The Middle East Regional Security Complex and the Syrian civil war.

Søren Schmidt

Introduction

The Syrian conflict involves bewilderment of external actors: regional as well as international. For every year of the conflict, the more actors seem to get involved and the more these external actors seem to matter. In the latest peace initiative (2017) Russia formed a diplomatic trio with Turkey and Iran to back such talks in Astana, Kazakhstan. While the U.N. sponsored peace talks continue in parallel in Geneva, the hard bargaining clearly takes place in Astana, where the U.N. and the U.S. participate as observatories, but are not direct participants. The talks are between the three powers and are only selectively involving Syrian parties. The Syrian conflict is thus now more a matter to be settled between external actors than a matter to be settled by the Syrians themselves.

In this chapter I will analyze external actors in relation to the Syrian conflict with a view to identify the salient issues to be settled between them in order to agree on ending the Syrian conflict as well as to try to predict a possible scenario as to its probable outcome. But in order to conduct such an analysis I need first to present my theoretical framework, which is Buzan’s and Wæver’s Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan and Wæver 2003).

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

According to Buzan and Wæver Regional Security Complexes (RSC) comes in three variants: standard RSC which is dominated by military security concerns of states, collective security systems and security communities. The Middle East is clearly a standard RSC; i.e. an anarchic system of insecure states with insecure regimes, whose major concern is military security and where the balance of power is the dominating structuring principle.

RSCT prioritizes regional over global security concerns because distance is crucial in security matters. Neighbors pose more of a security threat than distant countries. Extra-regional security relations may of course influence regional security, but does it along the existing lines of regional amities/enmities.

Regional systems should be analyzed by a combination of realism and constructivism. Neo-realism is useful in indicating the system of relative politico-military strength of units and the resulting potential for respectively balancing and bandwagoning within this system, while constructivism invite the analyst to look for historical and cultural securitized amities and enmities which creates the patterns of security relations of the system. The term politico-military is used to indicate that the strength of the state depends on military capabilities as well as on how well it is organized politically in order to project power outside its borders.
The realist focus on relative politico-military strength leads to classification of states into global powers (states with a global reach), great powers (states with some reach outside its own RSC, but without global reach), regional powers (states dominating its RSC) and other powers in the region (states that must either join other states by balancing against or bandwagon with a regional power).

A RSC is to some degree penetrated by global as well as by great powers. Such external powers attach themselves to existing patterns of amity/enmity within the RSC and may alter the relative strength of states within the RSC, but do not create the patterns themselves.

This theoretical framework invites the analyst to prioritize regional security relations instead of global security relations and to look for objective relative politico-military strength in combination with patterns of constructed amity/enmity relations. It is the combination of the two lenses (realist and constructivist) which is expected to explain how external actors penetrate a civil war and thus contribute to predict its outcome.

The specific task in this chapter is to analyze how external actors affect the Syrian civil war (the local level). I will treat the local level as a third level in the sense that regional and global/great powers may alter the relative strength of Syrian protagonists, but does not in themselves craft the amity/enmity patterns of the Syrian civil war.

External state actors influence internal combatants through direct military intervention as well as indirectly through network relations. The availability of such network relations is necessary in order to yield indirect influence (Gause 2014). Sectarian identity or ideology is important insofar as it gives external actors the opportunity to hook up with internal actors. While Russia influences the regime’s ability to wage war, the extent of the U.S. indirect influence on the relative balance of power is limited to the few militias who are secular. Saudi-Arabia yields influence because they have good relationships with Salafist rebels, who dominate the battle field, while Israel does not have such relationships with internal combatants.

The predominant view of the role of regional actors in the conflict as an expression of an age-old conflict between Sunni and Shia Islam is therefore turning the causal mechanism on its head. Saudi-Arabia supports Salafist groups (but not groups with an affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood), because it is a way for it to yield influence; not because they are Sunni Muslims. In the same way, the orthodox Shiite Iran supports Asad, because this is a way whereby it may yield influence, not because the Asad regime is associated with the heterodox Shiite minority in Syria, the Alawites (Salloukh 2013).

While external actors at first tend to intervene indirectly in civil wars, they turn increasingly towards direct military intervention in its later phases. While Turkey, Iran, Russia and the US at first only intervened indirectly in the Syrian conflict, they now – in addition to Israel – intervene directly as well.

The above framework provides the following sequence of the empirical analysis: the Middle East RSC as such, the extra-regional level in relation to the Syrian conflict, the regional level in relation to the Syrian civil war, units/states in relation to the Syrian civil war and finally the conclusion, which summarizes findings and provides the contours and dilemmas of future developments.

