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Syria: to end a never-ending war

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*There is no desire more natural
than the desire of knowledge*

INTRODUCTION

In March 2011, incidents in the small town of Daraa, not far from the border with Jordan, caused massive demonstrations in a number of cities across the country. Syria, like other countries of the Middle East, has been experiencing growing popular discontent. Impoverishment of parts of the population, increasingly visible contrast with the lifestyle of certain members of the presidential family, who were benefitting from corruption (in particular the case of Rami Makhlouf), the growing number of well-educated but often unemployed young people, and decades of humiliating oppression, all contributed to amplifying this public unease.

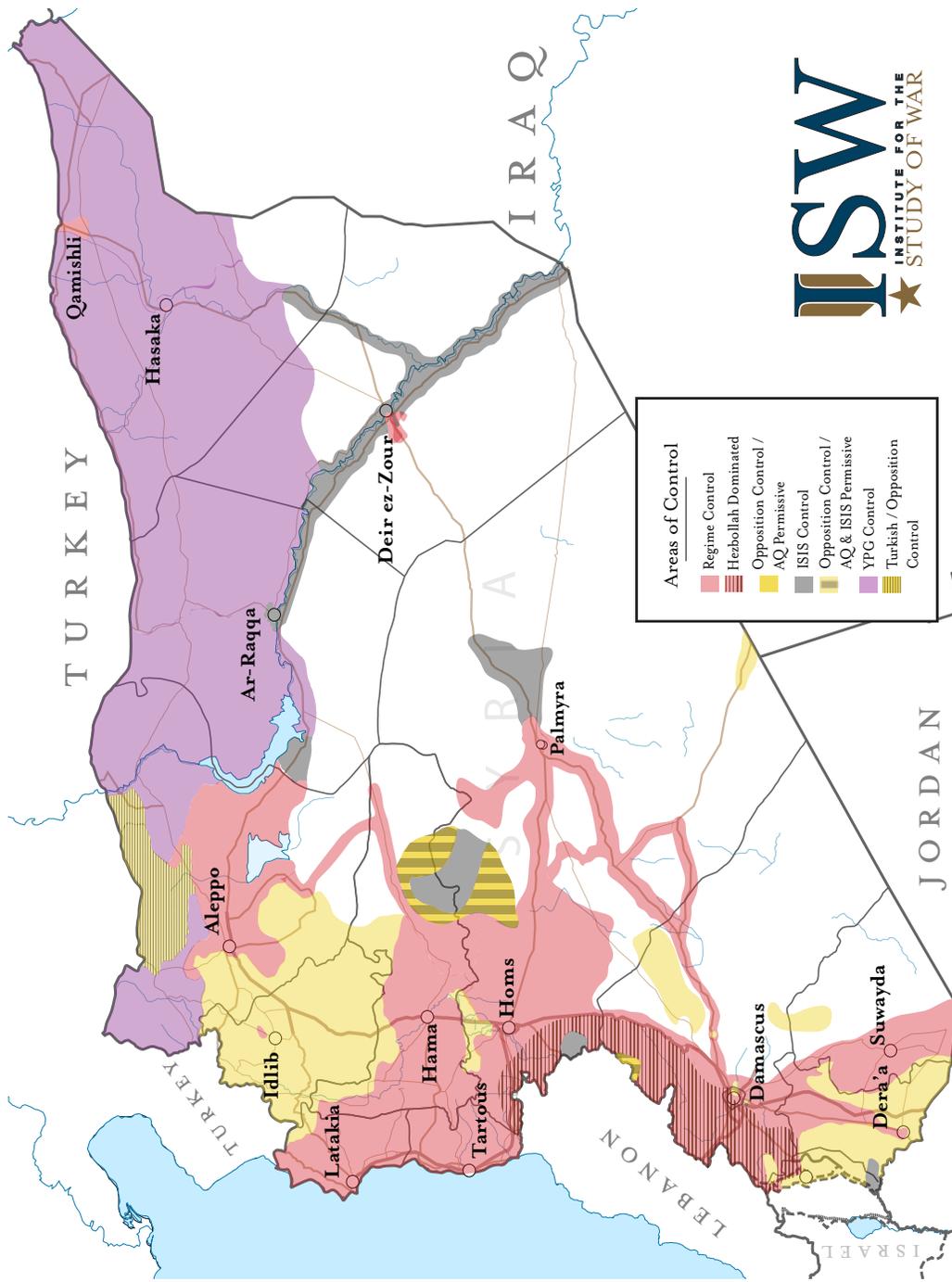
The appalling repression that Bashar al-Assad's regime immediately imposed on his people together with the context of the Arab Spring led to a revolt that started peacefully but quickly turned into a revolution, before resulting in a civil war marked by religious implications. A regional conflict by proxy, which included an East-West dimension after the Russian military intervention (September 2015), was also grafted onto the civil war. At the same time, the emergence of terrorist groups in the region, and in particular the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), quickly imposed another conflict alongside, although linked to the central struggle between the regime and the opposition. Moreover, Kurdish unrest in the North-East, and Israeli anxiety at the intervention of Hezbollah, added other facets to this tangle of conflicts.

A little over six years later, out of a population of 22 million Syrians, 400,000 have died, often atrociously, more than 6 million are displaced in their own country and more than 5 million have fled abroad. One million Syrians are barely surviving in besieged areas and at least 13.5 million are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. Although the Syrian tragedy first affected its own children, the shock waves it caused have had a destabilising effect on the entire region and reached Europe, which has been repeatedly hit by terrorism and weakened by the refugee crisis.

Nevertheless, in February-March 2017, the impression prevailed that we were reaching the beginning of an end to the crisis. The Russians, who, since the fall of Aleppo's eastern districts, had been perceived as the masters of the game facing a weakened non-jihadist opposition, gave the impression they wanted to find a political agreement, despite their regional allies' reluctance (the regime and Iran). The fall of Raqqa, ISIS' Syrian capital, was programmed by the United States (US) and the anti-ISIS coalition. Trump's freshly installed administration first seemed willing to come to an agreement

with Moscow but the chemical attack on 4th April, and especially America's punitive strikes that followed on the 6th, may call these hypotheses into question. However, one can still wonder whether the current circumstances are opening up a window of opportunity for a political settlement of the Syrian tragedy?

The aim of this paper is to provide answers to this question by outlining an analytic reading of the conflict six years after it started (I), before recalling the nature of the Syrian regime (II), evaluating the current situation (III), and setting out proposals of action, mainly for Europe and France (IV).



THIS GRAPHIC LIKELY UNDER-REPRESENTS THE EXTENT OF THE LOCATIONS TARGETED IN EASTERN SYRIA, OWING TO A RELATIVE LACK OF ACTIVIST REPORTING FROM THAT REGION. THIS MAP DOES NOT DEPICT AL QAEDA CONTROL IN WESTERN SYRIA. ISW IS DEVELOPING A NEW CONTROL OF TERRAIN MAP THAT WILL ASSESS THE FULL EXTENT OF AL QAEDA PRESENCE IN SYRIA.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FROM THE SYRIAN CRISIS

How did we get to this?

A. Understandings of the crisis

1. According to the regime and its supporters, the situation has remained unchanged over the past years. Their theory is that the legitimate government faces an insurrection by radical Islamists (known as the *takfiri*) sustained or even initiated by foreign countries. The rest of the world needs to understand that there is no alternative to the 'secular' power of Assad's regime, which is the only bulwark against Islamism and its derivative, jihadism.

Propaganda is a lot more efficient when it is based on elements of truth and speaks to our most deeply held feelings. In recent years, Salafism undoubtedly succeeded in permeating certain sections of the population. The regime's release of various jihadi militants (such as Zahran Alloush, Ahmed Issa and Hassan Aboud, as well as members of ISIS and al-Nusra), was a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. The most significant releases took place from June to October 2011.

Moreover, the regime's 'discourse' also resonates in the deep-seated obsessions of Syria's religious minorities (Druze, Christians, and of course the Alawites) to which must be added some of the Sunnis (the urban bourgeoisie) who support the regime out of personal interest but also out of fear of Islamism. The Alawites only represent 10% of the population (compared to 72% of Arab Sunnis, the remainder being constituted of other minorities), but one can expect the regime's support base to be of about 30% among the minorities and Sunni loyalists. The Christian hierarchies' support for the regime's position has, of course, had an important impact on the West's perception of the conflict.

