars. This utilization of religion or ethnic based ideology was a typical example of one of Kaldor’s founding labels of identity politics<sup>495</sup>, which emerged in a context of globalization, where political cleavages had been supplanted by cosmopolitanism and inclusive, universalist, multicultural values, as opposed to more particular identities. These particular identities came to the fore with the Arab Spring in Syria and were harnessed astutely by local and transnational VNSAs. Concepts such as politics clan, religion and ethnicities created further divides in the context of state failure, only exacerbated by state failure in neighboring countries. All this was crystallized by the Syrian revolution, which started to take an increasingly sectarian form in 2012, with the overwhelming narrative radicalizing on both ends of the divide. Rallying calls against the “Nusayri“ regime of President Assad circulated profusely while the latter increasingly denounced the insurgency as the work of (Sunni) “Takfiri” terrorists. Across the country, Kurds in Syria followed the events with caution and weariness. “ We quickly saw the threat posed by an insurgency that became day by day more extremist,” says Sehanok Dibo, a member of the PYD who spoke to the author<sup>496</sup>. In Syria and across the region Sunni sheikhs relied on religious text to provide a rationale for their call for Jihad, which is mentioned multiple times the Quran, the sacred book of Muslims. Jihadist fatwas were not alone the prerogative of Sunni clerics, as Shi’i fighters from Hezbollah, told the author that they had received a takleef Sharii, or religious

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494 Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, (Harpercollins, 2011).

495 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*

496 Interview with Sehanok Dibo, Qamishli, Syria, September 2018.



command to fight there<sup>497</sup>. Increasing reports of Hezbollah members fighting alongside Syrian regime forces circulated, with the U. S sanctioning in August 2012 the group for playing an important part in the cycle of violence<sup>498</sup>. In 2012, Hassan Nasrallah underlined that foreign takfiri groups threatened the shrine of Sayyida Zainab, of great religious importance for Shiite Muslims. Nasrallah repeatedly said<sup>499</sup>, that what was going on was no longer an uprising against a political regime but solely an “arena for imposing political projects led by America”, accusing the opposition of being part of a “US-western-Arab regional axis” fighting alongside the takfiri groups. At the other end of the ideological spectrum was the Syrian Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) and its military arm the YPG ( People’s Protection Unit), the founder of what would become the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In 2012, Syrian army retreat from northeastern Syria resulted in the filling of the gap by the Kurdish PYD, which swiftly established an autonomous region. The PYD clearly stated from the beginning that its main enmity was with terrorist groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIS and Turkish--backed Islamist groups. The PYD said it wanted to promote in its regions a political and economic system based on self-sufficiency and democracy based on popular and local regional councils and communes, in many ways inspired by Ocalan’s visions.

All these movements from the onset of the war clearly resorted to identity politics to mobilize their audiences. In the words of Kaldor :“It is often claimed that the new wave of identity politics is merely a throwback to the past, a resurgence of ancient hatred kept under control by colonialism and or the cold war. While it is true that the narrative of identity politics depends on memory and tradition it is also the case that these are reinvented in the context of the failure or the corrosion of political legitimacy”

This chapter will be looking at how the various VNSA resorted to religious and non-religious ideologies to mobilize their audience and make use of identity politics. We will first take a look at ISIS ideology, then at the ideology of Iran backed Shiite groups such as Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces and some of its sister organizations established in Syria. We will also be looking at the PYD and the SDF narratives. A fourth part looks at their commonalities and differences. We will finally look at how they compare and how their approaches fall within the concept of new war and how they were used as geopolitical tools?

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497 Interview with a Hezbollah fighter, by Mona Alami, April 2013, Beirut Lebanon.

498 Anne Barnard and Rick Gladstone, “U.S. Accuses Hezbollah of Aiding Syria’s Crackdown,” The New York Times, August 10, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/11/world/middleeast/us-officials-say-hezbollah-helps-syrias-military.html>.

499 Samir Shalabi, “Hezbollah: Ideology, Practice, and the Arab Revolts,” (Lund University, 2015), p. 65.

## I- The evolution of Jihadists of ideology in Syria and the rise of ISIS

A few months after the beginning of the demonstrations in Syria, bloggers on Salafi websites began asking jihadi scholars for fatwas allowing them to join the protest movement. Sheikh Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti advised bloggers to join the protests as long as they avoided calling for democracy or any other secular slogan. At the end of 2011, Osama al-Shehabi, a commander in Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon, called for armed struggle in Syria on the Shumoukh al-Islam online forum, a website since closed down. This was followed by a fatwa on the same website posted by Sheikh al-Shinqiti on Minbar al-Tawhid Wa al-Jihad, allowing for the use of violence against the Assad regime.

In January 2012, al-Manarah al-Bayda Media touted the creation of a new jihadi organization called Jabhat Nusra (JN), led by Abu Muhammad Jowlani<sup>500</sup>—believed to be a Syrian national whose origins go back to the Golan Heights. In February 2012, al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on militants in the Levant to support “their brothers in Syria.” As Henrich Shafer said, in *the Janus Face of Religion*, traditionally religion works within conflictive environments to mobilize people and to re-structure their identities<sup>501</sup>. Thus, massive repression with a sectarian tint and foreign intervention allowed for the facilitation of the radicalization of the insurgency. This allowed for Jabhat al-Nusra over the course of 2021 to acquire mainstream fighters as it gained in power, and its perceived effectiveness on the battlefield over made many perceive it as an invaluable ally, despite initial suspicions it was a creation of the regime. In an interview with the author a Syrian activist said: “We are all turning to Jabhat al-Nusra, it is the strongest faction in Syria and joining it will help us win,”<sup>502</sup>. Around the same time a powerful PBS’s documentary labeled “Syria behind the lines” showed the evolution of the country’s peaceful revolution<sup>503</sup>, into a sectarian and ideological conflict, by following the slow radicalization of an FSA fighter called Ahmad with little Islamic knowledge, who joined Jabhat al-Nusra, after his village and family were decimated. The pull of jihadists and the emergence of radical organizations in Syria was also driven by the many fatwas emitted by Sunni sheikhs across

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500 Jason Burke, “Al-Qaida Leader Zawahiri Urges Muslim Support for Syrian Uprising,” *The Guardian*, February 12, 2012, , <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/12/alqaida-zawahiri-support-syrian-uprising>.

501 Heinrich Schäfer, “The Janus Face of Religion: On the Religious Factor in ‘New Wars,’” *Numen* 51, no. 4 (2004): 407–31.

502 Interview with Syrian activist, by Mona Alami, Beirut Lebanon, April 2013.

503 Olly Lambert, “Syria Behind the Lines,” FRONTLINE (2013), accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/syria-behind-the-lines/>.

the region. In 2012, sheikh Ahmad Assir, a radical cleric from Sidon, started organizing marches in Beirut during which he called on Sunnis to support the Syrian opposition in its fight against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. “I wanted to support the ( Syrian ) people who are subjected to violent repression and face a real conspiracy from the Syrian regime,” Assir told this author<sup>504</sup>. Then, in April 2013, following the Syrian army’s assault on the town of Qusayr, Assir sent about a dozen fighters from Sidon to that place. In a sermon at the time, Assir said, “There is a religious duty on every Muslim who is able to do so to enter into Syria in order to defend its people, its mosques and religious shrines, especially in Qusayr and Homs.”<sup>505</sup> The sheikh even published images of himself and his fighters inside Syria. Assir was not the only Lebanese sheikh calling for jihad in Syria as Sheikh Salem Rifai told the author he had called for Jihad in Syria primarily to contain Hezbollah’s intervention in Qusayr<sup>506</sup>. The cleric had called on his followers to join rebels fighting in Syria and to support Sunni residents of Homs and Qusayr. In June 2013, leading Sunni Muslim cleric Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi- based in Qatar and associated with the Muslim Brotherhood- called “on all those able to undertake jihad and fighting to head to Syria to stand by the Syrian people” who were being killed at the hands of the regime and were now killed at the hands of what he dubbed “the party of Satan” (Hezbollah) <sup>507</sup>. Around the same time, Jordanian Salafi Jihadist Sheikh Abu Muhammad Tahawi released a fatwa calling for jihad in Syria. “I called for any man able to go for Jihad in Syria; it is the responsibility of any good Muslim to stop the bloodshed perpetrated by the Nusayri (Alawite) regime,” the sheikh told the author in an interview in 2013. By this time, it had become clear that jihad in general was a rallying cry for Muslims from all over and Sunni countries opposing Syria tacitly. Tahawi’s call underlined the growing influence of the Salafi jihadist movement over the Syrian insurgency. The theology of Salafism is based on going back to the roots of Islam in the Qur’an, Prophet’s Sunna and the example of the ‘al-salf al-salih’ (just predecessors: the first three generations of Muslims).

According to Jordanian thinker Muhammad Abu Rumaneh<sup>508</sup>, Salafi Jihadism was marked by the promotion of radical change through military means and the declaration of

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504 Interview with Sheikh Ahmad Assir, by Mona Alami, March 2012, Saida , Lebanon

505 “Clashes escalate on Syria-Lebanon border,” al-Jazeera, April 24, 2013. Accessed March 9, 2019: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/4/24/clashes-escalate-on-syria-lebanon-border>

506 Interview with Sheikh Salem Rifai, Tripoli Lebanon, April 2013.

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508 Mohamad Abu Rumaneh, “I Am a Salafi. A Study of the Actual and Imagined Identities of Salafi,” Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2014). Accessed June 11, 2023: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/10938.pdf>

takfir on Arab rulers (i.e. declaring them to be apostates from Islam despite their profession to be Muslims). The concept of modern mobilization for jihad came to prominence in the Afghan War through Abdullah Azzam<sup>509</sup>. The Afghan Jihad was labeled as *Fard Ayn*, and became obligatory for every Muslim, according to Azzam, because of the enemy invasion of Muslim land<sup>510</sup>. For Azzam, the success of jihad in Afghanistan would pave the way for freeing all other ‘usurped’ Muslim lands<sup>511</sup>. According to Gilles Kepel<sup>512</sup>, the Afghanistan war followed by the Palestinian insurgency in the 1990s phase eased Sunni reservations on suicide attacks, with the emergence of fatwas, by Hamas in 1993, Qaradawi and Egyptian al-Azhar sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi<sup>513</sup>. The lack of a hierarchy within Sunni circles analogous to the Catholic Church’s institution of the Pope and central church in Rome to regulate doctrine and stipulations allowed for the propagation of suicide attacks and the notion of Jihad, further developed by of Al-Qaeda<sup>514</sup>. The war in Syria, was part of this logical sequence in legitimization of international mobilization for jihad. It also solidified a shift in priorities where more and more efforts became devoted to fighting the “near enemy” (regional rulers) directly instead of the “far enemy.” a strategy that could be key in defining the region’s future. The jihad emerging in Syria also emphasized the sectarian war between the two branches of Islam, kick started in Iraq under Zarqawi, reflecting the escalation in hostility between them since the region’s Shi’a were accused of backing the Assad regime. “This jihad is to defend Ahl al-Sunna (the Sunni people). It became obligatory when the war turned sectarian, especially after Hezbollah and Iran interfered. Hezbollah is the enemy of the Sunna,” said Jordanian Salafi Jihadist Abu Sayyaf in an interview with the author in January 2014<sup>515</sup>. Abu Sayyaf, who told the author at the time that “Bilad al-Sham” held special significance for Jordanian jihadis who now had the opportunity to build their “Dar al-Tamkeen” (abode of enabling: whereby jihadists actually control territory). For many jihadists, Syria could provide a platform near to home from which to launch holy war and expand a single transnational Islamic state based on Sharia law. It was ISIS that embodied this global vision starting from Syria more than anyone else. Already in 2013 following its

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509 Gilles Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, trans. Anthony F. Roberts, (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2003).

510 Gilles Kepel, *Terreur et Martyre : Relever Le Défi de Civilisation* (Flammarion, 2009).

511 Kepel, *Jihad*.

512 Kepel, *Terreur et Martyre*

513 “Tantawi Validates Suicide Attacks,” *Haaretz*, March 22, 2002. Accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/2002-03-22/ty-article/tantawi-validates-suicide-attacks/0000017f-f5ef-d47e-a37f-fdff247f0000>.

514 Kepel, *Terreur et Martyre*

515 Interview Abu Sayaf, by Mona Alami, Amman, Jordan, January 2014

official expansion into Syria and its rejection of Zawahiri's order to return to Iraq and allow for the autonomy of Jabhat al-Nusra, whose establishment it had supported. ISIS increasingly emphasized the global nature of its project in messaging from Syria with talk about the 'promised project of the Caliphate'. Finally, ISIS would announce the Caliphate on 29 June 2014, its uncompromising vision articulated by spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani in a speech entitled: "This is the promise of Allah [God]<sup>516</sup>": "Succession, establishment, and safety—a promise from Allah reserved for the Muslims, but with a condition. "They worship me [Allah] and do not associate anything with me" [An-Nur: 55]. Having faith in Allah, keeping far from the gateways to shirk [idolatry or polytheism] and its various shades, along with submitting to Allah's command in everything big and small, and giving Him the level of obedience that makes your lusts, inclinations, and desires comply with what the Prophet (peace be upon him) brought [i.e. the revelation (the Qur'an)] only after this condition is reached will the promise be fulfilled. For by fulfilling this condition comes the ability to build, reform, remove oppression, spread justice, and bring about safety and tranquility. Only by meeting this condition, will there be the succession, which Allah informed the angels about...

...So, the animosity and hatred they had for each other vanished from their hearts. They were united by faith, and piety became their measuring scale. They did not differentiate between an Arab and a non-Arab, nor between an easterner and a westerner, nor between a white person and a black person, nor between a poor person and a rich person. They abandoned nationalism and the calls of Jahiliya [pre-Islamic ignorance], raised the flag of la ilaha ill Allah [there is no god but Allah] and carried out jihad in the path of Allah with truthfulness and sincerity. So, Allah raised them through this religion and honored them by having them carry its message. He bestowed His grace on them, and made them the kings and masters of the world...

...Here the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of tawhid [monotheism], rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala. Beneath it, the walls of the tawaghi ...have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed. Their soldiers are either killed, imprisoned, or defeated. The Muslims are honored. The kuffar [infidels] are disgraced. Ahl as-Sunna [the People of Orthodoxy (the Sunnis)] are masters and

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516 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "This is the Promise of God," al-Furqan Media, June 29, 2014 <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/14242/ADN20140629.pdf>, which contains the quoted excerpts in translation.

are esteemed. The people of bid'a [innovations] are humiliated. The hudud [fixed shari'a penalties] are implemented—the hudud of Allah—all of them. The frontlines are defended...

...The umma has not tasted honor since they lost it. It is a dream that lives in the depths of every Muslim believer. It is a hope that flutters in the heart of every mujahid muwahid [monotheist]. It is the khilafa [caliphate]. It is the caliphate—the abandoned obligation of the era...

...Indeed, Allah (the Exalted) blessed you today with this victory, thus we announced the caliphate in compliance with the order of Allah (the Exalted)", said Adnani.

#### A- ISIS tenet and the Purification of the state

The talking points in Adnani's speech above deserve some analysis. Islamic State applied to the extreme the particularism argued by Kaldor<sup>517</sup> and its rejection of identities outside the religious framework. This rejectionism included emphasis on Tawhid or God's monotheism, the rejection of 'innovation,' 'loyalty and disavowal' Hakimiya (sovereignty of the rule of God), and takfir. ISIS worked on polarizing society, a tool that only cemented the identity they worked on promoting as Kaldor argued. This was cemented by the emphasis on takfir of *Murtadin* or renegades/apostates, and the Wahhabi idea of 'nullifiers' of Islam that would take someone outside the fold of the religion.<sup>518</sup> Two primary targets of ISIS' takfir are the Shi'a and Sunnis who actively reject and/or fight against ISIS, the latter commonly being dubbed 'Sahwat' in reference to the Iraq Sunni tribal 'Sahwa' forces that fought ISIS' predecessors with American support and significantly reduced the group's influence in Iraq.

Loyalty and disavowal (wala' and bara') was also another important tenet promoted by ISIS. It is based on the idea of showing loyalty to Islam and Muslims and rejecting and hating that which is not Islamic or Muslim. This serves to emphasize the dichotomy of identity between believer and non-believer and that there is no grey zone in between.

Another essential ISIS tenet was also the adoption of the Hakimiya, considered a cornerstone of Islamic society in the view of the Egyptian ideologue Sayed Qutb. For Qutb the sovereignty of God made Islam the only reference for society which he believed was living in Jahiliya, (pre-Islamic ignorance) by adhering to western ideals<sup>519</sup>. Another ideological tenet of ISIS has been the use of violence. Kaldor has argued that the greater the

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517 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

518 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Islamic State Training Camp Textbook: 'Course in Monotheism' - Complete Text, Translation and Analysis," [aymennjawad.org](http://aymennjawad.org), July 26, 2015. Accessed January 14, 2023, <https://aymennjawad.org/17633/islamic-state-training-camp-textbook-course-in>.

519 Sayed Qutb, *Milestones*. Online edition at [www.izharudeen.com](http://www.izharudeen.com). Accessed May 10, 2019, [http://www.izharudeen.com/uploads/4/1/2/2/4122615/milestones\\_www.izharudeen.com.pdf](http://www.izharudeen.com/uploads/4/1/2/2/4122615/milestones_www.izharudeen.com.pdf).

sense of insecurity<sup>520</sup>, the greater the polarization of society, and the less the space for alternatives. ISIS has intuitively used this approach, perhaps inspired by the writing of Abu Bakr Naji, the author of *The Management of Savagery*<sup>521</sup>. “One who previously engaged in<sup>522</sup> jihad knows that it is naught but violence, crudeness, terrorism, frightening (others), and massacring,” says Naji who is believed to have influenced Zarqawi, before ISIS. Naji considered that spilling their blood of enemies was “one of the most important obligations since they do not repent, undertake prayer, and give alms”. He also added that the companions of the prophet often resorted to violence citing the examples of the likes Ali bin Abi Talib and Abu Bakr burning people with fire. Beheadings were transmitted by Zarqawi with the killing in 2004 of Nick Berg<sup>523</sup>, shown in the Guantanamo orange jumpsuit before his death<sup>524</sup>, but whereas such executions were previously shown on low quality tapes, now they were broadcast in high quality by ISIS, which also took things to new lengths through burning alive the Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasasbeh. Ultimately all these tenets and their linkages with one another enabled ISIS to justify the use of violence as an agent to purify society from groups it considered as apostates ranging from rival jihadist groups (Jabhat Nusra) or religious minorities like the Yazidis as well the Shi’a. Violence was also used as an efficient tool to coerce local population into contributing to the creation of a utopian Islamic Caliphate.

“One who previously engaged in jihad knows that it is naught but violence, crudeness, terrorism, frightening (others), and massacring. I am talking about jihad and fighting, not about Islam and one should not confuse them<sup>525</sup>.”Naji refers to enemies having to “pay the price”, and that this is not limited to the “Crusader enemy”. He cites an example of the “apostate Egyptian regime” undertaking an action to kill or capture a group of mujahidin<sup>526</sup>. “The youth of jihad in Algeria or Morocco can direct a strike against the Egyptian embassy and issue a statement of justification, or they can kidnap Egyptian diplomats as hostages until the group of mujahidin are freed, and so forth. The policy of violence must also be followed such that if the demands are not met, the hostages should be

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520 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

521 Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery* (2004), 268.

522 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

523 Gilles Kepel, *Jihad*.

524 Guantanamo refers to a prison in Cuba where Qaeda were sentenced to reclusion, they were traditionally dressed in orange jumpsuits.

525 Jeff Sole, “‘Management of Savagery’ – A Model for Establishing the Islamic State,” The Mackenzie Institute, June 2, 2016, <https://mackenzieinstitute.com/2016/06/management-of-savagery-a-model-for-establishing-the-islamic-state/>.

526 Naji, *The Management of Savagery*:

liquidated in a terrifying manner, which will send fear into the hearts of the enemy and his supporters. «Ultimately the goal of ISIS was to create a homogeneous society through coercion and violence, in which any remaining and tolerated non-Muslims would have to accept second-class status, at best. “The aim is to control the population by getting rid of everyone of a different identity (and indeed of a different opinion ) and by instilling terror. Hence the strategic goal of these wars is to mobilize the extremist politics based on fear and hatred . This often involves population expulsion through various means such as mass killing... “says Kaldor<sup>527</sup>.

### **B- The creation of the caliphate through recruitment and education**

As seen in Adnani’s earlier statement, IS’ other main goal was the creation of a state, where Muslims could live under Islamic law . The idea of an Islamic state, attracted Muslims from across the world to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria, as it expanded control over territory. ISIS represented the most explicit form of the ideal of revival of the Caliphate that many jihadists had only perhaps seen as a distant vision to be realized over generations.

The Islamic caliphate had been argued for, fifty or so years before, by Qutub in *Milestones*<sup>528</sup>. For Qutb, the protection of Dar Islam (the House of Islam), and Muslim belief and society was not a final goal, but a tool to create the kingdom of God, that could be used as a base to project onto the world. The terrorist organization further developed the concept of *tamkin* linked to the consolidation of power around Islamic caliphate, also based on the works of thinkers such as Naji. In chapter 7 of his book, Naji argues that the first step for recruitment is “the creation of institutions to improve the management of the areas under our control.” This policy appears to have been applied initially following ISIS surge<sup>529</sup> in June 2014: as an example, an article by the Independent, reported that ISIS was running nearly everything from bakeries and banks to schools, courts and mosques in Raqqa. One activist admitted at that the time that the organization had been doing “massive institutional work”. ISIS governance will nonetheless be further be developed in the chapter on territorialization of VNSAs. The improvement of faith and local populations was another essential element to Naji’s writings. He explained that the only truly valuable method of learning the teachings is through the act of jihad with the Quran at one’s side. “The greatest field for education is the field of battle...” “Active jihad which the first Muslims undertook is connected with spiritual

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527 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

528 Qutb, *Milestones*

529 “Life under Isis: For Residents of Raqqa Is This Really a Caliphate,” The Independent, September 6, 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-under-isis-for-residents-of-raqqa-is-this-really-a-caliphate-worse-than-death-9715799.html>.



jihad. One is never disconnected from the other for a single moment. Active jihad is the greatest means of educating the Muslims and establishing the heavenly meanings and exalted standards in their souls". Naji argues that only preceding generations of jihadists and their sacrifices will enable subsequent generations to bear the trust of the religion and move the *Umma* to join the practice of jihad.

But ISIS also worked on developing education in the more conventional sense as part of its vision of society. Jacob Olidort<sup>530</sup> outlined in his study of ISIS textbooks for schools how ISIS developed a specific curriculum that would promote its ideology . Textbooks used could be broken down into two tiers: "The first tier refers to how the group treats traditional subjects of religious study — the Quran, hadith, creed, and law — all defining features of Islamic faith and practice. The second has to do with other subjects — physical preparedness, history, geography, and mathematics — all of which are incidental to Islamic identity but central to training the 'citizens' of their state project." ISIS textbooks denounce Western democracies and explain the difference between "the people of unbelief," or non-Muslims, and "hypocrites," or people who claim to be Muslims but partner with the West and/or actively oppose ISIS, according to Olidort. The books provide justification for violence and declare killing necessary for religious purposes and emphasize that "the obligation of both imposing religious governance and fighting those Muslims who disobey Islamic law," and they forbid any form of governance that is un-Islamic.

### **C- Doomsday scenario and the Muslim Divide**

ISIS has relied on prophecies and eschatological traditions regarding Syria to boost its appeal. A widely circulated hadith attributed to Mohammad says al-Sham, or Syria, is God's favored land with the prophet answering the question as where the next jihad will be, he replies: "God has guaranteed me Sham and its people<sup>531</sup>." Another refers to Muslims gathering "at the time of war in Ghouta, near a city called Damascus". Ghouta refers here to a region east of Syria's capital and was a rebel stronghold until 2018. Reference to the battle of Dabiq, in northern Syria near the Turkish border was profusely used by ISIS which named its glamorous English-language publication Dabiq. The group arguably boosted its appeal by the takeover of Dabiq in summer 2014.

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530 Jacob Olidort, "Inside the Caliphate's Classroom," Washington Institute for Near East Policy August 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus147-Olidort-5.pdf>.

531 Mariam Karouny, "Apocalyptic Prophecies Drive Both Sides to Syrian Battle for End of Time," Reuters, April 1, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-prophecy-insight/apocalyptic-prophecies-drive-both-sides-to-syrian-battle-for-end-of-time-idUSBREA3013420140401>.

Will McCants has looked at ISIS apocalyptic beliefs underlining that the previous group leader Abu Omar Baghdadi believed that the end of days would come, with the creation of an Islamic caliphate<sup>532</sup>. According to Christopher Anzalone<sup>533</sup>, IS creates a propaganda narrative of (alleged) historical Shiite perfidy towards Islam and (Sunni) Muslims. ISIS constantly interprets the behavior of contemporaries such as Hezbollah and the Iranian state in a 'historical' context, whereby Shiites will keep on harming Sunnis". Dialogue and rapprochement are thus not options in the IS narrative because Shi'a by their very nature will continually seek to undermine and harm Sunnis, no matter what they claim. Thus, Sunnis are never safe and are in constant need of ISIS protection which only strengthens the identity and the brand of the Jihadist group.

## II- Shi'i Jihad in Syria, Hezbollah and pro-Iran PMU forces

As seen in previous chapters, Iran has been an expert at projecting across the region with limited means and using the tool of identity politics. Iran has made efficient use of status as the guardian of Shi'a in Sunni dominated regions. One pathology of identity politics is the "victimhood syndrome," which first arises when blame and prejudice against perceived wrongdoers become a central part of a group's identity but become extreme when the tendency of "victim talk" undermines self-responsibility and manipulates support (Parker, 2005, 53-54). One example is the sectarian identity politics of the "minorities" in small states under the influence of Iran," say Yidirim Turan and Lan Nguyen Haong in *Beyond the sectarian identity politics of the Middle East, the Case of Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia*<sup>534</sup>.

This was first use in Lebanon, in the 80s, in Palestine and later in Iraq, in Syria, in Iraq again as well as in Yemen. The subject of this study is the Syrian use of identity politics and more importantly of Jihad as a geopolitical tool. Iran as previously seen was wary of the fragmentation of its axis of resistance, with the Arab Spring hitting Damascus. To counter the budding revolution there, it used to be Lebanese proxy Hezbollah and Iraqi proxies that

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532 Chris Zeits, "Doomsday Scenario: Reviewing The ISIS Apocalypse," The Strategy Bridge, October 14, 2015, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2016/1/1/doomsday-scenario-reviewing-the-isis-apocalypse>.

533 Christopher Anzalone, "In the Shadow of the Islamic State: Shi'i Responses to Sunni Jihadi Narratives in a Turbulent Middle East," in Simon Staffell and Akil Awan (eds.), *Jihadism Transformed: Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's Global Battle of Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Accessed May 24, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/31130204/In\\_the\\_Shadow\\_of\\_the\\_Islamic\\_State\\_Shii\\_Responses\\_to\\_Sunni\\_Jihadi\\_Narratives\\_in\\_a\\_Turbulent\\_Middle\\_East](https://www.academia.edu/31130204/In_the_Shadow_of_the_Islamic_State_Shii_Responses_to_Sunni_Jihadi_Narratives_in_a_Turbulent_Middle_East).

534 Yildirim TURAN and Lan Nguyen Hoang, "Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics within the Middle East: The Case of Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia," *Ortadoğu'da Mezhepsel Kimlik Politikalarının Ötesinde: İran-Suudi Arabistan'ın Rekabeti Örneği*. 14, no. 2 (October 2019): 77-120, <https://doi.org/10.17550/akademikincelemeler.494934>.

later congregated under the label of the Popular Mobilization Forces. From the onset of the protest there, pro-Iran groups used religious references to mobilize their local audiences for war there.

In May 2013, when justifying the involvement of the militant group in the Syria war, Hezbollah's secretary general Sayed Hassan Nasrallah underlined "We are not only ready to declare jihad (in Syria); in fact, with a couple of words you would find tens of thousands of mujahideen heading to these fronts"<sup>535</sup>. The most direct Iraqi theological support for armed mobilization in Syria came from Ayatollah Kazim al-Hairi, an Iraqi scholar residing in the Iranian seminary and shrine city of Qum in Iran<sup>536</sup>.

The Syrian insurgency followed by ISIS' takeover of large swaths of Syria in 2014 not only led to the mobilization of Lebanese Hezbollah but also of a number of Iraqi Shiite fighters, who would after June 2014 fall under the banner of Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units. Among such factions were the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haqq and Harakat al-Nujaba. Like ISIS, pro-Iranian militias have framed the war in Syria to an Islamic doomsday scenario and the return of the Mehdi (Messiah). This eschatological interpretation of the ongoing conflict by Shiite militias close to Iran falls within Tehran's successful regional mobilization drive and its effort in propping up the regime of President Bashar Assad.

#### **A- The Religious Dimension To The Syria War: Kitab Al-Jafr**

Tehran's efforts to project influence and create an alliance gathered around the Islamic Republic of Iran had included Syria's Assad regime, which dated back to the Iran-Iraq war, as Syria had long viewed Saddam Hussein as a dangerous competitor for supremacy in the Arab world. Iran also claimed the Alawites as a branch of the Shi'a and Syria and Iran shared the same perception of anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism, "as well as the apparent geopolitical interests of each state and the calculations of opportunity that and this alliance provided them to promote their influence in the region," according to Nguyen and Turan<sup>537</sup>. Iran had to protect this alliance at all costs through a narrative that could appeal to the imaginary of its base and most importantly to its fear of oppression.

When Hezbollah made public its involvement in Syria in 2013, many of the organization's supporters in Beirut who were interviewed at the time by the author linked the war there to Kitab al-Jafr (Book of Al-Jafr) and the reappearance of the Mahdi (the

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535 "Hezbollah Leader Hassan Nasrallah's Speech on Syria," Voltaire Network, May 25, 2013, <https://www.voltairenet.org/article178691.html>.

536 Anzalone, "In the Shadow of the Islamic State."

537 Yıldırım TURAN and Lan Nguyen Hoang, "Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics within the Middle East."

Redeemer), which would precede the end of days. Around the same time, the Middle East newswire al-Monitor<sup>538</sup> posted a piece describing the Book of Al-Jafr as “a series of old symbolic events, whose interpretation explains the nature of the events that will take place before Judgment Day.”

At the core of Hezbollah’s belief is the return of the Mehdi, also known as the Hidden Imam revered by Shiite Muslims. The Hidden Imam is the twelfth Imam Muhammad Ibn al-Hassan al-Askari. According to Al-Jafr, the occurrence of major bloodbaths in Syria was one of the major signs of reappearance of the Hidden Imam, who would come to save fellow Shiites from injustice. Hezbollah and its supporters believed that the signs preceding the reappearance of Mahdi are being successively unveiled, and preclude the “Great War with Israel and the disbelievers”, which was imminent. Lebanese Sayed Ali Amine argued nonetheless that “some are attempting for purely political objectives to link the events in the Middle East, more specifically in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, to the appearance of the Imam, and we do not see any connection between these events and the appearance of Imam Mahdi, or participating [in to ( this war)] in his support.”<sup>539</sup> Nonetheless, in previous interviews with the author, Hezbollah followers said that in the Al-Jafr, it was believed that “that (Syrian) President Assad would be killed and that the country would be ruled by a “Sunni leader who would persecute Shiites.”. This state of injustice, according to the myth, would come to an end after an army from the East intervened to liberate Syria. Many who believe in the story consider Iran as the eastern country that sends its army to Syria. “This army will keep marching toward Jerusalem to liberate it from the Jews. There, Imam Mahdi will appear to pray in Jerusalem along with the Messiah messiah [Jesus],” according to al-Monitor. “This is the scene where the earthly time comes to an end and the divine era— – where justice, fairness and peace prevail— – will start.”

Other images of Shiite eschatology and linked to return of the Mehdi can be seen in areas governed by Hezbollah. In Lebanon’s Hezbollah-controlled areas, the number 313 is often seen featuring on banners and clothes. The number 313 refers in Twelver Shiite eschatology, to military commanders who would be leading Imam Mehdi’s army upon his anticipated reappearance, explained anti-Hezbollah activist Lokman Slim <sup>540</sup>. Many people in these regions who spoke to the author believe Hezbollah commanders are included among

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538 Anonymous, “Is Hezbollah’s Syria Approach Tied To Shiite End-Times Doctrine?,” al-Monitor, September 12, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/09/hezbollah-nasrallah-shiite-doctrine-syria-conflict.html#ixzz50ainUD7Y>.

539 Interview by the author with Sayed Ali Amine December 2017

540 Interview with Lokman Slim in October 2017

the 313 Mehdi's companions. Hezbollah is not alone in tapping tap into the doomsday narrative to incite recruitment in Syria among its most religious followers. The Secretary-General of the Asaib Ahl al-Haq Iraqi militia, Qais al-Khazali, previously stated that after the end of the Battle of Mosul, the forces of popular mobilization will enter to the Syrian territory in coordination with the Assad regime to confront the so-called takfiris , and will continue to fight until the emergence of the Mahdi<sup>541</sup>. Using war as preparations for the return of the Imam Mahdi has been mentioned at the end of public statements made by other Shiite Iraqi militias, such as Harakat Al- Nujaba. "This axis is the axis of God and supported by the Imam al-Mahdi," has stated Harakat Nujaba about the war in Syria and Yemen<sup>542</sup>. "Imam Mehdi is to bring justice to the world, and this will not be achieved by sowing division or by waging a blind fitna between brothers, and if Imam Mahdi's project is justice; to bring justice through oppression is not a sustainable one," says Sayed al Amine in contrast.

#### **B- The defense of Ahl Al-Bayt and Shiite pilgrimage sites in Syria:**

The religious dimension of the Syria war is a central part of the discourse of Hezbollah militants fighting there. Like in Kitab al-Jafr, the party's militants have framed the war as a prelude to the apocalypse. Hezbollah fighters believe the battle to be part of an ancient Sunni-Shi'i conflict triggered by the dispute over who should succeed the Prophet Muhammad. Among those many thousands of sayings, or hadith, are accounts which refer to the confrontation of two huge Islamic armies in Syria, a great battle near Damascus, and intervention from the north and west of the country.

Iran has flamed the ideological fame of the Jihad in Syria to mobilize its proxies across the region. According to an article by Reuters, Iranian cleric and parliamentarian Ruhollah Hosseinian declared: "This Islamic Revolution, based on the narratives that we have received from the prophet and imams, is the prelude to the appearance of the Mahdi." He cited comments by an eighth century Shiite imam who said another sign of the Mahdi's return would be a battle involving warriors fighting under a yellow banner - the color associated with Lebanon's pro-Assad Hezbollah militia which would fly over Damascus<sup>543</sup>. At the core of this Shi'i Jihad are several principles: namely, the defense of Ahl

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541 "Head of AAH, we will fight until the return of the Mehdi," Al-Jazeera December 22, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2016/12/22/المهدي-ظهور-حتى-سنقاتل-الشعبي-سنقاتل-حتى-ظهور-المهدي>.

542 *Harakat Nujaba Showcases Its Forces in Aleppo*, Zaman Alwsl, September 26, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDcgCKKkmo>. (see 1:50-2:00).

543 Karouny, "Apocalyptic Prophecies Drive Both Sides to Syrian Battle for End of Time,"

Al-Bayt, the example of martyrdom shown by Imam Hussein and the protection of Shi'i holy sites in Syria.

Hezbollah supporters described the war in Syria akin to Karbala tragedy, which led to martyrdom of Imam Hussein- the grandson of the prophet and many of his family members- and its supporters in a battle with a much larger Umayyad military force in 680. The survivors- including Hussein's sister Sayyida Zaynab- were made prisoners by the the caliph Yazid ibn Muawiya, in Damascus.

In a previous interview with the author, a Hezbollah field commander reported that Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei told Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah that Syria was the second Karbala<sup>544</sup>“This means that we must sacrifice our lives for this cause, as did Imam Hussein in Karbala”.At funerals of Hezbollah militant killed in battle in Syria, chants of “Labyakh Ya Hussein,” an exhortation of loyalty to a revered Shi'i imam are commonplace<sup>545</sup>. Both Iraqi and Lebanese Shiite militant groups have defended their involvement in Syria as being in protection of the shrine of Sayida Zaynab, who is remembered for her defiant speeches she delivered in front of the caliph Yazid in which she excoriated him and the Umayyads for their persecution of the Ahl al-Bayt. Caliph Yazid in contrast is abhorred as a tyrant by Shi'i Muslims.