The Middle East RSC

I define the Middle East RSC as extending from Egypt to Iran and including Turkey. When we look at security interactions and discourses this is a well consolidated RSC, with relative clear borders to adjacent
RSC’s such as the Southern Asia RSC, the North Africa RSC and the Euro-Asian RSC. States within the Middle East RSC are linked to each other through the security dilemma, where a defensive measure of any state at the same time is seen as an offensive measure by other states (Jervis 1978) and which is not attenuated by either a collective security regime or being a security community.

The RSC has no overarching dominant power, but several competing regional powers: Turkey, Iran, Saudi-Arabia and Israel. Its structure is therefore decidedly anarchic, in particular at present when the US (a global power) has retreated from its previous role as a sort of unipolar overseas organizer. In parallel to the retreat of the US, Russia (a great extra-regional power) has intervened in the region and particularly in the Syrian conflict. Russia’s capability should be seen rather as an influencer and go-between without the capability of dictating solutions, as the US tried to do on several occasions (e.g. the second and the third Gulf war). Russia’s influence derives in particular from having better relations with states than those states have between themselves. As an example, Russia’s relationship with respectively Iran and Israel is better than the relationship between Iran and Israel and likewise with regard to Saudi Arabia and Iran.

While non-Arab states like Turkey and Iran previously only played a marginal role in the RSC, these states have increased their influence and are now the dominating regional powers together with Saudi-Arabia and Israel, while Egypt no longer play an important role as it used to do, due to its internal conflicts which weaken its ability to project power outside its borders.

The two dominant structures of amity/enmity are the Israeli-Arab conflict and the conflict between Saudi-Arabia and Iran in the Persian Gulf. These two conflict theaters are increasingly interlinked; in particular since the US occupation of Iraq, which gave Iran an opportunity to extend its power projection capability much closer towards Israel.

In addition to the two dominant structures of amity/enmity there exists a host of other lesser regional conflicts; such as Islamic State vs. the Middle East system of states, Turkey vs. Israel, Syrian Kurdistan vs. Turkey, Saudi-Arabia vs. Qatar, Hezbollah vs. Israel, Iraq vs. Iran etc. Also, conflicts between Russia and Turkey and between Russia and Iran, not to mention the conflict between the U.S. and Russia affect security relations in the Middle East.

As remarked by Buzan and Wæver (2003:190) the Middle East RSC is so interlinked, that an alliance between any numbers of powers in relation to one conflict will necessarily antagonize a potential friend in relation to another conflict. Alliances are therefore necessarily fluid and greatly affected by which security concern has prominence at any given moment.

The extra-regional level

The U.S.

There are four reasons, why the U.S. either can’t or is not inclined to micro-manage the Middle East as it used to do. And the less influence international actors have on local conflicts, the greater the influence of regional actors.

The first reason for the diminished influence of the U.S. is the end of the Cold War, which terminated its need to balance the Soviet-Union in regional theaters.

The second reason is what is best described as ‘the rise of the rest’ (Zakaria 2011); meaning that the percentage of U.S. economic production relative to total global production has fallen steadily since its
height in the immediate period after the Second World War. In 1960 the GNP of the U.S. represented 40% of total global GNP, while in 2013 it was only 22% (World Bank 2015). The main reason for this is the relative higher growth of China and India. Economic resources are decisive for how much influence a country may have on the international and regional scene and even if the U.S. is by far the most powerful country in the world, the world is steadily moving toward a more multilateral distribution of power, where influence is yielded by a far greater number of actors. The Western economic crisis of 2008 further reduced the inclination of the U.S. to intervene militarily in areas, where its own strategic interests were not threatened (Lynch 2015 and Simon and Stevenson 2015).

The third reason for the diminished U.S. influence in the region in recent years is the fall-out of the failed interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, where, in spite of overwhelming military power, the US policies of regime change failed to create stable successor regimes. The attack on Iraq in particular produced a lot of bitterness among Muslims and Arabs as has its unwavering support for Israel, which is still conceived as a colonial power in the region (Gerges 2013). In short, because the image of the U.S. has not been worse in the Middle East for many years and because the execution of power today depends much more on legitimacy than brute military power, it has become difficult for the U.S. to exercise influence in a region, where it itself has contributed to weakening the traditional state mechanisms of power and where instead decentralized social forces (for good and bad) have been strengthened (Lynch 2016). As the influence of the U.S. on the region has weakened, influence has instead partly moved to the regional powers (Turkey, Iran and Saudi-Arabia), who lately have had a much greater inclination to go their own ways regardless of American view and strengthened decentralized social forces relative to centralized states, where the U.S. could much easier yield influence.

The fourth reason that the US has scaled down its engagement in the Middle East, is that its strategic interests in the region have diminished because of its increased reliance on its own oil and gas resources due to the shale oil revolution as well as the global trend towards renewable energy. The energy sources of the Middle East are simply not as important to the US (and the world) as they used to be because of these new developments.

