

# SYRIA OR THE INEVITABILITY OF FEELING CONCERNED

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**When the Survey was conducted, there where hopes on politics and diplomacy efforts to reach some sort of agreement for Syria. Some months later, the evolution of events on the ground brings a gloomy perspective to the future of the region.**

**The drama of refugees is overwhelming, sectarianism is reaching unexpected levels and terrorism has spread to an unexpected rhythm and strength.**

Predictions were bound to become certainties. And so it tragically occurred with the answers given to this 2014 Euromed Survey's questions concerning Syria. At the beginning of 2014, when the Survey was conducted, one could still maintain some hope in politics and diplomacy efforts reaching some sort of agreement for Syria built upon the "Geneva Communiqué". Some months later, the evolution of events on the ground brings a gloomy perspective to the future of the region.

As was suggested, the drama of refugees is overwhelming, both for local population, neighbouring countries and humanitarian organizations, and there is no sight of improvement in the near future. Secondly, sectarianism as a product of sectarian politics promoted by certain governments, such as Bashar Al Assad's and Nouri Al Maliki's, is reaching unexpected levels, dooming societies and communities to fracture and confrontation. Furthermore, terrorism has spread to an unexpected rhythm and strength that directly threatened the government in Baghdad and the territories held by Syrian rebels in the North. The proclamation of a caliphate on the Iraqi and Syrian territories by Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, leader of the terrorist organization Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), now turned into an explicit "Islamic State", triggered all the alarms in both regional and international security agencies. The organization's appeal to foreign fighters, its funds, arms provision and organizational and combat skills, have made it an unbearable challenge to the stability of the region and a real threat for the international community. Radicalization is on the rise, and the old borders of the region seem challenged today not so much by Kurdish claims or confessional cleavages, but by a radical militant and violent project based on fear, totalitarianism, murder and brute force. The Islamic State feeds itself from the cruelties of war, raising militarization, sectarianism, marginalization, human drama, conflict... And it draws international attention and jihadi recognition claiming that its caliphate is bound to erase the borders designed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement, reviving the echoes of colonialism for its own benefit.

Concerning regional actors, the old rivalry between Saudis and Iranians (both played their perverse roles, as other Gulf countries such as Qatar did, in supporting either the Syrian regime or some components of the Syrian rebel opposition) has encouraged sectarianism in their respective spheres of influence, as they also gained regional leverage. Gulf countries have opened a new phase of involvement entering into a coalition with the US to fight against the threat of expanding terrorism in the region, which they deem too close and too risky for their own domestic security. Iranian fighters joined the troops to counter the advancement of Islamic State in Iraq, and Iranian leaders backed – somehow following the efforts of the US and Saudi Arabia – the replacement of Maliki by Haider al Abadi, in an attempt to de-escalate Iraq's sectarian conflict.

On the contrary, Iran's involvement in international initiatives to appease Iraqi politics have not been emulated within the Syrian context, although it is difficult to envisage a successful political settlement without drawing to the negotiating table key players in regional politics, such as Russia and Iran. All in all, the dynamics and trends outlined by respondents in this year's Survey have been more than confirmed, unfortunately surpassed.

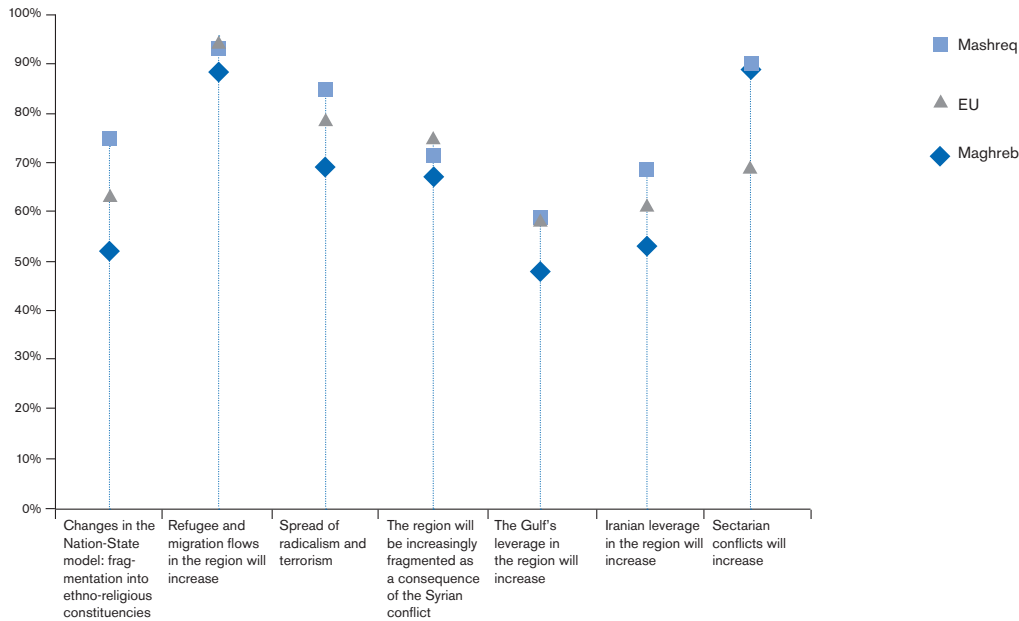
Nevertheless, it is interesting to explore the answers in depth, as they provide interesting insights into how perceptions are constructed according to different variables in place. At first glance, one of the most outstanding remarks that can be made is that respondents from the Maghreb region show less awareness of the consequences of the Syrian conflict among respondents from the Maghreb region than those from Mashreq countries. The latter have a natural tendency to envisage a more severe deterioration of the situation in the region due to their geographical proximity to the conflict.

