

# Evolution and Outlook of the Syrian Crisis

**Thomas Pierret\***

Lecturer in Contemporary Islam  
Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies,  
University of Edinburgh

The current shape of the Syrian crisis derives from three key developments witnessed in 2013. Two of them directly strengthened the Assad regime after a succession of military setbacks: first, the growing involvement of foreign Shia militias such as the Lebanese Hezbollah on the side of loyalist forces, starting with the battle for al-Qusayr in the spring; second, the United States' decision to respond diplomatically, rather than militarily, to the chemical attack carried out in Damascus in August. These turning points were followed by a long series of loyalist victories that culminated with the evacuation of the centre of Homs by the rebels in May 2014. Politically, Assad's renewed sense of confidence resulted in the failure of the Geneva II peace talks in February 2014, and in the holding of a *de facto* non-contest presidential election in June.

The third major event of 2013 was the creation of the radical Jihadi group the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) in April. ISIS' hostile behaviour towards other rebel factions led to an all-out war from early 2014 on, adding a new fault line to an already multi-front conflict, since the regime-opposition struggle had been supplemented with fighting between the opposition and Kurdish nationalists from late 2012. The struggle against ISIS diverted much of the military resources of the rebels, but it also had positive effects for the latter, as it accelerated the restructuring of the decaying Free Syrian Army around a handful of robust military coalitions, and helped to ease tensions with Kurdish nationalists.

By May 2014, the state of play was thus determined by two major trends: on the one hand, a reinvigorated regime gradually cleansing the centre of the country from rebel presence and strengthening its hold over Damascus; on the other hand, a rebellion which, after expelling ISIS from the western half of the country, demonstrated its persistent capacity to deal severe blows to the regime in peripheral provinces. As no major breakthrough by either side was likely in the foreseeable future, and with a moribund diplomatic process, all the ingredients for the war to continue in the long term were in place.

## The Regime Turns the Tide

Between the summer of 2012 and March 2013, the Assad regime was forced to retreat on many fronts, thereby suggesting that it was on the verge of collapse: in July 2012, it lost the eastern half of Aleppo and most of its province, including the border crossings with Turkey; concurrently, a similar scenario was witnessed in the eastern region of Deir ez-Zor, on the Iraqi border; it is in this context that Prime Minister Riyad Hijab defected and fled to Jordan; in November, rebels seized important military bases in the vicinity of the capital, reached the gates of the international airport, and came dangerously close to laying siege to the centre of Damascus; in early 2013, loyalist forces abandoned two airbases in the north (Taftanaz and al-Jirah); in March, Raqqa was the first (and so far, only) provincial capital to fall into the insurgents' hands; the same month, rebels in the south took advantage of a recent shipment of Saudi-purchased Croatian weapons to cut off supply lines between Damascus and the southern city of Der'a. Throughout the spring of 2013, however, loyalist forces managed to turn the tide by adopting a new

\* This article was finalised in April 2014 (Editor's note).

## The struggle against the ISIS diverted much of the military resources of the rebels, but it also had positive effects for the latter, as it accelerated the restructuring of the decaying Free Syrian Army around a handful of robust military coalitions, and helped to ease tensions with Kurdish nationalists

counter-insurgency strategy aimed at making up for the structural lack of manpower caused by the Alawite-dominated regime's distrust of its own Sunni soldiers: first, increasing firepower by supplementing heavy artillery and airpower with ballistic missiles and, eventually, chemical weapons; second, abandoning non-essential areas and focusing on the defence and recapturing of a limited number of strategic positions; third, recruiting reinforcements on a sectarian basis, both inside Syria, with the formation of a predominantly Alawite auxiliary militia called the National Defence Force, and abroad, with the arrival, under the supervision of Iranian officers, of thousands of Shia fighters from Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Iraq (Abu al-Fadl al-'Abbas Brigade, Nujaba Movement, Badr Organisation) who played a crucial role in virtually all the victories won by the regime from that moment on.

Results were quick to materialise: loyalist forces gradually pushed back the rebels from central Damascus and cut off the supply lines of their strongholds in the city's suburbs; the road to Der'a and important communication lines in the north were re-opened; in June, Hezbollah infantry captured the city of Qusayr, which isolated the insurgent pockets in Homs from their networks of logistical support in northern Lebanon.