2. The so-called 'moderate' opposition, which is to say the nationalists, tried to oppose the 'revolution' discourse to the 'conspiracy' narrative.

Observers were impressed by the first demonstrations, which were marked by the desire to overcome religious divisions – as well as by the courage that the demonstrators required to face a regime whose ferocity had created a reign of terror in the country for so many years. A 'revolutionary' spirit then emerged, in the areas freed from government control, through the functioning of local councils which often showed a remarkable sense of responsibility.

This essentially civic-inspired movement was undeniably marginalised as the regime (and possibly with cyber aid from Russia and Iran as of the first few months) eliminated the young, urban and social network activists, who made up the heart of the initially pacifist opposition. At the same time the militarisation and 'radicalisation' of rebels in non-government controlled areas drove out the middle and educated classes – as well as Western journalists. The opposition's most important defeat was losing this 'battle of narratives'.

3. The most committed Western governments (notably the American, the French and the British) did not clearly take sides in this conflict of interpretation. They addressed the issue from a different angle by asking for Bashar al-Assad to step down, first in accordance with the position previously adopted for Ben Ali and Mubarak, and later on because of Assad's role in the rise of extreme conflict.

However, these governments never really gave themselves the means to operate their demand, partly because of their reluctance to use force, as we will see later, but also because of a fundamental doubt. The West was demanding Assad's departure without the conviction that the regime's version of the events was completely false nor that the nationalist opposition's version was completely credible. Conversely, Assad's regime and its supporters did not simply promote their 'story', they also persistently implemented a military 'triangulation' strategy, which prioritised the destruction of the nationalist opposition while instrumentalising the rise of jihadism.

B. Asymmetry of external support and internal dynamics

1. A kind of retrospective illusion might suggest that the defeat of the insurrection was inevitable given Syria's 'Ottoman' demography (a very different situation from that of nation states such as Tunisia, Morocco or even Egypt).

On the one hand, the solid basis aforementioned (which needs some clarification: the upper-middle class Sunni citizens of Damascus remain loyal, but not so much so that they haven't withdrawn their sons from conscription; young Alawites are also distancing themselves more and more; a large part of the population in the area controlled by the regime is probably less 'loyal' than 'submissive'). On the other hand, Sunnis divided between cities and countryside, Aleppo and Damascus, religious and secular people, tribes, Bedouins, Westernised elites, still too divided to form a true *assabiyah* (a united community) and, up to now, unable to produce recognised political leadership.

Notwithstanding this 'social base', Assad's regime required both Hezbollah and Iran's intervention (from 2011-2012) to 'hold on' until the Russians intervened. More generally, the true lesson to be learnt from the Syrian conflict lies in the major influence of external interventions on internal dynamics.¹

2. This phenomenon can be observed in the impact that the interventions of Hezbollah, Iran and Russia have had on the general evolution of the Syrian conflict(s).

The battle of al-Qusayr in May 2013 was a major turning point, which marked Hezbollah's official entry on the scene. From that point on, jihadist speeches, previously marginal in the rebellion, began to echo. Gulf funding started feeding into Islamist groups to the detriment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

¹ On this topic, please refer to the box on page 14: 'A fluctuant balance of power within the Syrian wars'.

A fluctuant balance of power within the Syrian wars

Accounting for changes in the balance of power in Syria is a challenging task. Especially since the front line between the regime and the opposition as well as the configuration of the parties to the various conflicts (regime/nationalist rebels/jihadists) have kept changing. Nevertheless, four phases can be distinguished.

1. First phase, from 2011 to 2013: *the rise of the rebellion and weakening of the regime.*

In 2012, the regime lost control of most of the Syrian territory, a large part of the cities of Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor, the suburbs of Damascus, Homs and Daraa and a large number of oil wells and border areas. Within the State apparatus and the army, desertions multiplied. At that point, Islamists and jihadists were a minor, or even non-existent, part of the rebellion, which allowed the FSA and civil society to create a system of parallel government.

2. Second phase, covering the year 2013: *religion started playing a bigger role in the conflict.*

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria during the Battle of al-Qusayr in May 2013 emphasised the polarisation between Sunni and pro-Iranian actors in Syria. The Sunni jihadist discourse, which was a marginal part of the rebellion, began to resonate. In August, the US' refusal to intervene following the Ghouta chemical attacks considerably weakened those within the rebellion who were in favour of an alliance with the West. In December, the forces of the Islamic forces plundered the FSA's arms stockpiles and attacked its headquarters in Bab al-Hawa, from where it was attempting to form a unified command. The regime was now convinced of its ability to use the military to destroy the opposition without fearing the international community's reaction. In despair, many rebels joined the ranks of the jihadist groups whose anti-Western stance became more credible. The rise of the al-Nusra Front and the formalisation of its allegiance to al-Qaeda, the creation of ISIS and the capture of almost all resources by Islamist networks considerably weakened the FSA's unification efforts and governance by local councils. The city of Raqqa, which was taken over by the FSA in March 2013, illustrates this evolution: ISIS gradually and

systematically targeted its opponents, members of the local council and FSA, before finally taking full control of the city in early 2014.

3. Third phase, from the beginning of 2014 to September 2015: *the territorialisation of ISIS, leading to the rebellion becoming a relative sanctuary.*

The rebellion declared total war on ISIS in January 2014. That very month, ISIS took control over Raqqa's province and then of Deir ez-Zor in July 2014, thereby establishing territorial continuity between the land it controlled in Iraq and the land from where it declared its caliphate. The nationalist rebellion nonetheless regained some coherence during 2014 and 2015. In the North, the FSA drove ISIS out of the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo, and received weapons to fight against the regime and jihadist organisations. The use of anti-TOW tank missiles prevented the regime's infantry to progress. In March 2015, the rebels seized the town of Idlib. In the South of the country, FSA brigades dominated by nationalist elements united and created the Southern Front, which became more professional thanks to Jordanian support.

4. Fourth phase, from September 2015 to the beginning of 2017: *Russians started intervening and the regime resumed control over 'Useful Syria'.*

Russia's air intervention in Syria is manifested by mass bombing of the rebel's both civil and military structures. These strikes have caused populations living in rebel zones to flee the area and have rendered the construction of an autonomous government system impossible. They are particularly aimed at FSA groups backed by the West, since the regime perceives them as serious political and military threat. Meanwhile, states that supported the opposition pushed the rebels to 'de-escalate' their conflict with the regime and focus on combating jihadism. Assad analysed this as a desertion of the opposition by its allies, which encouraged him to continue his strategy to completely crush the insurrection and refuse to negotiate. The regime thus continued to advance on the rebels, seizing the last districts of Homs (December 2015), Daraya (August 2016) and Aleppo (December 2016), as well as against ISIS by taking Palmyra back (September 2016).

The country is *de facto* divided into different zones: the 'regime's zone', ISIS, and the Kurdish, Turkish and rebel zones. Most of the factions supported by Turkey,

Jordan or the US are no longer fighting the regime. Some rebel groups still resist around Homs and Damascus. In Idlib's province and north of Hama, FSA brigades and other factions are allied to al-Nusra during the day and fight it at night.

Moreover, when the Syrian army collapsed (300,000 men in the beginning, 20,000 still fit to fight today according to Russian sources), Hezbollah and Iran organised, armed and trained Syrian (National Defence Forces and others) and foreign militias (besides Hezbollah, Iraqis, Pakistanis, Afghans, Lebanese, Iranians etc.). The number of militia operating alongside the regime is now estimated to be between 50,000 and 70,000, resulting in a sort of atomisation almost symmetrical to that of the rebellion.

The Russians, from their naval and air bases in Tartus and Khmeimim, provide air coverage, which is essential to make up for the deficiencies of the regime's ground troops. There are periodic reports of tensions that certainly exist between the various members of the Russian-Iranian-regime coalition. So far they have managed to remain in terms of identifying priority targets: the nationalist rebellion rather than jihadist groups. This idea is based on the thesis that one cannot (Assad's view) or that it is difficult (Russian view) to differentiate the rebel groups according to their supposed affiliations.

Thus, the regime and its allies justified the attack on the eastern Aleppo neighbourhoods by the alleged presence of jihadist forces (much less numerous, according to the United Nations (UN), than nationalist groups) working closely with the rebel factions supported by Turkey and other regional actors.