In 2013, Hezbollah's television station al-Manar started playing videos showing fighters near the shrine. <sup>546</sup>In May of that year<sup>547</sup>, Nasrallah escalated his tone, announcing that his forces would prevail in the Syrian uprising. “This battle is ours,” he said in what many saw as a surprising turn, “and I promise you victory.” Hezbollah has linked the Shi'i concept of martyrdom and suffering, which can be traced back to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, to its fight in Syria, explained Mona Fayad, a Lebanese University professor and sociologist<sup>548</sup>. Until the surge of ISIS in Iraq in June of 2014, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani had refused to condone fighting in a war he viewed as political rather than religious, contrary to senior Shi'a clerics who encouraged fighting in Syria<sup>549</sup>. Yet many Iraqi fighters felt they

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544 Ali Ali Mamouri, “Suicide Bombings on the Rise among Shiites,” Al-Monitor, December 17, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/suicide-bombing-increase-shiite.html>.

545 Mona Alami, “Syria's Twin Jihads,” Inter Press Service” June 2014, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/06/syrias-twin-jihads/>.

546 Martin Chulov, “Hezbollah's role in Syrian conflict ushers new reality for its supporters,” The Guardian, May 24, 2013. Accessed March 9, 2019: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/24/hezbollah-syria-new-reality-supporters>

547 “Hezbollah Leader Nasrallah Vows Victory in Syria.” BBC News May 25, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22669230>.

548 Interview with professor Mona Fayad, by Mona Alami, March 2014, Beirut Lebanon.

549 “Sistani Calls on Iraqis to Unite against Islamic State Danger,” *Reuters*, August 8, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-sistani-idUSKBN0G810320140808>.

could not sit on the sidelines. “There is no better and more religiously sanctioned duty than protecting the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Syria,” one Iraqi fighter from the Badr organization told the author<sup>550</sup>. Many Lebanese and Iraqi fighters who were interviewed by the author also described the battle in Syria not only as one in defense of the prophet’s family but also of Shi’a in general facing an Israeli-‘Takfiri’ conspiracy. The convergence of Salafist and Israeli interests has indeed been a central argument in the discourse of Hezbollah militants. Other members of the pro-Iran – Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces have espoused the same narrative of a Salafi-Israeli conspiracy, as seen in statements by Harakat Nujaba and Asaib Ahl Haq<sup>551</sup>. Through Hezbollah and the Iraqi PMU, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards balanced power against Arab Countries and Turkey in Syria.

### **C- Radicalization of Lebanese Shi’a fighters in Syria:**

In Lebanon Hezbollah fighters believe that the party has been able to succeed in the face of Israeli aggression because of the culture of sacrifice and power of endurance the party has maintained, which was later projected onto the party’s Syrian war narrative. The invocation of apocalypse and eschatological beliefs to justify the war in Syria has exacerbated sectarian sentiment among Shi’a fighters in Lebanon.

The Syria war, has thus ushered in the growing militancy and radicalization of fighters exposed to the violence, exacerbated by the sectarian dimension of the conflict, as well as the doomsday creed of Kitab al-Jafr. When asked how comfortable he was killing a fellow Muslim, one Hezbollah fighter told the author of this report that a “takfiri [a radical Sunni] is not a human being.”

In several speeches, Hezbollah figures have referred to the events that led to the Sunni/Shi’i schism, invoking Imam Ali and the sacrifice of his sons the Hassan and Hussein, (revered figures in Shiite Islam) in speeches on Syria. “Our destiny is to take the path of Hussein. We are born to die whether in Lebanon or in Syria or in defense of any other Muslim cause” , says one Hezbollah militant interviewed by the author<sup>552</sup>.

This narrative finds a strong echo within the majority of Hezbollah’s fighters. In a previous interview with the author, a young Hezbollah militant argued <sup>553</sup>that” what is happening in Syria today is a repetition of what happened over 1000 years ago against

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550 Interview Hezbollah fighter by Mona Alami, March 2014, Beirut , Lebanon

551 Ahmad Majdayar, “Another Iran-Backed Iraqi Militia Leader Visits Lebanon, Threatens Israel,” Middle East Institute, February 18, 2016, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/another-iran-backed-iraqi-militia-leader-visits-lebanon-threatens-israel>.

552 Interview Hezbollah militant, by Mona Alami, December 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

553 Interview with a Hezbollah teenage fighter, by Mona Alami, Bekaa Lebanon, January 2016.

Hassan and Hussein. We will not allow that to happen another time”. “Those we are fighting are not true Muslims. You cannot be a Muslim and try burning another Muslim’s religious site...and they burn down our mosques. This is not the work of a Muslim. During battles, you fire at them and they keep on coming, they are on drugs». Hezbollah fighters justified their involvement in Syria by saying they had received beforehand a taklif sharii (a religious command). The same teen fighter argued that he joined the organization to wage Jihad in Syria. “ it is my religious duty to fight there. It is the duty of every Muslim. It will also ensure my salvation after my death...I think I have been ready to die for a long time, and when the war in Syria broke out, it was clear to me it was a war of good against evil. The takfiris in Syria were attacking our holy sites, “our Muqaddasat”, our most sacred places such as the Sayida Zeinab pilgrimage site: we could not let that happen”.

Fighters also believe that the religious command means that dying in battle which is the ultimate proof of martyr after suicide bombings will grant them a pure and righteous status. “My place is secured in heaven if I die (in Syria) and my family taken care of,” says Abu Ali, a commander who has been deployed several times in Qusayr, Qalamoun, Damascus and Aleppo and who spoke previously with the author<sup>554</sup>.

Besides striving for martyrdom, most Hezbollah supporters believe that the war in Syria is an existential war of survival. “By waging war on Syria, they are targeting Hezbollah,” said the Hezbollah commander<sup>555</sup>, speaking of the Sunni rebel fighters, whom he says is backed by the international community. “If someone comes to your house to kill you, don’t you have the right to defend yourself?” Hezbollah fighters have justified killing Syrian insurgents by labeling them as “terrorists” and “takfiris”. Most militants described their opponents in Syria as foreign fighters that came from Europe, the Gulf, Chechnya, Jordan and even the Philippines and in which Syrians only play a support and secondary role in the rebellion, unless they fought in Iraq or Libya. “These Takfiris are savage enemies as they chop off their enemies’ heads because they believe beheading will elevate them (on earth and heaven),”<sup>556</sup> said one Hezbollah fighter. Interviewed a few months later, the same fighter, argued that the same Takfiris were manipulated by foreign countries, “fighting under the banner of God but their beliefs are false”. Many of those arrested were young and some had no real understanding of Islam or knowledge of prayer practices. Some of them did not even

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554 Interview with Abu Ali, by Mona Alami, April 2017, Beirut Lebanon.

555 Interview with Abu Ali, by Mona Alami, Beirut, Lebanon, April 2017

556 Interview with Abu Ali, by Mona Alami, Beirut, Lebanon June 2016



know where they were fighting<sup>557</sup>. These justifications have had several implications. First, they allow the fighters to conduct the military effort under religious sanction. Second, it has from what the author could see qualitatively- increased sectarian animosity Hezbollah supporters and fighters towards members of the Sunni community who are coalesced under the takfiri label. Finally, it was conducive for a massive mobilization at the Lebanese level with grave future repercussions, sowing the seed of communal hatred.

#### **D-The backdrop of Hezbollah's Jihad in Syria : Hezbollah basic tenets and the evolution of the party's identity politics:**

Hezbollah's long political and revolutionary history has forced the movement to mature and moderate its identity politics discourse. Hezbollah's ideology is firmly rooted in three tenets. According to Naim Qassem<sup>558</sup>, the organization's undersecretary, the first is the belief in Islam. Islam is considered as the last and most comprehensive of heavenly message comprising belief in God, complying with God's religion and avoiding what is prohibited, and acts of worship, which entail prayer, fasting pilgrimage to the holy sites and charity and self-discipline. Belief in Islam is also built on a fair economic perspective which rejects interest and respects a joint social responsibility thorough zakat. For Hezbollah, there is also the concept of 'la ikrah fil deen' ("no compulsion in religion"), which bans imposing religion on others, separating the organization from other extremist organizations totalitarian practice of religion. Those of the most interest to us given their controversial nature and relevance to identity politics are the following:

A second main tenet of Hezbollah's Islamic belief is the ideal establishment of the Islamic caliphate, something that has nonetheless progressively disappeared from Hezbollah's official discourse as the party delved more into internal Lebanese politics. Hezbollah has also differentiated<sup>559</sup> between the intellectual and practicality of such a vision. Qassem argues that "the creation of an Islamic caliphate is thus not a function of the adoption of one group or branch and its subsequent imposition on other groups. Such a path is refused both for this project and others , irrespective of who its originators are " . Hezbollah's pragmatism can also be perceived early in its Open Letter of 1985. The Letter recognizes Islam as a main tenet obliging the party's members to abide by its code, also states that Hezbollah is not a sectarian party but an ideological one, despite the fact that it follows the path of the prophets and its descendants. A third of Hezbollah's main tenets is jihad and

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557 Interview with Abu Ali, by Mona Alami, Beirut, Lebanon October 2013.

558 Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah (Hezbollah): The Story from Within*

559 Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah (Hezbollah): The Story from Within*.

martyrdom, which constitutes a main cornerstone of Hezbollah's ideology. Hezbollah believes that jihad is an integral belief for every Muslim because it sees the world as perishable and temporary. Martyrdom is essential it can determine the fate of every individual on the day of resurrection and thus for Qassem "it is the duty of humans to struggle against oppression and injustice through jihad"<sup>560</sup>. Jihad is first about struggling against the self, secondly it is about uprooting the enemy from one's land and defeating evil. "Jihad is a door toward life not death" and "even martyrdom is life" says Qassem. While the concept of martyrdom is present and revered across multiple sects of Islam, it seems to hold great importance in the Shia tradition as seen in the early practice of suicide attacks by Hezbollah in the 80s in Lebanon. Hezbollah ties the martyrdom tenet to the 7th-century Battle of Karbala. A belief in martyrdom, moreover, is a powerful driver within the overall framework of Hezbollah's military ideology and its recruitment drive. Martyrdom is perceived as a greater fight between the oppressed against their oppressor, said oppressors ranging from Israelis to takfiris or illegitimate regimes, and the promise of the afterlife motivate fighters into battle. According to Kepel<sup>561</sup>, Shi'i religiosity is essentially plugged into the martyrdom of Hussein and was passed on by the IRCG to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

As discussed above, fostering a belief in martyrdom—and the perception that those dying in a war against Israel in Lebanon or against terrorists takfiris in Syria are martyrs—is critical because it encourages others to follow in the same path.

Yet it is interesting to look into the evolution of Hezbollah's martyrdom discourse. Before the Syrian war, the organization generally focused on defensive jihad, comprised of the defense of Muslim and their land against foreign occupation, namely Israel's (which lasted until 2000). Hezbollah adhered in the post 2011 phase to a new form of Jihad against other Muslims. This was previously disregarded by Hezbollah's thinker Qassem because it entailed the confrontation of other Muslims and the entry into others land, inapplicable in the absence of the Imam Mehdi return<sup>562</sup>. Jihad in Hezbollah's understanding can only be declared by the jurist theologian. According to Kepel, the only legitimate martyr is that of those who died in a jihadi operation sanctioned by the theologian jurist<sup>563</sup>. The importance of the jurisdiction of the jurist theologian in Jihad, paves the way for this principle as a central tenet in Hezbollah ideological construct. The ultimate authority for Hezbollah is the Iranian

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560 Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah (Hezbollah): The Story from Within*

561 Gilles Kepel, *Terreur et Martyre*

562 Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah (Hezbollah): The Story from Within*

563 Gilles Kepel, *Terreur et Martyre*

Supreme Leader’s embodiment of Wilayat al-Faqih. In their absence of the last imam, the guardianship of jurist theologian is thus imperative and allows for continuity according to Hezbollah<sup>564</sup>. The unbreakable connection between Hezbollah and Iran in terms of identity politics and the use of religious appeal, its military capabilities as an Iranian geopolitical tool in defense of Syria are rooted in the open letter of 1985<sup>565</sup>. “ We are the sons of the Ummah of Hezbollah who are the vanguard of the victorious revolution in Iran, which God helped and who succeeded to lay down the nucleus of the central Islamic state in the world . We obey the orders of one wise and just leadership, which is presently substantiated with the infallible imam, the grand ayatollah Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini. Each of us is a fighting soldier when jihad calls for it , and each of us takes up his mission in accordance with his godly assigned obligations in the framework of working under the tutelage of Wilayat al-Faqih,” says the open letter on 1985<sup>566</sup>. These basic tenets displayed in Hezbollah from within the Open Letter of 1985 are still relevant to Hezbollah’s regional Syria discourse. Much of the war on Syria has been described-- as seen in previous sections-- as one against oppressors, labeled as ( Sunni) Takfiris and Israel. Since its early days, Hezbollah has enjoined the “obliteration” of Israel and denounced the hypocrisy of the “Arab defeatist” regimes with the obligation for the oppressed to form a global front of the downtrodden<sup>567</sup>.

### **E- Iraqi Jihad war in Syria war and the Hezbollahization of pro-Iran factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces**

Hezbollah is not alone to have adhered to the jihadi construct in Syria and the war there has carried significant repercussions in other countries such as Iraq.

“Martyrdom is the destiny of every fighter,” explains Hussein a member of the Badr organization<sup>568</sup>. “The war on Syria is not only about Jihad it is an existential war to defend ourselves against the terror of ISIS”. The fighter has been deployed in Syria several times denies he has ever fought in civilians areas there. “ There are no civilians or opposition only terrorists”, he underscores. According to deceased Iraqi expert Hisham Hashemi there were about 8000 Iraqi Shi’a fighters belonging to Iraqi PMU deployed in Syria in 2018 . For a Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq official, fighting in Syria was part of a larger security war on ISIS. “ ISIS

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564 Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah (Hezbollah): The Story from Within*

565 Fadlallah, *Hezbollah Change of Discourse*.

566 Ibid.

567 Ibid.

568 Interview with Abou Hussein, by Mona Alami, March 2018, Baghdad, Iraq.

used Syria and Iraq as the land of Tamkin, and so the fight could only take us there, it was our strategic interest, “ says the commander.

This opinion was also shared by a high member of the Abu al-Fadl Abbas Brigade who explains that the group’s origin was to protect the pilgrimage site of Sayeda Zeinab, and so took the name of Abu Fadl Abbas.

“ The **Popular Mobilization Forces** is ideological, it is rooted in the Islamic idea of struggle and in the defense of one’s country and pride. Islamic ideology is what makes it so effective, “ remarks a commander in the Badr organization who spoke to the author on condition of anonymity<sup>569</sup>. The **Popular Mobilization Forces**’ pro-Iranian factions believe that their core beliefs include jihad and the principle of Wilayat al-Faqih , similar to Hezbollah’s doctrines. Jihad and Wilayat al-Faqih forms the crux of contemporary Shiite political thought in factions aligned with Tehran. Jihad is the sacred duty to wage war on the enemies of Islam while Wilayat al-Faqih is a guardianship-based political system, which relies upon a just and capable jurist to assume the leadership of the government in the absence of an infallible Imam, epitomized by Iran’s Supreme Leader. Like Hezbollah in Lebanon pro-Iran factions have related the importance of winning the hearts and mind of their constituents to the importance of martyrdom. A case in point is Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq which started as a militant group fighting U.S occupation of Iraq has morphed into a large network including a social outreach program. “We are building schools and universities as we see the importance of creating a religious culture and more awareness among people , “ underlined Dr Nai’m Al-Aboudi in a previous interview with the author.

The war on ISIS and its heavy death toll has also pushed the militant group to bolster its martyrs’ program. “Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq leaders decided that every martyr family should have a house, or a piece of land to build a home. We have succeeded (in this endeavor) and we will be reaching this goal by the end of the year,” highlights Dr Al-Aboudi.

Similarly, to Hezbollah, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq came to realize the importance of the war on ISIS in Iraq and Syria and promoting a culture of martyrdom in Iraqi society, and the important role women played within this framework. “We are currently developing a social and political program and major projects targeting women. Unlike Lebanon, we did not have the culture of martyrdom, given that wars launched by (ousted president) Saddam Hussein were very unpopular and were deemed futile because of his destructive policies, “says Dr Al-Aboudi. The Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq spokesperson underlines the prominent role played by

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569 Interview with Badr Commander by Mona Alami, Baghdad, Iraq, March 2018.

women in the war on ISIS. “Men who fought against ISIS were driven by religious belief and a feeling of nationalism, and the role of mothers in that regard was very instrumental,” underlines Dr Al-Aboudi who cites a visit conducted by the organization’s leader sheikh Qais al-Khaz’ali to a martyr’s family in the city of Basra. “At the end of the visit, the martyr’s mother, said she wanted to greet sheikh Khaz’ali and we expected her to ask him for help. She told him instead that she had another son she wished to send to fight ISIS, to replace her martyred son,” explains Dr Aboudi.

The emergence of the culture of martyrdom is not the only common point pro-Iranian Popular Mobilization Forces groups shared in the aftermath of the Syria war with Lebanese Hezbollah, an organization that has helped train and advise these groups since 2003. According to Hezbollah expert Nicolas Blanford, Hezbollah has a past history of clandestine involvement in Iraq. During the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Hezbollah sent teams to Iraq and Iran to help the Revolutionary Guard form Shiite paramilitary cells that staged numerous attacks on coalition troops. In 2014, Hezbollah dispatched around 250 fighters to assist the PMU in its fight against ISIS. The Hezbollah’s Iraqi unit advised and trained Iraqi Shiite militias and was engaged in reconnaissance work, according to previous interviews with Hezbollah fighters by the author. It also coordinated with them during battles in Syria.

### **III- Rojava and Ocalan’s Confederal Democracy**

Far from Islamic tenets, doomsday scenario and the creation of an Islamic state articulated by VNSAs such as Hezbollah or ISIS is the ideology that has been at the core of the creation of the Autonomous region for North- east Syria. One cannot understand the ideology of the PYD, the central party dominating the Autonomous Administration without looking at the philosophy developed by Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK’s founder. After all, the PYD is the result of the PKK branching out into foreign franchises namely 2002 with the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (*Partî Çareserî Dîmokratî Kurdistan*, PÇDK) in the Kurdistan autonomous region in Iraq followed in 2003 by the creation of the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD), focusing on the Syrian struggle, and in 2004, of the Kurdistan Free Life Party (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê*, PJAK), in Iran<sup>570</sup>. Öcalan thoughts are essentially based on several main principles touching the nature of the state, gender and social equality. Ocalan believes that the modern state results from social, gender and cultural inequalities that contribute directly to the dominance of state bureaucracy in

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570 Joost Jongerden, “Governing Kurdistan: Self-Administration in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria,” *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 61–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1525166>.

opposition to the will of the people<sup>571</sup>. To avoid ending up with such a failed system Ocalan views the ideal path as the creation of a political framework based on local self-administration. Ocalan theorizes that local populations are central to this system and should thus be directly involved in the decision-making process, which is built around open councils, town councils, local parliaments and larger congresses. Decision making and politics is thus the result of a bottom up approach where citizens are agents of change. Another idea, defended by Ocalan is that modern states also tend to favor homogenization, by assimilating minorities. Ocalan in contrast favors the defense of the right of cultural, ethnic, gender and religious groups to organize themselves and give expression to their interests and identity. For the PKK founder, the best way is ‘democratic autonomy’, which refers to participatory democracy whereby the decision-making process is left to citizens. Ocalan was heavily influenced by Murray Bookchin’s ideas of communalism<sup>572</sup>, libertarian-socialist political system and transnational direct democracy as an antidote to the bureaucratic nation state.

Inspired by Ocalan’s writing, the Autonomous Administration of Syria is based on three main tenets. The first tenet is the supposed practice of direct democracy system through libertarian municipalism<sup>573</sup>, in which citizens participate actively in decision-making and the management from smaller to greater regions, IE from the neighborhood to the municipality and as far as the government<sup>574</sup>. The second tenet, and very much linked Ocalan’s rejection of the nation state, is the idea of self-government that incorporates diverse religious and ethnic groups. Empowerment of these various groups is ensured through the process of self-organization. The Autonomous region social contract “proclaims a new social contract, based upon mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society. It protects fundamental human rights and liberties and reaffirms the peoples’ right to self-determination”<sup>575</sup>. Illustrating this principle<sup>576</sup>, political bodies administering Rojava enforce the Social Contract requirement for proportional representation of the ethnic communities

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571 Joost Jongerden, “Governing Kurdistan: Self-Administration in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria,” *Ethnopolitics* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 61–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1525166>.

572 Andrea Glioti, “Rojava: A Libertarian Myth under Scrutiny,” al-Jazeera, August 6, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/08/rojava-libertarian-myth-scrutiny-160804083743648.html>.

573 Murray Bookchin, “Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview,” (1991, reprint the Anarchist Library, 2009), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-libertarian-municipalism-an-overview>.

574 Evangelos Aretaios, “The Rojava Revolution,” openDemocracy, March 5, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/rojava-revolution/>.

575 “Charter of the Social Contract,” *Peace in Kurdistan* (blog), March 7, 2014, <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/>.

576 Charter of the Social Contract,” *Peace in Kurdistan* (blog), March 7, 2014, <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contra>.

that are living in each region of the confederation. These communities' law are allowed to have freedom of religious and cultural beliefs. These two tenets show that the PYD and the political umbrella organization of the Syrian Democratic Council (*Konseya Demokratîk a Sûriyê*, SDC) did not aim, according to sociologist Joost Jongerden, at capturing the state to take over from the Assad regime, constructing a new state or even separating from the Syrian state but instead creating a new political system within the Syrian state learning, from the failed experiences of the PKK<sup>577</sup>. This system promotes what it describes as a sort of grass root democracy through a bottom-up structure starting from neighborhood councils, village councils and city councils up to regional ones. This active political participation of citizens can be defined as a Democratic Confederalist system and described by Ocalan as<sup>578</sup> “a non-state political administration or a democracy without the State. [...] States are founded on power; democracies are based on collective consensus [...]. It is a flexible, multi-cultural, anti-monopolistic, and consensus-oriented system. Ecology and feminism are its central pillars”. A third and major tenet of the Rojava region is feminism. Feminism and gender equality insured by the Social contract. “Men and women are equal in the eyes of the law. The Charter guarantees the effective realization of equality of women and mandates public,” says the founding social contract<sup>579</sup>. Women’s empowerment has translated into the enactment of civil marriage and the introduction of equal testimony for woman's and man (contrary to Islamic law)<sup>580</sup>. The administration adopted a law that expressly forbids men to marry more than one woman, contrary to other areas in Syria where Islam allows the marriage of four women to one man. At the military level, women play a pivotal role as seen in the all-female defense unit of the YPJ (the female wing of the YPG) through conscription of females. In addition to military bodies, all governing institutions and local committees follow the principal of parity and equal opportunity at the leadership and of minimal representation for both sexes. This translates in most bodies in committees to be made up of a minimal percentage according the Social Charter<sup>581</sup>, which also enshrined the idea of joint co-presidency, whereby each council from the neighborhood and the executive bodies are governed by man and one woman. At the level of the Rojava administration, every institution

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577 Jongerden, “Governing Kurdistan.”

578 Valentina Dean, "Kurdish Female Fighters: The Western Depiction of YPJ Combatants in Rojava," Glocalism (2019), accessed May 29, 2019:

[https://www.academia.edu/39041627/GJ\\_2019\\_1\\_Kurdish\\_Female\\_Fighters\\_the\\_Western\\_Depiction\\_of\\_YPJ\\_Combatants\\_in\\_Rojava\\_by\\_V.Dean](https://www.academia.edu/39041627/GJ_2019_1_Kurdish_Female_Fighters_the_Western_Depiction_of_YPJ_Combatants_in_Rojava_by_V.Dean).

579 “Charter of the Social Contract.”

580 Aretaios, “The Rojava Revolution.”

581 “Charter of the Social Contract.”

and organization have a 40% quota of representation of women, with the remaining 40% being for males and the remaining 20% being for those who receive the highest number of votes. Thus, female emancipation is a fundamental part of the building of administration and governance as it destroys the patriarchal construct generally followed in the Middle east.

While the SDC is the only VNSA that attempted in principle at least, to create a forward looking and inclusive project that opposed the label of identity politics argued by Kaldor, the project has had many shortcomings. The authoritarianism practiced by Kurdish members at the expense of Arabs, the lack of respect to Arab customs in tribal and patriarchal areas observed by the author in areas such as Raqqa and Deir al-Zor and the ensuing protests clashes that took place in the 2020 phase are a testament to the Kurdish hegemony over the SDC/ SDF construct. Yet without a doubt the SDC/ SDF VNSA is in a category of its own when it comes to VNSA in Syria as it does not fall within Kaldor's classical label of identity politics.

#### **IV- Differences and commonalities between Syria VNSAAs**

ISIS and Hezbollah, as we have seen earlier share many commonalities in the way they have marketed their campaigns in Syria.

Both groups have invoked Jihad to attract and motivate fighters to go to war in nearby Syria. Whereby Hezbollah did not publicly endorse the advantages a fighter dead in Syria would get, it spread the idea that dying in Syria, like ISIS did with its fighters would insure to live in a land of milk and honey with virgins as wife, according to interviews led by the author with fighters.

Jihad against ISIS was considered as one against the takfiri and the mythology of the battle if all battles was also described as seen earlier in Syria. Resorting to Kitab al-Jafr to legitimate that narrative as also heavily relied on.

This reliance on religion by ISIS and Hezbollah, and on identity politics, were for a while much more efficient than any narrative used by a conventional army to justify a conflict of force its recruits to adhere to the cause invoked. The religious justification is one that is ultimately convincing, especially at a time where communities are fighting at both end of the divide. At the end, can anyone argue or doubt the word of God?

This is why identity, including religion was considered as one marking by Kaldor of new wars. A vision also shared by Samuel Huntington infamous book *The Clash of Civilization*. Quoting the academic Edward Mortimer, Huntignton argued that the separation of religion from international politics was coming to an end and that "religion was



increasingly going to intrude on international politics”<sup>582</sup>. However, when it came to the SDF it was articulated around one cause the fight against ISIS and the undertone of the creation of a Kurdish area that would act as a buffer with the rest of warring Syria. Here it was ethnicity that was a factor of identity. However, on the surface, in many ways, the SDF narrative was that of a conventional army, unlike those of ISIS and Hezbollah.

The groups' military infrastructure was also common in the case of ISIS and Hezbollah, where the role of women was limited to non-fighting role, which was totally opposed to that of the SDF where the women were given a center stage in the military effort.

Their relationship with sponsors, pitted Hezbollah and the SDF , against that of ISIS. Hezbollah, had the strongest relation with Iran, which made it the least vulnerable of the three groups when it came to financing or geopolitical depth. That of the SDF was fragile and transactional which made it extremely vulnerable to international geopolitical changes. ISIS lack of formal endorsement was definitely one of the major reasons to its failure

## **V. Conclusion**

Syria’s fault lines wars have revealed the different array of identities. In his book *the Clash of Civilization , Remaking of the World Order*, Samuel Huntington predicted that wars within states, or( Kaldor’s new wars) could go on six times as long as interstate wars. “ Involving fundamental issues of group identity and power, they are difficult to resolve through negotiation and compromise,” he added<sup>583</sup>. Understanding mobilization when it is linked to identity politics is often complicated when it masks social and political conflicts<sup>584</sup> and the oppression of the state. Transnational or foreign linked VNSA ideologies which show many connecting points are thus key to the groups’ strategy of mobilization in the Syrian war, and ultimately impact the survival chance of these groups. “The new warfare also avoids tends to avoid battle and to control territory through political control of the population,” notes Kaldor<sup>585</sup>. What better way than the fundamental transformation of society through millenarian tendencies, a practice adopted by ISIS, Hezbollah and the PYD? As noted by David Rapaport<sup>586</sup>, ISIS has rooted its ideology in Islamic millenarianism id Islam, noting that millenarian religions are often seen as sources of terrorism . Once a messianic advent appears imminent, doctrine guides the expectations and the actions of believers, and

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582 Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*

583 Huntington.

584 Badie and Vidal, *Nouvelles Guerres*

585 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

586 Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism*.

terrorism allows for the liberation from suffering, with believers believing change to be imminent<sup>587</sup>. In this framework, martyrdom is often justified and used as an efficient warring tool. Both ISIS and Hezbollah adhere to that narrative that they are acting in the name of the oppressed or the victim of injustice, a typology often used by VNSAs and terror organizations<sup>588</sup>. Also, for both organizations the jihad is characterized by an aversion to western beliefs and norms, despite the fact that the aversion has significantly evolved in Hezbollah's construct with its acceptance of Christian traditions in Lebanon and its acceptance of inhabitants who follow western lifestyles in Lebanon. Yet while martyrdom is exploited profusely by these groups, there are differences. For one thing, Hezbollah is not so cavalier about targeting civilians and freely using suicide bombers en masse. ISIS' jihad is also much more openly universal, targeting other jihadist organization, other insurgents, local governments, other communities and the West in general, explicitly and repeatedly emphasizing the idea of eventual world conquest. However, both ISIS and Hezbollah have waged in Syria an international jihad in the sense of crossing borders into Syria. "There is no difference between foreign jihadists and Hezbollah militants fighting in Syria, both are practising political terrorism," says critic Sayed Hani Fahs, who believes the only hope for both communities resides in replacing sectarianism with citizenship.

Religious conviction has played an equally an important role in building and institutionalizing a strong identity among both ISIS or Hezbollah. Promoting a religious ideology allows these two VNSAs to bridge the cultural gap and increase the interconnectedness and shared commitment of its regional forces in confronting domestic and foreign threats. Such a use of ideology acts as an efficient conduit to the creation of consolidated militias and societies. For the PYD it has been mostly the leftist constructs of Ocalan emphasizing supposed equality and diversity that have mobilized the Kurdish and minority elements against the onslaught of ISIS.

Authoritarianism has been nonetheless central to all these VNSAs, despite the vast differences between them. The authoritarianism of ISIS translated into the purification of society and the creation of an ideal caliphate that bears no opposition or question. Authoritarianism as practiced by Hezbollah and the PYD and SDF branch is of a lesser kind. The authoritarianism of Hezbollah is more prevalent in its own community, where opposition is either threatened, or marginalized as seen in the incidents preceding the 2018 Lebanese

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587 Ibid.  
588 Ibid.

elections. Hezbollah has also relied on the assassination of its opponents, as seen in the killing campaign of the post 2005 phase targeting anti-Syrian and anti-Iranian figures, yet without directly claiming them<sup>589</sup>. The PYD's Stalinist legacy inherited via Ocalan's PKK is clearly maintained via a personality cult as seen in the number of Ocalan's portraits punctuating Kurdish and Arab areas under SDF control. The PKK supporters are not generally inclined to accept criticism of Ocalan, who has been often portrayed by his former "comrades" as a despot. Another feature of the three VNSAs is that they started out as millenarianist movements, meaning that they believe in a fundamental change of society. However, while ISIS revolutionary movement is absolute and incapable of compromise and adaptation to its political and social environment, both Hezbollah and the PYD have greatly evolved, the first over a thirty-year period and the other over 8 only. Moving away from aiming at creating an Islamic state and being a Islamic movement representing the larger Muslim movement, Hezbollah in its new manifesto of 2009 defines itself as a "national liberation movement," "resistance movement," "jihadi movement" that is seeking "true democracy where the elected majority rules and the elected minority represents the opposition" and wanting a state that "protects public freedoms," "is committed to the rule of law ... and impartial application of citizens' rights and duties, irrespective of religious sect, home region or the citizen's views," and "works to strengthen the role of women in society, and enhances their participation in all fields", according to a thesis by Samir Shalabi<sup>590</sup>. The PYD- SDF seems to be the most pragmatic of the three. The organization has since its beginnings been pragmatic in its relation with the Assad regime that has faced phases of tensions and negotiations. In addition, the PYD was quick to understand that the SDF could only survive if it integrated a large Arab component to continue benefiting from western support and to be able to fight more efficiently against ISIS.

Finally, it is interesting to see that the evolution of VNSA ideology is not only linked to the nature of the group but also to its external affiliation. Both Hezbollah's survival and the PYD-SDF's survival are directly linked to foreign countries , respectively Iran and the U.S. This means that the policies of these groups will be more prone to pragmatism, as the interest of these countries is superimposed on national interests of these VNSAs, forcing them to evolve according to situational factors.

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589 The incidents referred to are ones linked to activist Mohamad Amine or politician Ahmad Assaad. The assassinations mentioned are those following that of PM Rafic Hariri, followed by journalist Samir Kassir, member of Parliament Walid Eido, and that of Internal Security Chief Wissam Hassan.

590 Shalabi, *Hezbollah: Ideology, Practice, and the Arab Revolts*.

### Chapter 3: Military Structure and approaches of VNSAs in Syria

After looking into the nature of terrorism and the ideologies at the core of the transnational or foreign linked VNSAs in Syria, this chapter looks at the military approaches and structure adopted by these various VNSA in Syria.

The War in Syria introduced a fresh military model for Syria, more specifically with the internationalization of the war. There VNSAs were fighting alongside large powers or against regional powers, reminiscent in many ways of the paradigm shift introduced by David Kilcullen. In his book, *The accidental Guerilla*, fighting small wars in the midst of a big one<sup>591</sup>, Kilcullen says “the destructive capability of the United States is so asymmetrically huge vis-a-vis every other nation on earth that it poses what other international relation theorist call a security dilemma. Unless other countries can be assured of America’s benign intent they must rationally treat the United States as a potential threat and take steps to balance and contain American power to defend themselves against it... However the efforts of insurgents and terrorists since 9/ 11 may in fact have already...shown the way to all future adversaries and leaving western powers with fabulously capable and appallingly expensive militaries that are precisely adapted to exactly the wrong kind of war.”

The post-Cold-war era of unparalleled US military power may have been a passing phase: Al-Qaeda might indeed turn out to be as Zawahiri called the vanguard of new era of conflict. This is the analytical line taken by the historian Andrew Basevich. In September 2006, the performance of Islamic militias and insurgents in the Palestinian territories and Iraq along with Hezbollah’s achievements in fighting Israel to a standstill, noted earlier, led Basevich to describe a new Islamic way of war “that incorporates a “panoply of techniques employed to undercut the apparent advantages of the high-tech conventional forces. The methods employed do include terrorism – violence targeting civilians for purpose of intimidation, but they also incorporate propaganda, subversion agitation, economic warfare, and hit and run attacks on regular forces, either to induce an overreaction or wear them down”. In a first section, we will look at how VNSAs resort to such panoplies of techniques to balance power against regional or super powers such as Syria, Iran, Turkey, the US or Russia. This section also shows how that strategy has been revamped and evolved in Syria, with VNSAs adapting to the war in Syria and their control of territory by combining guerilla

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591 David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, (Oxford University Press, 2011, reprint).

warfare and hybrid approach incorporating conventional army structures with insurgency tactics. We also briefly look in this section at the utilization by foreign powers of the proxy. In a second section we will look at VNSA structure, in Syria, and what it means in terms of their nature, and their goals.

## **I- VNSA's hybrid and irregular warfare in Syria.**

Super powers have made extensive use of hybrid warfare in Syria, mixing conventional and irregular warfare techniques to fight the ongoing insurgencies via their proxies such as was the case of Tehran with Hezbollah or the United States with the SDF.

For Kaldor<sup>592</sup>, new warfare includes guerilla warfare, systematic murder of people of different labelled identity, ethnic cleansing and rendering an area uninhabitable: techniques that violate international law. These techniques were used by Hezbollah backed by the Syrian regime and Russia, and they were used by ISIS.

### **A - Hezbollah's Hybrid warfare in Syria**

According to Bernard Hourcade, in his book *Geopolitique de l'Iran*<sup>593</sup>, the Iranian revolutionary Guards relied on guerrilla action founded on terrain knowledge by small groups of professionals. This was partly applied by Hezbollah where the technique was mixed with conventional warfare, the organization thus operating as a hybrid organization as it fought alongside the Syrian, and Russian army as well as units of the Iranian Revolutionary guards, in highly sophisticated operations, far from the guerrilla warfare they started with in South Lebanon. The role of Hezbollah in Syria has been essentially threefold: offensive support during battle, holding strategic territory that is subject to frequent assaults and training pro-regime militias. Interviews with Hezbollah and members of the opposition attest that in many cases Hezbollah was the ground assault force for the Syrian Army; this first transpired in the battle for Qusayr. In an interview with this author in 2013, a Hezbollah fighter admitted<sup>594</sup>: "Hezbollah is leading operations in Qusayr; the Syrian army is only playing a secondary role, deploying after an area is completely 'cleaned' and secured". According to a report by Institute For The Study Of War, the Syrian government showed that it can use Hezbollah fighters, and possibly Iraqi and Iranian fighters, as a reliable infantry force alongside its own heavy weapons and airpower. Typically, and with Russian support

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592 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

593 Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran. Les défis d'une renaissance*

594 <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/interviews/hezbollah-fighter-details-ops-in-qusayr>

later in 2015, operations were conducted by heavy preparatory bombardment followed by the infiltration of irregular allied units, and finally armor-supported infantry attacks”<sup>595</sup>.