### Opposition in Turmoil: the Chemical Crisis and Saudi-Qatari Rivalry

Over the summer of 2013, a new, albeit less spectacular, reversal of fortune occurred when insurgents won victories west and north of Aleppo (Khan al-'Asl, Munnagh) and reached the eastern outskirts of

central Damascus. The latter development was worrying enough for the regime to prompt the use of the sarin nerve agent in the capital's suburbs on August 21, killing hundreds of civilians within a couple of hours. Although the chemical attack allowed loyalist forces to make immediate territorial gains as part of the broader Operation Capital Shield, its main consequences derived from the Western reaction to the massacre. Barak Obama having described the use of chemical weapons as a "red line" one year before, initially threatened the Syrian regime with military retaliation, but the US administration rapidly rallied to a Russian initiative providing for the dismantlement of Syria's chemical arsenal by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Obama's volte-face was deeply comforting for the Syrian regime: it proved that Washington had no intention of getting more involved in the conflict, let alone to actively push for regime change; Assad was now re-legitimised as a partner of the international community in the implementation of the agreement; it signalled to Assad that he would be safe provided he refrained from using chemical weapons, thereby paving the way for a conventional escalation in the form of forced starvation and daily barrel-bombings over Aleppo; the requirements of the agreement even implicitly encouraged loyalist forces to step up their military effort in order to secure strategic roads linking chemical plants in Damascus and Aleppo (Sfire) to the port of Latakia, where chemical stockpiles were to be embarked for destruction at sea; last but not least, Washington's failure to enforce its own red lines on the use of chemical weapons prepared the latter's re-emergence in the spring of 2014, when several chlorine attacks were reported across the country.

Thus, in the months that followed the chemical attack, loyalist forces achieved an impressive series of successes: they cordoned off Damascus' southern suburbs and subsequently imposed humiliating truces upon their rebel defenders; re-opened land communication towards the south-eastern entrance of Aleppo in Khanasir, then attacked the rebel-controlled half of the city from the east; re-captured the strategic town of Ariha on the Idlib-Latakia road; gradually seized all the major towns of the Qalamun mountains north of Damascus up until the battle of Yabrud in April 2014; destroyed insurgent pockets west of Homs (Krak des Chevaliers) in March and

forced rebels to evacuate central Homs itself in May. In all of these campaigns, the regime compensated its lack of manpower with the massive use of artillery and airpower, thereby provoking mass displacements of populations making Syria's refugee crisis the largest of its kind in decades: by the spring of 2014, it was estimated that 9 million Syrians (out of 22 million) had been displaced, 2.5 million of which had taken refuge in neighbouring countries.

Politically, the chemical episode also struck a devastating blow to the moderate opposition, whose pro-Western stance was now widely reviled in the light of Washington's attitude. At the end of September 2013, a dozen major rebel groups formally broke with the Syrian National Coalition, the opposition's main representative body, while whole divisions of General Salim Idriss' Free Syrian Army (FSA) literally collapsed as their units rallied to Islamist factions. Insurgent defiance towards the mainstream opposition was apparently fuelled by Qatar, whose influence within the National Coalition had recently dwindled as a result of the July election of Saudi-aligned Ahmad al-Jarba at the head of the organisation.

### **The Rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham and Rebel Consolidation**

The travails of the moderate opposition following the chemical crisis emboldened the most radical end of the insurgency, namely, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS). The organisation was created in April 2013 by the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who proclaimed the merger of his organisation with its Syrian franchise, the Nusra Front of Abu Muhammad al-Jolani. Al-Jolani's rejection of that decision resulted in a split between the Nusra Front, which was recognised as al-Qaeda's official branch in Syria by Ayman al-Zawahiri, and ISIS, which attracted to its ranks the majority of the thousands of foreign volunteers fighting alongside the opposition.

Whereas the Nusra Front had maintained decent relations with the rest of the opposition, ISIS rapidly alienated many because of its brutal implementation of Islamic law, abduction of journalists and civilian activists, and paranoid behaviour towards other rebel groups. Over the summer of 2013, ISIS assassinated

a prominent FSA commander in Latakia, ousted the FSA-affiliated Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades from Raqqa, and preyed on the small Northern Storm Brigade in A'zaz, north of Aleppo. The latter attack was part of a broader strategy aimed at taking control of border crossings with Turkey in order to cut off the mainstream insurgents' supply lines. Tensions continued to mount during the autumn as a result of further aggressive moves by ISIS, including the kidnapping and execution of rebel commanders affiliated with Islamist groups such as the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham.

**Whereas the Nusra Front had maintained decent relations with the rest of the opposition, ISIS rapidly alienated many because of its brutal implementation of Islamic law, abduction of journalists and civilian activists, and paranoid behaviour towards other rebel groups**

In January 2014, rebel forces ranging from FSA-affiliates to the Nusra Front launched a joint military offensive against ISIS across the country. Following fierce battles and car-bombings that took a thousand lives within a few weeks, ISIS was forced to evacuate its positions in Idlib, Latakia and most of Aleppo, and concentrated on the defence of its stronghold of Raqqa. By May 2014, fierce battles were still raging for domination over the Deir ez-Zor province.