3. While Iranian and Russian support of the regime has followed a clear and coherent strategy, the US and its allies' support of the opposition has been much more unreliable.

The aborted strikes in August 2013 (Barack Obama gave up sanctioning the regime's chemical attack against the Ghouta) led to the rise of Islamism in the rebellion after Hezbollah's intervention in al-Qusayr. The episode, which was aligned with the American population's desire to end interventions abroad, embodied President Obama's reluctance to use force in Syria. This added to more short-term variables, such as the disillusionment following the intervention in

Libya – which was long, costly, hazardous and brought about contested results – and perhaps more importantly, as John Kerry later admitted, to Barack Obama’s will not to compromise the prospect of an agreement on nuclear power by risking to confront Iran on a regional level.

Nevertheless, whether or not to use force in Syria was an issue that was never posed by the Obama administration in terms that were compatible with the situation’s realities. The President himself claimed to have rejected the option of a full-scale intervention, like in Iraq or Libya, although this alternative could not have been and was not recommended by any strategist.

Carrying out targeted strikes or secret actions, in the aim of changing Assad and his acquaintances’ expectations, was never seriously considered by the White House. Indeed, such operations carried an important risk of escalation, despite Israel making use of these practices almost routinely (as a matter of fact, the American strikes on the 6th April did not entail major uproar). Thus the only remaining option was to arm the opposition, which is what the government ended up doing, although still in a restrained way, since there was legitimate concern that sophisticated weapons could fall into the hands of anti-Western rebels and be turned against their suppliers.

Considering ‘what-if’ scenarios would not be very productive, simply because it is impossible to prove a counterfactual case. But what can be done is evaluate the consequences of the cautious choices that were made.

- By refusing to supply anti-aircraft weapons to certain armed rebel groups or to establish ‘security zones’ as requested by the Turks, the US and their allies allowed the regime, as of summer 2012, to compensate for its loss of territory by its domination of the airspace. The ‘liberated zones’ were targeted by deadly bombing campaigns, which deeply traumatised and discouraged the population. This greatly contributed to breaking the growth of civic-type government and to encouraging the rise of Islamists.
- By renouncing to target the regime, including ‘ambiguous strikes’ (unclaimed), the US and its allies entirely discredited their alleged wish to see Bashar al-Assad leave. In 2015, as the situation was critical, certain high-ranking Alawite officers confided to their contacts: ‘Why should we relinquish Assad when Obama is doing nothing against him?’.

- Finally, by providing only a restricted amount of supplies to rebel armed groups, the South – and especially Americans – deprived themselves of the opportunity to lead the rebellion. They often left their regional allies (Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) take the lead, which contributed to the fragmentation and radicalisation of the rebellion. The test was their refusal to organise a unified command of the FSA.

Therefore, the issue was not the intervention or non-intervention of the US and its allies, but rather the poor calibration of the actions that were effectively carried out. Not only did the West lose the ‘battle of the shadows’: the choices they made weakened the nationalist rebels, who were predominant at the start of the conflict, in favour of radical Islamists.

C. Proof by diplomacy

1. The Russians, followed by the Chinese (sometimes unenthusiastically), maintained their support of their Damascene *protégé* on the different grounds.

To date, Russia vetoed eight Security Council resolutions. For the first two (in 2011 and 2012), representatives of the five permanent members (P5) had, as usual, agreed on the texts, after the Russian Ambassador’s approval and significant Western concessions. It was a last minute instruction from Moscow (the Kremlin) that imposed the veto, corresponding to a line of obstruction set at the highest level.

2. Although the divergence of views between the West (and its regional allies) and Russia often seemed manageable, no compromise was found.
 - On 30th June 2012, while Mr. Annan was Special Envoy of the UN and the Arab League for Syria, the Geneva Communiqué was approved. Differences in interpretations regarding the side-lining of Assad immediately split Russia and the West.
 - In November 2015, in the wake of the Russian intervention and in a format which this time (unlike Geneva) included Iran, a ‘roadmap’ was adopted in Vienna, followed in December by Security Council resolution 2254. These texts aimed to establish a ceasefire, a timetable for the transition and the drafting of a new constitution. However, this did not lead to the regime showing more flexibility during the sporadic Geneva meetings (II, III, IV).

- In February 2016 (by a Security Council resolution) and then in September 2016 (Russian-US agreement) ceasefires were agreed. In both cases, a decrease of violence was observed, for a limited period only in the second case, as the regime, supported by Russia, refused to restrain its right to strike 'terrorists', by which it meant all opponents.
3. In the West, a gradual erosion of positions in multilateral discussions was observed.
- The Geneva Communiqué of June 2012 laid down the principle of a 'transitional governing body' replacing the current Syrian government. In resolution 2254 of December 2015, only the mention of a 'neutral government' remains, while the requirement for a transitional governing body without Assad was *de facto* eliminated.
 - During the year 2016, in the context of 'letting go' of the opposition and focusing on the fight against ISIS, American diplomacy's goal increasingly limited itself to a cessation of hostilities. John Kerry constantly raised the issue with Sergueï Lavrov, but failed to agree on the list of armed groups to be included in a ceasefire (the Russians and the Assad regime wanted to retain the right to strike groups supported by the West). The idea of a transition became secondary.

At the same time, the emergence of a credible opposition force never was a priority for Western governments and their allies, whereas Russia continuously intended on dividing this opposition.

It was ultimately without the Americans (and without the Arabs, nor, obviously, the Europeans), and without representatives of the opposition's political body mandated to negotiate (the High Negotiations Committee), that the Russians finally concluded a truce on Aleppo, together with the help of the Turks at the end of December 2016. This was followed by several meetings in Astana, during which they tried to extend this truce to the whole country under the auspices of Turkey, Iran, and their own. At this time, the Russians shared the idea of a constitutional process, which could potentially replace the transition process.

THE NATURE OF ASSAD'S REGIME

Regardless of the importance of external factors in the development of the Syrian crisis, it goes without saying that the central actor of the Syrian conflict remains the regime in Damascus, led by Bashar al-Assad.

A. A regime stuck in the past

1. The Syrian regime's image outside the country, sometimes characterised as 'Ba'athist' or 'Alawite', has always been very ambivalent.

On the one hand, the regime inspires a great deal of fear: it is considered as utterly unscrupulous, capable of deploying the utmost violence (bombings and assassinations) against countries that stand in its way. France and the US, in particular, remember the attacks on French and American forces in Beirut in 1983, preceded by the assassination of Ambassador Delamare in 1981 and the bomb blast in rue des Rosiers in 1982.

On the other hand, it enjoyed the perks of being associated to a 'secular' regime that appeared to engage in pragmatic (and although very occasional) cooperation with Western intelligence services, in order to dismantle terrorist networks. The regime's stability relies on the army, which combines Soviet-type statism and the security infrastructures of the Arabian Peninsula 'friendly dictatorships'. For a long time, and still today, such organisation has inspired a certain form of favourable prejudice. Diplomatically speaking, the countless negotiations between Washington and Assad's father around the Middle East peace process, as well as Damascus's control over neighbouring Lebanon, had consolidated the allegedly 'pivotal' role of Assad's Syria in maintaining balance in the region.

2. Reality undoubtedly denied this favourable perception.

As it had been the case from the outset (but increasingly so over the last few years), the Syrian regime deliberately exploited religious differences to consolidate its internal legitimacy. It was no coincidence that the revolutionaries of the first months of 2011 insisted that their claims to power were built on national, and not religious foundations. As with other so-called 'secular' dictatorships, the

power of Assad's regime was largely based on a pact with the growing Islamic fundamentalism – excluding the Islamists from political power but leaving them more or less free to control large segments of the population in exchange for their loyalty.

Between 2005 and 2010 in Syria, the Ba'ath Party had ceased to play any role other than that of a *façade*, while the army appeared to have withdrawn to its barracks. Power was concentrated in the hands of the ruling clan, which in turn relied on the *Mukhabarat* (the 17 so-called 'intelligence' services) as well as business circles. The true power of the Syrian regime was no longer embodied in the superficial, official State but in a network of familial and clan affiliations, undermining institutions, mobilising the historical resentment of the Alawite community to take over the entire system. Led by the Assad family, this network exercised its power through fear. It engaged in systematic, predatory behaviour, while managing to share some of the spoils of the highly centralised economy with important Sunni businessmen.