A Hezbollah fighter interviewed by the author explains: “Our attacks are very well planned; our advance is first insured by airplane bombings which clean out terrain. Russia provide us precious technological guidance in the form of tactical controllers (basically, a controller deployed in the vicinity of the target would be communicating directly with the pilot or with ground forces and giving final guidance on the strike)<sup>596</sup>. Similar techniques were witnessed both in Zabadani and in Aleppo. In Zabadani the joint forces made extensive use of barrel bombs dropped by the Syrian air force’s planes and helicopters and heavy artillery shelling, notably through ground-to-ground missiles. Their slow advance contrasted with their earlier swift gains in the wider Qalamoun offensive. A similar method was used in Aleppo initially. Yet there, more details were provided by Hezbollah fighters. One commander admitted that the organization relied on a three-pronged formation to advance into “enemy” territory: an offense team securing the area, a demining team and then followed by a stabilization team (tathbit). The last team is typically deployed from as little as one month to two years, says Hezbollah commander Abu Ali. “We increased pressure on the “terrorists” by slowly diminishing the territory they held,” explained Abu Ali who adds that frontlines were divided into sections manned by various factions such as Iraqis, Hezbollah and the Iranians, and who were all managed by a common operating room. Militants also practiced on a wide range of Iranian weapons from the Toophan (anti-tank missiles), to the Karrar, an Iranian military drone that can hit high-speed targets and, the Qassem that locks onto the heat signature of helicopters and other aircrafts.

In addition to its offensive role, Hezbollah has played a key role in the regime's development of effective irregular and auxiliary forces. The organization created several major training centers such as the one in Qusayr which, according to Abu Ali, has trained over the last five years some 120,000 fighters, including 80,000 earmarked for a new fighting force. Abu Ali’s estimation may nonetheless be an exaggeration. A Hezbollah trainer who was also interviewed by the author underlines that while thousands have been trained across Syria , some 10,000 have been trained alone in Hezbollah’s largest training facility in Syria, in Qusayr. “These training courses take from three days to several months depending on capabilities, ranging from combat, sniper shooting, handling explosive or manning tanks

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595 « “Syria Update : the Fall of al-Qusayr,” Institute for the Study of War, June 6, 2013  
<http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr>

596 Interview with a Hezbollah fighter , January 2017

among many others, “ says the trainer on condition of anonymity. The Hezbollah trainer also explained that dozens of trainers were deployed in various Syrian regions and that the training provided by Hezbollah also included an ideological dimension, which was one of the requirements for any formation. “We also provide training for reconnaissance missions, manning explosives and train elite forces and our program differs depending on geographical location as our trainees are trained to fight in different environments from a mountainous area to the badia (desert),” explains the trainer.

Hezbollah’s operation in Syria was at the behest of the Iranian revolutionary guards. The geographic and social proximity of Syria to Lebanon, its similar landscape of the two countries, its similar multi-religious nature and Hezbollah’s long guerrilla experience against Israel as well its deep knowledge of the Syrian regime and its close collaboration with its secret service and army made the group an ideal military tool for Tehran for its interventions in Syria.

#### **B-ISIS Irregular warfare:**

In his book, *The Geopolitique of terrorisme*, Jean Michel Dasque explains that “the terrorist generally fights an adversary that is more powerful, more armed and more organized than they are, and conducts an asymmetric war. They operate in a clandestine way and with the a few notable exceptions, they conserve their anonymity .”

Despite enormous differences with Dasque, Kaldor’s thoughts on Bosnia Herzegovina, pointed to a few characteristics in that particular war that could apply to ISIS in Syria. She mentions first reports of terror in rural areas. The Serbs would terrorize Muslim communities with acts of terror such as random killing and rape. Houses, cultural and religious buildings were destroyed . Instead of the blinding bombing Serbs would use, ISIS instilled terror with bobby trapped vehicles launched full speed against towns or buildings.

ISIS adopted the art of asymmetric warfare as it grew in power, evolving from the ashes of its previous setbacks in Iraq. Once it became the caliphate, it sought to develop an army along conventional lines, with divisions, brigades and battalions. Some veterans of the old Iraqi armed forces may have had a role in developing ISIS’ military. According to an article by Thomas Maurer published in *Small Wars Journals*<sup>597</sup>, up to one third of ISIS military leadership was comprised of troops officers of “the former regular Iraqi military, the secret services and the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party” and “significantly influenced by military

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597 Thomas Maurer, “ISIS’s Warfare Functions: A Systematized Review of a Proto-State’s Conventional Conduct of Combat Operations,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 2 (March 4, 2018): 229–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1435238>.

advisers from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the 1980s, and they had fought in the Iraq Wars of 1991 and 2003 against Iran and the US forces”. Still according to Maurer, ISIS’s combat force was organized in battle groups of 500–800 fighters equipped with 150 vehicles each, which corresponds to the equivalent of a battalion. Maurer believes that these battalion-like formations were most probably subdivided into 5 tactical combat units of 100–150 fighters with 30 vehicles each. According to an interview by the author with Peshmerga commander Kamal Kirkuki, ISIS’ strong blitz like campaigns relied on two essential elements, strong intelligence, and the massive role for the inghimasiyin: those who plunged into the ranks of the enemy knowing they would almost certainly be killed.

“Members of the local population informed ISIS of the deployment and formations of military forces and key personalities to be targeted within a specific area,” says Dr Kamal Kerkuki who spoke to the author. Based on the information of spies, ISIS put in place its plans to wear out its enemies through attrition before launching assaults to take over territory.

ISIS second innovative weapon was its heavy reliance on VBIEDs, which amounted to armored trucks laden with explosives and driven by hardcore suicide attackers, which aimed at breaking the enemy’s reinforced positions and terrorize them, thus forcing them to flee, instead of putting up a fight. These VBIEDs were strengthened by metallic plates. During operations, ISIS also used unmanned aerial vehicles, to assess the enemies’ capabilities. Meanwhile, for its ground strike force, ISIS mainly relied on light mobile assault forces of a dozen or so fighters, generally equipped with four by fours and armored infantry vehicles. Machine guns mounted on vehicles ensured direct fire support for the very mobile infantry force.

ISIS combat groups also employed heavy weaponry such as cannons, antitank weapons, guided missiles, rocket launchers, and mortars as well as light artillery weapons, howitzers, and armored artillery. It was also equipped with local air defense capabilities, more specifically in cities, namely air defense missile systems, and portable surface-to-air guided weapons.

Once a region was captured, ISIS used construction material, explosives and mines, destroying bridges, setting up trenches and tunnels networks. It also always used the civil population as a shield to avoid heavy onslaught, which slowed down counter-terrorism offensives led US coalition on ISIS, during the Mosul siege which lasted over five months.

### **C- The SDF and the US reluctant hybrid warfare in Syria**

The United States under the presidency of Barack Obama found itself reluctantly dragged into the Syria war. In fighting ISIS, Obama wanted to avoid at all cost a



commitment of large numbers of American ground troops, by finding a reliable partner that would be backed by American air strikes . This approach was embodied in the partnership with YPG/SDF .

At the onset of the battles, most of the Syrian Democratic Forces weapons were old Russian weapons Kalashnikovs and with only commanders having some US weapons bought on the Iraqi black market or taken from ISIS, according to Wladimir Van Wilgenburg<sup>598</sup>. The US trusted the YPG because of their large gains against ISIS. which had captured by October in 2015, according to Washington Institute, more than 17,000 square miles from ISIS, much of it in the wake of Washington's<sup>599</sup>. “US- US- US -Kurdish partnership is transnational, and dates back prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. There is a CIA base in Erbil ( the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan), the alliance is thus a solid one, » says Karim Bitar a resident fellow at the French Institute de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques in an interview with the author<sup>600</sup>.

The YPG- SDF forces used insurgency techniques similar to that of ISIS and resorted in their early days in large displacement of population typical of new wars. Amnesty International report entitled<sup>601</sup>, “We Had Nowhere Else To Go” said the YPG, had razed entire villages captured from Islamic State forces in retaliation either “for perceived sympathies with the jihadist group or as punishment for past grievances and old land” disputes. Though more focused than Russia’s bombing campaign, civilian casualties due to U.S. air strikes increased with the YPG- SDF troops determining targets of US-led coalition strikes.

Syria’s multisided war intertwining players and enemy as well as conventional and irregular forces exemplifies a gray zone conflict. According to Army Lieutenant General James M. Dubik and Nic Vincent see these conflicts escalating, a gray zone conflict is as “hostile or adversarial interactions among competing actors below the thresh old of conventional war but above the threshold of peaceful competition”<sup>602</sup>.

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598 Interview with Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, by Mona Alami December 2015,.

599 , Barak Barfi, “Kurds Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 9, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurds-now-our-best-ally-against-isis-in-syria>.

601 VOA, “Syrian Kurds Accused of Human Rights Abuses Against Arabs,” Voice of America October 13, 2015, <https://www.myanmarnews.net/news/237584899/syrian-kurds-accused-of-human-rights-abuses-against-arabs>.

602 Anthony N Celso, “Superpower Hybrid Warfare in Syria,” *MCU Journal* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2018): pp. 1-25.

Given that Syria had become the war scenes of enemies ( Turkey and ISIS) and frenemies ( the Damascus regime, the SDF resorted to hybrid warfare, first against ISIS and second against Turkey. Regions under Turkey’s hegemony are constantly plagued with assassinations and bombings, generally attributed to the YPG- SDF dyad. The SDF hybrid warfare was nonetheless, heavily dependent on the US. US Trump’s military’s disengagement from Syria was problematic., at the least, for the organization.

#### **D- Comparing the VNSAAs warfare in Syria**

The various groups as seen have adopted different warfares in Syria that reflected the nature of their structure on one side and the needs of the war on the other. Since the 90s Hezbollah, in its war with Israel has adopted a flexible structure and irregular warfare that suited the nature of its opponent the IDF, a highly structure and conventional army at the time. However, its evolution, the centralization of power, with the end of the war in Lebanon, as well as its collaborative effort in the Syria war with conventional armies , forced it to change. In Syria, Hezbollah had to coordinate with both the Syrian army as well as the Russian army. This collaboration forced to become at some level more structure, and lead more structured operations, that were highly coordinated with the strategy of the Syrian army and the leadership of Iranian commander operational rooms, under the protection of the Russian air force. “ We became much more efficient and learnt to coordinate with various forces, foreign to us, something we had never done in previous wars in Lebanon,” says a Lebanese Hezbollah commander<sup>603</sup>. ISIS strategy could only be irregular as it was its strength in both Syria and Iraq. Small battalions, the resort to heavy vehicles reinforced with steel and driven by suicide bombers, created shock and awe in the heart of their adversaries.

Like Hezbollah the SDF had to mix between irregular warfare, which was the only way to deal with ISIS and regular warfare due to its coordination with international forces, which informed them where to hit, was used by the group. In addition, like ISIS the SDF resorted to intelligence from individual opposing ISIS to get greater details on potential targets.

## **II. VNSA Structure in Syria**

### **A-Hezbollah’s military structure in Syria:**

It is very difficult to assess Hezbollah deployment in Syria but experts close to the organization as well as anti- Hezbollah activists have assesse<sup>FF</sup> the number of Hezbollah fighters from 6000 to 9000 in the 2014-to 2016 phase, with the number fluctuating depending

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603 Interview with a Hezbollah commander, by Mona Alami, Beirut Lebanon, August 2016.

on the needs of the conflict. According to Hezbollah expert General Amine Hoteit <sup>604</sup>, the militant group boasts a deployment capability of some 60,000 with at least 20,000 full time fighters and about 20,000 others reservists. Hezbollah units are divided into Afwaj (regiments) which can each include 1000 to 1500 fighters, Saraya, each comprising over 100 fighters, Fasa'il of around 40 fighters each and Majmu'at . The Fawj is equivalent to a traditional military's "regiment". The Majmu'a varies: "We can be a dozen and as little as six or seven," says Abu Hassan, a Hezbollah fighter who led a Majmu'a in Damascus.

The highest level of leadership is designated to the Majlis Jihadi<sup>605</sup> (which decides all things military and security) and is generally selected by Hezbollah Shurah Council. The Majlis Jihadi overseas various in Qita'at or sectors, organized according to weapon used or a geographical deployment, according to General Hoteit.

Hezbollah's traditional geographical units of organizing its forces include the Nasr Unit, generally positioned between the blue line (the Israel- Lebanon border) and the Litani, while the Badr Unit is positioned in the Beqaa Valley. It is not clear if some of these units have been deployed in Syria, with the exception of the Radwan units. Others units deployed in Syria are Hezbollah's non-Shi'a fighters which are affiliated in the Lebanese Resistance Brigades (Saraya al-Muqawama al-Lubnania). "This structure was applicable to the 2006 war but it's very fluid and has probably changed since," says Hezbollah expert Nicolas Blanford. But in some cases, it seems some of these factions are still operational in Syria. In an interview with the author, a Hezbollah fighter specified that the Radwan forces operate within the offensive teams.

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604 Interview with General Amine Hoteit, by Mona Alami, January 2017, Beirut, Lebanon

605 <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/exclusive-the-hezbollah-military-command-structure/>

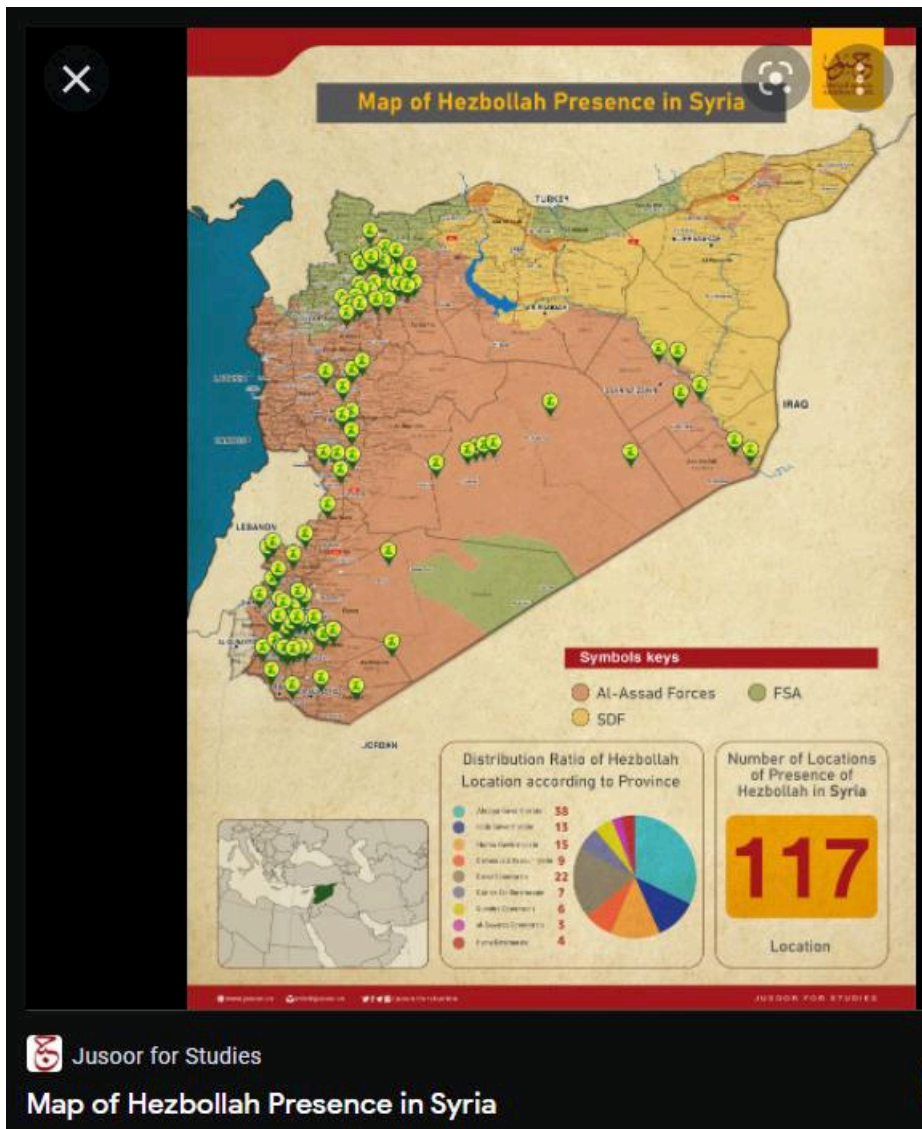


Figure 19: MAP OF HEZBOLLAH PRESENCE IN SYRIA

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## B-The “Hezbollahization” of Syria

Nearly a year after the start of the Syrian revolution, Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah started to shore up the Assad regime by creating and supporting para-military forces that operated alongside the Syrian army. Many of these militias have some sort of relation with Lebanese Hezbollah, and while some are of considerable size, they do not match the larger pro-Iranian Popular Mobilization Forces factions in Iraq like Badr and Kata’ib Hezbollah in terms of capabilities and resources. According to research<sup>607</sup> by

606 “Map of Hezbollah Presence in Syria,” Jusoor, November 30, 2020. Accessed April 14, 2022, <https://jusoor.co/details/Map-of-Hezbollah-Presence-in-Syria/806/en>.

607 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, *Bibliography: Pro-Assad Militias*

Aymenn Jawad Tamimi, these local Syrian militias have included Quwat Rhidha, the National Ideological Resistance (NIR), Liwa al-Imam al-Mahdi and Junud Mahdi. Tamimi believes that Quwat al-Ridha is the core nucleus for Hezbollah in Syria and seems to be operating under the leadership and supervision of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Quwat al-Ridha's nucleus consists of Syrian Shi'a hailing from Homs countryside. countryside areas around cities such as Homs, Aleppo, Daraa and Damascus.

In an interview with Maan Talaa<sup>608</sup>, a researcher on pro-regime militias from the Turkey-based think tank Omran Dirastat, Talaa adds that Quwat Ridha is estimated at 3,500 fighters and its military leadership is headed by Syrians, but the organization is financed and trained by Hezbollah. According to Talaa, two other groups can be directly linked to Hezbollah, the Liwaa al-Imam al-Mehdi and Assad Allah Ghaleb. Talaa underlines that Liwaa al-Imam al-Mehdi is also estimated at 2,000 fighters and are mostly Alawites. "Assad Allah Ghaleb played a role in Ghouta, but they appear to have been decimated in battles," explains Talaa. "The Imam Mehdi Scouts are comprised of about 800. Other groups that are directly linked to Hezbollah also include Fawj Imam al-Hujja (based in Nubl and Zahara') and the 'Special Force'. The Omran Dirasat researcher emphasizes that many other groups are the result of a joint venture between Hezbollah and Iran. "In such cases, Iran generally bankrolls the groups while Hezbollah provides training," he points out. Such groups include Hezbollah Syria, which includes some 1500 members of the Shiite community, from Tartous, the rural Aleppo region in Damascus. Another group is the Harakat Shabab Al Fedaeeyen Falasteneeyen: Firkat Jaleel amounting to 1000 people, which are under direct Hezbollah leadership and are earmarked for the fight against the Islamic State and deployed more recently in Deir Zour. "There are also obscure links between Hezbollah and Hezbollah Afghanistan that emerged in Syria, although there is no tally on the number of fighters the groups possess," says Talaa

Hezbollah has also learned to work with foreign battalions. According to Hezbollah commander Abu Ali, Hezbollah units worked with Afghans and Yemenites around Damascus around the shrine of Sayyida Zainab, with "some of these fighters had been trained by Hezbollah as well as Iran".

"Since 2015, Hezbollah is also training elite forces from Itihad Shabibat Thawra, which are composed of students affiliated to the Syrian Baath," he added.

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608 Interview Maan Taa, phone, by Mona Alami, Beirut 2017

Over the past three decades , Hezbollah has transformed from a secretive resistance movement a political player with regional influence. The organization’s transformation has not been without an impact its structure and its military strategy, both locally and regionally.

### **C- ISIS military architecture and initial structure.**

Much has been written and said about ISIS label as a terrorist organization. Yet , ISIS exceeded this mere labeling by succeeding for four years in creating a pseudo terror state with branches extending to Afghanistan, Egypt, Nigeria, Yemen and Libya, and spreading continentally from Asia to Africa. This temporary success was achieved with the creation- by ISIS leadership- of a complex government structure and its reliance on a hybrid style of warfare, in many ways similar to that adopted by Hezbollah in Syria.

When it announced the creation of the Caliphate in 2014, ISIS stated it would be led by Caliph Ibrahim -also known as Abu Bakr Baghdadi. In this caliphate, Baghdadi was considered as the successor of the first Islamic state founded by Muhammad. It is believed that both Baghdadi and his deputy were supported by several councils<sup>609</sup> We will only look in this section at the military and intelligence ones.

There was perhaps originally a Military Council, which was headed by Abu Ahmad al ‘Alawani, and included three members, and it may have been in charge of planning and managing military operations and military forces. There may also have been a Defense, Security and Intelligence Council responsible for for the counter-intelligence effort, the protection of important figures and foreign operations.

By 2016 , ISIS had released a video highlighting its governance structure<sup>610</sup>. Under Caliph Ibrahim operated the Shura council and the Delegated Committee, and underneath it, was various ‘Diwans’. “The administrative structure that ISIS showed in 2016 was devised and implemented after caliphate, and the councils existed before that,” said Aymenn Jawad Tamimi in an interview with the author<sup>611</sup>.

The main task of the Shura Council is to help the Caliph in supervising affairs the state. The Delegated committee acted more like a government. It supervised the wilayat (different governorates and regions), the diwans and the committees and offices that are tasked with specific areas.

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609 Dr. Jacques Neriah, “The Structure of the Islamic State (ISIS),” Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, September 4, 2014, <http://jcpa.org/structure-of-the-islamic-state/>.

610 Jack Moore “ISIS Releases New Video Outlining ‘Structure of the Caliphate,’” Newsweek, July 7, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-releases-new-video-outlining-structure-caliphate-478502>.

611 Interview with Aymenn Jawad Tamimi, by Mona Alami, June 2019.

The Diwan of General Security, tasked with enforcing responsible for security in the Islamic State and defend it against foreign infiltration. The Diwan of Soldiery was in charge of guarding borders, managing the war effort and the army and recruiting personnel.

#### **D- The creation of the SDF**

The role of the YPG at forefront of the war on ISIS, contributed to the creation in October 2015 of a unified national military paramilitary called the “Syrian Democratic Forces ” (SDF) that was dominated the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG). The other militias involved in the Syrian Democratic Forces included minority-led groups such as the Syriac Military Council as well as Arab allied groups. The latter included factions such as Liwa Thuwwar al-Raqqa , the al-Sanadid Forces of the Arab Shammar tribe, as well as other formations associated with the major tribes existing in northern and eastern Syria. The SDF has also subsequently integrated some former Arab rebels from northwestern Syria, as embodied in the formations of Jaysh al-Thuwar and Liwa al-Shamal al-Dimoqrati. According to Sheikh Hamad Bou Saddam, a tribal leader and the Arabic spokesperson for the SDF, Arab tribes represent about 70% of the forces.

Washington backing for the SDF increased as the campaigns intensified across Arab regions first in Raqqqa, then in Deir Zour where the military campaign was launched in the summer of 2017<sup>612</sup>. The military publication Stars and Stripes commented at the time that the United States had increased the size of its special operations advisory force embedded with the Syrian Democratic Forces as the group prepared its assault on Raqqqa, adding that more American commandos to the fight will place them in a better position to provide real-time battlefield advice.

“Today the force is comprised of about 100,000 fighters,” says SDF director of media relations Moustapha Bali<sup>613</sup>. According to interviews conducted with various SDF officials, the force has the structure of a conventional army and includes several counter terrorisms, sniper, explosive expert infantry and rapid deployment units. It is led by a Military Council and high commander. Women are also represented at all levels on the military hierarchy.

Part of the SDF is the Deir Zour Military Council. Abou Khawla<sup>614</sup> the leader of the brigade who spoke to the author says that the council boasts about 11,000 fighters in addition

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612 Corey Dickstein, “US increases its special forces in Syria as SDF begins Raqqqa offensive,” June 6, 2017, Stars and Stripes, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us-increases-its-special-forces-in-syria-as-sdf-begins-raqqqa-soffensive-1.472201>

613 Interview with Moustapha Bali, September 2018, AAin Issa.

614 Interview with Abu Khawla, a, September 2018, Hassaka

to another 6000 that fall under the Asayish umbrella and trained by both Coalition forces and the SDF. “There are three levels of training, basic, military and ideological,” explains Kino Gabriel, a member of the Syriac Military Council ( SMC) and the SDF spokesperson in an interview with the author. The military training is turn subdivided into specialized and strategic training. Gabriel underlined that the ideological training focused on diversity, coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups, plurality and the focus on counter-terrorism.

In January 2018, the U.S.-led coalition announced it was working with its Syrian militia allies to set up a new border force of 30,000 personnel<sup>615</sup>. According to Abou Khawla, the force would deploy along the border with Turkey to the north, along the Euphrates River Valley, which broadly acts as the dividing line separating the U.S.-backed SDF and Syrian government forces backed by Iran and Russia and finally the Iraqi border to the southeast. It appears this project was never implemented.

### **III. Conclusion:**

In terms of warfare, it has been interesting how VNSAs in Syria have merged guerilla warfare with conventional army techniques. Because Hezbollah had to operate in conjunction of operating rooms with large conventional armies such as Russian or Syria. Hezbollah played various roles, during attacks and the group learned to rely on insurgency and conventional techniques, which gave it much agility on the war terrain. The SDF coordination the US led coalition has also forced it to make a similar evolution. In term of technique, ISIS relied on guerrilla warfare and insurgency but after the caliphate developed what resembled a conventional army structure. It is s ironic to see that both Hezbollah and ISIS saw a in Syria a clear evolution in their organizational charts . According to Bernard Hourcade, in his book *Geopolitique de l’Iran* <sup>616</sup> Hezbollah was a typical guerrilla organization in its infancy in Lebanon. The same could be said of the early Al Qaeda in Iraq. As Jean Michel Dasque argued in his book, *Geopolitique du Terrorisme*<sup>617</sup>, many cold war groups came to be structured and centralized. They were founded as military organizations, with strong hierarchy. They were commanded by charismatic figures , exercising an uncontested power. This was exactly the fate of Hezbollah, which can be considered as Cold

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<sup>615</sup> Tom Perry and Orhan Coskun, “U.S.-led coalition helps to build new Syrian force, angering Turkey,” Reuters January 14, 2018,, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-sdf/u-s-led-coalition-helps-to-build-new-syrian-force-angering-turkey-idUSKBN1F300A>

<sup>616</sup> Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l’Iran. Les défis d’une renaissance*.

<sup>617</sup> Dasque, *Géopolitique Du Terrorisme*.



war group. While ISIS is not, it also became more centralized as it gained territory and gained a charismatic leader.

The three groups have been used largely or in a more limited way by regional sponsors. Hezbollah and the SDF represent the most successful utilization of regional proxy projection. To this day Iran can deploy Hezbollah anywhere in the region, and we have the Party of God units in Yemen as well as in Iraq. The relationship between the US and the SDF is more limited in scope and possibly in time to Syria. Turkey's on and off facilitation of ISIS into Syria has been a marriage of convenience, a trade-off between one threat and another. Turkey was ready to risk bombings on its own territory, more than an autonomous Kurdish entity on its border close to its PKK nemesis.

In addition, the groups have been shaped by different ideologies. The Marxist and feminist inspired ideology has provided the locally based communes style, that differentiate the autonomous regions under control of the SDF from other VNSAs such as ISIS and Hezbollah. It is interesting to see that the influence of Islamic religious ideology has shaped the structure of ISIS and Hezbollah which share common similarities. Both organizations are ruled by an undisputed leader who is allocated full powers over the militant group, and who, in both cases is assisted by a shura council. Both organizations have government like structure in the form of an executive board for Hezbollah and diwans for ISIS with diwans. Both have Islamic judicial Islamic councils.

Religious ideology is at the core of the two organizations because it is one way they can appeal to audience and use identity politics, one in the name of Sunni, the other in the name of Shi'a, while nominal ethnic and religious diversity underpins the SDF. The difference between both is that Hezbollah's military structure in Syria is limited and less of a template, unlike ISIS, which can be applied to any new wilayat and expansionist from a military standpoint.

Ethnic and religious based differentiation has also marked the evolution of the SDF, which appears to work on homogenizing the various group. At the behest of the US this could be maintained in a limited fashion, but the hegemony of the YPG on the group, the limited and secondary role provided to Arabs and the lack of the trust between the two groups complicate the endeavor.

## Conclusion

Foreign support has allowed players such as Hezbollah and the SDF long term survival and territorial continuity, something that ISIS did not benefit from. Yet, ISIS' detailed structure and succession procedure. Despite the loss of its state, it remains an insurgent organization with an enduring future in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.

The main thesis questions we pondered on in this section is how do Violent non state actors (VNSAs) work and how do they acquire longevity? Syria's fluid environment has proven challenging for VNSAs, many have risen, but many more have fallen. Either they failed to convince the masses, became victims of their overarching ambition or lost the support or sponsorship of powerful states they relied on to project power. In the end, these three factors have been instrumental to explain the longevity, or the decline of the VNSA under study in this thesis.

The first factor, convincing the masses, has been through marketing the VNSA creation, presence or role in Syria primarily as a resistance movement. We have seen in the first chapter how all of the groups have used this card with their targeted audience. Because a group cannot survive within a territory without an enabling community, the use of propaganda, of identity politics, of the us versus them message, has massively been used by the VNSA, irrespectively what difference exist between them. Ideology has been the building block of the VNSA messaging and the glue that brings it together. When it was rooted in religion it had undoubtedly, and added appeal in a devout country such as Syria. Thus, the Hezbollahization of Syria of local groups trained ideologically and militarily by the party of God has been a smart move by Iran, with radicalization of new fighters creating hordes of loyal servants to Tehran. Similarly, ISIS venture could have been successful if the group had not pushed so far in its violence, in its repression, that even its resourceful use of identity politics could not convince anymore its popular base, with Syrians rejecting its far-reaching interpretation of Islam. The SDF construct has been a particular success from a political marketing perspective. While it has been able to build strongly within its Kurdish base of the PYD, to whom it appealed, it has still not been accepted broadly within the Arab community as the author could sense in areas such as Raqqa or deir Zour, which resented Kurdish domination. It however certainly provided a strong popular and persuasive message within the west, to which the SDF wanted to appeal.

The second factor is the nature of VNSA's goals is a major marker of longevity for these groups. Whether these goals are limited, negotiable, or absolute made a major

difference to the VNSA longevity. As an example. Hezbollah's goals in Syria have been limited and negotiable: shore up the regime of president Assad, secure the Lebanese borders, secure strategic areas for Iran and its proxies, and negotiate with Russia on the southern borders when needed<sup>618</sup>. The realism of their approach has made it acceptable to Assad while Russia has not seen their policy as directly threatening, although it decided to contain it to a certain extent by giving Israel free access to Syria's skies. A case in point is the Israeli Defense Forces statement it has bombed Iranian and Hezbollah positions and resources in Syria hundreds of times since the beginning of the war there<sup>619</sup>. In marked contrast, ISIS' all-out war on not just Iraq and Syria but also its express desire for global domination means that it will likely trigger international intervention against it whenever it might make gains again, limiting its ability to realize its long-term vision.

The third factor that has proven to insure and explain longevity of VNSA in Syria has been sponsorship of either nearby states ( proximity playing an important role) or powerful ones. As an example, ISIS significantly weakened when Turkey tightened its borders. A VNSA will need to rely on constant re-supply routes of fighters, resources and finances. Turkey provided that initially through its lax border policies. In the case of the SDF, the sponsorship of the US has provided it with air cover, training, weapons, money as well resources when needed. A sponsor relation comes with a price but provides geopolitical depth. Hezbollah's relation with Iran has allowed it along the years to become powerful in Lebanon. From a guerilla group that fought an insurgency against Israel, it has become the king maker in Lebanon, and can block any decision at the government and parliament level thanks to its astute alliances, and more importantly it wields military dominance over the country.

Geopolitical depth nonetheless also makes a VNSA vulnerable to being wholly subordinate to its sponsor's interests. Today Hezbollah's involvement at the regional level, is far from being in the interest of its home country or its Shi'i popular base in Lebanon, and may ultimately cause its demise, but that is another discussion altogether that will be reserved for the thesis conclusion.

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618 Noa Landau, "Russia-Israel Deal Is Clear: Iran Away from Border, Assad's Rule Accepted," Haaretz July 15, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/.premium-russia-israel-deal-iran-away-from-border-assad-s-rule-accepted-1.6269407>.

619 Judah Ari Gross, "IDF Says It Has Bombed over 200 Iranian Targets in Syria since 2017," The Times of Israel, September 4, 2018. Accessed October 15, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-it-has-carried-out-over-200-strikes-in-syria-since-2017/>.

## **Part 4: The opportunistic territorialization of Violent Non-State Armed Actors in Syria**

## Introduction

The unraveling of Syria has seen much competition between states and non-state players, each attempting to extend its influence on territory in the war-torn country. Syria's heavily centralized and authoritarian system<sup>620</sup>, which remained as such despite a reform that was put in place by a wide network of municipalities after 2004<sup>621</sup>, did not give much leeway to the ethnic, religious, rural, or urbanized, as well as tribal aspirations of its citizens. The 2011 revolution changed that in many ways, with the "Lebanization" of the conflict, an expression used by Stephane Roziere in his book, *Geographie politique et Geopolitique*. "We can talk about the implosion of the state, about the disintegration of a state during a civil war. Unlike Balkanization, the primary state does not implode into new states but new entities with no legitimacy that exercise a de facto state power in the territory they control explains Roziere<sup>622</sup>. In this fourth and last section of this thesis, we will look at the strategy VNSAs chose to expand and control territory from a political geography perspective. What were their priorities in their territorialization? How do they attempt to implement and finance these strategies to suit their goals? How do these factors fall within the New War theory? The specific question we attempt to answer in this section is how these choices impact VNSA and allow them to maintain territorial control and expansion, or on the contrary, did they make them more vulnerable?

In the first chapter, we will be looking at the VNSA's capture of territory, expansion, and governance approaches. What were the main territorial priorities for each VNSA? What tools did they use to acquire and maintain territory?

In the second chapter, we will study in detail the financing approaches of ISIS Hezbollah and the SDF, that allow them to maintain power. For ISIS we will look at the structure of the financial organization, its revenue streams (namely oil), confiscation measures, taxes, fees and fines, donations, and investments. As for Hezbollah, we take a look at their reliance on Iran, their illicit trades, the different regions they operate in, and the growing corruption they face. For the SDF, we will look at their primary revenue streams and their reliance on the United States.

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620 Fabrice Balanche, "Les Alaouites, l'espace et le pouvoir dans la région côtière syrienne : une intégration nationale ambiguë" (phdthesis, Université François Rabelais - Tours, 2000), <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00011981/document>.

621 Fabrice Balanche, "Les municipalités dans la Syrie baathiste : déconcentration administrative et contrôle politique," *Revue Tiers Monde* n° 193, no. 1 (2008): 169–87.