According to almost all respondents (92%), the Syrian conflict predictably has a huge impact on migration and refugee flows throughout the region (see graph 1). As a direct consequence of the deterioration of living conditions in the country, the displacement of population has been constantly increasing in 2013, reaching critical thresholds in terms of hosting capacity in neighbouring countries. In July 2014, around 2.9 million refugees were registered by UNHCR, 1.4 million in Lebanon (where population does not even reach 5 million people), 808,000 in Turkey and 607,000 in Jordan. In fact, the evolution of the refugee issue is a major concern for Mashreq countries.

**Respondents from the Maghreb region show less awareness of the consequences of the Syrian conflict than those from Mashreq countries.**

**The evolution of the refugee issue is a major concern for Mashreq countries, due to their geographical proximity to the Syrian conflict.**

**Graph 1: Comparing the improvement or deterioration in the past three years and in the long term, on governance elements**



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 5th Euromed Survey

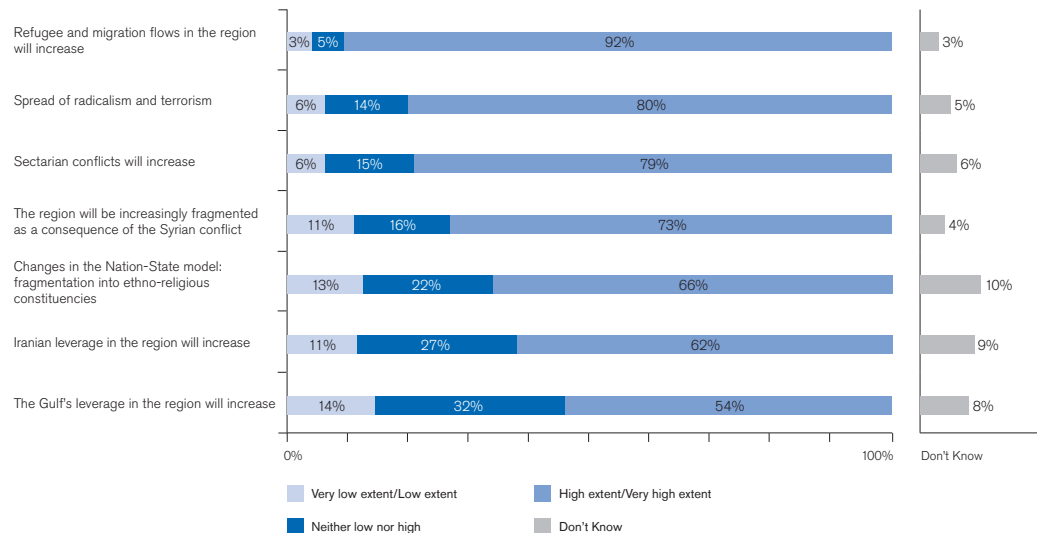
In addition to this, there were more than 6 million IDPs (internally displaced people) within the Syrian borders. The movement of people is not decreasing, as UNHCR recently reminded us: more than 100,000 new refugees were registered every month during the first semester of 2014. Furthermore, the current jihadi offensive in Syria and Iraq has provoked an increase in migration flows, due to the increase in combats and repression from jihadi fighters. Although figures are alarming, they do not account for the real complexity and human drama behind them, since they abound on an already existing issue of refugees provoked by previous conflicts. Thousands of Palestinians and Iraqis in Syria are now suffering an extreme condition of double refugees. The issue is so alarming that UNHCR announced on 20 June that the world number of refugees is the highest ever since the Second World War. Undoubtedly, the Middle East, with the Syrian crisis as its epicentre, is clearly showing this tendency.

Aside from Mashreq respondents, a considerably high portion of participants from Mediterranean Europe and from the EU-28 consider that the number of refugees will increase due to a protracted conflict. For the former the reason is obvious, whereas for Europeans the answer reflects a certain focus on the debates around migration issues: thousands of Syrians are waiting at the doors of Europe (in Morocco or in the Balkans) and 82,000 asylum seekers filled their requests before the EU between 2011 and 2013.