3. If any confirmation were needed of the extent to which the regime was, above all, repressive and focused on a single clan, it could be found in the way in which it reacted to the 2011 insurgency. Immediate repression was the order of the day. Similarly, the infiltration of the rebellion by jihadi elements to ensure its radicalisation was yet another expression of the regime's habits since the early 1980s. Falling back on foreign sponsors – mainly Iran and Russia – was another of the regime's playbook, which was never sufficiently confident in its internal legitimacy to dispense with external guardians.

A true counter insurgency strategy can be detected when analysing the regime's reaction to the crisis. However, the most striking aspect is the way in which the regime remains stuck in the past. There has been no change in its nature but a change in its recourse to violence. For those who are familiar with the ins and outs of the regime, a key explanation can be found in the relationship between the Alawite inner circle (not to be confused with the remainder of the Alawite community) and the rest of the population, characterised by the perception of an irredeemable rejection by the Sunni majority. According to this group, it was inevitable that the Sunnis would one day seek to avenge the 1982 Hama Massacre. The fight to death between the minorities and the Sunni majority can be considered as the natural consequence of Hama.

B. An imperturbable President in power

How did an apparently modernist 'authoritarian' turn into a mass-murdering criminal?

1. The 'Westernised' and 'reformist' nature of the 'young President' was greatly exaggerated in the US and Europe.

In reality, Bashar al-Assad is first and foremost the product of his father's system and upbringing. The time he spent in London to complete his ophthalmological studies was only brief and his 'Westernisation' is therefore relatively superficial. Called back in 1994 to replace his older brother as the regime's appointed successor, he was given 'training' missions by his father, including the governorship of Lebanon – which was not exactly a part-time job. When he came to power, Bashar al-Assad was fully initiated in the ways of the regime.

Even in 2011, the West still saw him as a 'reformist'. He had opened the economy to allow some external banking and trade to the benefit of businesspeople close to his own family. However, eleven years after he came to power, he had taken great care to avoid even the slightest political reform, or any reform to the country's social structures. He repeatedly told his foreign visitors that he was in favour of such change but that 'his people were not ready'. In early 2011, he confided to those close to him: 'My father was right: the 30,000 deaths in Hama ensured us thirty years of stability'.

This sense of quasi-professional obligation to drown any rebellion in blood is a dominant aspect of Bashar al-Assad's personality. He is no Idi Amin, but a merciless clan leader who methodically applies the family's manual of how to be the perfect dictator.

2. Naturally, a psychological explanation has been sought to account for Bashar al-Assad's behaviour. Some consider him to be a weak and hesitant man who lacks authority even over his own family, ultimately overshadowed by his own father, and convinced he has to imitate his pitiless toughness.

However, his close circle describe him as a confident man, who does not question his personal superiority over his entourage or the leadership of the regime, and who has faith in his own luck. On this last point, he does hold some truth: in the early years of his presidency he comfortably completed purging the regime of

the old guard, a process initiated by his father. Like many people in Damascus, he saw the 2003 American invasion of Iraq as a prelude to the destabilisation of his regime by the Bush administration. He responded by going to (a secret) war, sending all candidates for Jihad who approached his intelligence services (or whom they recruited) to Iraq. This resolute choice was undoubtedly the way by which he earned the respect of his regime's security chiefs.

He then went on to pass another test that would have defeated many: the crisis triggered by the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. He kept a low profile, expecting George W. Bush, Jacques Chirac and Kofi Annan to exit the political stage before he did. He probably also believed, during the current civil war, that Barack Obama, François Hollande, David Cameron and others would not last as long as he would. This is one of the lessons of his father: what matters is to hold on the longest.

3. According to his compatriots, Bashar al-Assad's personal character set the direction for Syrian policy, at least in one respect.

The younger Assad offended his Arab peers in his speeches in ways that run utterly contrary to the region's customs. In particular, he formed a close, personal relationship with Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, at a time when the latter enjoyed a great deal of prestige. Assad gave him access to the palace in Damascus in a way that would have been unimaginable in his father's time.

In relation to Iran, where Assad senior had set up a strategic alliance between equals, built on State interests, Assad junior is perceived by his compatriots as having gradually invested in a privileged relationship on all levels, which gradually turned into subordination. Contrary to what is often believed to be the case, the Alawite community does not have any particular affinity with Iran, which is why the 'Assad card' is so important to Tehran.

C. The dilemmas of the transition process

1. In these circumstances, was the West (particularly Washington, London and Paris) right to ask for Bashar al-Assad's to step down so early in the crisis?

From an analytical point of view, there is no doubt on the question. Once the nature of the regime is understood, it is unthinkable to believe in its capacity to

change or to view it as a partner because of its connivance with terrorism and its unfathomable duplicity. Bashar could not simply resume control and lead the entire country again, or even the part of the country that remained under his control, as if nothing had happened.

2. In terms of tactical diplomacy, insisting on Assad's departure turned out to be counterproductive. India, Brasil and many other emerging countries viewed it as symptomatic of the Western *regime change* syndrome. The Libyan war and Vladimir Putin's discourse both contributed to further aggravating the *regime change* strategy's reputation.
3. Above all, the very reasons that make it necessary to get rid of Assad and of his chief followers – since the two are linked – also make this eviction a particularly arduous – and according to many analysts, impossible – operation.

Difficulties or objections to an exit along the lines of that of Ben Ali in Tunisia or Mubarak in Egypt, or even following the Saleh model, referring to the Yemeni President who left office as part of a negotiated transition under international monitoring, and which was used as a reference point by the Arab League at the start of the crisis, are often invoked. Some scenarios remain more substantial than others. Firstly there is a widespread idea, particularly among most countries' intelligence services, that Assad's clan is the key to the entire Syrian system. Removing it would cause the regime to collapse.

Six years into the conflict, the relevance of this theory can be questioned. If Assad has remained in power through the support of his top officers, it can no longer be due to relationships built by his father decades ago, but rather to the power base of his country's true masters: Iran and Russia. The Russians keep spreading the message that 'they have not yet found a replacement', but one suspects that given the regime's current lack of structure, any other proxy leader would do just as well.

Another explanation to maintaining Assad in power is that the regime must remain in place to preserve 'the State's institutions'. This idea has resonated in the US, where leaders remember the mistake of the Ba'ath Party dismantling in Iraq (not perceiving that the Syrian Ba'athists do not in any way play the same role as their Iraqi counterparts).

However, if the 'the State's institutions' are the army, the civil service and the public sector, these structures have already demonstrated an unexpected resilience, not thanks to the regime but rather in spite of its destructive behaviour. Clearly the continuity of the public health service does not depend on a power structure that systematically bombs the country's hospitals; and the economy does not depend on a regime that has led to the loss of half of its GDP.

Nonetheless, the question that has haunted decision-makers lies elsewhere: how would Assad be removed? And who could replace him?

The lack of a clear and decisive answer to this question greatly contributed to the Obama administration's lack of action, although even in that respect, it is interesting to look at how the question was asked.

Replacing Assad by a pure democrat would have been near to impossible, but replacing him with another product of the regime, who would have ensured continuity and open to negotiation, could have been an option. Until the Russian intervention, the idea was that an internal coup would arise from within the regime, as the result of sufficient pressure from the West and their allies, leading to Assad's removal. Since September 2015, Assad's fate has mainly remained in the hands of the Russians. While the Iranians admittedly control the situation on the ground in Damascus, they would have few options when faced with a new government as a *fait accompli*.

If Assad is not forced out by coercion or on suggestion of his international sponsors, the only other available option is a negotiated departure. The regime and its leader must agree to discuss the modalities of their exit, but it is unlikely this could ever cross their minds. When, in July 2012, certain of the regime's senior members, including the President's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, appeared open to dialogue with external forces, a conveniently placed bomb blast in the heart of Damascus put an end to their careers (and their lives).

In an attempt to circumvent the issue, it is tempting to explore the options suggested by Russian or Iranian officials: diluting the problem by operating constitutional change which would either reduce the President's powers (following the Lebanese model) or which would make Assad's continued rule subject to new elections (with the right to choose whether to stand for another mandate). We are then faced with a last difficulty: experience shows (recently in Yemen, for

example) that in this type of regime, constitutional values count less than the reality of the power relations forged by clan and family links.