622 Stephane Roziere, *Géographie Politique & Géopolitique*

## Chapter 1: The evolution of transnationally linked VNSA territorial control and forms of governance

Two main players- who find themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum- came to prominence in Syria as a result of the protests and subsequent Lebanization of the war<sup>623</sup> there: mainly Hezbollah and the IS, each seizing and maintaining control of swaths of territory, Hezbollah did so at the behest of the Syrian regime and ISIS in a direct manner. However, in an interesting twist of fate, the role played by the IS also contributed directly to the formation and empowerment of a new VNSA in Syria: namely, the SDF. The emergence of this group can undoubtedly be considered as a byproduct of the IS onslaught on Syria, similar to the dynamics that led to the Popular Mobilization Forces after the IS expansion in Iraq. The groups we mainly choose to focus our attention on in this section - IS, Hezbollah, and the SDF- have nonetheless followed different evolutionary goals and paths in Syria. At the heart of ISIS and the SDF are in the words of Roziere<sup>624</sup> a vision of space or territory as an element of symbols and wealth (given the number of resources in the territory under their control), while for Hezbollah, space in Syria has been mainly perceived from a security perspective, given Syria's political importance in the Hezbollah- Iran- Syria alliance as well as its geographic importance as a direct route for weapons to Hezbollah from Iran to Lebanon. Additionally, both ISIS and the SDF followed a systematic plan put in place by their leaders, implementing clear governance architectures in seized territories. Both organizations had thus a distinct sense of territoriality and a definite governance approach. While ISIS created a caliphate relying on territorial victories and the appeal of Islamic imagery, the SDF's autonomous region blueprint was inspired by the PKK and is meant to operate within the framework of a united but federal Syria.

That was ISIS's mistake. In the words of Robert Kaplan, in his book, *The Revenge of Geography*<sup>625</sup>, a state is always a bad idea, for those whose goals are inspired by religious extremists, that can never be realized by statehood. A lesson to learn well by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. Hezbollah's primary objective was very different as it was aimed at bolstering the survival of the Assad regime. As a byproduct of this effort was the territorial acquisition in areas it considered strategic, more specifically in the Homs and Qusayr regions,

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623 Ibid.

624 Ibid.

625 Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography* (Random House, 2012).

as well as on the Iraqi borders with the support given by the Popular Mobilization Forces, as well as the creation of the LDF. Hezbollah has focused its attention on rebuilding the capabilities of the Syrian army and allies' forces.

The question that this particular chapter will look into is What are the main territorial priorities for each VNSA? Why is territory so important? How do these goals affect VNSA capture, expansion and maintenance of territorial control? What tools do they use to acquire and maintain territory? What makes these groups' territoriality vulnerable?

### **I-Hezbollah in Syria: territory as an element of Iranian security and its survival in Lebanon.**

From 2012 onwards, as the war intensified in Syria, defections and losses within the Syrian army increased Assad's reliance on Iran and its Lebanese proxy. Hezbollah at the time deployed around 7500 to 9000 fighters in Syria according to various sources close to Hezbollah. According to Roziere<sup>626</sup>, often the defense of the state not only relies on military alliances with other states but also private actors such as mercenaries when confronted with a war situation. Syria relied heavily on its military alliance on Russia and Iran, which deployed various militias and mercenaries in the war effort. Hezbollah's entry into Syria thus ushered in the privatization of the country's defense at Assad's behest. As explained in the introduction, Hezbollah's main territorial goal in Syria was security. Roziere believed that territory could either be seen as a symbol, as a resource, or as a security element<sup>627</sup>, the latter perspective was without a doubt adopted by Hezbollah as it felt security was paramount to maintain its clout in Lebanon. it was also extremely important for its sponsor, Iran, as Syria represented a land bridge between Tehran and Beirut. From 2011 to 2013, the role of Hezbollah in support of regime forces started in the first phase with its advisors providing expertise in guerilla warfare to the Syrian army before its combat forces were officially deployed in 2013. Hezbollah's long experience in guerilla warfare, in its decades-old struggle against Israel, complemented well the Syrian Army capabilities, which lacked experience in urban asymmetric conflict. In this section, we are looking at the main phases of Hezbollah's deployment in Syria and the militant group's efforts focused mainly on securitizing Syria's power center and defending the party's medium-term strategic interests in specific areas. We will look at its territorialization techniques through 'coercive modification of the

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626 Roziere, *Géographie Politique & Géopolitique*

627 Ibid.

population<sup>628</sup>. We will thus scrutinize the evolution of the Lebanese militant's group role in Syria and look at its future territorialization perspectives.

### **A-Hezbollah's early involvement in Syria: from 2011-2013**

As previously seen, as demonstrations erupted in March of 2011 in Syria, Hezbollah's leader Sayed Hassan Nasrallah stated at the time that "Lebanese shouldn't interfere in what is going on in Syria, but let the Syrians themselves deal with their issues", adding that Hezbollah was committed to Syria's stability, security and safety<sup>629</sup>. Despite Nasrallah's statements, in September of that year, as previously seen, local Lebanese media outlet *Ya Libnan* reported the death of seven Hezbollah militants in Syria involved in the pro-regime crackdown against protestors<sup>630</sup>. In January 2013, combat videos of Hezbollah fighters in the vicinity of the Sayyida Zaynab surfaced on the net<sup>631</sup>. Nasrallah had admitted that Hezbollah fighters were in Syria, where he said they were protecting Lebanese Shiites living in border villages in Syrian territory<sup>632</sup>. By April 2013, Nasrallah finally vowed that "Syria has real friends in the region and across the world that will not let the country fall into the hands of the US, Israel, or takfiris,"<sup>633</sup>. Nasrallah's speech came on the heels of a visit to Tehran, which appears to have kick-started the launch in May 2013 of the party's first large-scale Syrian operations with the Qusayr campaign<sup>634</sup>, a Syrian region bordering Lebanon. Some 1000 to 1500 fighters were deployed and another 200 were killed, according to a Hezbollah fighter interviewed by the author at the time and who spoke on condition of anonymity<sup>635</sup>. The fall of Qusayr in June 2013 marked an important turning point in the Syria battle, underlining Hezbollah's prominent role in the conflict. Hezbollah's gradual involvement in Syria led to a back clash on its Lebanese turf as several rebel attacks were waged on Hezbollah strongholds and areas inhabited by its Shi'a support base mainly in the Beqaa Valley and Beirut. On May 26, 2013, two rockets hit a Hezbollah area of Beirut injuring five people while another two rockets caused property damage to buildings in the al-Hermel

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628 Ibid.

629 Qifa Nabki, "Nasrallah on Syria: More Equal Than Others?," Qifa Nabki, May 28, 2011, <https://qifanabki.com/2011/05/26/some-arab-revolutions-are-more-equal-than-others/>.

630 "7 Hezbollah Fighters Killed in Syria," *Ya Libnan*, September 2, 2011, <http://yalibnan.com/2011/09/02/7-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-syria/>.

631 Nicholas Blanford, "Video Appears to Show Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites Fighting in Syria," *CSMonitor.Com* January 18, 2013, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0118/Video-appears-to-show-Hezbollah-and-Iraqi-Shiites-fighting-in-Syria>.

632 Ibid.

633 Nicholas Blanford, "Though Strengthened in Syria, Hezbollah Faces Unprecedented Dangers Within," *World Politics Review*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28196/though-strengthened-in-syria-hezbollah-faces-unprecedented-dangers-within>.

634 Blanford, "The Battle for Qusayr: How the Syrian Regime and Hizb Allah Tipped the Balance,"

635 Interview with a Hezbollah fighter, January 2017



district of Beirut<sup>636</sup>. In June and July, five separate roadside bombings targeted Hezbollah convoys in the Beqa Valley<sup>637</sup>. In August 2013<sup>638</sup>, a car bomb struck southern Beirut, killing twenty and wounding more than a hundred. A Sunni group calling itself the Brigades of Aisha claimed the attack. A few months later, the bombings morphed into suicide attacks with two suicide bombings rocking the Iranian embassy in Lebanon, killing at least twenty-three, in November 2013<sup>639</sup>. The Abdullah Azzam Brigades, a Lebanon-based Palestinian organization with links to al-Qaeda, claimed responsibility and threatened further attacks unless Iran withdrew its forces and those of its allies from Syria. This suicide bombing was followed by several others claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and ISIS in Lebanon. Despite the Syrian rebels intensifying attacks on Hezbollah areas in Lebanon, the organization launched in November 2013, a massive attack on the border area of Qalamoun<sup>640</sup>, where the militant group captured the towns of Nabk, Rankous, and Yabrud, which fell in March 2014. Yabrud was not only a strategic gain for Hezbollah but also very symbolic to the rebels<sup>641</sup>, who had previously boasted he end of the party there. Rebels fleeing Hezbollah's takeover encroached in the Lebanese Syrian mountainous border of Qalamoun, which was only recaptured in 2017. "Assad regime forces backed by Hezbollah and Iranian militias depend on the north-south highway that runs through Qalamoun and connects Damascus with other provinces, including Homs. Equally important, the region links Damascus to the regime's core supporters, the nominally Shi'a Alawites who reside on the coast," wrote at the time Middle East expert David Schenker From the Washington Institute<sup>642</sup>. 2013 onward, Hezbollah commandos provided expertise to support regime forces in the capital Damascus and free its

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636 "Two Rockets Hit Hezbollah District of Beirut," BBC News, May 26, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22671565>.

637 Loveday Morris, "Bomb Hits Hezbollah Convoy in Lebanon," The Washington Post, July 16, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/bomb-hits-hezbollah-convoy-in-lebanon/2013/07/16/fc5a1ebe-ee30-11e2-bb32-725c8351a69e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/bomb-hits-hezbollah-convoy-in-lebanon/2013/07/16/fc5a1ebe-ee30-11e2-bb32-725c8351a69e_story.html).

638 Leila Bassam, "Car Bomb Kills 20 in Hezbollah's Beirut Stronghold," Reuters, August 15, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-explosion/car-bomb-kills-20-in-hezbollahs-beirut-stronghold-idUSBRE97E0S520130815>.

639 Leila Bassam and Erika Solomon, "Suicide Bombings Kill 23 near Iran Embassy in Beirut," Reuters, November 19, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-blast/suicide-bombings-kill-23-near-iran-embassy-in-beirut-idUSBRE9AI08G20131119>.

640 David Schenker and Oula Rifai, "Hezbollah's Victory in Qalamoun: Winning the Battle, Losing the War," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 20, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-victory-in-qalamoun-winning-the-battle-losing-the-war>.

641 Jean Aziz, "What Does the Fall of Yabrud Mean for Lebanon?," al-Monitor, March 18, 2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/fall-yabrud-syria-repercussions-lebanon.html>.

642 Schenker and Rifai, "Hezbollah's Victory in Qalamoun."

suburbs from insurgents<sup>643</sup>. Hezbollah had also expanded its geographical presence to Homs where it fought alongside the Syrian army trapping thousands of civilians in the city. Hezbollah also established its foothold in areas north of Syria around the besieged Shi'a villages of Nubl and Zahraa, north of Aleppo city and near Afrin<sup>644</sup>.

### **B-Hezbollah operations expansion from Damascus to Aleppo in the 2013-2016 phase**

The end of 2013 and beginning 2014 were marked by Hezbollah's increased focus on the areas surrounding Damascus. Hezbollah concentrated its attention on Damascus after securing the border areas with Lebanon and the strategic axis linking the Alawite coast-known to be the bastion of the Assad regime- to the capital. The capital and surrounding regions were not only considered as the center of power for President Bashar Assad but also the strategic supply line for Hezbollah's weapons coming from Iran, through the Damascus-Beirut highway. This meant that the region had utmost importance for the Lebanese militant group. Hezbollah's expanding activity in Damascus was underscored by more frequent Israeli strikes against the party's in and around the city. In December 2014<sup>645</sup>, the Washington Post reported that Israel had carried out airstrikes in Syria on at least four occasions since early 2013 seemingly aimed at destroying shipments of Iranian missiles and other weaponry to the Lebanese movement. These attacks went on in 2015-2017, and by September 2018, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) claimed they had bombed over 200 Iranian targets in Syria since 2017<sup>646</sup>. The 2015 phase underscored Hezbollah's regained determination to regain control of Damascus suburbs. Damascus as said before the seat of power for the Syrian regime, and its fall was simply impossible neither for Tehra or its proxy Hezbollah. On July 3, 2015 Hezbollah and the Syrian Army launched an offensive against Zabadani, a strategic town located close to the capital and applying the successful besieged tactics used in Qalamoun. The Zabadani siege only came to an end after Iranian, Turkish and Qatari mediation that resulted in an agreement on September 24<sup>647</sup>, which ultimately led to rebels surrendering

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643 "Hizbullah from Lebanon's Bekaa Valley Battling Syrian Rebels in Damascus Suburbs," World Tribune, January 8, 2013, <https://www.worldtribune.com/archives/hizbullah-from-lebanons-bekaa-valley-battling-syrian-rebels-in-damascus-suburbs/>.

644 "Assad's Forces, Hezbollah Hammer Syria's Homs," Reuters, July 5, 2013, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Assads-forces-Hezbollah-fighters-hammer-Syrian-city-of-Homs-318879>.

645 Liz Sly and Suzan Haidamous, "After Israel Bombs Targets in Syria, Damascus Says That Helps the Extremists," *Washington Post*, December 7, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/israel-bombs-syria-in-attacks-probably-aimed-at-hezbollah/2014/12/07/dc0040d6-7e3e-11e4-b936-f3afab0155a7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-bombs-syria-in-attacks-probably-aimed-at-hezbollah/2014/12/07/dc0040d6-7e3e-11e4-b936-f3afab0155a7_story.html).

646 Judah Ari Gross, "IDF Says It Has Bombed over 200 Iranian Targets in Syria since 2017," *The Times of Israel*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-it-has-carried-out-over-200-strikes-in-syria-since-2017/>.

647 Fadi Adleh and Agnès Favier, "'Local Reconciliation Agreements' in Syria: A Non-Starter for Peacebuilding," *European University Institute*, June 2017., 20.

their weapons before their transfer to Idlib by 2017. Hezbollah also besieged and captured Madaya<sup>648</sup>. Both the Madaya and Zabadani battles appear to have translated into the encirclement and siege of the towns, which forced the opposition into submission by starving the population. These sieges followed by deals, allowed Hezbollah and the regime to achieve demographic change in sensitive areas around the capital, the seat of the Syrian regime's power. Hezbollah was also involved in the siege of Ghouta<sup>649</sup>. The capture of territory in and around Damascus was a way to assuage the Assad power in the eye of Hezbollah. As the battle of Zabadani came to an end, Hezbollah fighters started moving north toward Aleppo. Aleppo was the next step for Hezbollah and Iran. First it was the country's economic capital. Second, it was close to the Turkish border and its capture by Turkish backed fighters was in the mind of the group and its sponsor an impossibility as it would provide control over a nexus of the country's main roadways and more power to Ankara. Before the fall of Aleppo, the economic city was at the time split between government in the western area and rebel control in the East. Before the Aleppo battle, Hezbollah general secretary, Sayed Hassan Nasrallah instructed some 200 of its commanders to capture the northern capital in a swift battle, even if that meant the loss of 10,000 militants, explains a Hezbollah commander called Abu Ali who spoke to the author on condition of anonymity commander. In June 2016 Nasrallah declared<sup>650</sup> : "The defense of Aleppo is the defense of the rest of Syria, it is the defense of Damascus, it is also the defense of Lebanon, and of Iraq," he said adding: "We will increase our presence in Aleppo... "retreat is not permissible." In the battle to capture eastern Aleppo, Hezbollah played a dual role: it helped thwart suicide attacks, and lead offensive operations. "Hezbollah sharp shooters stood their ground and opened fire, blowing up the trucks before they could hit their targets", according to a Reuters report with their support, pro-Assad forces consolidated their positions around Aleppo and in February severed the most direct supply route from Turkey to the rebels, the Castello Road<sup>651</sup>. The fall of Aleppo was in many ways symbolic to Hezbollah and the regime as its capture allowed the regime to claim back Syria's second most important demographic and economic center after Damascus. Ultimately nonetheless, these moves were also part of Iran's strategic goals in the

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648 Fadi Adleh and Agnès Favier, "'Local Reconciliation Agreements' in Syria: A Non-Starter for Peacebuilding," European University Institute, June 2017., 20.

649 Perry Smadar, "Hezbollah Forces Participating in Ghouta Massacre," Ynetnews, March 12, 2018 <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5159205,00.html>.

650 "Hezbollah to Send More Fighters to Syria's Aleppo," al-Jazeera and agencies, June 26, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/hezbollah-send-fighters-syria-aleppo-160624180847854.html>.

651 Leyla Bassam and Tom Perry, "Hezbollah, Other Shi'ite Allies Helped Assad Win in Aleppo," *Reuters*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-fall-insi-idUSKBN1431PV>.

country. The entrenchment of Iran and its proxies mostly in South Syria and on the Iraqi borders were viewed as strategic gateways: one as part of the expansion of Iran's proxy Hezbollah along Israel's frontline and another extending to Iraq and wider eastern Syria.

### **C-Hezbollah in Southern Syria , the expansion of Hezbollah if its Israeli frontline:**

Since the beginning of the war both Hezbollah and Iran eyed southern Syria with great concern because of its expansion into Israeli occupied Golan heights. In January 2015, Jihad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's commander of the Syrian Golan sector and the son of Hezbollah's commander Imad Mughniyeh was killed in the Syrian province of Quneitra near the Golan Heights<sup>652</sup>. Four other Hezbollah fighters were killed in the strike, including Commander Mohammad Issa, an Iranian Commander in the Syrian Golan Heights Abu Ali al-Tabtabai and Ismail al-Ashhab. In December, 2015, Syrian reports claimed Israel killed Hezbollah commander Samir Quntar using surface-to-surface missiles. It was believed Hezbollah was training militiamen and Syrian government forces near the area of the strikes and that Quntar<sup>653</sup>, who was originally Druze and visited the Golan area multiple times, was tasked to lead the movement there. The new "resistance" was dovetailed by alleged Shi'ification efforts, according to the work of Syria expert Aymen Jawad Tamimi<sup>654</sup> who reported on the rumors of a center for conversion to Shi'i Islam in Suwayda' city. This center has allegedly managed to convert dozens of the Druze to Shi'i Islam, prompting local backlash. But why was Hezbollah interested so much in South Syria? The simple answer was that the group was trying to replicate what it had done in South Lebanon to Syria, IR export the fight against Israel to Syria's southern border.

It used multiple strategies to achieve its goal.

- Creating strong base for Hezbollah.

According to a paper by researcher Mazen Ezzi<sup>655</sup>, Hezbollah has amassed around 2,500 local fighters in Daraa and Quneitra, since the reconciliation agreements in mid-2018, and who are mostly comprised of former opposition fighters. Hezbollah has also used in Quneitra as a place for arms and ammunition depots as well as training and preparation centers for new volunteers and forming cells responsible for gathering intelligence according

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652 Roi Kais, "Jihad Mughniyeh Killed in Alleged Israeli Strike in Quneitra," Ynet, January 18, 2015, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4616368,00.html>.

653 "Terror Chief Samir Kuntar Killed in Reported Israeli Strike in Syria," The Times of Israel, December 2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/samir-kuntar-said-killed-in-israeli-strike/>.

654 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Harakat Al-Hawiya al-Arabiya al-Druziya: Defending Druze Identity in Suwayda'," [aymennjawad.org](http://www.aymennjawad.org), March 6, 2016. Accessed February 3, 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/18573/harakat-al-hawiya-al-arabiya-al-druziya-defending>.

655 Mazen Ezzi, "Hezbollah's experience in Syria," European University Institute, March 2020 [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/66546/MED\\_WPCS\\_2020\\_4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/66546/MED_WPCS_2020_4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

to Ezzi. Additionally, a source close to Hezbollah commanders, who spoke to the author, Hezbollah has infiltrated the Syrian regime forces located in the region with its own forces, since Russia supposedly made a deal with Israel to maintain pro-Iranian forces 80 kms away from the border<sup>656</sup>. The source added that the group had built large underground fortifications that could be used for guerrilla warfare against Israel and had booby trapped the areas with land mines.

Gathering intelligence: The Israelis have also accused Hezbollah of embedding a new secret unit labelled the Golan File Unit, in charge of building militant in infrastructures whose purpose is to gather intelligence and carry out insurgency acts against Israel. The Unit was allegedly formed by Hezbollah Ali Mussa Daqduq who trained Iran backed militants to attack American forces in Iraq in the post-2003 phase<sup>657</sup>.

“Hezbollah has done a good job infiltrating the areas as we can see in the various IEDs it has been capable to smuggle into the heavily guarded Golan area,” says Brahim Beyram, a Lebanese analyst with close ties to the party<sup>658</sup>.

#### **D- Hezbollah and its support of the Iranian project in Deir Zour:**

Iran has been expanding in foothold in the Deir al-Zor region. Again, Iran’s interest in the region was due to the importance of it to its grand strategy: maintaining the link between Iraq, which was under Tehran’s foothold and Syria.

The tools Tehran used were manyfold.

- Reliance on local militias: Tehran has set up military presence in the areas stretching in southern Deir Zour, west of the Euphrates river, relying on Iraqi Popular Mobilization groups units such as Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and the Nujaba Brigades, as well as the Afghan Fatemeyoun and Pakistani Zaynabiyoun units. Additionally, Iran has been recruiting local Syrians to become part of its Syrian militias’ sources tell the author. The southern Deir az-Zor areas of Mayadin and al-Bukamal were increasingly dominated by Iranian forces and their Shia militia proxies including the strategic border crossing with Iraq.

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656 Ami Dombe, “Russia’s Syria Envoy: Iranian Forces Remain 80 km Away from Israeli Border,” Israel Defense April 2018, <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/node/38303>

657 “Hezbollah hides Golan Unit from Assad,” Al-Modon, March 14, 2019 <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2019/3/14/%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%81%D9%89-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF>

658 Interview with Brahim Beyram, Lebanon 2018, with the author

Exporting religion and culture: Iran has also spearheaded cultural initiatives to win people's hearts and minds.<sup>659</sup> The researcher explains that in 2019 alone, Jihad Al-Bina restored sixteen schools in Deir al-Zor. He added that "Jihad Al-Bina periodically distributes food aid to civilians in an effort to gain loyalty from the local population" and that during the coronavirus pandemic, Iran established several small medical points in Deir al-Zor to supply civilians with medical support. The report was confirmed by Ayman Jawad Tamimi, who had interviewed members of Jihad Al Bina in 2018<sup>660</sup>.

### **E-Hezbollah in the post 2018 phase and the evolution of its territorialization**

#### **perspectives:**

The winding down of the war in Syria with much of the country's frontlines calming down and the regime extending its grip over Syrian territory, appears to have impacted Hezbollah's task and future role in Syria.

As mentioned earlier and from the early days of the protests, followed by the war, it was not Hezbollah's intention to conquer and control territory in the long run. Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsor Iran had three main priorities in Syria all linked to its securitization role, that we will be discussing in the next paragraph. The first was to prop up the regime of president Assad and to allow it to reclaim territory. The winding down of the war in Syria, the negotiations and the Idlib offensives in 2018 and 2020 all pointed to Hezbollah's success in achieving that first objective. A second goal, was for the militant group to set up an Iran proxy on Syrian soil. With the creation of the LDF discussed in previous chapters, Hezbollah- which provided religious and military training to some of the organization member groups- had at least for a while, contributed to the establishment of direct Iranian proxies there. That objective was nonetheless jeopardized by the consolidation efforts led by Russia, which has trained and supported other militias such as the prominent Liwa al-Quds brigade, which was originally part of the LDF network and now mostly works with the Russians. In addition, Israel and the U.S conducted multiple raids on Hezbollah, Iran and pro-Iranian groups across Syria, with the acquiescence of Russia, namely around Damascus, Homs, Aleppo and the country's east.

Hezbollah's third role seems to have focused in the second phase of the Syrian de-confliction process on training Syrian army units as well as reconciliation factions. As an example, as early as 2015, media reports emerged of Hezbollah's training of Syrian army

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659 Nawar Saban, "Factbox: Iranian influence and presence in Syria," Atlantic Council, November 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>  
660

members. At the time, the website South Lebanon purportedly showed video of a Hezbollah militant training a Syrian Army commander<sup>661</sup>. As Russia attempts to restore the Syrian army's might while cracking down on loose pro-regime paramilitaries, Hezbollah appeared to be stepping up efforts to rebuild the Syrian army and auxiliary forces. "It is still very speculative, the Syrian Army may adopt a heavy weight Hezbollah model with a bigger focus on anti-armored, anti-tank weapons and long-range missiles, by basically trying to build a more asymmetric and fluid force," explains Nicolas Blanford<sup>662</sup>. At the level of paramilitary, several media reports<sup>663</sup> pointed in 2018 to the involvement of Hezbollah in training pro-regime forces to be merged with the Syrian army. Hezbollah knew that it had to rely on local forces, for great territorial impact. A member of the Syrian Hezbollah-trained militia Quwat Ridha, who spoke to the author on condition of anonymity<sup>664</sup>, confirmed that Hezbollah provided training to units of the Syrian Army. Such training, he explained, includes weapons drills with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades as well as urban warfare training, using training facilities at camps in Syria established by Hezbollah. An article published by Al-Modon,<sup>665</sup> highlights Hezbollah's training of former rebels who signed a reconciliation agreement with the regime in the wake of the fall of Southern Syria. It seems Hezbollah was at the time most active in the northeast of Deraa, where it has trained dozens of militants who were later integrated to the 9th brigade of the Syrian army. A source had told Al-Modon at the time that the training provided by Hezbollah in the Lajat area in Deraa covers face-to-face combat involving light weapons. Despite the fact that Hezbollah's role will be more limited in form in the future, it intends to keep a presence in areas such as Sayida Zaynab, Qalamoun, Qusayr as well as in South Syria and the borders with Iraq.

A final aspect to Hezbollah's role in Syria is based on securing Iran's strategic interest of projecting on the frontline with Israel and securing the Iraqi border. On the principle of continued confrontation with Israel. Iran will play the long game in southwest Syria by relying either on Hezbollah or Iraqi militant groups despite a 2018, Moscow and Tel Aviv deal, forcing Iran to retreat from Israel by a distance of 85 km<sup>666</sup>. "Tehran will also want to extend what Hezbollah has on its Lebanese frontier with Israel, to the Golan and leverage

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661 "A Hezbollah fighter who threatened to eradicate Sunnis trains Syrian army commanders," Araby 21, August 23, 2015, <https://arabi21.com/story/853753/مقاتل-حزب-الله-الذي-هدد-بإبادة-السنة-يدرب-ضابطا-سوريا-فيديو>

662 Interview with Nicholas Blanford, Mona Alami, September 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

663 Fatina Hajj Ali, "Hezbollah trains the agreement's factions," almodon, November 10, 2018, <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld/2018/11/10/التسوية-فصائل-التسوية>

664 Interview with a member of Quwat al-Ridha, October 2018.

665 Ali, "درعا."

666 Landau, "Russia-Israel Deal Is Clear: Iran Away from Border, Assad's Rule Accepted

southwest Syria in its confrontation with Israel on the long run. Iran is trying to shape its strategic interests in Syria as time passes by, to maintain its land bridge there against Israel,” explains Hezbollah expert Nicolas Blanford<sup>667</sup>. Iran’s interest in Deir al-Zor lies in the region’s strategic location. Firstly, Tehran sees the area as an essential land bridge from Iraq. Given that the Iranian military aims to control all the major road networks that lead from Syria through Iraq and down to the south of Syria, Deir al-Zor is instrumental to their plan. With that goal in mind, they have placed their own units supervised by the revolutionary guards there and established loyalties among the local population. Control of the Deir al-Zor-Anbar land bridge allows Tehran to secure its overland route to allow for transport and distribution of weapons and personnel to its various bases across Syria and onward to Lebanon, in addition to the regular air routes Iran has been running. Conversely, it also brings in and out smuggled goods and drugs across the frontier.

Secondly, Deir al-Zor’s proximity to US military bases located in the North East of Syria gives the region strategic importance, especially since the region is the object of a tug of war between Iran, Turkey, the US and Russia. Iran and the regime have carried out assassinations against Arab tribal leaders in Deir al-Zor in an attempt to turn local tribes against the US said a tribal source to the author on condition of anonymity.

#### **F- Rationalization Hezbollah’s techniques and goals and its impact on its future role in Syria:**

How Syria was viewed in terms of strategic priorities has evolved with time. It started with the defense of Lebanese on the border, quickly taking a religious connotation with many references to a Takfiri war in Syria, Takfiri connoting Sunni religious extremism. Additionally, multiple references were made to Damascus as the seat of Sayeda Zeinab, prophet’s daughter, a figure revered in Shiite Islam. Thus, Damascus from the onset was clearly framed as religious pole, following Roziere theorization. Hezbollah following its sponsor rational attempted to merge “useful Syria” ( its political anHezbollah’s prime objectives have been securitization of that corridor considered as strategic centers to itself, assisting Iran and the survival of the Assad regime. “ What is security “ ponders Roziere<sup>668</sup>? He perceives it’s as the notion of safety or absence of threat and links territory to security- a notion that Hezbollah appears to endorse in Syria. Hezbollah appears to favor a mixed technique theorized by Roziere as direct and indirect control. It practices direct military control in the form of

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667 Interview with Nicholas Blanford, Mona Alami, September 2018, Beirut, Lebanon.

668 Roziere, *Géographie Politique & Géopolitique*



garrisons in areas it perceived as strategic such as the Lebanese borders and certain bases in Homs or Aleppo. It has also exerted indirect control in its assistance to the Syrian army and the LDF units. This helps the movement to adopt a more flexible approach and limit friction with the population, although its direct control in strategic areas has caused instances of friction with the Syrian army, causing clashes with Syrian Arab Army soldiers<sup>669</sup>. To regain control of these areas Hezbollah as well the Assad regime relied on coercive demographic changes. This took the form of spontaneous communitarian segregation (defined by Roziere as a geographic separation of inhabitants<sup>670</sup>) such as we saw in areas bordering the capital such as Madaya and others before their fall. Population transfers, after each fall of areas, and blocking access to populations to their home areas through sieges, starvation, among others another technique mentioned by Roziere as *refoulement* were also facilitated by Hezbollah. Finally, Hezbollah has been accused of massacres in the Ghouta suburbs in Damascus<sup>671</sup>. For Roziere, exterminations are one of the last techniques used in war to maintain territories and include massacres. A massacre does not necessarily mean extermination but it is punctual and often equates a threat of extermination with a strong symbolic and psychological value. Hezbollah's future role in the new post war Syria will keep on evolving. Nonetheless day by day the portfolio seems to be going out of the party's hands and defined mostly by Iran's interests while Russia imposes on its red lines and Israel pushes back, containing Iranian and Hezbollah activity. It remains to be seen as well whether the Ukraine Russia conflict will diminish in any way the support Moscow brings to Syria and Iran in term of aerial coverage.

## **II- The Islamic State, territory as an element of security and as a rallying symbol**

Hezbollah was not the only transnational or transnationally linked militant group to emerge in the Syria. The war in Syria was also marked by transnational Sunni jihadist groups. The first notable group was Jabhat al-Nusra, which was formed in 2011, when the Islamic State of Iraq amir, Abu Bakr Baghdadi sent his Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani to Syria to set up a new front of jihad against the Syrian regime. This may or may not have been done with the approval of al-Qaeda amir Ayman al-Zawahiri. Evidence suggests that as Jabhat al-Nusra grew more successful, Baghdadi wanted to subsume the group more clearly under Islamic

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669 Interview with a source close to Hezbollah commander, August 2020, by Mona Alami, Beirut, Lebanon.

670 Roziere, *Géographie Politique & Géopolitique*

671 Smadar "Hezbollah Forces Participating in Ghouta Massacre."

State of Iraq's authority. Eventually, in April 2013<sup>672</sup>, Abu Bakr Baghdadi released an audio statement in which he declared that the two groups were merging under the name "Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham" (ISIS). Jowlani rejected Baghdad's statement, denying he had been consulted it, though he almost certainly had knowledge of efforts behind the scenes to have Jabhat al-Nusra more subject to Baghdadi's authority. He declared a 'renewal' of allegiance to Zawahiri- the first time Jabhat al-Nusra acknowledged such a connection. It is likely in making this declaration that Jowlani was attempting to get Zawahiri to rule in his favor and rein in Baghdadi. Zawahiri ruled in Jowlani's favor but ISIS refused to back down.<sup>673</sup>

ISIS would not back down for strategic territorial reasons. It expanded and captured<sup>674</sup> between 30% to 40% of Syrian territory at its peak in 2014, probably having as many as 50,000 fighters in Syria by 2015<sup>675</sup>. ISIS's goal was not just territorial control but state formation. For these reasons, it had to take control of large cities and areas rich in resources. In June 2014, IS launched an attack allowing the capture of Mosul and Tikrit in a large-scale offensive. Mosul was one of the largest Iraqi cities, and Tikrit, the home of Saddam Hussein was highly symbolic. According to the Centre for the Analysis of Terrorism, the theoretical value of assets controlled by IS (such as oil reserves, gas reserves, minerals and monetary assets) was put at more than USD 2 billion by late 2015, 11 % more than in 2014<sup>676</sup>.by the end of 2014. At the end of the same month on June 29, the caliphate was declared labelled as the Islamic State. By the end of 2014, the proclaimed "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ruled over seven million people located in a territory encompassing large parts of Syria and nearly a third of Iraq<sup>677</sup>. ISIS adopted a very direct and ruthless approach to imposing control over territory in Syria, seeking recognition as the sole legitimate faction and ultimately working to subsume rivals. Rather predictably, large-scale in fighting broke out between ISIS

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672 , "How Al-Nusra Front Split Up From Islamic State?," *Countercurrents* (blog), May 14, 2017, <https://countercurrents.org/2017/05/how-al-nusra-front-split-up-from-islamic-state>.

673 Jeff Burdette, "It's Not You, It's Me: Key Questions on the al-Qaeda-ISIS Breakup," *Georgetown Security Review*, February 25, 2014. Accessed October 30, 2019, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/14483/it-not-you-it-me-key-questions-on-the-al-qaeda>.

674 "ISIS in Control of '35 Percent' of Syrian Territory," *al-Arabiya News*, July 19, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/19/270-Syrian-fighters-killed-in-biggest-ISIS-operation-.html>.

675 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "How Many Fighters Does the Islamic State Really Have?," *War on the Rocks*, February 9, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/02/how-many-fighters-does-the-islamic-state-really-have/>.

676 Agnès Levallois, Jean-Claude Cousseran, and Lionel Kerrello, "The Financing of the 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," Directorate-General for External Policies (EU), September 2017 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/603835/EXPO\\_IDA\(2017\)603835\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/603835/EXPO_IDA(2017)603835_EN.pdf))

677 Robin Wright, "ISIS's Leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—the World's Most Wanted Man—Is Dead," *The New Yorker*, October 27, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/isiss-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-the-worlds-most-wanted-man-is-dead>.

and other rebel factions, including Jabhat al-Nusra. ISIS' conduct ultimately led to an official statement of disavowal by al-Qaeda in February 2014.

As previously seen, Roziere has noted that control over territory could be indirect or direct. ISIS favored direct control to the point that it went into the minute details of the life of the population under its control, as exemplified by bodies like the Hisba apparatus for enforcing virtue and prohibiting vice.<sup>678</sup> But as stated by Roziere, direct control not only takes place through coercive institutions but through 'attractive' ones such as the creation of functioning administrations and schools, among others, because they provide jobs, provide people with possibilities for social promotion and security and can guarantee popular support. ISIS perceived territory primarily as a symbol. In the words of Roziere, a territorial value can be intrinsic and establish the legitimacy of power, which is exactly what the Islamic State banked on when it seized large swaths of territory in Syria and decided to base its caliphate in Raqqa.

Although, ISIS has had from the beginning a very clear and distinct vision of its territory, it also saw territory as an element of security. With ISIS working on acquiring territory first through intelligence work prior to its entry into a specific region, followed by building up an army. The latter also helped the organization to achieve its primary goal: secure territory from a symbolic perspective by establishing dominion over its new "territory of Islam" - Dar al-Islam. Maintaining control of territory was ensured by establishing proper governance through establishing an Islamic-based (in their own interpretation) justice system—leading to the establishment of a "fighting society," at all levels within the community, which reinforced its first two goals. ISIS goals were thus to gain territory, control resources and population. To achieve these goals, ISIS resorted to a various range of tools.

#### **A- "The Islamic Intelligence State"**

In 2015, Christoph Reuter published an article revealing the secret files of Hajji Bakr, a former Iraqi officer who planned and implemented the Islamic State's takeover in Syria<sup>679</sup>. At the onset of the conflict in Syria, Bakri had put in place there a group of followers

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678 Aymenn Jawad Al-Taamimi, "The Internal Structure of the Islamic State's Hisba Apparatus," Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, June 1, 2018: <https://www.aymennjawad.org/21246/the-internal-structure-of-the-islamic-state-hisba>

679 Christoph Reuter, "The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State," *Spiegel Online*, April 18, 2015, sec. International, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html>.

responsible for gathering intelligence and assessing the weaknesses of the Syrian territory that ISIS was to capture. According to Reuter, Haji Bakr looked into who were the powerful families and powerful individuals in Syria, the sources of income of those people, names and sizes of (rebel) brigades in the village and the names of their leaders, their political orientation, as well as who imam were in certain areas and what type of preaches did they deliver. Knowledge of illegal activities practiced by powerful individuals were used to blackmail them. Reuter underlined that Bakri had decided to "appointed smartest ones as Sharia sheiks," and that "brothers" would be selected in each town to marry the daughters of the most influential families, in order to "ensure penetration of these families without their knowledge." "The agents were supposed to function as seismic signal waves, sent out to track down the tiniest cracks, as well as age-old faults within the deep layers of society -- in short, any information that could be used to divide and subjugate the local population. The informants included former intelligence spies, but also regime opponents who had quarreled with one of the rebel groups" explained Reuters.