During the last months of 2013, the need for unity against ISIS, the decay of the FSA as a result of Western abandonment and internal factional rivalries, and the feeling that uniting the most credible insurgent groups would maximise both military efficiency and fund-raising capabilities, combined to prompt a reorganisation movement among rebel ranks. Instead of a broad but loose umbrella like the FSA, this movement took the form of smaller, but more robust and cohesive coalitions. The largest one was the Islamic Front, a nationwide alliance dominated by the Salafi groups Ahrar al-Sham (Free Men of the Levant) and Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam). Moderate Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and/or traditional religious

leaders established the Ajnad al-Sham (Soldiers of the Levant) Islamic Union in Damascus, Jaysh al-Mujahidin (Army of the Holy Warriors) in Aleppo, and Faylaq al-Sham (The Sham Legion) in Idlib. As for the remnants of the FSA, they reorganised into the Syria Revolutionaries Front and the Hazm (Steadfastness) Movement.

The challenge constituted by ISIS also entailed another positive development for the rebels, namely, an easing of tensions with Kurdish nationalists. From late 2012 on, rebel groups had been battling the YPG (the military wing of the PYD, itself the Syrian branch of the PKK) on the outskirts of Kurdish-majority areas in the north. Hostilities were rooted in the fact that the PYD maintained ambiguous relations with the Assad regime as part of a strategy prioritising Kurdish autonomy over any other goal. Accordingly, the regime had handed over control of several Kurdish-majority regions to the PYD over the summer of 2012 in order to prevent any alliance between Kurdish nationalists and the rebels. Conflict between the latter was also fuelled by local Kurdish-Arab ethnic tensions as well as by a drive for resources, in particular the oil wells in the province of Hassake. With the January 2014 anti-ISIS campaign, however, the rebels and YPG found themselves fighting the same enemy, a situation that paved the way for local truces and even instances of military cooperation against ISIS.

### **Geneva II, Presidential Elections, and the End of The Diplomatic Process**

At the end of the Geneva I conference on Syria in June 2012, the United States and Russia had expressed support for a political transition managed by an executive authority composed of regime members and opponents, and endowed with full prerogatives. Behind this façade of unity, however, Washington and Moscow were strongly divided about whether or not Assad should leave power. This disagreement seriously hindered any move forward, a situation that prompted the resignation of the Joint UN-Arab League Special Envoy Kofi Annan.

During the year that followed the appointment of Annan's successor Lakhdar Brahimi in August 2012, no progress was made on the diplomatic front because of the considerable deterioration of the situa-

**No progress was made on the diplomatic front because of the considerable deterioration of the situation on the ground but also, first and foremost, because of the United States and Russia's lack of determination in pushing the process forward**

tion on the ground but also, first and foremost, because of the United States and Russia's lack of determination in pushing the process forward. Although during that period both sides continued to discuss the possible convening of a Geneva II conference, they were obviously more interested in the idea of a diplomatic process than in the actual implementation of a peace plan: for Washington, claiming that a diplomatic solution was in sight was a way to justify a policy of non-intervention in Syria; yet, precisely because of this policy, the Obama administration had very little leverage over the conflict, and therefore lacked the means to impose a diplomatic solution on the warring parties; for Moscow, speaking of a "political solution" was a convenient way to cover for the fact that Russian arms were flowing to the Syrian regime – the Kremlin had already gone too far in its support for Assad to hope it could salvage its interests in a post-revolutionary Syria.

Plans for a Geneva II conference were revived in the autumn of 2013 as a follow-up to the agreement on the dismantlement of Syria's chemical weapons. The conference, which took place in January 2014, was marked by the first direct negotiations between the regime and the opposition, but rapidly proved a complete failure, as circumstances were even less auspicious than two years before. Assad's position of strength on the ground encouraged him to flatly reject any prospect of transition. This stance was endorsed by his allies, whose position was less uncomfortable than it was two years earlier due to the gradual desensitisation of international public opinion towards Syria's atrocities after two years of all-out war. Iran had never accepted the principle of political transition in Syria, and while continuing to pay lip service to Geneva I, Russia (which was now involved in a major diplomatic crisis with the West over the Ukraine) drifted

away from its earlier commitment by announcing it would accept the result of the Syrian presidential election planned for June 2014. Although formally pluralistic, this was designed to be a *de facto* non-contest election, thereby ensuring the re-election of Assad, hence the final collapse of the transition talks initiated in Geneva in 2012.