Over six years after the start of the conflict, Assad's role remains a fundamental and unresolved issue, more because of his personality than the securitaro-mafia matrix ('Assad or we burn the country') which he embodies.

ENDGAME OR NEVER-ENDING WAR?

A. After Aleppo's fall: the scenario of a Russian peace

1. Aleppo's districts fell in December 2016, following a long battle started in the summer and marked by particularly bloody assaults led by the regime's allied forces, violating laws of war as well as humanitarian law.

There are three points to consider regarding the balance of power at play. First, it illustrates that the aims and interests of Russia, Turkey – and even Iran – converge. After the failed coup on 15th July, Ankara reassessed its priorities. Turkey subsequently decreased its support to the rebel groups that held Aleppo. Its army, which was given the green light by Moscow, entered Syria as part of the Euphrates Shield Operation in order to prevent Syrian Kurds from the PYD party (Syrian branch of the PKK) from connecting their district in eastern Syria and Afrin. Ankara was suddenly less concerned by driving Assad out and a somewhat circumstantial alliance was formed with Russia.

Secondly, the loss of Aleppo marked a considerable weakening of the nationalist rebellion. The FSA's units now only control parts of the territory. In Idlib and elsewhere, they have to share the ground with extremist groups and jihadists. In the outskirts of Damascus and Homs, the regime and its supporters are hoping to clear up areas which are still outside their control. In short, the regime is close to victory.

Thirdly, the Aleppo victory (i.e. the success of the military option applied by the regime), Iran and Russia, since the start of the conflict, provided Russian diplomacy with the opportunity to negotiate a political settlement that was consistent with their leadership's views.

2. After the fall of Aleppo, Russia had enough bargaining power to ensure a political agreement that would favour the regime.

Thanks to its *rapprochement* with Turkey and the support, perhaps too enthusiastic, it received from Iran, Russia was able in Astana to oversee talks between rebel armed groups, with the alleged aim of strengthening and extending the ceasefire implemented in Aleppo. This allowed Russia to help the regime regain control of 'Useful Syria' and further divide the opposition. Russian diplomats saw this as an opportunity to relaunch the political process by drafting a Syrian constitution designed to 're-legitimise' the regime.

Once Turkey more or less agreed to this scheme (which was never really the case) Russia could hope that other Sunni powers, particularly the Gulf States, would eventually rally. The US, first under Barack Obama and later under the Trump administration, which is considered to be inclined to dialogue with the Russians, turned its back on the project. Vladimir Putin wanted to join forces with Washington in their stance against ISIS (Raqqa in particular), which was always the American priority in Syria. It should also be noted that the fall of Raqqa, led by the anti-ISIS coalition, could only benefit the Syrian regime. Since the US and its allies relied on the Kurds to take Raqqa, there were good reasons to believe that the governance of the liberated city could include the regime, as it was the case in Manbij.

3. After two or three months, the 'Russian peace attempt' proved its limits, mainly because of its local allies' reluctance to play along.

First, neither the regime nor the Iranians respected the ceasefire agreed in Astana, which placed the armed groups involved in the negotiations in a difficult position, thereby weakening Russia's desire to reach a political settlement. In Ghouta and elsewhere, the pro-regime forces were supported by Russian bombings. In Geneva, the regime's UN representatives remained as uncompromising as usual. The regime then went 'a step too far', so to speak, with the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhun (4th April), a move that altered the new American administration's view of the Syrian regime and Russia's involvement.

Mid-June, as this paper is being finalized, the regime is using all its forces to bomb the southern town of Daara. The pro-Iranian militias have launched a move to take control of the 'desert' between the Jordano-Syrian frontier and the

Euphrates, in order to establish a junction with the militias of the 'Iraqi popular mobilisation', present in Deir ez-Zor's region. On the diplomatic front, the different challenges of the Astana process were either postponed or failed. Finally, Bashar al-Assad's so-called 'secular' regime uses the pretext of Ramadan to postpone a new meeting in Geneva within the UN mediation framework.

But above all, a Russian-led peace agreement would be confronted with a structural issue posed by Iran. If Assad's regime were to remain in power, at least for some time, the Sunni powers, Syrian opposition and current American administration would expect a withdrawal of Hezbollah and Shiite militias. On the one hand, in order to ensure a military victory via a political agreement and to establish its authority in the region, Russia would 'lose' or have to confront Iran, while maintaining a presence in Syria that would have to work without militia groups, who are doing all they can to keep the Assad regime in place. On the other hand, Russia could separate from Iran and replace the Moscow-Ankara-Tehran triangle by a Moscow-Ankara-Washington triangle, while knowing that these are turbulent times and the end result is uncertain.

Assad himself has been happy to exploit Moscow's dislike for a *regime change* and has been happily pitting his supporters against each other.

B. Post-Kahn Sheikun: towards a Russian/American-led peace scenario?

1. The American strikes on 6th April in response to the chemical attack on Khan Sheikun are not part of a strategy or a 'doctrine'.

Nevertheless, it does reveal certain aspects of American foreign policy: it is now harder for Washington to consider Assad as a partner against terrorism, something the Trump administration was once inclined to do. Significantly, his key foreign policy spokesperson, M. Tillerson and Ms. Haley, radically changed their rhetoric on the subject. Similarly, the idea of letting the regime establish a base in an ISIS-free Raqqa can no longer be taken for granted.

Another American attack against the regime's forces (Iran-backed militias) occurred on 18th May in al-Tanf, followed by other incidents including an American engagement against an Iranian drone. The question is now to know whether these interventions result exclusively from local consideration (protect friendly forces) or if it corresponds to a strategic way of aborting pro-Iranian movement

of forces towards the Euphrates in order to establish (under cover of fighting ISIS) the 'corridor' between Tehran and the Mediterranean, which is what the guardians of the Revolution wish for.

2. Simultaneously, the American strikes on 6th April reopened the Russian-American dialogue.

Those strikes did not entail the escalation predicted by the Obama administration. The Russians, along with the Turks and the Iranians, cleverly 'repackaged' their proposals to take into account the Americans' idea of differentiated security zones. They are now proposing the implementation of four 'de-escalation zones' for which Russia, Iran or Turkey would be responsible, depending on the geographic localisation. Neither the rebels nor the US have yet endorsed this proposal, but violence in the areas in question has decreased and discussions are being pursued. The Americans have shown particular interest in becoming the 'guardians' of an area on the outskirts of Golan, in the South (on the condition that the Iranians and their affiliated militias keep away).

The fundamental problem of Assad's regime, which it admitted in 2014, is its lack of regular troops, which is only partially offset by the proliferation of militias. Any progress in the pacification of a 'Useful Syria' would allow Assad to open up other fronts, including one against ISIS, or to embark on a race with the anti-ISIS coalition for the control of Deir ez-Zor. In this 'turn against-ISIS', which would be completely new, the regime is backed by Hezbollah as well as by highly-trained Syrian militias such as the 'Tiger Forces'. This race just started, together with the perspective of joining pro-regime and Shiite militia forces from Iraq.

3. This is one of the elements of what could be called the 'American dilemma'. Washington can either forget about driving ISIS out from Raqqa (which was the Obama administration's position) but this would encourage the regime and its allies – in the context of the nationalist opposition's current weakness – to complete their reconquest of 'Useful Syria' and take control over a large part of areas currently occupied by ISIS); or it can consider such a solution inadmissible, especially because of the advantages it would give to Iran, and therefore need to establish a complicated and costly strategy to deal with eastern Syria.

In other words, from the American point of view, there are two options: working for Iran or engaging further in the conflict. However, considering the weakness of

the current decisional process in Washington, American decision-makers may not perceive these challenges as clearly.

C. The third scenario: partition of the territory and a never-ending war?

1. The possibility of a 'Russian peace agreement' – which would correspond to an internationally-backed victory of Assad's regime – may not be out of the question, but certainly seems unlikely. We are entering a second scenario, or a second post-fall of Aleppo phase, characterized by a joint attempt of the Russians and the Americans to manage the conflict. Nevertheless, this phase seems very uncertain considering the current state of the Russian-American dialogue.