At the level of each provincial council, Bakri put in place an intelligence framework from a commander in charge of subversive operations from murders, to murders or encryption, a secret spy cells and an "intelligence service and information manager" for the district reported to each of these deputy-emirs. A general intelligence department reported to the "security emir" for a region, who was in charge of deputy-emirs for individual districts.

A familiar modus operandi appears to have emerged in the 2013 period in which ISIS would establish da'wa offices in areas, under the guise of which subversive intelligence activities could be conducted before making a move to subjugate rivals.<sup>680</sup>1- Recruitment policy

People (i.e. human resources) are the most important resource for any army and for a nascent state. ISIS realized that in its early expansion, using a two-pronged recruitment approach, one targeting foreigners looking to join the "new ummah", the second focusing on local populations. Recruitment locally and internationally allowed to satisfy its security territorial goal as well as boost its symbolic territorial goal by providing legitimacy to its new pseudo territory built on a new generation of citizens.

In this frame of mind, ISIS thus relied on a powerful branding strategy, diffusing violent images on social media, YouTube and Twitter. ISIS's approach to communication

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680 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 9 No. 4 (August 2015): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297420>

has been highly sophisticated and showed the significant resources dedicated by the group to its high-tech media outlets like Al-Hayat. Its media arm issued well-produced magazines and videos showing two contrasting aspects of the group: torture and execution scenes on the one hand, and the ‘utopia’ of the caliphate on the other. Everything was made to attract a new army and create a narrative of an ever-expanding pseudo-caliphate

### *i-International recruitment*

In 2015, a Brookings<sup>681</sup> twitter census estimated that over the September through December 2014 period “at least 46,000 Twitter accounts were used by ISIS supporters, although not all of them were active at the same time”. Each ISIS supporter had on average about 1,000 followers each, a figure considerably higher than an ordinary Twitter user. ISIS-supporting accounts were also considerably more active than non-supporting users according to the Brookings study. Much of ISIS’s social media success were attributed to a relatively small group of “hyperactive users, numbering between 500 and 2,000 accounts, which tweet in concentrated bursts of high volume». These users understood and spoke the language of ISIS’s primary target audience, which was mainly comprised of young Muslims as well as possible converts feeling marginalized and alienated in their own societies, whether they lived in Saudi Arabia, France, Australia, Holland or Lebanon and were generally aged between 20-30 years old. By resorting to poster boys for brutality such as the infamous ‘Jihadi John’<sup>682</sup> who appeared in the beheading of journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, ISIS was able to appeal to a new generation that was a building block of its expansion plan. ‘Jihadi John’ is the nickname given by the western media for British national Mohammed Emwazi, now a celebrity figure in extremist circles. By relying on figures such as Jihadi John IS was able to attract a large pool of young men and women who when indoctrinated could in their turn be used to spread the IS message. In her book *What terrorists want, Understanding The Enemy, Containing the Threat* Louise Richardson<sup>683</sup> stated that terrorists seek revenge, reaction and renown. ISIS publicizing its jihadists’ acts of war and victorious military offensive achieves exactly that. The organization knew also that it had to show

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681 JM Berger and Jonathan Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter,” Brookings, March 2015, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis\\_twitter\\_census\\_berger\\_morgan.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf).

682 Souad Mekhennet and Adam Goldman, “‘Jihadi John’: Islamic State Killer Is Identified as Londoner Mohammed Emwazi,” *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/jihadi-john-the-islamic-state-killer-behind-the-mask-is-a-young-londoner/2015/02/25/d6dbab16-bc43-11e4-bdfa-b8e8f594e6ee\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/jihadi-john-the-islamic-state-killer-behind-the-mask-is-a-young-londoner/2015/02/25/d6dbab16-bc43-11e4-bdfa-b8e8f594e6ee_story.html).

683 Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*

continuous and elusive expansion to sustain its online branding successes, in keeping with its slogan of ‘remaining and expanding.’ The organization thus released several documentaries boasting its military exploits such as the *Flames of War* featuring heroic jihadists as well as gruesome footage including bombings and cold-blooded executions. This systematic glamorization of violence allowed the terror group to attract western recruits.

### *ii-Local recruitment*

On the other hand, ISIS local recruitment approach partly corresponds with Abu Bakr Naji’s ideating “*Idarat al Tawahosh*”,<sup>684</sup>. In chapter 7 of the book, Naji argued that the first step for recruitment was “the creation of organizations to improve the management of the areas under our control.” A strategy followed initially by Isis in territories it first conquered. An example of was the manipulation of tribal *Asabiyah* and ethnic tensions in favor of the organization. When ISIS attempted to mobilize Arab crowds ahead of the battle of Tel Hamis in northeast Syria, it resorted to an anti-Kurdish narrative<sup>685</sup>. In his book, Naji recommends appealing to tribes using money or power as incentives. In Raqqa, local tribal leaders were offered money, power or *sabaya* ( female slaves) to encourage them to swear allegiance to ISIS, according to activists<sup>686</sup>. c-Child recruitment

The improvement of faith and belief among local populations as well as its youth was another cornerstone to Naji’s manifesto, one that was used by IS in Syria and Iraq. Since its inception, IS imposed on children religious and military training in the Raqqa province. Two training camps were dedicated to the indoctrination and training of children namely “*Sharea Ashbal*” as well as “*Maahad ashbal al-khilafa*” (Cubs of the Caliphate Institute)<sup>687</sup>. Illustrating this point is the 2017 propaganda video posted by the Islamic State<sup>688</sup>, which featured Yazidi young boys converted to Islam and recruited by the group before they carried out a suicide bombing. In the 2017 video two young Yazidi boys explain how they converted from their faith to Islam, speaking about the orientation and training the extremist group had provided them. One of the two boys Amjad (Abu Yusuf) al-Sinjari, explained how their earlier Yazidi faith was “devil-worshipping” and a representation of “ignorance” and

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684 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Review: ISIS, Inside the Army of Terror,” Syria Comment, February 3, 2015: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/book-review-isis-inside-army-terror/>

685 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NE7DJUYaAlg>

686 Interview with Abu Ibrahim, Raqqa is Beling slaughtered February 13, Skype

687 Interview with Abou Brahim, Raqqa is Beling slaughtered February 13, Skype

688 Mohamad Mustafa, “Islamic State Video Depicts Final Hours of Yazidi Child Suicide Bombers,” Iraqi News, February 15, 2017, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/video-depicts-last-minutes-life-minor-yazidi-suicide-bombers/>.

paganism, according to the website Iraqi news. The two children were enrolled in the organization's "religious institute", where they were taught the group's doctrine before they were transferred to a training camp in Syria where they pledged allegiance to the local commanders and enlisted in the suicide attackers' squad.

According to an August 2014 Syrian Human Rights Committee report mentioned in an article by NPR, there were at least 800 children under the age of 18 who had been recruited by ISIS<sup>689</sup>, while other reports highlighted that more than 30 "kids" fought with ISIS in Kobani<sup>690</sup>. An ISIS defector told NPR that militants targeted the young for indoctrination, "breaking down traditional authority structures: the alliance to the family and to the tribe"<sup>691</sup>. In 2016, it was estimated that about 300 Syrian child soldiers brought in by IS to Iraq have been killed until the start of the Mosul offensive in October that same year<sup>692</sup>. Child recruitment appeared to have increased rapidly between 2015 and 2016, according to a report by the CTC Sentinel<sup>693</sup>. "From January 1, 2015, to January 31, 2016, 89 children and youth were eulogized in Islamic State propaganda. 51% percent were alleged to have died in Iraq, while 36 percent died in Syria. The remainder was killed during operations in Yemen, Libya, and Nigeria. 60% of the sample was categorized as "adolescent" based on Islamic State photographs, 34 % were classified as "older adolescent," and 6 % were "Pre-Adolescent." 31% were Syrian, 25 % Syrian/Iraqi, and 11 % Iraqi. The remaining 33 % were from Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Libya, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Nigeria', according to the CTC report. Of the 89 cases, 39 % died upon detonating a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) against their target with 33% percent were killed as foot soldiers in unspecified battlefield operations, 6 % died while working as propagandists embedded within units, and 4 % committed suicide in mass casualty attacks against civilians explains the study. The final 18 % were *inghimasis*, meaning they died in

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689 "ISIS Kills Childhood: A special report on the Violations committed by ISIS against children in Syria," SHRC, August 18, 2014: <http://www.shrc.org/en/?p=23838>

690 Alessandra Masi, "ISIS Youth Recruitment: Life in ISIS-Ruled Raqqa So Grim, Parents Are Giving Up Their Children," IB Times, November 6, 2014: <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-youth-recruitment-life-isis-ruled-raqqa-so-grim-parents-are-giving-their-1719124>

691 "Islamic State Defector: 'If You Turn Against ISIS, They Will Kill You,'" NPR, September 25, 2014: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/09/25/351436894/islamic-state-defector-if-you-turn-against-isis-they-will-kill-you>

692 "300 ISIS Child Soldiers from Syria Killed in Mosul Operation, Syrian Watchdog Says," rudaw.net, October 2016, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/301020167>.

693 Charlie Winter, Mia Bloom, and John Horgan, "Depictions of Children and Youth in the Islamic State's Martyrdom Propaganda, 2015-2016," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, February 2016, <https://ctc.usma.edu/depictions-of-children-and-youth-in-the-islamic-states-martyrdom-propaganda-2015-2016/>.

what in marauding operations in which a group of mostly adult fighters infiltrated enemy position to conduct suicide operations.

“The data unambiguously suggests that the Islamic State’s mobilization of children and youth for military purposes is accelerating. The rate of young people dying in suicide operations rose, from six in January 2015 to 11 in January 2016. The rate of operations involving one or more child or youth is likewise increasing; there were three times as many suicide operations involving children and youth in January 2016 as the previous January of 2015,” explained the report at the time.

### *iii- ISIS governance*

In its 4th issue of its English-language newsletter Dabiq, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria boasted that a “state cannot be established” unless it looked after both the “worldly and the religious needs” of Muslims<sup>694</sup>. With that specific goal in mind, IS replaced the presence of the state, especially in the fields of justice, education and healthcare, with mixed results in areas where it was located in Iraq and Syria.

#### *a-Justice*

In the early days of the caliphate, ISIS successfully consolidated its hold on the judiciary. It established Islamic courts in the areas under its rule<sup>695</sup> that acquired a certain level of credibility. Courts were reorganized with the judiciary split into two branches: one providing general judgments based on sharia; the second tasked with complaints about Isis “soldiers”<sup>696</sup>. “Sharia courts sentences have been relatively fair up until now,<sup>697</sup>” said a Raqqa resident speaking on condition of anonymity. IS courts were also believed to be speedier than courts under the Assad regime. In an interview in November 2013, an ISIS non-Syrian judge, promised that sentences could be delivered in a maximum of a month<sup>698</sup>. To strengthen its hold over the judiciary, ISIS also forced lawyers to take courses in religion and religious law, executing those who did not comply to ISIS instructions<sup>699</sup>. IS enforced as well a radical interpretation of the sharia law, killing men accused of blasphemy or homosexuality in

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694 Ahmed Hashim, *The Caliphate at War: The Ideological, Organisational and Military Innovations of Islamic State* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

695 , “Habitants of Salahedine and Ninew under the Threat of Creation of Sharia Court,” Iraq Leftist voice, 2014, <http://saotaliassar.org/Frei%20Kitabat/18012014/Richt0002.htm>.

696 Kerr Simon and Salomon Erika, “‘State of Aleppo’ Brochure Reveals Isis Visions for Islamic State,” Financial Times, June 30, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/0e882b36-005e-11e4-a3f2-00144feab7de>.

697 Whatsapp Interview with Raqqa resident on condition of anonymity.

698 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76\\_K9zwNBuw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76_K9zwNBuw)

699 Mara Revkin, “The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State,” Brookings, July 2016:

[https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper\\_Mara-Revkin\\_Web.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper_Mara-Revkin_Web.pdf)



northern Syria<sup>700</sup>. IS carried out corporal punishments often enforced publicly ranging from amputations and lashings for reasons as trivial as smoking or improper dressing with, according to interviews conducted by the author-Education:

A similar approach was applied to the education system. ISIS established Islamic schools in the region of Aleppo, where in 2014, 20 sharia institutes taught some 2,500 children to memorize the Koran<sup>701</sup>. In al-Mayadeen, Deir Ezzor, ISIS also imposed on philosophy teachers, to take sharia classes and banned the teaching of philosophy<sup>702</sup>. In addition, as seen in the previously section, ISIS imposed military training namely combat lessons as well as teachings on the use of weapons on children in the Raqqa province. Similar changes were applied to the field of higher education in Mosul, where the schools of fine arts, political science and law were deemed un-Islamic and closed down<sup>703</sup>.

*b-The healthcare system:*

A last cornerstone of ISIS policy, the healthcare system was nonetheless considered as a one of the organization's major failures. "Only the very poor go for treatment to the Mashfa watany ( the public clinic), which is managed by ISIS, " reported the Raqqa resident. The group's management of hospitals- already in dire straits due to power outages and lack of resources- was marred by inconsistencies. According to a report published in 2014 by the Guardian<sup>704</sup>, female staff members, working at Mosul hospitals were ordered to wear full-face veils. IS fighters even prevented male anesthesiologists from treating women patients. In September and October, at least five doctors were killed by the organization in Mosul<sup>705</sup> and in August 2014, ISIS beheaded a female dentist who had continued to treat both male and female patients in Al-Mayadin, in Deir Zour<sup>706</sup>.

*d- Failed governance*

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700 "ISIS Executes a Man in the Charge of Insulting Allah," The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights, December 9, 2014, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=7751>.

701 Simon and Solomon, "State of Aleppo' Brochure Reveals Isis Visions for Islamic State

702 Quinana, Qaddour, "Inside ISIS' Dysfunctional Schools," Foreign Affairs, October 13, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-10-13/inside-isis-dysfunctional-schools>.

703 Ben Hubbard, "Islamic State Imposes Strict New Order in Mosul, and Deprivation Is a Result," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/world/islamic-state-imposes-strict-new-order-in-mosul-and-deprivation-is-a-result.html>.

704 Mark Townsend, "Inside the Islamic State's Capital: Red Bull-Drinking Jihadists, Hungry Civilians, Crucifixions and Air Strikes," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/30/raqqa-isis-capital-crucifixions-civilians-suffer-jihadis-red-bull>.

705 . Mark Townsend, "Inside the Islamic State's Capital: Red Bull-Drinking Jihadists, Hungry Civilians, Crucifixions and Air Strikes," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/30/raqqa-isis-capital-crucifixions-civilians-suffer-jihadis-red-bull>.

706 "Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic\*," OHCHR, February 5, 2015.

These measures created some backlash. The dress code imposed on female personnel at Mosul hospitals also led to a strike<sup>707</sup> in August 2014. Preferential treatment accorded to IS fighters also hindered the organization's credibility. Reports surfaced of IS-only hospitals being staffed with the "best doctors and the latest equipment<sup>708</sup>" as well as the requisitioning by militants of Mosul's blood bank and of some of its clinics to treat its wounded fighters, at the expense of civilian patients. IS stringent and rigid rules further paralyzed a healthcare system, already in tatters and dependent on government funding<sup>709</sup>. Other indicators to the governance failure were drawn from simple examination of the IS budget needs. In spite of its enormous revenues, with IS's revenues amounting in 2014 to a maximum of \$1.4 to \$1.5 billion per year<sup>710</sup>, and its successful consolidation of power in areas under its control, ISIS harsh policies and mismanagement eventually backfired. The terror group known as the richest did not make its caliphate model sustainable in the long run. Administering the five provinces where it had majority control (Raqqa Deir Zour, Salahudin, Anbar, and Nineveh) required enormous funds and the ability to deliver services to a large territory housing up to five million people in Iraq and three million in Syria. to cater to such a large population, IS needed to think of state building such financing and rebuilding.

The budgetary needs of areas IS administered for a short phase were massive, if it wanted to operate as a state. While the Iraqi central government still paid salaries under ISIS control after the surge, its financial needs remained important. The Salahuddin province official Iraqi governmental budget was at \$409 million in 2014<sup>711</sup>, the Anbar's budget was at \$1.153 billion in 2010, the Diyala province, although not all under ISIS control) budget in 2012 was at \$123 m, and the Nineveh province in 2013 was at \$840 million, totaling over \$2.6 billion in Iraq. Although the budgetary needs in Syria were more difficult to estimate as the provinces do not have independent budgets, the amount required was staggering nonetheless. Forty-five percent of the country's 2014 \$8.18 billion fiscal budget was allocated to feeding its population<sup>712</sup>, meaning that in Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor—areas under

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707 Scott Lucas, "Iraq Feature: Women Doctors in Mosul On Strike Over Intimidation by Islamic State," *EA WorldView* (blog), August 18, 2014, <https://eaworldview.com/2014/08/iraq-feature-women-doctors-mosul-strike-intimidation-islamic-state/>.

708 Townsend, "Inside the Islamic State's Capital..."

709 Erin Cunningham, "Islamic State Imposes a Reign of Fear in Iraqi Hospitals," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/islamic-state-imposes-a-reign-of-fear-in-iraqi-hospitals/2014/11/25/94476f3e-6382-11e4-ab86-46000e1d0035\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/islamic-state-imposes-a-reign-of-fear-in-iraqi-hospitals/2014/11/25/94476f3e-6382-11e4-ab86-46000e1d0035_story.html).

710 Mona Alami, "The Islamic State and the Cost of Governing," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 4, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/56534>.

711 Ibid.

712 "Syria Maintains Spending in 2014 Budget despite War Losses," *Reuters*, October 12, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-budget-idUSL6N0I20DH20131012>.

IS control—\$902 million were required just on food. To achieve its ambition of statehood and implement security over its territory, ISIS relied on every trick of the book to ensure its sole authority. Massacres, population transfers, politicides, religious and ethnic cleansing were used for territorial remodeling<sup>713</sup>. As seen in previous sections, political opponents were assassinated, the Sheatat tribe that rebelled was massacred, the Yazidi community was subjected to genocide. While ethnicity theoretically did not matter to ISIS, which envisioned society based on faith, ISIS pursued and fought secular Kurds in northern east Syria that opposed the terrorist organization. Its radical interpretation of religion and of governance ended in antagonizing the local population. It simply failed to win the hearts and minds of the Syrians, which started to collaborate with the anti-ISIS coalition. “To annex or attach a territory can become counterproductive if an actor can only impose itself by coercion. It is unlikely that direct control is sustainable on the long run. Direct control generates instability and insecurity: latent opposition, passive resistance, or insurgency, civil war or terrorism. The dominant power can find itself into the role of occupant that underlines its illegitimacy,” says Roziere<sup>714</sup>. Counter insurgency was thus facilitated by ISIS’ extreme form of domination, that could not nonetheless happen without the backing of international powers/

### **III/ The rise of the SDF: territory as an element of security, symbol and source of wealth**

In a way, the emergence of another major non-state armed actor in Syria, namely the SDF was a direct by-product of the war on terror and more specifically, ISIS. The SDF expanded the self-ruling Autonomous Administration project that had been established by the PYD.

#### **A - Power Structures in the North- East**

As early as December 2011, a few months after the revolutionary wave started shaking the north east region, PYD members founded the People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK), with 320 members. The PYD<sup>715</sup> also founded People's Local Committees

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<sup>713</sup> Roziere, *Géographie Politique & Géopolitique*

<sup>714</sup> Ibid.

<sup>715</sup> Radpey Lokman, *Kurdish Regional Self-rule Administration in Syria: A new Model of Statehood and its Status in International Law Compared to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq*,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, August 12, 2016: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/japanese-journal-of-political-science/article/kurdish-regional->

(PLCs), responsible each for a certain jurisdiction, and which appear to be still active. Another group emerged at the same time called the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a group of 15 Syrian Kurdish groups in Syria led by the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP-S), tied to the Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq and opposed to President Assad. In July 2012, the regime's security forces withdrew from Kurdish areas, which fell to the control of the PYD and its military affiliate the YPG that same month. Subsequently, the PYD and the KNC signed a cooperation agreement between the two parties in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, founding the Kurdish Supreme Committee <sup>716</sup>(KSC also known as the DBK in Kurdish), which was tasked with governing Syrian Kurdistan. While the KNC wanted to work with the broader opposition, the PYD took a different, more realistic approach. "We were viewing the Syria crisis through the optic of the regime survival," says Abdel Salam Hamsurak<sup>717</sup>, a member of TEV DEM ( Movement for A Democratic Society, in an interview with the author. In addition, the refusal by the KNC to include a reference to the 'Kurdish people in Syria' in its Cairo meeting in July 2012 led to more tensions between the two Kurdish factions. The KSC dissolved in 2013, in the backdrop of mounting tensions between the two factions and the PYD decision to abandon the coalition. The PYD had decided at the time that it had the opportunity to create another founding body for Syrian Kurdistan, based on a leftist-influenced confederate society that eventually translated into the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM).

TEV DEM increased its power by relying or building up paramilitary structures such as the People's Protection Units (YPG) which and Women's Protection Units (YPJ)<sup>718</sup>, which were founded in 2012 and was complemented with the Asayish police force, which are internal police forces falling under its wing. TEV-DEM created legislative, executive and judicial councils, integrating the local councils approach advocated by the PYD and that reflected Kurdish concern for decentralization efforts in northern Syria . These executive councils were formed through "consensus", according to TEV DEM members and dubbed as Democratic-Autonomous Administrations (DAA). "The first local council was formed in the

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selfrule-administration-in-syria-a-new-model-of-statehood-and-its-status-in-international-law-compared-to-the-kurdistan-regional-government-krq-in-iraq/E27336DA905763412D42038E476BBE61/core-reader

716 Rojaba, the Kirdish democracy, by the Kurdish project, [Learn About Rojava | The Kurdish Project](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Kurdish_Supreme_Committee.html), [https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Kurdish\\_Supreme\\_Committee.html](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Kurdish_Supreme_Committee.html)

717 Alami, Mona, Interview with Abdel Salam Hamsurak, September 2018, Qamishli

718 Helbast Sekhani," VIDEO: Syrian Kurds resume establishment of army for north Syria, graduate 3,500 fighters," March 3 2018, Kurdistan 24, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/8a2fe1e1-7420-40b5-9db1-8d36b306c1c3>

Jazira,” said Syrian Democratic Council’s co-chair Hekmat Habib<sup>719</sup>. In November 2013, it unilaterally announced the creation of an interim autonomous administration extending over Rojava’s three cantons namely Afrin, Euphrates and the Jazira. Syrian government structures buildings were taken over by the local administration across Kurdish areas, with security structure replaced by the YPG and Asayish police. In 2014, as ISIS expanded its control of territory to northern and eastern Syria, the Kurds became the focus of attention with the battle for Kobani, near the border with Turkey<sup>720</sup> which heralded the first major defeat for ISIS. As seen in previous chapters, Kobani was instrumental in cementing the Kurdish-American partnership in Syria, with the air support given to the YPG. The role of the YPG at forefront of the war on ISIS, contributed to the creation in October 2015 of a unified national military paramilitary called the “Syrian Democratic Forces ” (SDF -largely supported by the United States),

In terms of security, Tev Dem had several goals in mind. First it saw Sunni Arab groups and more particularly jihadist ones as a direct threat to ethnic secular Kurds. More importantly, it quickly saw the alliance between the various Sunni groups with Ankara, the PYD nemesis, as a threat that could only be countered through the creation of a military institution backed by a superpower such as the United States. With its consolidation and expansion of military power in northern Syria, the SDF worked on building up a political arm the Syrian Democratic Council known as the SDC. Control of territory as seen previously with Roziere<sup>721</sup> had to also take an attractive form with the creation of functioning administrations. Late in 2015, the Democratic Syrian Assembly was created. At its inception, the assembly was made up of 13 members from specific ethnic, economic and political backgrounds and comprised of two main components, according to an article by Syria expert Aron Lund<sup>722</sup>. The first, according to the expert, consisted of representatives from the various Kurdish groups ruling northern Syria, including the Rojava self-governing cantons and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) and a few others such as the YPG/J, the Syriac Union Party’s corresponding political fronts. The Syriac Union Party is a movement representing the interest of the Syriac people in Syria. The other main element explained Lund was a loose network of Syrian leftists and other secular activists, “most of them connected in one way or another to Haytham Manna, a Europe-based

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719 Interview by Mona Alami, August 2018, Syria.

720 “Battle for Kobane,” BBC, June 25 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>

721 Roziere, *Géographie Politique & Géopolitique*

722 Aron Lund, “Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a primer,” January 22 2016, Syria Deeply, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/01/22/origins-of-the-syrian-democratic-forces-a-primer>

human rights activist from the Deraa Governorate in southern Syria”. Manna later resigned over disagreements with the movement. The assembly created the official SDF political arm known as the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), in 10 December 2015 in Al-Malikiyah. Haytham Manna and Saleh Muslim (the latter the PYD leader) were co-chairman of the SDC at its founding. “The SDC is our political arm and we follow their political leadership,” says the SDF media director Moustapha Bali in an interview with the author<sup>723</sup>. However, as the territory liberated from ISIS expanded, expanding to areas such as Tell Abyad and Raqqa, the idea of a federation became necessary, explained Habib to the author.

On 17 March 2016, a 151 delegation comprised of members from various northern regions of Syria proclaimed the "Federation of Northern Syria–Rojava" which was updated in December 2016 to the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria<sup>724</sup>. The SDC co-chair Hekmat Habib explained to the author<sup>725</sup>, that the SDC currently supervises the various local councils in regions including, Jazira, Kobani, Deir Zour, Tell Abyad, Tabqa Manbij and Raqqa<sup>726</sup>. To bolster coordination between Arab and Kurdish areas, a new body labeled as the General Council of the Self Administration in Northern and Eastern Syria was created in September 2018. The council would act<sup>727</sup> as a coordination body linking the self-administrations of the Kurdish majority areas such as the Euphrates, Afrin, and Jazeera region and the civil administrations in Arab majority areas such as the civil councils in Raqqa, Manbij, Tabqa, and Deir al-Zor. This remained until the 2019 Turkish invasion of Northern East Syria. In the model followed in the DFNS, every council was led by two co-chairs, from two different ethnic groups, generally one Arab and one Kurd. The SDC also promoted heavily the role women within the new political structures and favors them at the top of the political hierarchy. As an example, the SDC, and the Raqqa local council were respectively led by Ilham Ahmad and Layla Moustafa, who occupy the co-chair position. “Emphasis was put on the equal position of women, cultural diversity, a decentralized political and economic structure and the core element of our belief is partnership,” said Ahmad,<sup>728</sup> the SDC co-chair in an interview with the author. For members of the KNC who spoke to the author, the Syrian democratic Council fell essentially under the political hegemony of TEV-DEM and its PYD

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723 Interview with Moustapha Bali, August 2018, Syria.

724 Ferzand Sheirko, “Northern Syria’s New Democratic Federal System,” Fikra Forum, May 27 2016, 201 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/northern-syrias-new-democratic-federal-system>

725 Interview with Hekmat Habibi, by Mona Alami, August 2018, Syria.

726 The interview was conducted prior to the 2019 Turkish invasion of northern Syria.

727 Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, “New administration formed for northeastern Syria,” Kurdistan24, September 6 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c9e03dab-6265-4a9a-91ee-ca8d2a93c657>

728 Mona Alami Interview with Elham Ahmad, September 2018, Ain Issa,

component and was accused essentially of being un-democratic. “Only allied factions are present in Syria and the opposition has been brutally persecuted,” said Ibrahim Birro the head of the KNC<sup>729</sup>, in an interview with the author. The SDC has worked hard in controlling directly and indirectly its territory through the structures it has created. However, and despite international support to Rojava, the autonomous regions have been marked of late by terrorism and insurgency sabotage in Arab areas. These are phenomena that Roziere defines as a sign of failure of the authority’s direct control<sup>730</sup>. It is certain that the US continuous support to the SDC allow to limit the strength of the ISIS insurgency, more specifically in Arab areas, where the tribes complain of the PYD hegemony over the decisional process. In addition, Turkish as well as Syrian regime support to actors opposed to the SDF complicates the political landscape. Lasting stability is not achievable for the SDF autonomous regions in the near future.

### **B- DFNS’ geography : territory as a source of wealth.**

“ An actor seeks a territory for its riches. In this case this notion can be considered as more or less synonymous of resources Riches are a source of revenue and of power. Control of wealth is a motivation as ancient than important for actors fighting for special control, “ says Roziere. The SDC perceived the importance of the territory it controlled. The DFNS lies to the west of the Tigris along the Turkish border. It is composed of three regions: the Jazira, Euphrates and Afrin Regions and encompasses more recently the city of Raqqa, Tabqa and Manbij and the Deir Zour governorate. The DFNS was formed from most of al-Hasakah Governorate, the northern parts of Raqqa Governorate, the northwestern parts of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate and the northwestern and northeastern Aleppo Governorate.

The SDF controls large swaths of Syrian territory rich in resources boasting a number of oil fields and a large associated gas-processing facility, known as the Conoco plant.<sup>731</sup> Oil fields include Omar, al-Ward, Jafra and Tanak in Deir Zour. The Kurds had early on, gained control of Syria’s largest oil fields in northeast Hassakeh. They also control most of the Euphrates basin fields, previously operated by two international corporations: namely Shell and Total. In 2017, the Middle East Monitor reported<sup>732</sup> that President Bashar Al-Assad’s

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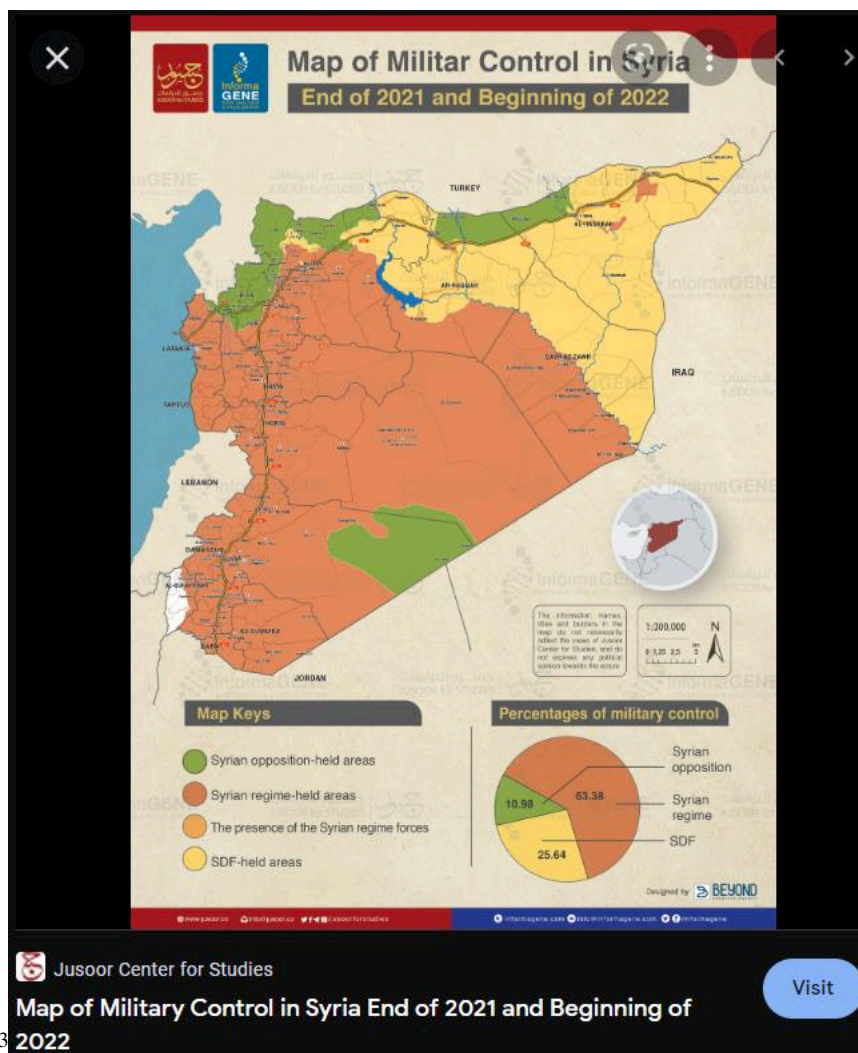
729 Mona Alami, Interview with Ibrahim Birro, September 2018, Erbil

730 Roziere, *Géographie Politique & Géopolitique*

731 Alessandria Masi, Hashem Osseiran , Kim Bode, “After ISIS who controls Syria’s resources?” , , Syria Deeply November 14 2017, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/11/14/expert-views-after-isis-who-controls-syrias-natural-resources>

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regime and the Democratic Union Party (PYD), had agreed to share the revenues of the oil extracted from the areas controlled by the Assad regime in the country’s north-eastern province of Al-Hasakah, which had nine fields three of which are active. “Approximately 30,000 – 35,000 barrels of oil per day are being produced from nearly 350 small oil wells located in the Syria’s south-western As-Suwayda city, in addition to the north-eastern cities of Rimelan and Karacok,” according to the article. The SDF knew that as long as it was in control of even part of these revenues , this allowed then to maintain power.



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Figure 20: MAP OF MILITARY CONTROL IN SYRIA (END OF 2021–BEGINNING OF 2022)

733 “Map of Military Control in Syria End of 2021 and Beginning of 2022,” accessed April 14, 2022, <https://jusoor.co/details/%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A->



## C-DFNS focus on foreign relations to bolster their international legitimacy

Early on the SDC figured out that the DFNS project largely hinged on the support of a large part of the international community. The importance of territory as we had seen was also largely symbolic as it provided legitimacy. The narrative weaved by the SDC as a democratic alternative to jihadist or failed groups had been acclaimed internationally. The SDC, focused on strengthening its position internationally and worked on balancing complex relations with its immediate and larger neighborhood, more specifically as the power shifted within Syria.

Prior to the Turkish invasion that occurred alongside the partial US pullout<sup>734</sup>, the SDC's most recent foreign policy venture was marked by the overtures to the regime of Assad. These were motivated by worries of a possible U.S pullout and in the wake of an American-Turkish deal over the city of Manbij,<sup>735</sup>. In recent years, TEV-DEM had worked hard on maintaining lines of communication with the Damascus regime. In 2012, when the regime left Kurdish areas, the political and security vacuum was filled at the time by the PYD and the YPG. The regime kept an official agreement with the Kurds in the sectors of agriculture and oil. Last September 2018, Turkish newspaper the Daily Sabah<sup>736</sup> had reported that the U.S.-backed SDF had terminated its oil trade with the Assad regime and restricted transportation to regime-held areas. However, during the course of the author's 2018 research in northern Syria, dozens of trucks transporting oil roamed the roads in direction of regime areas. The regime also provided the northern federation with cash revenue, supplying equipment, maintaining the oil pipelines<sup>737</sup> and paying the salaries of some of the facility's employees. The regime management of the Kurdish file in Syria has been long-term focused, pragmatic and relying on the carrot and stick approach. All through the Syria war, the regime has remained in control of Qamishli airport, which connects Damascus to other countries such as Iraq, Lebanon and Gulf countries. In August 2018, a SDC delegation led by Elham Ahmad, the organization's co-chair met with Syrian government officials. The meetings

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%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-2021-%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-2022/998/en.

734 Hardin Lanf, "Displacement and Despair: The Turkish Invasion of Northeast Syria - Syrian Arab Republic," ReliefWeb," November 12, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/displacement-and-despair-turkish-invasion-northeast-syria>.