### Current State of Play and Prospects

In May 2014, the succession of regime victories in southern Damascus, the Qalamun and Homs, a city once dubbed the 'capital of the revolution,' was widely interpreted as a sign that Assad was winning the war. However, this was probably a partial and short-sighted reading of the situation. The aforementioned successes were local developments that were unlikely to be replicated in other parts of the country, where loyalist forces were lacking what made their strength in central regions, that is, manpower and strategic depth.

The Damascus-Homs axis was always predominantly controlled by the regime; it borders the strongholds of the Lebanese Hezbollah, which sealed off much of the border to rebel movements and committed its own troops in support of Assad; given the importance of these provinces for the regime, they have been home to a very large share of the military's units and infrastructures; in Homs in particular, the presence of large Alawite and Christian communities allowed for the recruitment of sizeable auxiliary militias. The lack of such factors explains the mixed results witnessed in Aleppo, a very predominantly Sunni province whose countryside was under rebel control since early 2012. By May 2014, while regime forces were still threatening rebel-held neighbourhoods from the east, insurgents were closing in on loyalist strongholds in the western part of the city. At the same time, the rebels were able to tunnel-mine several headquarters of loyalist forces in the city centre.

*A fortiori*, the situation was even more difficult for the regime in less strategic peripheral provinces in the south (Der'a, Qunaytra), centre-north (Idlib, Hama) and east (Deir ez-Zor), where Assad's forces steadily lost ground to the rebels throughout the spring of 2014. Interestingly, the regime also suffered from a shortage of manpower in the Alawite stronghold of

Latakia, where rebels seized the Armenian border town of Kassab during the March 2014 Anfal campaign. Whereas a similar attack in the province in August 2013 had been met with a sweeping counter-offensive, this time, loyalist forces were still struggling to regain the lost ground two months after the rebel offensive.

**Saudi Arabia and Qatar were providing money and weapons but, in addition to being pitted against each other by a bitter rivalry, they lacked the know-how required to really boost the rebels' military standing**

Of course, the regime was still advantaged by the respective strategies of foreign actors. Whereas its Iranian and Russian allies were firmly and actively committed to its survival, the opposition had to deal with allies that were problematic in many respects: unlike France, the United States were unenthusiastic about toppling Assad and, out of proliferation concerns, were preventing their regional allies from delivering anti-aircraft missiles to the rebels; Saudi Arabia and Qatar were providing money and weapons but, in addition to being pitted against each other by a bitter rivalry, they lacked the know-how required to really boost the rebels' military standing; Jordan, although a major conduit of Saudi help for the rebels, was hesitant given its anxiety regarding the destabilising potential of refugees and Jihadi militancy; Turkey, although increasingly open in its support for rebel operations in the north, was constrained by the democratic character of its polity; as for Israel, which targeted several military facilities inside Syria from 2013 on, it was distrustful of the rebels until early 2014, when its intelligence started to establish contacts with insurgent units fighting along the Golan ceasefire line, with the goal in mind of establishing a buffer zone to prevent Jihadi incursions. In spite of all this, pro-opposition states had an advantage over Assad and his friends: because of the relatively limited nature of their support for the rebels, they retained many options for escalation, whereas Russia and Iran's war effort in Syria had already

reached proportions that were probably unsustainable in the long run. Teheran had reportedly spent several billion dollars to keep Assad afloat, in addition to the commitment of troops on the ground in the form of pro-Iranian Lebanese and Iraqi contingents. From the spring of 2013 on, the anti-tank guided missiles provided to the rebels by their Gulf allies destroyed hundreds of armoured vehicles that could not be systematically replaced. As for the regime's air force, it had lost relatively few aircraft, but it was increasingly overstretched as a result of daily missions.

Despite their many flaws, loyalist forces were likely to keep the means to retain strategic positions in the long run, roll back rebel presence in the regime's heartlands, and disrupt insurgent control over peripheral provinces. However, problems of manpower and hardware made total victory by the regime unrealistic, thereby making regime strongholds vulnerable to future rebel attacks from peripheral regions, as

exemplified by the May 2014 hit-and-run attacks against key military facilities in Damascus' eastern desert periphery.

Three years after the beginning of the Syrian uprising, therefore, nothing suggested that the war was close to an end, except, maybe, Saudi Arabia's announcement that it was ready to settle differences with Iran through negotiations. However, a rapprochement between Riyadh and Teheran would probably not suffice to solve the Syrian crisis. Whatever influence the two regional powers could exert over their respective Syrian protégés, the latter were engaged in a zero-sum game that made the problem particularly intractable: genuine power-sharing was not an option for Assad because it would ultimately lead to the demise of his highly personalised regime; while the rebels, for their part, would probably never become weak enough to be forced to accept mere cosmetic reforms.