This being said, given the presence of Iran, US and Russia's goals and interests are currently widely divergent. If Washington and Moscow can ultimately remain on the same page with regards to damage limitation, a Russian-American conflict management program could result in a 'false peace', whereby Syria would be divided into zones of influence. Several regions could thus be constituted: a 'Sunnistan' in the Northeast led by an American-Arab impulsion, a 'Useful Syria' (the Damascus-Homs-Aleppo axis and coastal region) under the control of an Assad-Russia-Iran-Hezbollah alliance and a mini-Kurdistan (the 'Rojava') with somewhat precarious alliances, as well as northern enclaves under Turkish control and perhaps an Israeli-Jordanian partnership in the South.

A *de facto* partition of Syria could be an essential step to a way out of the crisis. However, it would be dangerous to consider this as a solution or even a sustainable strategy. Indeed, contrarily to what some may believe, a 'Useful Syria' would probably not want to give up the phosphate, cereals or the oil reserves located in the East of the country. Conversely, public services networks, transport and commerce are concentrated in Damascus. At the same time, each zone could create bases and attack other parts of the country, leading to a continual state of civil war. Finally, neither the Syrians nor any country in the region really wants of a divided Syria.

2. A 'false peace' or the 'default solution' of dividing the country is likely to lead to a never-ending civil war scenarios. The level of violence may be lowered, but the pursuit of any type of war would fuel terrorism on all sides.

This scenario is quite likely to occur, in particular because of four inevitable or at least highly probable developments.

- The pursuit of the regime's drift: Russia could try to control the militia (for example by creating large military corps attached to the official army). However the regime would then have trouble maintaining a war economy that could deal with the militias' clientele and the various traffickers that form their current basis. Stopping the hostilities would force the regime to confront public discontent, including grievances held by the Alawite community, who lost a large part of its youth.
- The resilience of terrorism: the fall of Raqqa and the eventual ousting of ISIS from the rest of the Euphrates valley will not see the disappearance of militants loyal to al-Baghdadi.

It is most likely that ISIS will disappear from the political landscape only to emerge in other equally murderous form (regrouping in the inaccessible areas of the al-Anbar province, increasing urban and international terrorism). This organisation alongside its allies (al-Nusra Front/al-Qaeda) will easily find recruits among the mass of disillusioned youth (perhaps a million of people) who fill the region's refugee camps;

- The province of Idlib's ticking time bomb: similarly, the pacification of the regime and its allies has led to a concentration of forces in the Idlib province. These comprise the al-Nusra Front, now known as Fatah al-Cham, rebel groups of various affiliations and refugee populations from Aleppo among others, who all live in extremely harsh conditions. Indeed around 2.5 million people currently live in Idlib province, which is regularly bombed by the regime and its allies.

Moreover, the al-Nusra Front has demonstrated its capacity to mount attacks on areas under the regime's control. Unlike ISIS, this Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate is rooted in Syria. On the other hand, if Russia, Iran and Damascus decided to launch an attack on the Idlib province comparable to the East Aleppo offensive, it would probably entail a far worse humanitarian crisis than the terrible one

witnessed in Aleppo. It would also cause a political catastrophe, by rendering any chance of national reconciliation even more unlikely than it is now.

- Population displacement and Iranian settlement: some Syrian populations, including those who have remained loyal or subject to the regime, could be moved to strategic sectors such as Homs or Zabadani – a type of denominational cleansing that could see the construction of Iranian and Shiite settlements.

Other radical changes would follow, such as the transfer of property ownership, an Iranian seizure of entire sectors of the Syrian economy, the settlement of Shiite militias and their families in Homs former Sunni districts or a (potentially difficult) establishment of a ‘Syrian Hezbollah’, following Assad’s statements, implying that Syrians who left the country would not be welcomed back with open arms. Such actions would only contribute to further inflaming Sunni resentment.

3. A never-ending Syrian war and the European dilemma.

It may have been tempting for Brussels and some EU member states to fund Assad and its allies victory, in the hope of restoring order in the country. As it is, data gathered suggests the situation is leaning towards a never-ending war scenario, which means Europeans need – to meet their objectives – to find a solution other than simply throwing money at the reconstruction of a ‘Useful Syria’, which is currently an unrealistic option.

IV

ELEMENTS FOR A STRATEGIC PATH TOWARDS THE CRISIS' RESOLUTION

Only the mobilisation of the international community, on a renewed basis, could break the Syrian never-ending war dynamic. This is vital not only for Europe but also for neighbouring countries, which all bear the brunt of the 'geopolitical Chernobyl' caused by the Syrian crisis.

A. A window of opportunity?

Current circumstances could lead to a pathway to peace, based on four options that still need to be carefully weighed up.

- In order to avoid a stalemate, Russia could consolidate the political stakes that drove its involvement in the Syrian conflict in the first place. It could also support a 'frozen conflict' (a never-ending war but with a lowered level of violence), which is Russia's usual way of handling crises, particularly those near its borders.

However, for now, Russia continues to support offensives carried out by the regime's allies and Iran. Certain signs may nevertheless indicate that Russian officials are becoming less patient with Bashar al-Assad, who is best placed to sense the limits of this patience.

- An opportunity now exists for an American re-engagement, which would result both from a lesser reluctance to use force and a true preoccupation in regards of Iranian regional expansionism.

We remain nonetheless far from a re-engagement including a medium-term military planification, framed by a defined political strategy.

- The regional equation is evolving. The open crisis between members of the Gulf States Cooperation Council and Qatar confuses the diplomatic scene and may contribute to increasing the region's polarization. However, a rebalancing of the American position between the Sunni and Iranian powers may provide opportunities to restore the balance of power.

Iran, hyperbolically challenged by the new American President (see Donald Trump's speech in Riyadh) may not want to retreat, but could still adapt to a slightly less favourable context. In this respect, President Rouhani's re-election is a positive element. Iran's partners would have to fall in line with Tehran's regional policy, as to date they have not been beholden to the President of the Islamic Republic;

- Finally, though the US and their allies' fight against ISIS over the last two years has turned its attention away from the global aspects of the Syrian crisis, the prospect of ISIS' defeat should revive interest in finding a settlement to the crisis. This would require complete regional stability in a post-ISIS scenario.

This is undoubtedly the most important factor if the countries involved – and Europe in particular – are to redefine their policies. Tomorrow's challenge will be to manage post-ISIS. This will mean depriving the terrorist network it will carry on being, together with al-Qaeda in Idlib and elsewhere in Syria, from benefitting from a favourable ground for its development. Solving the Syrian crisis and leading the country towards a true and stable peace is – now more than ever – a crucial issue.

B. Which path to resolution could be conceived?

In this context, the time has come to discuss which path to resolution could be conceived, or, to use a military term, how to reach an 'end-state'.

In a nutshell, returning to regional stability – which will, without doubt, take time – would require the following five points:

- Eliminating jihadism (al-Qaeda, ISIS) and dealing with the regime's securitarmafia matrix.
- Withdrawing foreign militias and stopping external support to armed groups opposed to a peaceful, political solution.

Both of the above would largely be the responsibility of the P5 + Germany in collaboration with Syria and certain regional powers.

- A certain consensus on what a new Syria would imply (form of government, the degree of decentralisation, the role of religion etc.): despite their divisions, only

the Syrians themselves could decide on this and would need to take into account the various political opposition parties that have formed over the years.

- The implementation of external guarantees and a balance of interests for regional powers, with the aim of drawing up a final settlement. Such an agreement would need to involve world powers, regional countries and, of course, the Syrians.
- Territorial integrity and sustainable borders.

These elements, which certainly need to be further developed and defined, lead to three lines of discussion: inter-Syrian dialogue, co-operation between the major powers and negotiations between the regional powers. Only the UN will be able to ensure full co-operation between these three lines of negotiation.

C. What strategy?

Three main lessons can be drawn from the analyses discussed in this paper:

- Western countries and their allies (members of the anti-ISIS coalition – the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, France, the United Kingdom) could play a driving role, but would need to establish a two-fold approach. In other words they must accept – unlike President Obama – the necessity of military action, while recognising that any military agenda would need to fall within a political strategy.
- A Russian-American dialogue is essential to reach a peace deal, but it needs to be boosted by other channels, namely the involvement of regional powers and Europe in particular.
- The West and its allies have two main objectives: ending their struggle with ISIS and al-Qaeda and to force Assad's regime to enter a democratic transition.