735 "Turkish, U.S. units begin patrols near northern Syria's Manbij," Reuters, June 18, 2018,, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/turkish-us-units-begin-patrols-near-northern-syrias-manbij-idUSKBN1JE1A3>

736 Ragip Soyulu, "YPG suspends oil deals with Assad regime as US sanctions Iran-tied middlemen," Daily Sabah September 7 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2018/09/07/ypg-suspends-oil-deals-with-assad-regime-as-us-sanctions-iran-tied-middlemen>

737 "Syria, PKK/PYD share oil revenues in Al-Hasakah," Middle East Monitor, July 27 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170727-syria-pkkpyd-share-oil-revenues-in-al-hasakah/>

focused<sup>738</sup> on matters of service provision in the areas controlled by the Kurdish-led authorities, with the hope that the talks might widen to political and security matters. “We are for a peaceful solution in Syria and the regime is a reality,” says Habib. However, Elham Ahmad had told the author at the time that “the regime is not yet ready for serious negotiations,” despite its positive reception. “The problem with the regime is it still sees Syria through the lens of centralization,” she added.

Yet the regime still indirectly saw the Kurds as legitimate interlocutors. After some of its forces all it fought alongside the Kurds in Syria against Turkey. In February 2018, some pro-Syrian regime forces entered the contested Afrin to help Kurdish forces defend against a Turkish offensive. At the time the Independent<sup>739</sup> had reported that footage broadcasted by Hezbollah and Syrian regime-allied outlets showed convoys of tanks carrying Syrian flags and soldiers brandishing weapons entering from Aleppo. In addition, convoys of PYD forces attempting to join Afrin from the northwest regions had been allowed to transfer through regime areas.

The SDC has actively worked on maintaining good relations with countries in the U.S led international coalition, which provides it with widespread legitimacy. France has also afforded some recognition to the SDC by allowing the DFNS to open a representation office in Paris in 2016<sup>740</sup> and as early as 2015, PYD leaders were received by previous French president Francois Hollande. French Special Operations Command Forces are also supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces in operations and are operating in Syria alongside Americans and more recently incumbent president Emmanuel Macron met with a delegation that included members of the PYD and the YPG.

Outside the international coalition relations between the DFNS have fluctuated depending on events in Syria. The DFNS administration opened in 2016 a representation office in Moscow .In recent years, Russia has called for including Kurds in the Geneva III peace talks on Syria a delegation of the DFNS Democratic Federation of Northern Syria was invited to attend the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi in February 2018. The relation with Russia has deteriorated since the Turkish offensive on Afrin, which was

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738 Tom Perry, “Syrian Kurdish-backed council holds talks in Damascus,” Reuters, July 27 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-talks/syrian-kurdish-backed-council-holds-talks-in-damascus-idUKKBN1KH0QR>

739 Beth McKernan, Syrian civil war: regime forces come to Kurds' aid against Turkey in Afrin February 20 2018, The Independent, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-assad-regime-afrin-kurdish-kurds-turkey-ypg-militia-a8219651.html>

740 “Syrian Kurds open unofficial representative mission in Paris,” AFP 24 May 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/05/24/Syrian-Kurds-open-unofficial-representative-mission-in-Paris.html>

perceived by the Kurds as having obtained tacit agreement of Russia. “ We are trying to maintain relations with Moscow, but Afrin has been a definite strain in our relations,” says Ahmad.

#### **IV-the importance of acquiring territories in Syria.**

The manual of geopolitique correlates territory with many stakes. First control of borders and points of passage, which allows a group to control population and trade, ensuring a source of finance. Second, territory allows control to resources when they are available. Third territory can see as a threat, IE the loss of territory can unseat power, or weaken a power center as well as providing an advantage to an enemy, among other things.

All these calculations have appeared tom preoccupied Syrian VNSAAs. Hezbollah saw territory from a risk perspective, the unseating of Assad’s power, as well as the loss of the country’s economic city. It also saw the expansion of Turkish backed forces to Aleppo as direct advantage to Ankara, and a high threat for the future of Syria’s Assad.

ISIS saw territory as a source of power, when it expanded, a mean to gain population and hegemony on resources, as well as a symbol/ With territory ISIS could claim statehood and home to a pure caliphate.

#### **V-Conclusion**

As seen in previous sub-sections the three transnational or transnationally linked groups namely Hezbollah, ISIS and the SDF, have had different visions, priorities and approaches to territory in Syria.

Hezbollah’s vision and priority was to restore Assad’s clout on his territory one, that would be significantly dependent on its sponsor Iran and on proxies it would have established, such as the LDF and others, providing Iran and Hezbollah and continuous line of control over certain regions. The group also aimed on retaining strategic bases on the border with Lebanon, in Damascus, in Aleppo, and in the general area of Homs. South Syria was and remains for Hezbollah and Iran and important frontline in terms of the “Arab” conflict with Israel. Even more now, since the situation in Lebanon deteriorated economically, making the cost of any war at the Lebanese level extremely high for Hezbollah’s support base. Remaining in south Syria and being capable of staging, when needed attacks on Israel , at the behest of Iran was thus a priority for Hezbollah. Security and the securitization of Syria are thus the primary goal for Hezbollah, which remains in Syria, although in a diminished form

due to the decline in the war effort and the red lines implemented as seen in previous sections by Moscow.

Regarding ISIS, as a result of the international coalition led war against it , the terrorist group does no more exist as a territorial entity controlling strategic resources or infrastructure. The death of its 'caliph', Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi means that ISIS as a formal structure is no more. Losses in Iraq and Syria have ultimately seriously damaged ISIS international brand, from a propaganda and military perspective which has already translated with a serious drop in international terror activity. ISIS no longer poses a strategic threat as it did in 2015. Its many defeats and the fact that it lacks a strong core whether in Iraq and Syria has seriously damaged its appeal. IS built itself on the slogan *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding) , was thus no more, but now it could claim no more than *baqiya*.

Finally, the SDC/ SDF dyad has certainly partly succeeded to maintain its territorial bet. It maintains controls over 95% of Syrian oil resources<sup>741</sup> and over the largest country's wheat reserves. Yet , in terms of its securitization of territory, the SDC has had a controversial result. In one way the autonomous region has survived but its integrity has been severely challenged by the Turkish North East expansion.

Turkey has been able to well expand its foothold inside Syrian territory; it's much more powerful military, as well as its proximity to Syrian Kurdish areas give it major advantages in any race for territory along its borders. It backs proxy groups that operate alongside -although not necessarily with- undercover cells from ISIS, Arab tribes and regime supporters that challenge the authority of what they perceive as the covert dominance of the PYD on the SDF. The SDF recognizes increasingly its own inability to hold territory, especially without the full backing of the US. These subversive groups mentioned above, always pose the threat of staging guerilla attacks, especially in the absence of improved Arab Kurdish relations.

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741 Kenneth Rosen,, "Who Benefits from a U.S. Oil Deal in Northeast Syria?," Fikra Forum, September 18, 2020. Accessed October 29, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-benefits-u.s.-oil-deal-syria>.

## Chapter 2: Terrorism financing, an element of power or a source of weakness for terrorist groups?

Terrorism financing is defined as the funding of criminal activity with the aim of intimidating a population, or compelling a government or any international organization to do or abstain from doing any act<sup>742</sup>.

VNSAs, especially those in control of significant territory require massive amounts of money to operate, finance their activities, some of which terrorists and more importantly to survive on the long-term. VNSAs generally diversify their source of funds and rely on both licit or illicit ones, which can range from small donations to large amounts generated by contraband or drug activity. Very often, VNSAs rely on a variety of criminal activities, ranging from arms to human trafficking and racketeering. Generally, the more autonomous its revenue stream is, the more freedom a VNSA enjoys.

VNSA use evasion techniques used by money launderers to elude authorities' attention and to protect their funds and the identity of their controversial donors. The latter is essential for jihadists organizations to maintain their beneficiaries' continuous support.

The global financing of VNSAs is one way Mary Kaldor characterizes her New War theories.<sup>743</sup> She calls the emergence of this new financial system as a “new globalized war economy”. In such wars “production declines dramatically because of local competition, physical destruction or interruption in normal trade “, she said. Under those circumstances, she adds, the fighting units finance themselves through plunder hostage taking and the black market or through external assistance.

All techniques used by the three VNSA studied in this thesis.

As we will see in this chapter, Iraq and Lebanon VNSAs have moved their funds via the legitimate banking sectors, before reverting as sanctions grew to informal value-transfer systems and Hawalas. In addition, VNSA often rely on the oldest method of asset-transfer, namely the physical transportation of cash, gold and other valuables through smuggling routes.

In her book on New Wars, Mary Kaldor underlines that VNSAs rely on the trade of valuable commodities as one source of income<sup>744</sup>. As we will see in the following sections on

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742 “Training-Manual- Counter-Terrorism Financing,” UNODC (undated). Accessed January 29, 2020: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/pakistan//Report-TF-and-ML-Investigation-Training-Manual-Web.pdf>.

743 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*

744 Ibid.

Hezbollah and ISIS, the two organizations respectively dealt in drugs and antiquities to sustain the war effort. “ Given the collapse of productive act She calls the emergence of a parallel ivity, the main sources of income are what Mark Duffield calls asset transfer, i.e. the redistribution of existing assets so as to favor the fighting units or external assistance. The simplest form of asset transfer is looting, robbery extortion, pillage and hostage taking,” says Kaldor. The academic explains that other forms of asset transfers are market pressure such as checkpoints that provide groups with good sources of income. These activities were all linked to either Hezbollah or ISIS as you will see in the sections below. VNSAs has been also linked to legitimate abuse of external assistance. The latter can take the following forms: remittances and direct assistance from the diaspora, taxation of the humanitarian assistance , and assistance from foreign government. The latter has been the core strength of Hezbollah for the last four decades. Ultimately, VNSAs know that without funding they cannot purchase weapons, equipment, supplies, or services that allows them to expand their areas of control.

In this second chapter, we will study in detail the financing approaches of ISIS and Hezbollah, that allows them to maintain power. For ISIS we will look at the structure of the financial organization, its revenue streams, namely oil, confiscation measures, taxes, fees and fines, donations and investments. As for Hezbollah we take a look at their reliance on Iran, their illicit trades, the different regions, they operate in, the growing corruption they face . For the SDC, we will at their primary revenue streams and their reliance on the United States

### **I- Hezbollah and the slow diversification from Iran’s funding:**

Initially financed solely by Tehran, Hezbollah increasingly diversified its revenue stream in recent years, to reduce its dependence on Iran, and mitigate risks resulting from American sanctions. Hezbollah’s has thus been engaged in both licit and illicit businesses and trading operations, from the U.S to Africa. However, as Hezbollah’s clout increased over the past decade, with its growing hegemony on Lebanon and the influential role it has played in other countries and more specifically Syria, more and more of its members has been running side activities, mostly illicit, which have tainted the organization’s local reputation for integrity.

The Israeli army estimated in 2018 that Hezbollah received between USD 700 million - 1 billion per year from Tehran.<sup>(745)</sup> The main bulk of Hezbollah’s financing has thus been

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745 “Iran gives Hezbollah ‘between \$700 million and 1 billion a year,’ according to Israel,” L’Orient Le Jour, January 2, 2018 <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1092143/liran-donne-au-hezbollah-entre-700-millions-et-un-milliard-de-dollars-par-an-selon-le-chef-de-larmee-israelienne.html>

seen as corresponding to Kaldor's New war theory, in terms of the notion of reliance on an external sponsor. Sources within Hezbollah who spoke to the author added that the group has been diversifying its revenue stream through both licit and illicit funding. In recent years, drug and money laundering scandals have been linked to Hezbollah in South America, the United States, Europe, and Africa. In Lebanon, media reports and interviews with Hezbollah members have pointed to the involvement of figures in and close to the organization in drug and money laundering scheme scandals and in the grey economy.

Locally, much ambiguity surrounds the debate around Hezbollah's involvement in the drug trade for several reasons including the widespread support the organization enjoys within its community. Hezbollah is mostly known to have directly dealt in drugs schemes with members of the Israeli military in exchange for information, also called "drug-for-intelligence".<sup>(746)</sup> Another reason for the ambiguity is that in South America, radical Islamists whether affiliated with the Palestinian Jihad, Iran, or Hezbollah are often bundled together without clear distinction. Finally, Hezbollah members directly involved with illicit activity in Lebanon often use the coverage provided by their status in the organization to operate as free business agents, which highlights Hezbollah's growing internal corruption.<sup>(747)</sup>

Taking all of these nuances into consideration, this next section will examine Hezbollah's various revenue streams. In a first phase, the author looks into Hezbollah's sprawling structure and its relationship with Iran. The second sub-section will look at Hezbollah's international illicit activity. The final sub-section will focus on the organization's illicit activity in Lebanon and Syria. This author relied primarily on interviews conducted with current and former Hezbollah members as well as experts and individuals close to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

### **A-Hezbollah's Structure and Financial Relationship with Iran**

After the creation of Hezbollah in the 80s, Iran quickly realized that in order to protect its military gains in Lebanon, it had to capture the hearts and minds of its proxy's popular base. With Iran's assistance, Hezbollah built an extensive network of social services in Lebanon.<sup>(748)</sup> According to a report by the Middle East Policy Council (MEPC), Hezbollah developed a highly organized system of health and social service organizations under the

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746 "Israel soldier among arrested 'Hezbollah spies,'" , BBC, 20 June 2010 , <https://www.bbc.com/news/10462662>

747 Interview with Hezbollah commander, by author, Dahieh, February 2018,

748 Shawn Teresa Flanigan, Mounah Abdel-Samad, Hezbollah's Social Jihad: Nonprofits as Resistance Organizations, volume 16 Middle East Policy Council, June 2009: <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/hezbollahs-social-jihad-nonprofits-resistance-organizations>

umbrella of its Social Unit, Education Unit, and Islamic Health Unit. According to the MEPC, Hezbollah's Social Unit includes four organizations: the Jihad Construction Foundation (*Jihad al-Binaa*), the Martyrs' Foundation, the Foundation for the Wounded, and the Khomeini Support Committee. In the early 2000's, the Jihad Construction Foundation delivered water to about 45 percent of the residents of Beirut's southern suburbs and led reconstruction efforts in the southern suburbs after the 2006 war with Israel. In an interview with the author, Annahar columnist and Hezbollah expert Brahim Beyram estimated that Iran provided Hezbollah with \$200-300 million a year.

A source close to Hezbollah's fighters told the author in 2018 that "besides being financed by Iran, Hezbollah has diversified its money stream and is trying to be more autonomous financially." This could explain growing accusations against Hezbollah about its involvement in illicit activities. According to Dr. David Asher, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD), Hezbollah has developed a massive drugs-for-profit initiative. "Hezbollah, partnered with Latin American cartels and paramilitary partners, is now one of the largest exporters of narcotics from South and Central America to West Africa into Europe and is perhaps the world's largest money laundering organization," said Asher in a 2017 congressional testimony in front of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.<sup>(749)</sup>

### **B-Hezbollah's International Illicit Activities**

Hezbollah relies on a sprawling global network of members engaged in various illicit activities. Much of this effort is focused in Latin America. Hezbollah's illicit activity in South America appears to be focused on two main areas. Through supporters within the Lebanese Shi'a diaspora, "Hezbollah's drug trafficking operations in Latin America are spread over a number of places. The TBA is one; Colombia is another; there also important centers of trade that are used for money laundering purposes and smuggling, such as free trade zones there," said Dr. Emanuele Ottolenghi, a senior fellow at FDD, working on the Iran program.<sup>(750)</sup> In addition, Hezbollah's activities have also expanded to other countries and regions such as the U.S. and Europe.

#### ***i-The Tri-Border Area:***

In 2004, Assad Barakat was described by the U.S. Department of the Treasury as "one of the most prominent and influential members" of Hezbollah, according to a paper by Matt

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749 David Asher, "Attacking Hezbollah's financial networks," House Foreign Affairs Committee, June 8 2017, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20170608/106094/HHRG-115-FA00-Wstate-AsherD-20170608.PDF>  
750 Interview with Emanuel Ottolenghi by the author, June 2018.



Levitt, an expert on terrorism and security at the Washington Institute for Near East policies.<sup>(751)</sup> Barakat's import-export store at the Galeria Page shopping center in Paraguay was reportedly used for various nefarious activities ranging from counterfeit currency operations to drug running ones. Levitt's paper described the 2006 arrest of Farouk Omairi by the Brazilian Federal Police in Operation 'Camel,' for providing travel support to cocaine smugglers. Omairi was believed to be acting as regional coordinator for Hezbollah and was involved in trafficking narcotics between South America, Europe, and the Middle East.

Paraguay reportedly arrested Moussa Ali Hamdan in 2010 for providing material support to Hezbollah by selling counterfeit goods, money, and passports.<sup>(752)</sup> In 2013, Wassim Fadel was arrested in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay after he had used a 21-year-old Paraguayan girl as a "drug mule" to smuggle narcotics to Europe. The girl was caught with 1.1 kilos of cocaine in her stomach. According to a statement by Paraguayan police published by MEE, Fadel reportedly transferred the money he made from both narco-trafficking and the pirating of CDs and DVDs into bank accounts owned by people connected to Hezbollah located in Turkey and Syria. In May 2018, Foreign Policy reported that Paraguayan authorities raided Unique SA, a currency exchange house in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, and arrested its owner Nader Farhat for his role in an alleged \$1.3 million drug money laundering scheme.<sup>(753)</sup> "Farhat is alleged to be a member of the Business Affairs Component, the branch of Hezbollah's External Security Organization in charge of running overseas illicit finance and drug trafficking operations," said the article.

### ***ii-Venezuela:***

In 2008, the U.S. Department of Treasury sanctioned Hezbollah supporter Ghazi Nasr al-Din, a former Chargé d' Affaires at the Venezuelan Embassy in Damascus.<sup>(754)</sup> Hezbollah maintained a friendly and close relationship with the Venezuelan government led by Hugo Chavez, which evolved "into a tight ideological and business partnership," according to an article published by Now Lebanon.<sup>(755)</sup> The same article, quoting Lebanese Hezbollah expert Kassem Kassir, underlined that "a number of students and young men went [to Venezuela] to

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751 Matt Levitt, "Hezbollah narco-terrorism," IHS Defense, September 2012 [https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Levitt20120900\\_1.pdf](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Levitt20120900_1.pdf) a

752 Peter Spetjens, "Paraguay: Is Israel's latest 'best friend' also a Hezbollah haven?," May 21 2018, Middle East Eye (MEE)

753 Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Lebanon is protecting Hezbollah's cocaine trade in Latin America," Foreign Policy June 15, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/15/lebanon-is-protecting-hezbollahs-cocaine-and-cash-trade-in-latin-america/>

754 Treasury Targets Hezbollah in Venezuela, , US Department of treasury June 2008, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp1036.aspx>

755 [https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/how\\_much\\_does\\_venezuela\\_matter\\_to\\_hezbollah](https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/how_much_does_venezuela_matter_to_hezbollah)

participate in festivals, conferences and workshops. There were some consultants of Chavez who came to Beirut and visited Hezbollah officials.”

According to U.S. authorities, Venezuela acts as a safe heaven and a source of funding for Hezbollah members and supporters. In 2015, ABC International reported that Nasr al-Din maintained a close relationship with Tarek Aissami,<sup>(756)</sup> the former vice president of Venezuela who was accused by the U.S. of facilitating drug shipments out of Venezuela and of drug trafficking, and together they attended a meeting with members of the Cartel of the Suns, a powerful network of Venezuela traffickers. In 2009, Nasr al-Din was also linked to the transportation of 400 kilos of cocaine from Venezuela to Lebanon via Damascus, transported by Conviasa, the Venezuelan flag carrier.

“Spanish investigative journalist, Antonio Salas who covered extensively the subject, has emphasized that a group of Hezbollah members linked to the Nasr al-Din group have engaged in drug trafficking under protection of Aissami. These people enjoyed a special (privileged) relation with the state,” underlined expert Douglas Farah, in an interview with the author.<sup>(757)</sup>

### ***iii-Colombia:***

In 2008, U.S. and Colombian investigators dismantled an international cocaine smuggling and money laundering ring that allegedly used part of its profits to finance Hezbollah.<sup>(758)</sup> At the heart of the case was a kingpin in Bogota, Colombia, named Chekry Harb, who went by the alias "Taliban." According to the LA Times, Harb's group paid Hezbollah 12 percent of its profits, much of it in cash. “Harb brags about his uncle in the court documents being a senior member of Hezbollah,” said Ottolonghi to the author.

In December 2011, U.S. authorities accused Lebanese drug lord Aymen Jomaa, operating out of Medellin in Colombia, of allegedly helping to smuggle large amounts of cocaine into the U.S. and laundering more than \$250 million for the Mexican drug cartel Los Zetas.<sup>(759)</sup> Jomaa worked with at least nine other people and 19 entities to smuggle cocaine out of Colombia, before laundering the drug related proceeds from Mexico, Europe, West Africa, and Colombia through a Lebanese bank. Sometimes part of that money was sent to

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756 Blasco Emily, “El FBI investiga la conexión entre el narcoestado venezolano y Hizbolá,” ABC, January 31 2015, <https://www.abc.es/internacional/20150130/abci-venezuela-droga-201501302321.html>

757 Douglas Farah is a national security consultant and analyst, the president of IBI Consultants, and a Senior Fellow at the International Assessment and Strategy Center.

758 Chris Kraul and Sebastian Rotella, “Drug probe finds Hezbollah link,” October 22 2008, LA Times, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/oct/22/world/fg-cocainering22>

759 Longmire Sylvia, “DEA Arrests Hezbollah Members For Allegedly Laundering Cartel Money,” Homeland Security February 5 2016, <https://inhomelandsecurity.com/dea-arrests-hezbollah-members-allegedly-laundering-cartel-money/>

Mexico City in cash shipments to be delivered to drug cartel Los Zetas. The U.S. investigation also linked a money-laundering scheme to Elissa and Ayash Exchange,<sup>(760)</sup> and to the Lebanese Canadian Bank, which were sanctioned under the USA Patriot Act 311. “The link between Aymen Jomaa and Hezbollah was made because the money was directly traced back to Hezbollah controlled accounts although Jomaa was known mostly to be a supporter of the militant group,” said Farah. “Jomaa laundered on average 200 million dollars a month for drug cartels. Based on a number of other cases, we know that Hezbollah facilitators take 15-20 percent share a year. That means that the Jomaa operation alone would generate more than 400 million a year for this ( Los Zetas) organization,” said Ottolonghi in an interview with the author.

Investigators believe that some of the drug profits money was laundered through a used car trade-based scheme from the United States to West Africa. According to a report by the U.S. Department of the treasury<sup>761</sup>, figures close to Hezbollah were believed to be involved with a drug, merchandise and money laundering operation where products were transported across the Togo and Ghana borders on their way from Benin to the airport in Accra, and the cash was then shipped by Middle East Airlines to Lebanon. Hezbollah affiliates deposited bulk cash into the financial exchange houses with the money then routed through the Lebanese Canadian Bank and other financial institutions and subsequently wired money to the United States allowing the used-car businesses to purchase vehicles. The vehicles were then shipped again to West Africa for resale, said the report.

#### ***iv-The Caribbean:***

In 2009, 17 people were reportedly arrested in Curacao for allegedly being involved in a drug trafficking ring with connections to Hezbollah.<sup>(762)</sup> The Curacao police underlined at the time that some of the proceeds, funneled through informal Middle Eastern banks, went toward supporting groups linked to Hezbollah in Lebanon. "We have been able to establish that this (Curacao) group has relations with international criminal organizations that have connections with the Hezbollah," prosecutor Ludmila Vicente said to the Guardian. The amount confiscated by the police was significant and included two shipments of cocaine totaling 2,000 kilograms (4,400 pounds). The traffickers used cargo ships and speedboats to

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760 “Attacking Hezbollah’s financial network: policy options” June 8, 2017 statement of Derek S. Maltz, United States House of Representatives House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

761 “Finding that the Lebanese Canadian Bank SAL is a Financial Institution of Primary Money Laundering Concern,” Department of the Treasury (undated), <https://www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/shared/LCBNoticeofFinding.pdf>

762 “17 arrested on Curacao for involvement in Hezbollah-linked drug ring,” Associated Press, April 29, 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/29/curacao-caribbean-drug-ring-hezbollah>

import the drugs from Colombia and Venezuela for shipment to Africa and beyond to Europe, according to Curacao authorities.

***v-The United States:***

According to a report by Matthew Levitt,<sup>(763)</sup> in 2009 the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency revealed a series of Hezbollah criminal schemes in the U.S. which ranged from stolen laptops, passports, and gaming consoles to selling stolen and counterfeit currency, procuring weapons, and a wide range of other types of material support. “In those cases, senior Hezbollah officials from both the organization's public and covert branches played hands-on roles in the planning and execution of many of the criminal schemes,” said Levitt. In July 2015, Lebanese National Ali Hassan Mansour was arrested pursuant to a provisional arrest warrant issued in the Southern District of Florida by French authorities through diplomatic channels.<sup>(764)</sup> Mansour, a money launderer based in Beirut, was charged with multiple counts of money laundering over the course of a narcotics conspiracy. The report labeled Mansour as being a key money launderer and drug trafficker for Hezbollah’s External Security Office, and Business Affairs Component (BAC) global illicit network.

In 2017, another Lebanese man accused of trying to use his ties to Hezbollah to further a scheme to launder drug money pleaded guilty in New York.<sup>(765)</sup> Joseph Asmar worked with Lebanese businesswoman Iman Kobeissi, who had boasted she could use her Hezbollah connections to provide security for drug shipments. Kobeissi, who had been arrested earlier, had admitted she had friends in Hezbollah who wanted to purchase cocaine, weapons, and ammunition, according to the complaint.<sup>(766)</sup> Kobeissi said her associates in Africa could provide security for planeloads of cocaine heading to the U.S. and other countries. She was also accused by prosecutors of having laundered hundreds of thousands of dollars in illegal drug money through transactions in European and Lebanese banks. “The Iman Kobeissi case is one of the cases that have directly linked senior Hezbollah leadership to drug trafficking activities,” said Ottolenghi.

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763 Matt Levitt, “Hezbollah's Criminal Networks: Useful Idiots, Henchmen, and Organized Criminal Facilitators,” National Defense University, October 2016: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-criminal-networks-useful-idiots-henchmen-and-organized-criminal>

764 Asher, “Attacking Hezbollah’s financial network,”

765 Jonathan Stemple, “U.S. says Hezbollah associate pleads guilty to money laundering conspiracy,” Reuters, June 27, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-crime-hezbollah-asmara/u-s-says-hezbollah-associate-pleads-guilty-to-money-laundering-conspiracy-idUSL1N1IS1K2>

766 “2 Lebanese charged with laundering money for Hezbollah,” Ya Libnan, October 10, 2015 <http://yalibnan.com/2015/10/10/2-lebanese-charged-with-laundering-money-for-hezbollah/>

### ***vi-Europe:***

In January 2016, ‘Operation Cedar’ raids targeted Hezbollah operations in France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium, led by local law enforcement and supported by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.<sup>(767)</sup> These raids resulted in the arrest of over a dozen individuals involved in international criminal activities such as drug trafficking and drug related money laundering activities. During the raids, several millions in assets and cash were seized that were believed to be linked to drug proceeds collected by money launderers throughout Europe. ”These actions specifically targeted Lebanese Hezbollah criminal operations in Europe,” said Asher at the time.<sup>768</sup> For Ottolenghi,<sup>(769)</sup> Operation Cedar was another case that directly tied Hezbollah leadership to illegal activities. “Europe is a booming market for cocaine. Hezbollah taps that market by facilitating multi-ton shipments of cocaine from Latin America into Europe. Hezbollah operatives are involved in laundering its revenues there on behalf of local criminal syndicates,” he noted.

These prominent cases linked to Hezbollah’s illicit activity demonstrate that networks linked to the Lebanese militant group were clearly operating at an international level. Project Cassandra, which was unveiled in 2017 by Politico magazine,<sup>(770)</sup> was launched in 2008 by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to target Hezbollah’s illicit funding streams. The project showed that cocaine shipments – some traveling from Latin America to West Africa and on to Europe and the Middle East, and others through Venezuela and Mexico to the U.S. – were all connected to a line of dirty money, laundered through used car schemes that were shipped to Africa. The FBI believed at the time that the Hezbollah network was collecting \$1 billion a year from drug and weapons trafficking, money laundering, and other criminal activities.

### ***vii- Lebanon , a narco state?***

The end of the war in Syria witnessed the expansion of exports of captagon. An amphetamine, captagon was largely used by ISIS fighters. The drug was also sought after Gulf countries. According to sources close to Hezbollah’s<sup>771</sup> party’s commanders, more and more of the party leadership is now involved in the production and the smuggling of captagon

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767 Asher, “Attacking Hezbollah’s financial network.”

768 Ibid.

769 Interview with Emani Ottolenghi, by Mona Alami June 2018

770 Josh Meyer, “The secret backstory of how Obama let Hezbollah off the hook,” Politico, December 2017,

<https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/obama-hezbollah-drug-trafficking-investigation/>

771 Interview with an anonymous source, by Mona Alami Beirut, May 2021.

across to Syria. The latter has also caught on the production trade. It is believed that Bashar Assad's brother Maher is now one of the great Baron of the Captagon trade<sup>772</sup>.

Captagon loads have been caught many times in Beirut's port. Working on a documentary on Hezbollah's captagon trade, the author was asked 2000 USD to be taken to a captagon production plant in the Bekaa. Hezbollah growing hegemony over Lebanon transit points mean that captagon is not necessarily smuggled via Syria. "The Captagon trade in Syria has extensive roots in Lebanon, as the Syrian Fourth Division [led by Bashar al Assad's youngest brother, Maher] and regime-aligned narcoentrepreneurs have forged deep alliances with Hezbollah, using Lebanon as a key transit route and production site for the trade," said Caroline Rose, author of *The Captagon Threat: A Profile of Illicit Trade, Consumption and Regional Realities*<sup>773</sup>. "Captagon smugglers have used Lebanese ports, exploited corrupt governing systems, and have established small-scale, mobile Captagon laboratories along the Qalamoun mountain range that can easily shift over the Lebanese-Syrian border," she told *The Media Line*.

## **II-Hezbollah's Legal Financing**

Hezbollah does not rely on illicit trade alone for financing, which with time and the crackdown on its operations become more difficult to achieve. More and more, especially as its clout over Lebanon grew, the organization also ensured it had revenue from legitimate businesses in Lebanon and Africa. "Part of Hezbollah's attempt to diversify its revenue stream is the organization's licit enterprises. Hezbollah uses front figures to operate legitimate businesses mostly involved in construction, car dealing as well as gas stations in Lebanon, and trading activities in Africa," said a source close to the party to the author.

In recent years, Hezbollah-linked businesses have been targeted by U.S. law enforcement organizations for money laundering activity. In 2018, the U.S. Treasury designated six individuals and seven entities pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13224,<sup>(774)</sup> which targets terrorists and those providing support to terrorists or acts of terrorism. Specifically, they designated Lebanon-based Jihad Muhammad Qansu, Ali Muhammad Qansu, Issam Ahmad Saad, and Nabil Mahmoud Assaf, and Iraq-based Abdul Latif Saad and

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772 Taim Alhaji, "The Al-Assad Regime's Captagon Trade," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 6, 2022: accessed May 22, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88109>.

773 Andrea López-Tomás, "Addictive Drug Captagon Is Financial Savior of Hizbullah and Syria," *The Media Line*, December 25, 2022, <https://themedialine.org/by-region/addictive-drug-captagon-is-financial-savior-of-hizbullah-and-syria/>.

774 "Treasury Targets Hizbullah Financial Network in Africa and the Middle East," U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 2, 2018: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0278>

Muhammad Badr-Al-Din for acting for or on behalf of Hezbollah member and financier Adham Tabaja or his company, Al-Inmaa Engineering and Contracting. The U.S. also designated Sierra Leone-based Blue Lagoon Group LTD and Kanso Fishing Agency Limited, Ghana-based Star Trade Ghana Limited, Liberia-based Dolphin Trading Company Limited (DTC), Sky Trade Company, and Golden Fish Liberia LTD, and Lebanon-based Golden Fish S.A.L. (Offshore) for being owned or controlled by Ali Muhammad Qansu. Adham Tabaja had already been previously sanctioned in 2015, along with Kassem Hijaj and Husein Ali Faoud.<sup>(775)</sup> “The DEA has identified Adham Tabaja as one Hezbollah’s most senior member within the organization’s Business Component Affairs,” said Ottolenghi. Tabaja is also known to be a majority owner of the Lebanon-based real estate development and construction firm Al-Inmaa Group for Tourism Works. The company’s subsidiaries include Al-Inmaa Engineering and Contracting, which operates in Lebanon and Iraq, as well as Lebanon-based Al-Inmaa for Entertainment and Leisure Projects. In 2018, Tabaja is believed to have used the Iraqi branches of Al-Inmaa Engineering and Contracting to obtain oil and construction development contracts in Iraq. Kassem Hijaj was also accused of investing in infrastructure that Hezbollah uses in both Lebanon and Iraq.

Another man, Husain Ali Faour,<sup>776</sup> was accused of being a member of Hezbollah’s Islamic Jihad, which is believed to be the unit responsible for carrying out the group’s overseas terrorist activities. Faour managed the Lebanon-based Car Care Center, a front company used to supply Hezbollah’s vehicle needs. Faour worked with Tabaja to secure and manage construction, oil, and other projects in Iraq for Al-Inmaa Engineering and Contracting. A new wave of sanctions in 2019, targeted Hassan Tabaja, the brother of Adham and Wael Bazzi for facilitating Hezbollah financial operations.<sup>(777)</sup>

A source close to Hezbollah members told the author that in addition to car, trading, and construction activity, the organization is also involved in the diamond and gold trade in Africa. Expert Douglas Farah concurs, adding that Africa was a good collection point for Hezbollah, whose activity ranges from blood diamond trade to Europe, especially to Antwerp, in Belgium.

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775, US sanctions target Businesses close to Hezbollah, Wilson Center June 10, 2015  
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/us-sanctions-target-businesses-linked-to-hezbollah>

776 “**Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Front Companies and Facilitators in Lebanon And Iraq,**” U.S. Department of the Treasury October 2015

777 “US issues new Hezbollah-related sanctions,” Al-Jazeera, April 24 2019,  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/issues-hezbollah-related-sanctions-190424175927380.html>



Diamond and trade are not the only business Hezbollah members are involved in. In 2012, Reuters reported that the Democratic Republic of Congo had awarded forestry concessions to the Trans-M company, which was subject to sanctions by the U.S. for being a front company used by Hezbollah.<sup>(778)</sup> Reuters explained that the concessions covered a 25-year lease for hundreds of thousands of hectares of rainforest in the central African country. “The concessions are capable of generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues over 25 years, if fully exploited,” forestry experts told Reuters. Trans-M was controlled by businessman Ahmed Tajideen, known to also be the owner of Congo Futur, a company that manages sawmills and is accused by the U.S. government of being a front for Hezbollah.

### **III- Hezbollah’s Illicit Lebanese and Syrian Activities**

At the local level in Lebanon, Hezbollah members appear to be directly involved in criminal enterprises including drug dealing, racketeering, production of counterfeit money and medication, both with or without the knowledge of the top leadership. “Hezbollah’s direct dealing with drugs is solely for political and security reasons. Most drug deals are connected to the drug-for-intelligence and information scheme it has run with members of the Israeli army,” said Hassan, a Hezbollah fighter who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Since its creation, Hezbollah has been using drug dealers, to pursue the organization’s intelligence and military objectives.<sup>(779)</sup> Hezbollah was known to employ drug dealers for advancing its political interests, taking advantage of its control over Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, which is known for its lucrative poppy and hashish production to infiltrate the Israeli military. The organization gave drug dealers political protection as long as they provided the organization with information on Israel. Over the years, a number of Israeli military officers have been charged with drug smuggling or dealing from Lebanon and providing information to Hezbollah.<sup>(780)</sup> Hezbollah has also relied on drug dealers to recruit agents among Israeli Arabs.

According to Hezbollah fighters interviewed by the author, Hezbollah’s involvement in the drug trade in Lebanon is no longer driven solely by political or military interests. Sources explain that today, some Hezbollah commanders are tapping into the lucrative drug market for their own personal benefit. This has happened as the organization’s clout has

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778 Dino Mahatani, “Exclusive: Congo under scrutiny over Hezbollah business links,” Reuters, March 16 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-congo-democratic-hezbollah/exclusive-congo-under-scrutiny-over-hezbollah-business-links-idUSBRE82F0TT20120316>

779 Yossi Melman, “Hezbollah’s drug trail,” The Jerusalem Post, October 7, 2016 <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Analysis-Hezbollahs-drug-trail-469616>

780 “Israel soldier among arrested ‘Hezbollah spies,’”



grown in recent years, with its consolidation of power in Lebanon in 2006, and its entry into the Syrian war in 2011. The author could not confirm or invalidate these allegations.