**Porosity of Syrian and Iraqi frontiers and the military offensives of jihadi groups explain why most respondents consider the Syrian conflict as a catalyser of terrorism and radicalisation.**

Concerning terrorism and radicalisation in the region, 80% of participants consider the Syrian conflict as a catalyser of terrorism and radicalisation, particularly those from Mashreq countries. The porosity of Syrian and Iraqi frontiers and the military offensives of jihadi groups explain this result and the general perception of threat. Although al-Qaeda and its franchises seemed doomed after the success of Arab Revolutions and the winds of change in the region, the insecurity, lack of stability, weakness of political powers and influx of weapons in the region caused by armed confrontations in Libya and Syria, for example, fed the seeds of jihadi terrorist groups that were capable of emerging in the most vulnerable scenarios. But despite the widespread threat, Maghreb respondents turn out to be more optimistic concerning the increase of terrorism, a perception which might change in the future if local jihadi branches increase their activity.

**Graph 2: Comparing the improvement or deterioration in the past three years and in the long term, on governance elements**



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 5th Euromed Survey

Another interesting issue raised by the Survey is the implosion of the Nation-State model in place and ethnic and religious fragmentation. The progressive and different scale of self-rule of Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan, protected by the *peshmergas*, announce the de facto end of state sovereignty in the region. Furthermore, the later creation of a transnational “caliphate” comprising Syrian and Iraqi territories by the Islamic State (former ISIS) reinforces the fear of a deconstruction of modern states showing not only certain institutional weakness but also a major structural deficit. In this context, it is interesting to observe that the group of respondents more fearful of such a scenario are participants from non-EU countries, such as Serbia, Montenegro or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their leaning towards “Balkanisation” in the Middle East and their stance concerning ethnic and religious conflicts may well serve as an explanation for these results.

A large majority of respondents identify the threat in increased sectarian violence. For 73% of them the risk of inter-confessional conflicts provoked by the stalemate in the Syrian conflict is a real threat. After the Arab revolts in 2011, born from peaceful and civic movements, exploitation of identity politics has been on the rise, in Bahrain or Yemen, but also in Syria. In recent years, we have also witnessed a certain revival of tensions between both candidates to regional leadership, the Saudi Wahhabi Kingdom, on the one hand, and the Islamic Shiite Republic of Iran, on the other. This cleavage between Shiites and Sunnis provokes the revival of the spectre of civil war in Iraq but also in Lebanon, where stability is granted by a highly precarious confessional political system.

In this context, 62% of respondents consider that Iran, key player in the conflict, has an opportunity to expand its influence. Iranians have been militarily engaged on the side of Bashar al-Assad since the end of 2012, and sent advisors and instructors from the *pasdaran*. However, the perception concerning Gulf monarchies is quite different. Barely 54% of respondents grant such centrality to the role played by Gulf actors, despite the fact that they sent donations and weapons to support the Syrian rebels but have not succeeded in swinging the victory towards the rebels. Furthermore, Saudis who intend to lead the Sunni sphere are confronted with different interests than those of Qataris. Based on the results, it might be considered that despite common threats and interests, such as combating jihadi fighters in the region, both regional powers, Saudis and Iranians, continue to deploy an aggressive rhetoric in which it is difficult to decide who is leading the race.

In conclusion, the centrality of the Syrian conflict in Middle East policy-making is indisputable. Respondents of the Survey were well aware of this and their answers reflect how obvious it was that the situation could only deteriorate in the following months. When addressing the Syrian conflict the dices were loaded, and informed citizens knew already that political stalemate and diplomatic inaction could only bring more instability to the region.

It was difficult to foresee how the refugee crisis could worsen, but it did with the jihadi offensive and now with the US-led coalition air strikes. Sectarianism has exploded in Iraq and Syria, it is seriously threatening the fragile equilibrium of Lebanon, Bahrain and others, and it has its reverberation in countries where it had never been such an issue, like Egypt. Iran is there, for better and the worse, for the nuclear dossier negotiations, for Iraq and it should also be there for Syria’s future, despite reluctance from Americans, Saudis or Israelis. Radicalization is a concern for both Arab and non-Arab countries, faced with confronting a menace that might grow either inside or outside their own borders. They are working to reinforce security and intelligence mechanisms to control foreign fighters, extremely radicalized, violent and militarily trained. They pose a threat not only for the territories where they go to fight but also for their countries of origin where they come back afterwards. In the regional arena, despite their democratic deficits and their perverse role in the Syrian conflict, Gulf countries are growing in influence and becoming inevitable players in dealing with politics in the region. The issue is to what extent Gulf countries and Iran are being “Mediterraneanized” or Mediterranean countries are being “Gulfized”. We will have to wait for future Euromed Surveys to see.

**The creation of a transnational “caliphate” by the Islamic State reinforces the fear of deconstruction of modern states.**

**Most respondents consider that the Syrian conflict will contribute to the growth of sectarian violence, because of the rise in exploitation of identity politics and tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran.**