The paper has already discussed this last point. Decisive progress can only be achieved by exercising huge pressure on the regime and its forces, alongside witnessing a shift in Russia's position which could convince Assad to change his policy.

To achieve these goals, this paper sets out a comprehensive approach comprising six additional lines of action that do not distinguish between military or security aspects and political or diplomatic aspects.

1. Finalize the offensive on Raqqa, and manage its consequences. The offensive on Raqqa was launched without a fixed plan regarding the security and governance of the city after ISIS' departure.

Defining Raqqa's governance post-liberation is urgent, but it must be done without the local population perceiving it as being instigated by the Kurds or the current regime. This task is all the more difficult as Turkey, still shaken by its NATO allies' cooperation with the PYD, is proving to be uncooperative.

Furthermore, the taking of Raqqa only makes sense if it is followed by the liberation of the entire Euphrates valley (Deir ez-Zor in particular), which in turn renders a Kurdish alliance unsustainable. This entire area could be 'self-governed', with international support, and serve as a template that could be reproduced elsewhere. The US and its allies thus face a major military and political challenge, while the regime and its supporters do not believe this type of scenario to be in their best interests – hence the considerable risk of conflict between the forces on both sides.

2. Create a stabilising force stemming from the Sunni Arab rebellion: a necessary, short-term policy to ensure the security of areas freed from ISIS. However, past failures (*cf.* 'train and equip' strategies) alongside the fragmentation and weakening of SLF forces prevent the coalition from addressing this issue with the necessary determination.

Around several tens of thousands of young Arab fighters are available, in particular amongst those which constant defeat forced to return homes or join jihadist centres. Mobilising these troops will constitute a technical, logistic and political challenge since these potential recruits are not motivated unless they fight the regime or unless they are placed under Syrian command. Another challenge lies in the creation of long-term stability once a peace agreement is reached: there is growing need for a disciplined, well-trained and equipped force recruited among the rebellion, but which would join the ranks of the official army and help to eliminate militia organisations.

3. Aim for a nationwide ceasefire.

Unless the hostilities stop, there's little chance that negotiations on a transition will take off.

Calm on the grounds must be followed by massive humanitarian aid and prepare for stabilization programs. Such processes constitute an antidote to the jihadi influence and efficiently pressurizes the regime. The Astana talks have demonstrated their limits. A new approach, based on the Astana process, but enlarging the number of participants and extended the ceasefire to the 'zones' covered by the negotiations. To this end, the US and its allies could take over the discussion with Russia and offer to provide the technology for a reconnaissance mission (satellites, ground sensors, etc.), perhaps a sanction mechanism towards the regime in case it breached the ceasefire.

Discussions of this kind with the Russians could include the 'differentiation' between nationalist groups and jihadists, a particularly sensitive issue on which the Americans and the Russians failed to agree. Talks with the Russians should include the grounding of the Syrian air force, if there is to be a ceasefire or a cooperative strike against terrorists.

4. Render the coalition's ability to protect civilian populations credible.

The strikes of 6th April could be used as an effective deterrent against all forms of violence against the population. The statement made by President Macron when he met up with Vladimir Putin follows the same logic. Emmanuel Macron announced that France would not let another chemical attack unanswered, enabling the establishment of a coordinated action between voluntary countries possible. The nature and the perimeter of such sanctions remains undefined but the 'doctrine' that could be set up should be communicated to the Russian authorities.

5. Intensify the strategic dialogue with Russia.

As this note is being written, discussions between the Russians and Americans appear to be dissuasive, going a little further than the 'deconfliction' talks concluded in the aftermath of the Russian intervention.

This deterrent dialogue should be turned into a strategic one, including the anti-ISIS coalition. The talks could focus on the aforementioned points (the Euphrates Valley, a ceasefire, protecting civilians, stabilisation force, etc.) and propose a cooperative action to deal with the situation in Idlib. Up until now, no strategy for intensifying the offensive against the al-Nusra Front and al-Qaeda has been set

up. Foreign militias is also a point which should be discussed with the Russians. A draft resolution on this topic by the Security Council could discreetly enter into discussions held by a small circle of the involved parties.

Talks with Russia should also include the transition process. A large number of the actions suggested in this paper – such as removing the regime from the Euphrates valley, force stabilisation, protection of the civilian populations, ceasefire – could *de facto* be a strategy that ‘asphyxiates’ the regime.

However, it would not be a strategy designed to destabilise or enforce a regime change. Russia’s red lines wouldn’t be crossed. The resulting political weakening of the regime that would encourage Moscow to be less destructive in their military attacks and more flexible during negotiations.

6. Rethink the transition mechanism. UN mediators’ current lack of progress is not due to the terms presented, but to the Assad regime’s refusal to enter negotiations. In the background, talks with the Russians should deal with the Syrian State’s future. Eliminating the regime should enable the construction of a strong State in which the Russians and the European will play a key role.

This should not prevent countries interested in the success of the UN process to lay out realistic conditions for a transition process in anticipation of the day when Damascus is ready to move forward. Three possible strategies are suggested in the box on page 45. Firstly any transition in Damascus would need to be phased in: a ‘pre-transition’ phase would make it possible to identify the conditions – primarily those regarding security and constitutional issues – which would then lead on to the transition phase itself. Secondly comes the contentious issue which determines all others and must be resolved during the pre-transition phase: concerns the inter-Syrian security arrangements guaranteeing the protection of the various communities as well as members of the transitional task force, once a peace agreement has been implemented.

Finally, as is always the case in diplomatic negotiations, how the talks are formatted needs to be considered: security arrangements can be discussed between representatives of the regime and the opposition, but other topics could involve other sectors of Syrian society, something that is not currently in place. Finally, at some point the UN process will have to deal with issues relating to the non-Syrian regional and external powers who have entered into the Syrian conflict.

D. What role for Europe?

Could the European Union (EU) play a role in resolving the Syrian crisis, despite the conflicting positions between various member states?

Firstly, Europe has undoubtedly played a major role in providing support to Syrian refugees. Between 2011 and 2016, the EU spent just under 4 billion euros for Syria, mainly for aid to refugees (€9.4 billion if all the member states' contributions are added up). This effort could be continued in 2017 for up to 1.2 billion euros. However, there is massive need for foreign aid: according to a statement issued by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in April 2017, 536,000 Syrian children do not have access to school facilities in the three neighbouring countries (Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon). A UN study in Lebanon estimates that four out of five Syrian families currently live below the poverty line. The humanitarian crisis could – here too – have serious geopolitical implications.

Secondly, Europe should also spearhead any international action against impunity. The UN General Assembly, in response to the Security Council's lack of action, decided to set up a mechanism to oversee the judicial treatment of all crimes committed in Syria by the regime as well as by rebel groups. The need for a revised Syrian judicial system is paramount and it would be a mistake to believe that an exit from the crisis, even if it means implementing a transitional judicial system, would work if more serious crimes were overlooked.

Thirdly, the EU has a special responsibility towards Syrian society as a whole. Syria has a huge population of specialists, many of whom were trained in Europe, be they doctors, lawyers, businessmen or engineers, who have either remained (in ever decreasing numbers) or joined the diaspora. These elite come from different religious backgrounds and are generally politically moderate, but, as with the rest of Syrian society, have yet to unite in the interests of the country as a whole. EU programs should try to harness the good will of these elite groups and make them aware of their responsibilities.

Finally, the EU Foreign Policy's High Representative and some Member States envisage Europe playing a more direct political role. This ambition could be achieved in two ways.

The EU has a certain leverage that mainly consists in potential European institutions' contributions towards the eventual reconstruction of Syria. However, if a genuine transition process is not established in Damascus, European loans for stabilisation or reconstruction would only line Damascus's pockets and enrich its allies (already a large percentage of Syria's budget comes from diverted foreign aid without including private donations).

It would be much more politically appropriate to provide loans towards the governance of areas where anti-ISIS forces have managed to remove ISIS, provided, of course, that all financing is subject to strict non-corruption rules.

Moreover, it would be perfectly logical for the EU to use its good relations with some states in the region to encourage them to negotiate a political settlement. The most obvious option would involve Iran. In the light of foreseeable increasing tensions between the US and Iran (stricter sanctions for example, with US injunctions obliging the EU to follow suit), the EU has not only a vested interest in gaining a better understanding of the Islamic Republic's needs, but also in convincing it to change its views regarding Shia militias in Syria and the need for a transition phase in Damascus.