“Hezbollah turns a blind eye to the drug plantations around its training camps, and drug dealers provides it with significant contributions from their proceeds,” said a source close to the organization’s members, on the condition of anonymity. The Lebanese army has long been instructed not to approach spots where Hezbollah is known to host its training camps in the Bekaa, which is the hub of Lebanon’s drug production. One Hezbollah commander hailing from the Bekaa told the author that some members of the organization were involved in abetting dealers involved in the transfer of cocaine into Lebanon to be smuggled into Syria, an accusation the author could not confirm independently. According to a source involved in the drug trade, cocaine is smuggled into Lebanon where it is processed and sent to Syria, and from there to the Gulf.

Machines used in the production of the drug Captagon are smuggled into Lebanon illegally via the port of Beirut, where Hezbollah is influential. “Hezbollah commanders also facilitate through their control of Lebanese borders with Syria their export of drugs such as Captagon,” added the Bekaa commander who was interviewed by the author and who asked to remain anonymous. Lebanon is a large exporter of captagon, sent through the Beirut port or across the Syrian border, with the goal of reaching Gulf countries, explained a source close to the drug dealing networks on the condition of anonymity.

Hezbollah fighters, who spoke to the author for this thesis, accused the organization’s commanders of covering up illicit business dealings. “Hezbollah’s leadership is often aware of the dealings but has seem reluctant to rein in on them because of the high military or political status many commanders have acquired within the organization, especially after the war against Israel in 2006 and currently in Syria,” complained one fighter. It is important to understand why Hezbollah is not doing anything about its members’ illicit activity and rampant corruption, because of its reliance on these commanders for its external operations.

In addition to the drug trade, members of Hezbollah are also involved in the production of counterfeited money in the Lebanese suburb of Dahieh, explained the Bekaa Hezbollah commander in an interview by the author. The counterfeit bills are in turn traded via an international network, which is why Lebanon is known to be a producer of counterfeited money. In 2016, the New York Post reported that a large money-counterfeiting ring was busted when a Lebanese man was arrested for allegedly selling hundreds of thousands of dollars in counterfeit U.S. currency to a global network of clients in Iran,

Malaysia, and elsewhere.<sup>(781)</sup> According to the Post, between 2012 and 2014, Louay Ibrahim Hussein and other members of the ring sold more than \$620,000 in high-quality fake \$100 bills and €150,000 in fake Euros to undercover agents. Hussein had allegedly claimed to undercover agents that he had access to as much as \$800 million in high-quality counterfeit currency.

Other illicit dealings by Hezbollah members are connected to Iranian aid to Lebanon. One fighter also speaking on condition of anonymity explained that since 2006, food aid given by Iran to Hezbollah, often ended up being sold on the Lebanese market instead of being distributed free. In 2013, a warrant was issued against the brother of the Lebanese Minister of State for Administrative Reform, Mohammad Fneish Abdul Latif Fneish, in connection to a case of illegally imported medications.<sup>(782)</sup> “The brother of another Hezbollah minister has also been accused of running a Captagon production facility in Dahieh, every one of us is aware of the issue,” said the Hezbollah commander hailing from the Bekaa and who spoke on condition of anonymity. The author could not independently confirm the accusations.

The Syria war has been another financial boon for Hezbollah commanders, said a Hezbollah fighter speaking on condition of anonymity to the author. “A lot of the weapons seized from Syrian ‘terrorists’ or from ISIS is not given to the Syrian army but sold on the black market ( in Lebanon), which has contributed for the decline of weapons prices such as Kalashnikov, PKC and B7 on the Lebanese market,” said a source close to Hezbollah fighters in an interview in 2018. The Syrian war has flooded the region with weapons being smuggled into the country. In 2016, a team of reporters from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) and the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) uncovered discreet sale of more than €1 billion worth of weapons in the past four years to Middle Eastern countries that were known to ship arms to Syria.<sup>(783)</sup> Thousands of assault rifles such as AK-47s, mortar shells, rocket launchers, anti-tank weapons, and heavy machine guns were being routed through an arms pipeline from the Balkans to the Arabian Peninsula and countries bordering Syria.

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781 Lia Eustaseuwich, “Lebanon man accused of selling counterfeited money abroad,” New York Post, July 26, 2016., <https://nypost.com/2016/07/26/lebanese-man-accused-of-selling-counterfeit-us-currency-abroad/>

782 “Arrest Warrant Issued against Minister Fneish’s Brother of Drugs Scandal,” Naharnet, February 13, 2013: <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/72039>

783 “Revealed: the £1bn of weapon flowing from Europe to Middle East,” The Guardian, July 27, 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/27/weapons-flowing-eastern-europe-middle-east-revealed-arms-trade-syria>

“There might have one or two accusations of corruption with the war in Syria but these are exceptional and individual cases linked to the conflict there. Hezbollah has very strict rules about anything seized in war theaters and even during battle we were forced to do a detailed inventory of what we seized, and we are obliged to report any mismanagement,” said one Hezbollah commander, commenting on Hezbollah’s alleged illicit activity.

Sources close to Hezbollah admit that its members have been promised lucrative infrastructure contracts in Syria, specifically in Homs and Aleppo. Sometimes, Hezbollah members sponsor Lebanese businessmen getting these contracts in return for a cut of the profits. “The same scenario is taking place in areas under Hezbollah control such as Dahieh. Hezbollah commanders are involved in the parallel economy of providing electricity, satellite connection and water, leaving the government with failing services,” said the source close to the fighters.

Hezbollah’s Lebanon and Syria activities fail within Kaldor’s new war theory and concept of state failure. As state power further erodes in Lebanon and Syria, borders fade , corruption increases and allegiance based on identity increase across borders facilitating illicit trade networks . in the Bekaa region close by Syria, networks of smugglers , aligned with Lebanese and Syrian officials, all hailing from the Shi’i and Alawite communities turn a blind eye to smuggling activities taking place between Lebanon and Syria from drugs, weapons to more recently oil and dollars. Economists who spoke to this author on condition of anonymity in 2019 claimed that billions of dollars in subsidized oils had been smuggled into Syria<sup>784</sup>. In July 2020, currency changers told the author that millions were being smuggled to Syria with political backing of parties<sup>785</sup>. Asset and transfer and market pressure becomes the norm for Hezbollah across Lebanon and Syria.

#### **IV- ISIS Grand state Dreams and its devolution into racketeering**

Since its emergence in 2014, ISIS has showed its capability in operating in a semi-state like fashion. As seen in the previous chapter, the organization was labeled as the richest terrorist group at its peak in 2014, when it was in control of large oil and gas reserves, from the Ajeel field in Iraq to the Omar field in Syria. At the time, the organization was believed be generating one to two billion, per year.

ISIS has adopted a governmental approach structured around the diwans, including three dealing with financial issues. These are Diwan al-Zakat (Zakat department), Diwan Bayt

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784 Interview with Lebanese economist, Beirut, by Mona Alami March 2019.

785 Interview with Lebanese currency changer, by Mona Alami July 2020

al-Mal (financial department) and Diwan Rikaz, (resources department). These ministries are responsible for ISIS revenues and budgets.

This section will look at the ISIS financial structure and its budgetary policies, followed by an insight into the organization revenue stream and budgetary constraints. Finally, it will look at the evolution of ISIS from a semi-communist system to a predatory organization.

### **A-ISIS Government and financial ministries**

The Diwan Bayt al-Mal was foremost responsible for IS' financial policy. Still according to Hashemi's, the Finance Committee affiliated to the Diwan Bayt al-Mal was responsible for the strategic financial security axis and budgeting. The committee allocates money to the committees, regions, committees and organizational centers so that the money is distributed according to the curriculum set by the committee of money.

Both Hashemi and Iraqi expert Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi<sup>786</sup> who were interviewed by the author believe that ISIS has certainly developed a budgetary policy. According to the report by Hashemi, ISIS officials looked into the volume, sustainability, type and monthly financial resources from donations, commercial economic activity, theft and spoils. They then looked at the organization's monthly spending from and needs. These according to Hashemi included the expense of administrators and their monthly salaries, salaries for employees not formally affiliated with the organization, the salaries of the fighters and their families, military equipment and media efforts.

Tamimi who studied purported rough draft ISIS budgeting for the Deir al-Zor region in 2014-2015 found similar budgetary patterns. "ISIS does encourage the idea of provincial budgets working toward a surplus. The documents I have, show that the main priority goes to military expenditure, salaries, benefits for fighters and weapons," explains the researcher. The purported Deir al-Zor rough draft budgeting showed that expenditures were divided in the following manner: Expenditures for bases 19.8% , Fighters' salaries 43.6% , Media 2.8% ,Islamic Police 10.4% , Diwan al-Khidamat (Services Department) 17.7%, Diwan Bayt al-Mal: aid sums 5.7%.

### **B-ISIS revenues**

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786 Interview with Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, by Mona Alami. June 2017

ISIS depended at the height of the caliphate essentially on a diverse base revenue stream including ore ( oil, gas and antiquities ), confiscations, taxes and donations.

### *i-Oil*

“In 2014, the organization which became ISIS evolved and its revenue stream came from such as the field of Allas and Hajeel and the refinery of Baiji,” says Iraqi expert Fadel Abul Ragheef<sup>787</sup>. In Syria, at one point, ISIS controlled in Syria 11 oil fields in the governorates of Deir al-Zour, Hasaka, Raqqa and Homs, explained Jalal Hamad from the Justice For Life Organization<sup>788</sup>. The organization sold crude oil to neighboring countries and regions: Turkey, Iran, Iraq's Kurdistan, the Assad regime, Aleppo countryside, Idlib through a group of mediators who supervise and control a regional smuggling network. “ISIS sold ( in 2015) oil barrels at an average price of US \$ 20-25. Oil was a priority but after the coalition targeting of fields, its contribution to ISIS budget dropped. As an example, the production of the Omar field dropped from 16,000 barrels per day to now 1,800 barrels”, explained Hamad at the time of the interview in 2017. According to the organization’s director, ISIS also controlled at its height the gas-producing plants of Conoco Gas Plant and the Al-Shaddadi Plant . It also controlled, a number of wet oils producing gas fields that it pumped to Assad's power plants. The organization was selling up to 2015 the gas cylinder at a price of (1.25) US dollars.

### *ii-Antiquities*

Antiquities are another source of revenue, also managed by Diwan Rikaz. According to Abul Ragheif, ISIS purged various ancient sites such as such as Palmyra or the Nabi Younes shrine. The extraction and sale of antiquities seems to have been regulated by ISIS. “People who work in digging antiquities have to obtain a license from ISIS Diwan Rikaz and pay 20% of all finds( to ISIS),” explains Abou Mohamad Deiri, a Syrian respondent hailing from the region of Deir Zour<sup>789</sup>. Another respondent, Hatem from Syria’s Bu Kamal, explained that ISIS had brought in heavy machinery to excavate in Salihya, a town located 30 km away Bu Kamal as well as in Marea, another region close to the city<sup>790</sup>. “Most of the antiquities are sold to smugglers in Turkey, in small items, but we had one item that was sold

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787 Interview with Fadel Abul Ragheef, by Mona Alami, June 2017

788 Interview with jalal Hamad, by Mona Alami, May 2017.

789 Interview with Abou Mohamad Deiri by Mona Alami, April 2017.

790 Interview with Hatem, by Mona Alami, April 2017

9 to traffickers) for 200 million SP (\$400,000), a gold bracelet from the Babylonian phase ,” he explained. Two other respondents admitted that most of the smuggled antiquities were sold in Syria and Turkey.

### *iii-Confiscation*

Confiscation is another major essential source of revenues for the terrorist organization. According to Tamimi, confiscations (from religious minorities and opponents to the group) represented over 44.7% of the purported ISIS’ Deir al-Zor draft budget. Eight of 15 respondents interviewed in the framework of this research (conducted between April and June 2017 by WhatsApp) underlined the systematic confiscation of assets owned by Christians and other minorities, the highest prevalence being in the city of Mosul, which was home to a large number of Shi’a and Christians, among many others. In Mosul respondents pointed to the systematic search of all Christians leaving and who were stripped of all belonging from jewelry to money and other items.” The Hesba searched all the Christian women who were leaving Mosul and took their valuables, including their jewelry”, says Abu Bilal, a Mosul resident<sup>791</sup>. Their houses and land were confiscated and were given to ISIS members. Ahmad a travel agent from Mosul underlined that belongings of Christians families were sold on the public market Farming lands owned by Shi’a were also rented out and their cattle sold to Syria<sup>792</sup>. In addition, plants owned by big companies or feeing residents were also expropriated.

### *iv-Taxes*

Taxes fees and fines are another major source of revenue for ISIS. Direct taxes, which include transit taxes, revenue and property taxes as well as farming produce, appear to have been highly structured and organized. This level of organization reflects on all sectors of activity from the transit department managed according to one respondent by the ISIS Economic Security (Amn Iqtisadi) to the Zakat and Agricultural department. In the words of Rola, a resident of Deir al-Zor a Syrian region and who was interviewed while still in ISIS territory: “goods coming in from different areas were subject to invoice inspection”<sup>793</sup>. She added as well that taxes were assessed according to the value of the goods. The freight

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791 Interview with Abou Bilal, by Mona Alami, April 2017

792 Interview with Ahmad, by Mona Alami, April 2017

793 Interview with Rola, by Mona Alami, April 2017.

forwarding offices were subject to inspection by the Islamic State. These offices were required to submit statements on the outgoing and incoming trucks and the type of goods. Outgoing trucks had to obtain an authorization by ISIS. The value of the form had to be paid at the Travel Bureau and each truck driver who obtained an authorization could be accompanied by one person only.

It remains unclear what amounts were raised by ISIS on transit as taxes reported varied greatly from one respondent to another. As an example, Iraqi expert Abul Rgheef believed that ISIS imposed \$600 to \$800 for every truck transporting oil, while most respondents reported that trucks had to pay a \$100 to \$200 per ton, the first estimation ( \$100) also converging with that of Hashemi<sup>794</sup>. Other respondents underscored nonetheless that generally taxes on transit were calculated on the basis of the 2.5% zakat applied to the value of the merchandise transported.

Similar processes were put in place at the level of the Zakat bureau. Still according to Rola's statement which was confirmed by several other respondents in Syria, ISIS verified citizens income was recorded it in the registers of the Relations Bureau. "Each individual had to go to the Zakat Bureau and inform IS about their properties in order to calculate the value of the tax that is due. Committees inspected and counted people's properties. Individuals were fined double for failing to fully register their properties," underlines Rola.

In addition, ISIS appears to have imposed taxes on salary transfers both in Iraq for government employees and in Syria on Syrian workers transferring money to their families back home. Mohamad, a nurse who worked in Mosul, explained his father who was a retired military was receiving \$700 every two months<sup>795</sup>. "They used to tax my dad about \$40 to \$50 ( about 7%) on his salary," he points out. Saad a retired military, also residing in Mosul confirmed Mohamad's account, adding that ISIS imposed taxes on any transfer coming into Mosul, with the percentage rising when the amount exceeded \$700,going up to 15 percent<sup>796</sup>. Similar impositions were applied in Syria where according to Fatima, who resided in rural Aleppo, ISIS had started forcing people to pay a currency charge of 5000 SP ( \$10), and an additional \$50 for the \$300 her husband transferred every month from Lebanon<sup>797</sup>.

Businesses were also forced to pay revenue taxes and licensing fees. According to Hashemi, businesses had to pay taxes that could vary from \$2,500 and \$5,000. However,

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794 Interview with Fadel Abul Rgheer and Hisham Hashemi, by Mona Alami, June 2017.

795 Interview with Mohamad, by Mona Alami, April 2017.

796 Interview with Saad, by Mona Alami, April 2017.

797 Interview with Fatima, by Mona Alami, June 2017.

respondents underlined that taxation represented a percentage of the registered capital, in a form of license. In addition to that respondents reported that taxation on the business revenues was estimated on the base of the company's stock, generally at 2.5% with one respondent estimating that it could go up to 3%. "The revenues of large companies and corporate owners were periodically audited and recorded in special registers. Taxes were imposed under the pretext of Zakat. Sales and purchases had to be publicly registered, including the audited capital and profits, and the amount of taxes due," explained Rola<sup>798</sup>. According to Bakr, who lived in the city of Mayadeen one of the last ISIS territory to fall, inspectors and auditors reviewed invoices and sale and purchase records in commercial stores, and often conducted surprise visits as civilians to trick merchants<sup>799</sup>.

Similar measures were applied to the farming sector, explained Bakr, which was managed by the Agriculture Bureau, thus resembling to a large extent to what was previously known as the Farmers Union in terms of taxes (percentage of produce) and arrangements. "It was in charge of managing agricultural land and controlling irrigation, crops, etc.," he added. All farmers were affiliated with the Agriculture Bureau, which in turn audited agricultural produce and thus collected the corresponding tax. According to respondents' taxation on the farming sector varied from 5% to 10%. "You paid (rent) from 500 SP (\$1) to 2000 SP or \$4 per Dunam per year ( 1000 meters). After harvesting, farmers had also to pay between 5% to 10% depending on the produce and whether the land was irrigated or not," explained Mohamad Deiri, a Syria resident. Hassan a resident of rural Aleppo added that 12,000 SP (\$24) were paid per year for irrigation to ISIS. "ISIS also expropriated the local landlord, who was living in Aleppo and rented out his lands to local farmers, each hectare at 10,000 SP (\$20) a year," he added.

### ***v-Fees and fines***

As illustrated previously in the farming sector, ISIS imposed fees on services. It also added a flurry of fees on other services such as cleanliness, in some cases generators fees as well as rental of public market space. Most Iraqi respondents pointed to electricity fees varying from \$4 monthly for water and phone or water and electricity when the latter was available and municipal fees of \$4 monthly. The prices were slightly cheaper in Syria where water and cleanliness fees amounted from \$1 to \$8 in Syria.

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798 Interview with Rola, by Mona Alami, April 2017.

799 Interview with Bakr, by Mona Alami, April 2017.



Fines also appear to have been an increasing form of revenue by ISIS. These fines ranged from ones applied to people not compliant with Islamic Sharia to general driving infractions. Among the first class, most common were those imposed on women un-Islamic clothing (namely dressed without a niqab or a khimar- a transparent fabric that covers the face- or a colorful abaya instead of the black garb). In such cases, fines amounted from \$5 to \$43 in Iraq and Syria. Similar fines were placed on men, who did not conform to the Islamic beard and short pants (in the style of the Pakistani salwar kamiz). These fines varied from \$4 to \$40. “When you did not respect Islamic law, if a woman’s niqab was not proper, you were fined 8000 SP (\$16), other fines went up to 10,000 SP (\$20),” emphasizes Abu Hassan, a resident of the Deir Zour area<sup>800</sup>. Alongside these sharia fines, others were imposed, such as driving fines, which were estimated from \$8.50 to \$21. Some respondents explained that drivers had to obtain ISIS car licenses, priced at about \$60 to \$100 yearly. However, one respondent underlined that this fee was zakat to be paid yearly on the car value. Other sources were imposed on cigarette smokers and cigarette traders. “If the traders were not whipped or put to death, he was forced to pay a fine that amounted to five times the value of the packs, explained Abou Mohamad, a Syrian respondent<sup>801</sup>. Such amounts could go up in some cases to \$10,000 or \$30,000.

### *vi-Donations*

Another source of revenue for ISIS is donations from the organizer’s sympathizers either directly or indirectly through charities and relief organizations. According to Hashemi, Abu Qaeda ideologues such as Musab al-Soury, Dr. Abdul Qader bin Abdul Aziz and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi warned of the dependence of the terror group on donations which stripped them from their freedom . According to an [article](#) by al-Bayna news, ISIS is still able to raise money through donations indirectly or directly. The direct financing of the organization is usually in the form of remittances sent by wealthy people to persons belonging to ISIS. “These transfers go through the Iraqi banking system and according to the law. The recipient gives the money by giving his personal information and justifying receipt of these amounts as a price to buy a property, lab or car. These transfers are sent once or twice a month, amounting to \$ 27,000, according to the authorities. Money can be transferred by mobile phone between two conspirators inside and outside Baghdad, provided that the amount is delivered to the person concerned”, explained Hashemi. Other indirect donation was made in

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800 Interview with Abou Hassan, by Mona Alami, June 2017.

801 Interview with Abou Mohamad, by Mona Alami, June 2017.

the following way: goods would be sent to Iraq in a formal way are given to people in the organization free of charge to be put on the local market at low prices or in the form of special offers. The sales of these goods, usually the expiry date of which will soon be financed, are the activities of the organization in Iraq. Another article by Al-Araby Jadeed, featuring an interview with an Iraqi official, reported that ISIS received 250 thousand dollars a month<sup>802</sup>.

### ***vii-Local and Foreign Investments***

Despite the financial war on terror ISIS appears to have been able to smuggle huge amounts of money outside the country. In his interview, Hashemi underlined that over one billion dollars have been smuggled outside the country, possibly in Indonesia, Malaysia, Lebanon and Eastern Europe, and is implementing it in Iraq within large investments and commercial projects such as private hospitals and cement. He added that before its demise in Syria, ISIS worked on investing its money in legitimate business, using third parties, namely middlemen, irrespective of their religious and political affiliation. ISIS used these middlemen to purchase abroad or in Iraq legitimate businesses such as electronic companies, car dealers, private hospitals and the food and beverage companies. The third-party business owner then shares his revenues with his ISIS contact. Another way to launder this money is by selling Iraqi dinars and buying US dollars, with this goal in mind, ISIS engaged in the Central Bank of Iraq's (CBI) currency auctions.

Hashemi's statement converges with that of Iraqi military intelligence who were interviewed by Iraqi Newswire Niqash<sup>803</sup>. In the article the officer revealed that the IS group has invested millions of dollars in commercial projects around Iraq, including in the country's capital, Baghdad. "Since 2014, the leader of the group and his assistants invested huge amounts of money in Iraq, including into car sales showrooms, shopping malls, farms on the outskirts of Baghdad and private hospitals. They have also participated in foreign exchange auctions and bought and sold medicines," reported the article.

ISIS case even more than Hezbollah is a by the book example of a VNSA application of new wars environment to exercise asset transfer in its all forms via control of natural resources ( oil and antiquities), , or the redistribution of asset through looting , pillage or

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802 "ISIS Sources of Revenue Away from Oil," Al-Araby Jadeed, March 19, 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2017/3/19/12-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%85%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B7>.

803 Mustafa Habib, "Extremists' Commercial Investments Could Fund Them For Years," Niqash, August 11, 2016, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/security/5332/>.

kidnapping as seen extensively in previous sections. Finally, market pressure through racketeering and the imposition of taxes via checkpoints have all been used not only to control territory but raise funds.

### **III- The SDC/SDF and the pursuit of territorial legitimacy through financing :**

The successes achieved by the PYD in the war on, ISIS not only differentiated it from other rebel militias but also provided it with legitimacy at the international level, which eventually let as we saw in previous chapters to the creation of the SDC and the North East Autonomous region. The SDC/ SDF creation, under the protection of the United States was realized as it was perceived as the most effective force on the ground in the fight against ISIS.

The SDC/ SDF Dyad relied on several sources of funding. Funding for these services is supported by taxes and fees on trade and the population. According to a 2021 article by Enab Baladi, taxes levied by the AANES were divided into direct taxes, including the individual income tax. Those exempted were the military, the internal security forces and the families of the dead, as well as those working in the agricultural sector. In addition, other taxes included vehicle taxes and corporate profits taxes. As for the indirect taxes, they include the luxury tax and a fee or stamp tax<sup>804</sup>.

However initially the organization relied mostly on the region it had absolute control on which included natural oil and agricultural resources.

The Democratic Federation for Northern Syria known at the time as DFNS, which preceded Aanes, the Autonomous administration for Northern Syria lied to the west of the Tigris along the Turkish border and encompassed prior to the Turkish invasion is formed from most of al-Hasakah Governorate, the northern parts of Raqqa Governorate, the northwestern parts of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate and the northwestern and northeastern Aleppo Governorate.

According to a report by Sinan Hatahet labelled The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of the North Syria<sup>805</sup>, Taxes in the AANES were imposed on

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804 "Plenty of Resources, Still Bad Living Conditions: Economy of Syrian al-Jazira," Enab Baladi, May 20, 2021, <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/05/plenty-of-resources-still-bad-living-conditions-economy-of-syrian-al-jazira/>.

805 Sinan Hatahet, "The Political Economy of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.," Website (Publications Office of the European Union, February 28, 2020), <http://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b656d0fe-5c3b-11ea-8b81-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF>.

most business include fees for registering companies, practicing a profession, building permits or for services provided by administrations at the local and canton levels. There are finally income tax on salaries. Oil production represents a boon for the SDC. Much of Syria's Oil reserves are located in in Hassakah and Deir Zour. Quoting the Syrian Report Hatahet estimated that the region's current production did not exceed 70-80 thousand barrels, whereas leaks suggest it could reach 125 thousand bpd. In terms in trade taxes, Hatahet explains that those generate significant revenues for the AANES, with customs duty differing according to the origin of the goods. "While 5% is imposed on goods coming from opposition areas (through Manbij), only 4% is applied to goods coming from regime-controlled areas (mostly through Tabqa and Deir ez-Zor).<sup>71</sup> As for goods coming from the KRG through the Simalka crossing, the duty ranges between 2% and 7% depending on their nature". He explained. However, the Turkish and Syrian regime incursion definitely affected the region's capability to generate revenue.

A third and major source of funding is international support to the Administration. It was estimated at the height of the war on ISIS, that the SDC/SDF was receiving around \$300 million yearly from the US alone, although that budget was cut as ISIS as an entity was defeated in Syria. In article published by Al-Monitor in 2020<sup>806</sup>, quoting about the SDF funding at a Pentagon press briefing, acting Defense Department Controller Elaine McCusker said the US budget to aid Syrian opposition forces was "the same as last year," though the administration requested \$300 million for the Kurdish group to fight IS. It appears that the US Congress reduced that figure by \$100 million that year.

According to The Wall Street Journal, in 2018, Saudi Arabia agreed to contribute \$100 million in aid to U.S.-backed coalition efforts in Syria, the State Department. The sum represented a step in Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Syrian conflict to involve more Arabs in SDF factions including Syrian Arabs. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-to-contribute-100-million-to-u-s-backed-efforts-in-syria-1534469569>

In 2021, Turkey's pro-government newspaper Daily Sabah reported that Sweden pledged \$376 million in financial aid to the Syrian Kurdish administration in northeastern Syria<sup>807</sup>.

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806 "SDF Avoids Fight with Trump over Budget Cut," Al-Monitor, February 2020. Accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/02/sdf-syria-avoid-fight-budget-trump.html>.

807 "Sweden Pledges Financial Aid Package to Syrian Kurds after Meeting SDC Leaders," *Ahval*, December 12, 2021, , <https://ahvalnews.com/ilham-ahmed/sweden-pledges-financial-aid-package-syrian-kurds-after-meeting-sdc-leaders>.

#### **IV- How finances are a part of the new war economies:**

According to Kaldor, the new war economies are highly decentralized, with participation in the war low from an economic perspective and unemployment high. New war economies are extremely dependent on external resources, due to the support and involvement of foreign states in the wars. In new wars, production declines dramatically. “In these circumstances the fighting units finance through plunder, hostage taking, and the black market,” says Kaldor. This applies exactly to ISIS approach. In the beginning of the war, Hezbollah was much less dependent on this approach, but according to interviews of its fighters, as Iran’s assistance declines due to sanctions, Hezbollah systematically worked on diversifying its financial resources through drug trade. In SDF areas, the governing power operates like a state imposing tax on trade and businesses, taking over residents’ assets, moreover in areas that are dominated by Arabs.

#### **V - Conclusion**

The question we have tried to respond to in this last chapter is how does financial approaches support or on the contrary hinder territorial maintenance for VNSA?

We have seen that both Hezbollah and ISIS sources of financing have been unsustainable on the long run and slowly cost them their popularity for different reasons.

Hezbollah had initially a much stronger position than ISIS given its reliance on Iran. This model fits Kaldor’s third “foreign assistance model” namely under the “assistance from foreign government”. “Neighboring states often fund particular factions, to assist minorities or because of large numbers of refugees or because of involvement in various types of illegal trading arrangements,” she says in her book *New and Old Wars*<sup>808</sup>.

Hezbollah’s fate has thus been that largely linked to Iran’s fortunes and in turn to its misfortunes. Successive American sanctions on Iran and on its organization have forced Hezbollah to get creative when it came to its revenue stream as we have previously seen.

In addition, with increased illicit and criminal trades came corruption within Hezbollah ranks locally. “Guerrillas are expensive, which is why the survival of armed groups often requires the construction of commercial and financial logics aiming at ensuring the movement’s sustainability,” says Stephane Roziere in his book *Géographie Politique et Géopolitique*<sup>809</sup>.

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808 Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

809 Roziere, *Géographie Politique & Géopolitique*

Corruption scandals linked to governments issues and illicit trade between Lebanon and Syria in turn has affected the perception its popular base had of the party, translating to the participation of Lebanese Shiites in the first days of the October 2019 Protests Movement<sup>810</sup>.

Corruption among Hezbollah members is not the only grievance of Shi'a, whose complaints focus more on Lebanon's general state of affairs. Hezbollah previously claimed that it focused just on its resistance activities and Lebanon's military defense, but with its participation in successive national governments since 2008, this argument no longer holds. It seems that Lebanon's intifada, financial sanctions, a decline in the organization's revenues as well as increasing corruption scandals combined with Lebanon's economic collapse and an extended truce period with Hezbollah's nemesis Israel could prove more detrimental to the group on the longer run than any foreseeable military election. Hezbollah has been nonetheless able to ride the protest wave and remain in control of its territory in Lebanon and retains the main oversight over security, defense and foreign policy for the time being.

As for ISIS, the terror group worked at the onset of its caliphate on winning the hearts and minds of Sunnis living in war-torn Iraq and Syria. ISIS marketed itself as an Islamic utopia which applied a strict interpretation of Sharia law, and provided services to its residents from road works to the establishment of consumer protection bureaus to sharia compliant schools where it educated a new generation of jihadist children. "At first ISIS did work on certain projects, they lit the streets, fixed some of the roads, they wanted to buy the population's love," says Mosul resident Mohamad<sup>811</sup>. Other respondents underlined that initially ISIS may have provided food and donations to the poor. Like Hezbollah, corruption was another of ISIS weaknesses.

With time, the caliphate's dream started to unravel at the seams. As ISIS governance started faltering, and as it lost territory, the organization applied a more predatory approach to its management style. "ISIS financial management shifted dramatically since they started losing territory practicing more predatory behavior. ISIS capitalist members were clearly looking to steal as much money as possible, which created divisions within the organization," underlines analyst Abul Ragheef<sup>812</sup>.

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810 Hanin Ghaddar, "Protests in Lebanon and Iraq Show That Iran Is Losing the Middle East Through Bad Governance," *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/22/iran-losing-middle-east-iraq-lebanon-protests-bad-governance/>.

811 Interview with Mohamad, by Mona Alami, June 2017.

812 Interview with Mohamad Abul Ragheef, by Mona Alami, June 2017.

This was felt the most in the rich city of Mosul, in Iraq before it trickled to Syria where the terror group followed the same economic model. The city boasted a large industrial sector namely in the pharmaceutical industry, medical equipment, sugar, yogurt, clothes and cotton textiles , pre-cast concrete elements, wood and furniture, and flour . These companies, hotels, plants and other production facilities that ISIS attempted to managed initially, were the first victims of ISIS systematic racketeering. Iraqi and Syrian people interviewed reported that after the organization failed to manage properly Iraqi businesses, it started dismantling them, before they were sold to other regions, with several interviewees indicating strong trade relations with traders in Syrian regime areas. In the words of retired military man Saad, a Mosul resident: “ISIS started producing cement but when they failed, they dismantled and sold the machineries to Syrian regime areas or ISIS territory in Syria<sup>813</sup>. Another sector that was also hit by this war trade was the oil sector says Iraqi expert Abul Ragheef. The Iraqi added that Jaafar al-Koweiti, an ISIS judge who brought engineers responsible for dismantling the refineries and electrical plants and poles in Mosul. A similar approach was also applied in Syria, where Abou Hassan, a former resident of the Deir Zour rural area explained that ISIS had dismantled part of the train tracks and hangars and sold the scrap metal.

ISIS also turned to kidnapping local residents, Iraqi media report showed<sup>814</sup>. In June 2017, MP Fratt al-Tamimi, a deputy of Diyala province revealed the existence of what he called the "silent kidnappings" as the main source of funding for the organization.

Another dimension to ISIS racketeering is taxes which were also raised taxes frequently as well as fees and fines. “ISIS started taxing everything from cleanliness, to fines, to any sorts of services provided, such as a medical hospital in Hawija that operates like a private entity and makes patients pay for all surgeries” explains Iraqi expert Abul Ragheef.

The revolutionary tax is a form of racket which falls within a financial logic. Illicit trades are often intensive to the neighborhood of conflict, requiring little means and a good

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813 Interview with Saad, by Mona Alami, June 2017.

814 Mortada Aziz, “Silent kidnappings a main source of revenue, says Diyala MP.,” Baghdad Post, June 16, 2017, <https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/ar/Story/33762/%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%85%D9%88%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4>

knowledge of terrain and represents a substantial revenue source for guerrillas,' says Stephane Roziere in his book *Geography Politique et Geopolitique*<sup>815</sup>.

ISIS also appears to have adapted while to new environmental constraints by changing the way it worked or by further diversifying its revenue streams. As an example, Hatem a former Syrian resident of Bu Kamal explained: "ISIS produced oil and refined it and sold it, however when coalition started targeting the, ISIS started licensing civilians or its own members of certain wells, against huge amounts of money, 150 million SP monthly (\$300,000), in the Mayadeen area<sup>816</sup>. As an example, Bir Hesyane was exploited by Fawaz Rawi". [Rawi](#) was known as a financial facilitator for the organization.

As seen VNSAs have had a tendency to engage in criminal activity and clearly been challenged by economic realities. Both Hezbollah and ISIS have delved into illegal enterprises, such as kidnapping, trading in illicit products from artifacts to diamond, drugs as well as others. Both have unequally failed when it came to managing economically their territories.

Even in areas under its control in Lebanon, Hezbollah has turned a blind eye to smuggling activity, racketeering and corruption activities of its own commanders and close family members. Hassan Nasrallah's brother is the biggest illicit provider of satellite and television channels in the Southern suburbs according to sources who spoke to the author. Since Hezbollah and its allies won the parliamentary majority in 2018<sup>817</sup>, the country defaulted on a \$90 billion debt<sup>818</sup> and faced its largest intifada since 2005. Thanks to Hezbollah's regional antics, Lebanon has lost the economic support it used to enjoy from Gulf countries<sup>819</sup>, which contributed to the country's downfall and turned the country into a near pariah state. While Hezbollah's financial mismanagement has partly contributed to destabilizing its territorial control it is ultimately its identity politics, allegiance to Iran and hubris that are the real reason behind it.

When it expanded its foothold in Iraq and Syria, ISIS- unable to properly manage the resources under its control- turned to racketeering activity. While IS could thrive as an

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815 Roziere, *Géographie Politique & Géopolitique*

816 Interview with Hatem, by Mona Alami, April 2017.

817 "Factbox: Hezbollah and Allies Gain Sway in Lebanon Parliament," *Reuters*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-election-parliament-factbox-idUSKCN1IN1OJ>.

818 Tommy Stubbington and Chloe Cornish, "Lebanon's Sovereign Default Leaves Creditors Facing Big Losses," *Financial Times*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/75990a94-62c7-11ea-a6cd-df28cc3c6a68>.

819 Maha Yahya, "Lebanon: Not Expecting Gulf Aid to Come Back - As Gulf Donors Shift Priorities, Arab States Search for Aid," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 9, 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/06/09/lebanon-not-expecting-gulf-aid-to-come-back-pub-82009>.



insurgency it failed as a short-lived semi-state. In ISIS case, the group's illicit activities targeting its own people and its corruption certainly contributed to losing the hearts and minds of the people living within territory under its control, further impoverishing families and create resentment that could be utilized by its enemies. Instead of the model society it aimed to, ISIS ended in reality pillaging the land it pretended to save.

The SDC-SDF financial model prevails so far, but remains heavily reliant on the U.S assistance. While the movement is facing important challenges in Arab areas , in the form of acts of subversion , protests, and terrorism and it remains so far unchallenged in Kurdish dominant areas, where its financial governance has failed to be largely come under scrutiny or contestation. The PYD dominated SDC-SDF nexus has so far better succeeded in maximizing the use of its finances to maintain territorial control.

## Conclusion

As previously seen, the VNSAs expansion and governance choices, including their financial strategies have either allowed them to maintain territorial control and expansion, or on the contrary made them more vulnerable, even bringing their end.

In the case of Hezbollah, as seen in Chapter one of this section, there was not ambition of governance in Syria, but of securitization of the Assad regime and of areas that were of importance to the Party of God, namely Syria's borders with Lebanon, in Damascus, in Aleppo, and in the general area of Homs as well as South Syria. Yet, Hezbollah's expansion into Syria in opposition to a majority of Lebanese, the toll of Syria's war, the sanctions in brought on Hezbollah and on Lebanon with the Cesar Act<sup>820</sup> and with Gulf unnamed sanctions on Lebanon have all contributed to the economic crisis that brought Lebanon to its knees. By favoring its regional expansion, Hezbollah has made its hold over its home turf in Lebanon fragile. Its financial mismanagement as we have seen, have made quite a dent in its reputation, even within its own community.

While ISIS expansionary blitz was initially a success, its governance and financial strategies have been less fortunate and as previously seen led to a popular back-clash. The terrorist failed in managing properly the resources of the "state" it ambitioned to build, was plagued by corruption and racketeering and dabbled in every illicit trade possible from kidnapping to antiquity trades, extortion, blackmail as well as robbing banks in territory under its control. ISIS thus failed in its priority to securitize territory and control its resources. While ISIS as a territorial entity exists no more, it has succeeded in creating the precedent of a virtual caliphate, one that knows no boundaries, no nationality and is united by "Tawhid".

The SDC-SDF nexus has so far been the most consistent in its approach of governance whether in term of territorial control or its use of financial approach to maintain thus control. Despite many obstacles, represented lastly by Turkish incursion into the northeast, the SDC-SDF remains in control of much of the original territory and has for the most governed intelligently the AANNES putting to use all the resources available. Its only failure has been in Arab areas where it has failed to adapt to Arab customs and taken a more

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820 Hanin Ghaddar, "The Caesar Act Comes Into Force (Part 2): Pressuring Hezbollah in Lebanon," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 12, 2020 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-caesar-act-comes-into-force-part-2-pressuring-hezbollah-in-lebanon>.

compromising approach, or a less hegemonic one. As long as the AANES still secures US assistance, it will be capable of maintaining territorial control.

# Thesis Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, we looked into the impact of the Syria war on the transnational expansion of Violent Non-state Armed actors (VNSA). The question that drove this research was the following: Would the VNSA that emerged or expanded transnationally in Syria survive in the long term with the winding down of the Syrian war? Could they maintain their power in the longer term?

The answer to the first question is an affirmative yes, given the breakdown of the international liberal order and the resulting growing resort of proxy war not only by international powers but regional ones. To that, one could add, the further undermining of weak states, the world over whether in Africa or in the Middle East, as it took place in neighboring Syria where the longevity of VNSA appears to have been established in the absence of a deal.

Yet the answer to the second question is conditional on the willingness of sponsors to support their proxies in the longer term. This also depends on the capability of VNSA to remain legitimate given their management style- we have seen the failure of ISIS in that respect. These factors are also intertwined with the economic, environmental (global warming included), and sanitary crisis, the countries' situation in regard to fueling popular demand for employment, reforms, and less corruption. These answers will be further developed below.

## **Shifts in the international system and the survival of VNSA**

Syria is a typical example of the resulting failure in the international normative system known as the liberal order. President Barack Obama broke with the extreme interventionist policies of President George Bush, refusing to take a stance against the regime of President Assad even when it used chemical weapons against the Syrian civilian population.

The decline in the rule based international order combined with the erosion of state power in the Middle East, led to weakened security architectures due to globalization and exacerbated by ethnic and religious rivalries as well as competition over resources. With the Obama Presidency, the increasingly polyarchic nature of the international system meant that proxy warfare was set to shape to a great extent twenty-first-century conflicts in the region

and elsewhere. The disengagement of America from the Middle East combined with zero-sum thinking- created by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction at the level of regional powers -translated in more and more regional states -previously favoring conventional or diplomatic avenues- viewing proxies as a way to limit escalation model, which clearly played out in Syria.

The United States had already a long and not-always-so-successful history with proxies. Washington has made sporadic use of military surrogates to achieve foreign policy and security interests. Washington's longest sponsoring of surrogates has taken place in Afghanistan, where it supported tribal factions and government forces against the Taliban in the post-2001 phase, a faction it had been ironically on the same fighting side against Soviet occupation of the 80s, through its support of the Mujahedeen, who would later form the ranks of Al Qaeda. Other not-so-illustrious Cold War examples also included American support to the Hmong army in Laos and the Nicaraguan Contras. More recently, the United States relied in Somalia on the African Union Mission to contain and hamper the activity of the radical Shabab and on Arab Tribes in Iraq, in the 2007 Anbar Awakening, to fend off Qaeda. The creation of the SDF was one of its other attempts to come to mind.

The Syrian example shows the shortcomings of the US approach, which has been mostly reactionary and haphazard. US calculations have been motivated by the short-term urgency of the fight against the Islamic State terror organization. Its decision to drop its Syrian Train and Equip Program in 2015, and to grant Kurdish YPG leadership of what would become known as the SDF, disregarded frictions its initiative could have, both locally, with Arab communities, and regionally, with its ally Turkey, which considered the rise of the SDF as a direct national threat issue. When pressured by Turkey, the Trump administration once again favored a short reactionary approach in the form of a swift exit strategy, absent of proper stabilization, thus triggering a return of regime forces to northeastern Syria and a resumption of ISIS terror activity as well as a Turkish invasion of Syria to the East. The Trump administration's reactionary proxy experiment in Syria will undoubtedly result in hindering its two main goals there: an enduring defeat against ISIS in a smaller version and a containment of Iranian activity, a task, ironically left to the Russians.

Conversely, Iran use of proxy warfare has been perfected along the years. Iran military and political advance has been built on a long view of foreign policy, articulated around combining two simple principles: endorsing justified national causes and relying on Shiite communities around the region to build powerful proxies.

Tehran has expanded its presence by endorsing justified national causes, as argued by Robert Baer in his book *“The Devil We Know, Dealing With The New Iranian Superpower”*<sup>821</sup>. As previously seen, in the wake of Lebanon’s invasion by Israel in the 80s, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps trained a splinter group of Amal and of Shiite militants including the Iraqi Daawa party, which led to the emergence of Hezbollah, which has become today Tehran’s crown expeditionary force. In Iraq, Iran responded to the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) by stepping in and using the fatwa of Ayatollah Ali Sistani to integrate powerful Iranian-backed militias within the PMU, which are integrated to the state apparatus and allocated official state budget.

Iran has been able to hijack these justified national causes while legitimizing the role of its loyal proxies. The latter acted as a conduit to extend influence in these countries.

At the root of Tehran's success is its effort to unite the Shiite community, a policy applied to Lebanon. Hezbollah’s political clout in Lebanon could not have been achieved without the unwavering alliance it has with Speaker of the House Nabih Berry, leading to the parliament paralysis in the pre-2008 phase, and the subsequent Doha agreement, allocating a blocking third to at the time a Hezbollah-led minority block. From there, Hezbollah has been able to dominate the Lebanese system and project its influence in Syria, Iraq and even Yemen, when most needed by Tehran.

The victory of Shia groups supported by Iran has meant that the Syria war was seen as a vital conflict by Gulf countries. After all, the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, relied on Alawis, a heterodox Shia sect that made up about 13 percent of Syria’s population<sup>822</sup>, as a pillar of its power. Alawis also dominated the upper reaches of the country's military and security services and were the backbone of the forces fighting to support the Assad regime in Syria’s civil war. Thus, removing him, was one way to reverse Iran’s victorious trend in the Levant, where countries since 2003 had fallen one after the other into Tehran arms. The invasion of Iraq had unseated Saddam Hussein and instituted a Shia majority dominated parliament. Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia and political movement, had become the strongest party in Lebanon. The Houthis, who hail as a branch of Shiism and are Yemen militants in Yemen linked to Iran, had toppled the country's internationally recognized government.

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<sup>821</sup> Baer, *“The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower: Robert Baer: 9780307408679: Amazon.Com: Books.”*

<sup>822</sup> US State Department, *“SYRIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT.”*

Sunni governments, especially Saudi Arabia, were thus increasingly worried about their own grips on power and about Shiite minorities in their countries, a concern that was exacerbated during the protest movement that began in Tunisia in late 2010. The American retreat from the regional and Obama's open hand to Tehran only worsened their anxieties. The Arab Awakening, as the uprisings are known, spread to Bahrain and Syria, countries at the fault lines of Islam's sectarian divide. In each, political power is held by a sectarian minority—Alawis in Syria and a Sunni ruling family in Bahrain—where Shias are the majority.

Unlike Iran, the Gulf did not have the same approach or long-term experience with proxy war, which translated in Syria into a divided haphazard approach to the conflict. As an example, Gulf countries first supported the Free Syrian Army, then various Islamic movements. These movements ended up competing with the rising rivalry between Turkey and Qatar on one side and the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on the other. The fading out of the war in Syria has ushered nonetheless a more pragmatic approach of Gulf countries, which have attempted to bring President Assad into the fold, a campaign led mainly by the UAE<sup>823</sup>.

ISIS remained a free agent. Infiltrated by regional and international intelligence services such as Turkey's and Qatar's the terrorist groups remained a more grassroots reactionary movement born from the failure of the Iraqi state and of others in Africa for example, one that had a lesser chance of surviving in the longer run, without the geopolitical depth of a loyal sponsor.

While we did not really tackle the use of Russia of VNSA in Syria as it relied on Iran for that, it is worth mentioning its attempt to regroup opposition militias under the Syrian army Fifth Corp<sup>824</sup>. Russia has undoubtedly a longer and more successful experience with proxy warfare. Russian emperors routinely enlisted Cossacks to beef up their regular forces. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union made good use of proxies such as Cuban forces during the civil war in Angola. Modern Russia under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin also resorted to volunteers to defend its foreign interested in post-Soviet spheres of influence. Russia leveraged proxies in Syria, where it deployed Private Military Companies such as the Wagner group, or built more local formations such as the Fifth Corp according to local sources . PMC have also used by Russia in Africa, such as in the Central African Republic.

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<sup>823</sup> Reuters, "Emirati FM Meets Syria's Assad in Damascus in Further Sign of Thawing Ties."

<sup>824</sup> Abdulrahman al-Masri, "Analysis."

Another successful venture has been to resort to Russian minorities in post-Soviet areas, with the most illustrious example being the Ukraine's Donets River basin where separatists have been able to capture part of Eastern Ukraine. In April 2022, The Associated Press reported that hundreds of pro-Assad Syrians had signed up to fight alongside the Russians in Ukraine<sup>825</sup>. A source close to Hezbollah fighters also told the authors that same months Lebanese Shiites trained in Syria and hailing from the Lebanese borders were also signing in to fight in Ukraine alongside Assad<sup>826</sup>. In April, The Guardian reported that Russia had deployed between 10,000 to 20,000 mercenaries from Syria, Libya and elsewhere to Ukraine<sup>827</sup>.

### **Fragile states and geopolitical depth, a factor of survival for VNSA:**

According to the World Bank report *Breaking the Conflict Trap*<sup>828</sup>, the average civil war lasts around seven years, and by the end of the war per capita income is around 15 percent lower than it would otherwise have been. This means that dropping income “will raise the long-term incidence of conflict for the country both by increasing its risk of further rebellion and by increasing the duration of rebellion should one occur. For the typical country experiencing a civil war, this effect of the war would increase the risk by 13.5 percent and the duration by 5.9 percent, so that the long-term incidence would rise by 16.9 percent. The typical country reaching the end of a civil war faces around a 44 percent risk of returning to conflict within five years,” says the World Bank Report.

Additionally, State fragility, conflict and instability will continue to enhance the military, political and social importance of NSAs. This new kind of permeability of conflict and transnationality of VNSA will threaten state building in the Levant as boundaries between countries will continue to be blurred by both religion and ethnic identities, confirming scenarios predicted by new war theories. A model that will also apply to the African region. Besides the intervention of Jihadists in west Africa, we have seen the emergence of state supported self-defense militias in Burkina Faso<sup>829</sup>. In Sudan, comes to mind the Rapid Support Forces and in Ethiopia The Tigray and Amhara militias<sup>830</sup>.

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<sup>825</sup> “Syrian Fighters Ready to Join next Phase of Ukraine War.”

<sup>826</sup> Interview with a source close to Hezbollah May 2022, Lebanon, Mona Alami

<sup>827</sup> Borger, “Russia Deploys up to 20,000 Mercenaries in Battle for Ukraine’s Donbas Region.”

<sup>828</sup> Bank, *Breaking the Conflict Trap*.

<sup>829</sup> “Self-Defence Militias and State Sponsorship in Burkina Faso.”

<sup>830</sup> “Problems of Africa’s Militias - World - Al-Ahram Weekly.”



Thus, the nature of conflicts in region plagued by failed states, global warming and corruption will allow for the VNSA to continue playing an important role in the region. “Regime-induced, top-down, state-building permeability of the 1950s and 1960s, driven by Arab nationalist ideology, is replaced by a bottom-up state-destroying permeability driven by sectarian nonstate actors”, says Bassem Salloukh in his article “Sectarianized geopolitical contests and the rise of armed sectarian non-state actors”<sup>831</sup>.

Covid 19 and other possible pandemics will only aggravate the fragility of Levant and Africa states, already struggling economically and showing a democracy deficit. In a report published in May last year, the International Monetary Fund warned that the Covid crisis will pose a formidable threat to fragile states in the Middle East and Africa adding that a dramatic downturn will aggravate existing economic and human challenges<sup>832</sup>. “Fragile and conflict countries in MENA are already battling high poverty, political instability, weak states, and poor infrastructure. Failure to ease the potential suffering could further aggravate underlying social and political instability and could trigger a reinforcing spiral of economic hardship and conflict—adding to the existing humanitarian challenges of countries already in active conflict, including Libya, Syria, and Yemen,” reported the World Bank report. This will make regional countries, increasingly used as pawns by the multiplication of powers in apolar world, fertile grounds for the emergence of VNSA.

Other factors that could contribute to the weakness of MENA states and the empowerment of VNSA. Brooking report released in March 2022, <sup>833</sup>has labelled the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as among the most vulnerable places in the world to climate change. “The U.N. has highlighted the devastating toll that climate change will have on the region’s water supplies and food production systems, and its potential to create breeding grounds for terrorism and violent extremism. No country will be spared: The affluent Gulf nations face depleted freshwater resources within the next 50 years, while in conflict-ridden Iraq, average temperatures are soaring at a rate that is two-to-seven times faster than the global average. Food and water production systems across the Levant face imminent collapse,” the report highlighted.

VNSA will thus profit from the growing failure of this arc of country and its aggravated instability.

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<sup>831</sup> Salloukh, Bassel, “Sectarianized Geopolitical Contests and the Rise of Armed Sectarian Nonstate Actors.”

<sup>832</sup> “COVID-19 Poses Formidable Threat for Fragile States in the Middle East and North Africa.”

<sup>833</sup> Alaaldin, “Climate Change May Devastate the Middle East. Here’s How Governments Should Tackle It.”

The survival of these three groups will remain nonetheless be very much linked to their geopolitical depth in terms of sponsors and their capability to manage their territories and control of resources.

With that thought in mind, the categorization of some and not all of Syria's VNSAs is necessary. There are first those that operate as proxies to advance the regional interests of their backers and that are slowly turning into semi-state actors in the likes of Hezbollah and the PMU which illustrate this particular example. Second, local VNSAs resulting from transnational networks such as the SDC in Syria survive by attaching themselves to an international backer to advance their autonomous project. There are transnational organizations with state ambitions that have eroded but still survive in pockets of instability and that ultimately heed no one, such as ISIS. Finally, there are ethnic or community-based militias that could survive thanks to their control of resources.

In term of geopolitical depth, the willingness of their sponsor to continue supporting them is tantamount to their survival.

The first example that comes to mind is the SDC-SDF dyad that was thrown into disarray after President Trump's decision to retreat from Syria. The fickleness of its American sponsor has left the SDC-SDF dyad in a precarious position, especially with the invasion of Turkey of Syrian territory in the northeast. The inability of the regime to regain all of Syrian territory given its eroded capabilities and the remaining unstable Syrian security context is what favors them in the long term nonetheless. But the organization will remain contained by the measure of the threat it poses to regional political order.

Conversely, Hezbollah will continue to enjoy the loyal and long-term support of Tehran that has used to expand its regional reach whether in Iraq, Yemen or Syria. As previously mentioned, Hezbollah has become the Islamic Republic Crown main expeditionary force, allowing it to project power across the region at minimum cost. This means that it is highly unlikely Hezbollah will lose anytime soon its geopolitical depth, which will insure its long-term survival, despite the grand regional bargain recently made between Iran and Saudi Arabia<sup>834</sup>. This bargain will mostly affect Yemen proxies, while Saudi gives up its concern over Lebanese affairs.

Unlike the SDC-SDF and Hezbollah, ISIS has failed to secure a long-term sponsor. It was initially highly dependent on the accommodation of neighboring countries such as Turkey for a steady flow of weapons and fighters to survive as a strong actor. Conversely to

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<sup>834</sup> Farouk, "Riyadh's Motivations Behind the Saudi-Iran Deal."

the SDC which had federative ambitions, ISIS had state ones that rendered its complicated its allegiance to another state. Its lack of pragmatism and violent rhetoric, its ambitious expansionary program made any covert alliance with other nations, transactional at best, given the threat it posed to the regional political order. The rise of the “Islamic State” was after all an attempt of a socio-political project that endangered the Levant and the wider Arab authorities. The destruction of ISIS as a state was thus a necessity that resulted in the formation of an international coalition that worked on its disintegration into an insurgency movement surviving thanks to Syria and Iraq rampant instability. It will remain operational in small pockets in the expanse stretching from the Syrian -Iraqi desert as long as no real state building effort is achieved in this country. One has to keep in mind that in January 2022, ISIS was still confident to launch a surprise attack on the al-Sina’a prison in Al-Hasakah, a city in Syria’s north east Kurdish areas dominated by the SDF<sup>835</sup>.

Besides the Levant it will likely survive in failed state across Africa and countries in Asia such as Afghanistan. In Africa, ISIS and the larger Jihadists groups could pretend it could compensate for its losses in Syria. Africa with its weak state infrastructure, globalization pressure, and ethnic and religious diversity, fueling enmities had many of the constructs of Kaldor’s new war. In addition, Africa presented to foreign powers large geopolitical interests due to its colonial linkages, in addition to the immense resources that triggered the rivalry of international powers. In 2020, according to an article by Newline Magazine, there was ISIS’s three most significant provinces (in Africa) were “the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, and Mali; Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) in Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique; and Islamic State Sinai Province in Egypt. There was also an Islamic State Algeria Province in Algeria”<sup>836</sup>.

Ironically, the savage brutality of ISIS in Syria and its general delegitimization reflected strongly on how other jihadi groups promoted their image after the fall of the group in Iraq and Syria. The Nusra Front, tried to play a more pragmatic role in Idlib while the Taliban entry in Kabul was far more friendly, if one can say, to foreign press and communication savvy when it entered the capital in 2021<sup>837</sup>.

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<sup>835</sup> Berriault, “The Risks of an ISIS Comeback.”

<sup>836</sup> Jaffery, “ISIS in Africa.”

<sup>837</sup> Kugelman, “Pakistan’s Friendship With the Taliban Is Changing.”

Yet, VNSA that have so far survived but have come to dominate the states they have attached themselves to will conversely suffer from the economic and sanitary situation that favored their rise and their survival.

In Syria, President Assad oversees a country deeply divided, where militias abound. Both Hezbollah and the SDF seem to be a case in point. Hezbollah and the SDC still operate simultaneously as sophisticated armed organizations, complex political entities and as highly developed social movement organizations involved in administering and delivering social services at the grassroots level. Despite the slowdown in conflict there and the reinsertion of Bashar Assad into the Arab League, the Syria conflict has opened a Pandora box for Iraq and Lebanon where institutions are collapsing, migration and refugee crises abound everywhere, while globalization, economic strife, and the Covid crisis placed much strain on the fragile political systems of countries. Without massive money from their backers, these players will be unable to restore the social contract that was once established between them and society. The status quo will nonetheless remain for now unless living conditions further deteriorate. Despite the fact that in Syria, people are wary of war and have lost hope, protests have taken place South of the country<sup>838</sup>. In Lebanon an incremental but very slow change could take place with every election, with the country surviving on expatriate aid and money laundry activities. All parties there including Hezbollah- which remains a military behemoth- have nonetheless completely lost legitimacy.

With their rise to power and greater share into government, the PMU, the SDC and Hezbollah can difficultly allege their disconnect with the country's problems at large. Thus, the distance existing between autocratic rulers and their population across the region, is also growingly applied to them. The SDC suffers in Arab regions, while the PMU and Hezbollah are increasingly associated to the corrupt leadership. The social contract is eroding with increasing young populations calling for more citizenship and less marginalization. The SDF, PMU and Hezbollah have been associated to violent crackdowns against popular protests and the killing of activists.

## **A Grand Bargain in Syria?**

As a conclusion, we have seen that the rise and active role of VNSA actors in Syria has created a movement that is reshaping regional politics and dynamics. Regional powers try to influence these dynamics in order to extend their influence through proxies often

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<sup>838</sup> Ebrahim, "Rare Protests Flare in Regime-Held Syria as Assad Seeks International Rehabilitation."

sectarianized, at the risk that these VNSA replace the states where they originate or they expanded to. The SDF-SDC dyad has had federative ambitions that will have to be revised with the relegitimization of Assad. The transnational expansion of the other two main non-institutional actors, notably Hezbollah and ISIS, will certainly have quite different implications. ISIS functioned for years as an underground network of insurgents before transforming, for the last two or three years, into a terrorist organization, operating as a state in large areas of Syria and Iraq. This transformation created vulnerabilities. This made the organization a much easier target when real military, political, and social action was taken against the organization, forcing it to return to a clandestine and meager form in order to ensure its survival. Hezbollah presents a rather different case, the organization has become a state within a state in Lebanon, and in the absence of a serious political solution in Syria, it will retain its transnational role, as long as Iran wishes. It has nonetheless faced new challenges with anti-corruption 2019 protests as the party is now seen as the guardian of the deep state in Lebanon<sup>839</sup>. The same can be said of the Iraqi PMU.

The Syria war has nonetheless shown that the identity politics and sectionalization of geopolitics have resulted in the assumption by VNSA of important and long term local and geopolitical roles. It has set a precedent, as we have seen Syrian mercenaries exported to other frontlines by both Russia and Turkey to be used in conflicts such as the Libyan one. Hezbollah was until the Iran Saudi deal, advising the Yemenis in their fight against Saudi Arabia. It remains to be seen what will the nascent deal my bring in the future

For a variety of reasons ranging from the acquisition of nuclear weapons by super and lesser powers, to economies of scale, military inadequacies, military technological advances or a reduction in the global military footprint, larger and smaller states will make ample use of covert war tactics thorough the outsourcing of warfighting it would seem for the next decade.

This leads us to two conclusions, one at an international level and another at the regional level.

At the international level. The development of a proper proxy warfare protocol appears a much-needed necessity in the current framework. Proxy relations will remain interest-based and transactional for Washington, and contrary to what pundits may say, the Syrian fiasco will not hinder its capability to raise surrogates, as recent American history with

the Kurds has shown. Yet, future policies should be based on a cohesive strategy both at government and defense levels, a proper timeline, exit and stabilization phase also need to be put in place for any successful proxy relations. The issue of convenience should not supersede issues of the proxy's legitimacy. Transparent communication between the sponsor and surrogate, constant monitoring of human rights infringements and a medium-term approach are very much required to avoid another ignominious Syrian failure. Proxy warfare should also remain "an exceptionally morally permissible" endeavor.

At the regional level, given the destructive local and transnational roles played by VNSAs, two kinds of bargains, at both the domestic and regional levels, are required to restore some form of political stability in post-war states.

For this to happen, new grand regional geopolitical deal acknowledging spheres of influence will have to take place among the main regional actors namely Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. This has slowly started to take place as seen in the Iran Saudi recent deal, which has nonetheless failed to bring de-escalation.

Any Grand bargain however is unsustainable on the long run without acknowledging as well the needs of the local population and a democratic sharing agreement that puts capable elites into place far from the corrupt leaders. It is therefore doomed to fail.

The grand bargain will also greatly depend on the future stability these countries will also enjoy themselves. As an example, Iran and Saudi Arabia themselves will face major political and economic challenges in the next ten years that will put major pressure on their own stability. This could lead them as we are starting to see, to an attempted rapprochement. However, without real state building efforts, the region will remain failing and open to the emergence of new VNSA, or the resurrection of old ones.

Undoubtedly the Syria war use of proxy warfare and action or inaction of great power has certainly paved the way for other conflicts in the region, stretching from the Mediterranean to India.

**Syria: an example for other international wars in the framework of the New War, Terrorism and Geopolitical theoretical context?**

Syria has, in essence, reframed how wars are fought, given its global aspect and the transformation of a referent previously considered by Ken Booth<sup>840</sup> the state to a human aspect, conceptualized by identity with the we versus them.

These conceptualizations appear in Kaldor's edited book "*The Handbook of Global Security Policy*"<sup>841</sup>, which defines the latter by its "interconnectedness of contemporary sources of insecurity". She names conflict, terrorism, criminality, climate change, or economic crisis as such possible threats.

These threats can be according to Ken Booth<sup>842</sup>, of a global existential nature namely nuclear weapons, climate chaos, declining food and water as well as pandemics. They can also be emancipatory threats, which include freedom from oppression, social threats ( from religious and cultural dogmatism) and political ones.

In Syria many of these threats intertwined, the same can be said about Africa.

More dangerously, these threats can no longer, says Kaldor, be addressed by the nation state alone. Worst, institutions such as the UN, the EU and others that previously could operate and diminish these threats are failing with the multiscale nature of the power system.

New forms of technological communications that exacerbate mobilization, explains Kaldor as well as the weakening of states, which are the legacy of dictatorship, combined with the drying up of superpower aid, as well as globalized neoliberal economics increase these global threats. Other threats emerge from new criminal transnational gangs that according to John Sullivan now challenge the state's power<sup>843</sup>.

In this context, the world is now confronted with this new system of insecurity, in which regional instability born from new wars is combined with high-intensity conflict as we see in Ukraine. Despite being a high-intensity conventional conflict unlike the new wars defined by Mary Kaldor that we discussed in length in this thesis, the war in Syria paved the way and shaped the conflict taking place thousands of kilometers between Ukraine and Russia.

If we follow the new war level criteria, while it takes place between two states, it also involves thousands of tactics used by Russia in Syria and that fit the New War theory.

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<sup>840</sup> Kaldor and Rangelov, *The Handbook of Global Security Policy*.

<sup>841</sup> Kaldor and Rangelov.

<sup>842</sup> Kaldor and Rangelov.

<sup>843</sup> Kaldor and Rangelov.

These are primarily: the polarization of society within one country namely between Ukrainians of Russian origin and other Ukrainians, a complete, large-scale violation of human rights, and the use of mercenaries as previously mentioned, as well as international implications for other countries<sup>844</sup>. Ukraine is currently backed by the US and EU, which have offered it ample weaponry.

In Ukraine similarly, to Syria, Russia has adopted a violent counter narrative to brand its opposition. Given that unlike Syria it could not accuse Ukrainians of Christian origin of being Muslim radicals, it has adopted the narrative of denazification to label its war in Ukraine. Quoted by The Conversation, in his address to the Russian people on Feb. 24, 2022, “Putin said the purpose was to “protect people” who had been subjected to bullying and genocide ... for the last eight years. And for this we will strive for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine.<sup>845</sup>” The speech echoes strongly within Russians for whom the memory of the Second World War remains very present, and exacerbates antagonistic between Russian speaking and non-Russian speaking groups in Ukraine, especially given the presence of the Azov movement, which conversely to what Moscow portrays is not dominant in Ukraine.

In addition, the Ukraine crisis has attracted foreign fighters from both sides of the divide. We have mentioned in previous paragraphs the use of mercenaries by Russia in Ukraine to reduce the death toll of its soldiers, however, foreign fighters have also joined Ukrainian troops , hailing from the US, Europe, or New Zealand<sup>846</sup>.

Like in Syria, the Russian military besieged Ukrainian cities such as Mariupol, Kyiv and others. Their main tact was to bomb indiscriminately civilian and shopping areas while targeting intentionally hospitals, schools, and theaters, as if they were military targets<sup>847</sup>. These tactics left civilians unable to flee the rampage. The complete and intentional violation of human rights is exactly the strategy used by Russia in Syria, one that was barely decried internationally.

Finally, the Ukraine war like in Syria is witnessing international support from the US, European and Scandinavian countries, which are providing weapons and training to Kiev.

Most likely the war in Ukraine, especially if it continues in the long term, will turn from a conventional war into an irregular low-intensity conflict, like Syria. Putin’s

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<sup>844</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

<sup>845</sup> Veidlinger, “Putin’s Claim to Rid Ukraine of Nazis Is Especially Absurd given Its History.”

<sup>846</sup> MCAusland, Phil, “Foreign Soldiers Flocked to Ukraine after Russia Invaded. Five Months on, the Fighting Is Taking a Heavy Toll.”

<sup>847</sup> VOA, “Russia Is Deliberately Targeting Ukrainian Civilians.”



miscalculation that he could obtain a quick surrender from the Ukrainians and his apparent willingness not to abandon the fight could mean that the war would turn into an asymmetric warfare that will not favor Moscow.

In the context of terrorism, Ukraine like Syria is fueling extremist fires but those of the far right groups and militarized extremists.

According to a King's College researcher Claire Burchett and James Barth<sup>848</sup>, "the predominant sentiment expressed in posts which referenced the war was criticism of the West, specifically blaming the conflict on NATO or the administration of US President Joe Biden. Apart from two channels, there was far more support for Russia than there was for Ukraine. The pro-Russia support largely came from the New Right, as Russian President Vladimir Putin has courted political parties and groups aligned with this branch of the far right for many years. Pro-Ukraine support mostly came from groups endorsing National Socialist (Nazi) ideas, themselves more ideologically aligned with the Ukrainian far-right Azov movement".

Additionally the war has galvanized white supremacist groups internationally while dividing them, some siding with Russia other with Ukraine, according to a report by the Washington Post<sup>849</sup>. In this framework the contributors to terrorism may be similar in a way to Syria and very different in other ways. The ethnic, religious and psychological factors or feeling of humiliation do not appear to come into play when it comes to the Ukraine war, like it did in Syria. However, there is a strong ideological, national component<sup>850</sup>, in addition to remnants of what the Syria war triggered in terms of what is perceived as demographic changes in Europe. The far right believes that complacent right and leftist governments have allowed Europe to favor Muslims, which is leading to the dissolution of its identity and putting an economic burden on their countries.

In the context of geopolitical relations, Syria has I believe played a pivotal role in leading to the Ukraine conflict and consolidating the alliances made in Syria.

First the U.S inaction towards Russian involvement in Syria has directly led Russia to believe it would equally be given free reign on Europe's doorstep. Like Iran did in Syria with the Alawites it considered as religious brethren, Russia resorted to a Russian speaking minority to explain its intervention in Ukraine.

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<sup>848</sup> KCL, "Far Right Groups 'Using Russian Invasion of Ukraine to Push Anti-West Narratives.'"

<sup>849</sup> Stenly-Becker, Issac, "Russia's War in Ukraine Galvanizes Extremists Globally."

<sup>850</sup> Dasque, Jean-Michel, *Géopolitique Du Terrorisme Par DASQUE, JEAN-MICHEL*.

Secondly, if we follow the framework set by Amael Catarruza and Pierre Sintès in *Geopolitiques des Conflits*<sup>851</sup>, several factors that came into play in Syria are have become relevant in Ukraine today. These include the presence of a minority, the pressure of globalization that creates new networks and territorial grievances in the spatial sense as well as the emergence of new geopolitical alliances shaped by frontier interests.

Like in Syria, Ukraine suffered from a minority issue. While in Syria that was tenfold, with the Alawites aligned with Iran and the Kurds with the PKK, the Russian speaking minority living in East Ukraine has been a thorn when it came to the unity of Ukraine and an excellent excuse for Russia to lead a partial intervention when arose in Kyiv in 2014 when pro -Russian president Victor Yanukovitch was ousted in the wake of the Revolution of dignity<sup>852</sup>. The defense of the Russian minority was used again in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The pressure of globalization that as we previously saw contributed to the implosion of the Syrian society and created vast challenges for the Assad government with the emergence of new interstate networks across the country have taken a different form in Ukraine. There globalization, was down to whether Ukraine, previously a territory of the former Soviet Union could now join the European Union, which a majority of the Ukrainian wanted but was rejected by Moscow and the Russian-speaking minority. The question of how globalization affected identity and territoriality was at the core of that particular conflict. “Under many aspects, this movement (globalization) is accompanied by a state crisis as an organizational form of the legitimate political space,” say Sintès and Catarruza. This both applied to Ukraine and Syria.

The emergence of new grievances linked to frontier interests also apply to both Syria and Ukraine. Turkey always considered Syria’s borders as one of its old governorates and did not see favorably the expansion of PKK affiliated Kurdish groups on its borders. Iran saw Syria as part of its axis of resistance that connected it from Iraq to Lebanon. Russia saw equally Ukraine as an extension of Russia, given its appurtenance to the Soviet Union and saw any alliance with the EU as a direct threat. Frontiers imaginary or not were once again at the core of the conflict.

According to the Institut Francais Pour les Relations Internationales<sup>853</sup>, “Russia's war on Ukraine has a direct impact on the Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

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<sup>851</sup> Cattaruzza, Pierre Sintès, *Géopolitique des conflits*.

<sup>852</sup> Fisher, “Everything You Need to Know about the 2014 Ukraine Crisis.”

<sup>853</sup> IFRI, “La guerre en Ukraine vue d’Asie centrale.”

Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). The posture of neutrality, common to all Central Asian countries at the beginning of the Russian invasion, gradually changed in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and also in Kyrgyzstan”.

This is not only danger, more threats come Ukraine and Russia’s position of grain and oil producer (Russia) The instability it has provoked are spanning the globe, and the spectrum of instability includes far regions an that are not necessarily in overt conflict, but that are institutionally and economically weak and vulnerable to shocks that have to do with socio-economic factors.

Regional coercion and meddling, transnational terrorism, health insecurity, use of chemical and other unconventional weapons, massive displacement of populations, and overwhelming humanitarian crises- will further exacerbate the complex operating environment. Traditional tools of response have become ineffective given the large geopolitical divisions, with the combination of threats and instability presenting novel challenges for international players.

The Ukraine conflict only reinforced relation sown at length during the Syria war between Iran, Russia and Turkey, despite their vast divergence. They will likely force Russia to give Turkey and Iran more leeway in Syria, without nonetheless allowing the latter to enter in direct conflict with Israel, given Israel’s strong relation to Russia

When it comes to the western relations with Arab countries, the latter have learnt their lesson in Syria. They understand that they cannot trust the US and will remain on the sideline of this new conflict. This has pushed them to recalculate their alliances, as seen in the new Saudi-Iran deal.

The geopolitical shift by the Syria war, not only allowed Russia to think that the war in Ukraine would be a walk in the park but also consecrated the destruction of the American solidarity with the Arab countries while the transactional alliance between Russia, Iran and Turkey will solidify and expand to other countries.

Finally like in Syria, the war in Ukraine is tainted by another clash of civilization, opposing this time western ideals to those of imperialist Russia. Moscow, emboldened by what it considered its wins in Syria over a considerable threat for her, a Muslim government, repeated the same scenario in Ukraine, with a further and larger military engagement given the threat a NATO and EU influenced Ukraine would pose on its dominion and its regional power.

I believe nonetheless that whatever solution in Ukraine is found, it could serve as a lesson for the world's great power given the heavy economic toll it had on the western's economies. Ukraine could be one of the last conventional wars fought so close to the west.

With rapid pressures mounting on autocracies in Africa and the Middle East, or even in Asia whether over the fight for water, refugees, global warming or resources, New Wars, combined high military precision technologies used by the West to balance out the fight will be the trend in the future.

This is the new order that we will face for the next few years, one where non-state armed actors can only proliferate.

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