E. What role for France?

1. President Hollande's policy has been greatly criticised by both the French political class and many commentators.

He was mainly criticised for placing too much emphasis on demanding for Bashar al-Assad to step down. This policy would have resulted in a failure to anticipate the regime's 'resilience' and would have consequently locked France in a moral deadlock, thereby marginalising its diplomatic efforts. This marginalisation would have been exacerbated by a lack of dialogue with Russia.

It is fair to say that this was a somewhat clumsy approach and the 'neither Assad nor ISIS' discourse did not convince the political class. What is more, sticking to this position cut France off from most of its European partners. At the same time, it is doubtful that a greater prescience on the fate of the regime would have led France to change tact (except, perhaps, that France would align itself with the strongest side or the one most likely to win). Similarly, France has not been presented with concrete advantages that could have led to a more flexible attitude

regarding Assad's regime. The assumption that 'talking to all parties' enables to exert more influence is illusory.

2. The political agenda between 2011 and 2017 did not favour France's best interests, but it can provide a lesson in terms of future negotiations.

The French authorities have suffered the consequences of the two most recent talks with Assad (under Presidents Chirac and Sarkozy), both of which proved vain. French diplomacy was right about the diagnosis, but it failed to provide the leverage needed to have a high-level impact.

France had little chances of convincing the mediators during the talks with Moscow, mainly because it had 'bet' on an anti-regime outcome. What's even more troubling is that the French were not able to make themselves heard by Washington during the Obama presidency, with regards to the August 2013 strikes and other issues, such as the overall negative response to Turkey's concerns, timidity about Iran's regional policy, or the acceptance in September-October 2013 of the Russian proposal on chemical weapons, without an associated political process or, at the very least, a limitation of the regime's capacity to cause harm.

3. In view of this, the French President of the Republic will be faced with three main choices:

- How much priority should be given to the Syrian crisis. It is suggested here that the Syrian conflict remains of the utmost importance, not only because of security issues experienced by European countries (terrorism, refugees), but also because of its geopolitical scope.

Vladimir Putin was right against Barack Obama in stating that Middle Eastern influence remains an essential 'marker' in terms of global power levels. Syria currently structures all the tensions in the Middle East, and in terms of values, it is possible that the Syrian war will end up defining a 'conflict model' for the 21st century. Finally, with the election of Donald Trump, the escalation risk comes with a possible positive reorientation of the talks.

- A choice on the means to be used. If France wants to influence security arrangements (for example the modalities to ensure a ceasefire) or post-ISIS governance, it will need to increase its expertise in the field (intelligence

gathering, technical means, communicating with civil organisations, use of special forces, drones etc.). On the military front, a possible reinforcement of allocated means must include an overall reassessment of France's external engagement.

In terms of organisation, France needs a better cohesion between its diplomatic and military actions. This could be achieved through a higher grade of coordination, capable of interacting with other countries concerned by the crisis.

- A choice on strategy. The analyses and proposals presented in this paper suggests that the President of the Republic and the French government could focus on four main objectives:
 - help the US administration to 'determine' its strategy, in particular with regards to a continuing fight against the ISIS and a dialogue with Russia;
 - incite Moscow, in the event of an American re-engagement, to encourage the Assad regime to start negotiations to prepare for a transition;
 - contribute to unifying both viewpoints and action between Europeans (in particular between the French and the Germans);
 - make the most of its ability to mediate relations between regional actors.

With regard to the two last points, Europeans (EU and member states, Franco-German) should allocate themselves different responsibilities and search for common ground rather than 'merge policies', which could be counterproductive. Iran's regional policy remains an underlying issue to any settlement of the Syrian crisis and as the nuclear arms talks in 2003 called, this element may at some point call for an initiative by the EU and other European countries. French diplomacy could provide the catalyst for such initiatives.

The same reasoning can be applied to relations with Turkey, which remains a key player of the region's stability, despite its recent authoritarian drift. European leaders' have a tendency to only see Turkey's affairs through the prism of the country's relationship with Europe. A renewed effort should be made in order to understand Ankara's regional concerns. In this perspective, France could define an approach to the Kurdish question, which would allow it to be dealt within the longer term and in a more comprehensive way than is currently the case.

On a more general note, France has history with Syria, which should alert French authorities regarding the illusory option of a territorial partition of the country, which cannot be a sustainable solution. As we have seen, a division in zones of influence may actually lead to a never-ending war scenario, which would foster fertile ground for terrorism.

However, the only politically viable solution available is that of 'de-escalation zones', event if it comes down to creating 'zones of influence'. Although these subjects encounter quite some success in recent negotiations, our interest may rather lie in deviating the talks towards a general ceasefire under international control, somewhat moving from an Astana to an 'Astana plus' process.

In parallel, the French should insist with their European counterparts, on creating a UN mediation dynamic – a 'Geneva plus' – which is the only solution for future Syrian unity. The French should also, together with other European diplomacies, look up the conditions for a realignment of regional powers. Indeed, Syria will only find its equilibrium once it is abstracted from regional rivalries, and this can only happen if the countries concerned deem their strategic interests to be safe.

Finally, neither the Russians nor the Americans, nor any regional power, has – until now – put forward a coherent peace plan for Syria that implies a realistic transition. It may seem tempting to conclude by calling for the new French authorities to initiate a 'vision' for the crisis' settlement. However, caution should incite us to take all parameters for peace into consideration. In the current state of things, the Russia-Iran-United States triangle leaves little hope for a settlement of the conflict. France and Europe's role is to set landmarks for when a true 'window of opportunity' will enable to end the war.

TRANSITION PROPOSALS

1. The most challenging part of any transition agreement will be to get the Syrians to agree on security issues.

Considering its general *modus operandi*, it is quite unlikely that the regime will ever accept to share its power (such as in the case of a transitional executive body or ‘neutral governance’). Moreover, it would be suicidal for anyone from the opposition – leader or technocrat – to accept a position in Damascus while the city’s security (and ‘useful Syria’) remains in the hands of the *Mukhabarat*.

Consequently, **an inter-Syrian dialogue on security arrangements is essential**. The latter could, for example, include: a guarantee that the national army will remain dominated by Alawite and together with other measures to ensure the community’s security, in return for a drastic reform of the security services (dismantling the most harmful such as the air force, taking out leaders implicated in the regime’s repression policy).

2. A phased approach to the transition appears preferable.

The transition itself, and therefore the installation of new authorities in Damascus, should coincide with the establishment of new security arrangements: it could not be done beforehand.

Security talks – as well as other negotiations, such as on institutional issues and a wider the definition of a ‘national project’ – would take place during a pre-transitional phase. However, Bashar al-Assad would have to approve these talks and appoint competent representatives. It would also be coherent for the President to step back from the process of establishing new security arrangements and authorities.

3. To avoid fear of a *regime change*, the transitional phase could be carried out within a ‘provisional constitutional’ framework, adopted by a broadly representative ‘Syrian national assembly’.

This constitutional act would provide legal basis for these new authorities and the decisions they could take. Such process would not prejudice the selection of a constituent to prepare and adopt a definitive constitution in the future.

4. Regarding the ‘national project’, an inter-Syrian dialogue could, in the pre-transition phase, be extended to all parts of civil society, a concept that does not currently exist. Indeed, this could be a way for Syrians to overcome their divisions since discussions between representatives of the regime and the opposition are unlikely to favour the emergence of a national consensus.

UN mediators are aware of this, and therefore rely on different streams of dialogue (*track two*). **These streams should be reinforced, with support of certain states or of the EU, while maintaining a decision-making feature to the ‘opposition/regime’ format.** It is vital for UN mediation too carry on improving themselves and ultimately strengthen the authority of the High Negotiations Committee, currently chaired by Ryad Hijab, the only person capable of engaging the opposition.

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France should work with the United States to establish an ambitious but realistic strategy, reinforce a dialogue with Russia, contribute to unifying European countries' viewpoints and actions and make the most of its ability to mediate between regional actors. A catastrophic "never-ending war" scenario can be avoided if France and Europe increase their commitment to solve the Syrian conflict.

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