Because of the above reasons as well as due to the weakness of ideologically moderate opposition groups on the battle field, the U.S. has all along had a hesitant approach to the Syrian conflict. Since the rise of the Islamic State, the US has increasingly given priority to its defeat rather than to topple Asad. It is in this situation, that Russia has inserted itself in the conflict and has become an important actor.

**Russia**

As the heir to the Soviet Union, Russia has a long history as an ally of Syria, partly as a result of the logic of the Cold War (‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’), partly as a result of the ideological affinity between the populist nationalism which Hafez al-Asad and the Ba’th party adhered to and communism. Contrary to the US, Russia has therefore had intimate connection inside Syria which it could leverage in order to play a role in the conflict and its possible settlement.

Russia has greatly expanded its supply of military hardware to the Syrian regime and has acted as the protector of the regime in the U.N. Security Council, where it has managed to prevent the adoption of resolutions allowing Western military interventions. Russia had for a number of years had naval facilities for its Mediterranean fleet in the town of Tartus.
After mid-2015 Russia dramatically beefed up its assistance to Asad by establishing an air-force base near Lattakia and stationed a considerable number of special forces and military advisors. Recently it has acquired long-term base rights for this air-force as well as for the naval base at Tartus. Following the incident in November 2015, where Turkey shot down a Russian jet close to the Turkish border, Russia has now also deployed the integrated S-300 anti-aircraft missile system to Syria (managed by Russia and not by Syria) thereby in fact establishing a potential no-fly zone for Western planes. An indication of the impact of Russia’s increased assistance to the Asad regime is that in November 2015 Russian jets made more sorties against rebel forces in Syria on a daily basis than the Western and Gulf coalition forces did during the whole month!

Russia has all along had the view, that the Syrian conflict could not be solved militarily and instead proposed negotiations between the parties in order to arrive at a compromise which would not necessarily involve the removal of Asad. And this is indeed the actual effect of Russia’s recent direct military intervention in the conflict. Its intervention has made the idea of establishing a Western no-fly and safe zone in the North impossible as it has made the exclusion of Asad as a precondition for peace talks unrealistic. In this way, Russia has forced the Western powers to accept its own strategy for ending the conflict; i.e. a political settlement on Asad’s terms, including the participation of Iran and deferring the question of Asad’s future role to a later time. It is on this basis that it is now co-sponsoring peace negotiations with Turkey and Iran in Astana, Kazakhstan. Russia and Iran are the two actors, who may put the necessary pressure on the Syrian regime in order to arrive at a negotiated settlement and will therefore be a necessary participant in finding a solution to the Syrian ordeal.

Russia’s interests seem to be to have the Syrian conflict settled in a way which will allow it to uphold its air and naval bases and scale down the cost in life and treasure of its intervention (Trenin 2017-1). This will require some concessions to internal groups, which is also reflected in its proposal for a new constitution, which includes devolvement of power from the presidency to other national centers of powers (the Prime Minister, the Speaker of Parliament and the military) as well as to the regions. A crucial question is whether this will be satisfactory for Iran’s interests in Syria or whether Iran intends to continue its non-conciliatory approach to the Syrian rebels.

Informed analysts like Dmitri Trenin (2017-2) suggest that Russia’s ultimate motive for intervening in the Syrian conflict and making itself indispensable for settling the conflict is its urge to be treated as a Great Power by the US in matters of its interests; i.e. Ukraine, Georgia, Afghanistan etc. But as Trenin is also noting, you don’t ask to be treated as a great power, you are a great power and therefore will be treated as such. And here’s the Achilles heel of Russia. It is indeed as great power in terms of military and control of land. But in economic terms, it isn’t and as it has yet to figure out to organize its economic system in order to grow its economy, it is actually less and less likely that Russia will be treated as it craves to be treated, but will continue to be further internationally isolated as it continues its present strategy to spoil Western intentions. Such a scenario will not bode well for the likelihood of international cooperation for the settlement of the Syrian conflict.

The regional level

Iran

Iran’s overall security perception is that it is surrounded by enemies who want to overthrow its regime (Farhi 2017). Even after the international deal on its nuclear program, it still perceives the US as a deadly
Iran acknowledges the superior military capability of its enemies and deploys therefore asymmetric and defensive security posture, through linking up with non-state actors in the region as well as weak states like Iraq and Syria.

Syria plays an important role in this defensive strategy and is thus related to its conflict with Israel as well as to its conflict with Saudi-Arabia in the Persian Gulf. As these two conflicts have been dominating the Middle East RSC for years, it is also the reason why its engagement in Syria has been so extensive and intense. Several hundred of Iranian soldier and as many as five generals have been killed in Syria and Iran has supported the Asad regime financially with billions of dollars and invested in Syria’s private sector. The outcome of the conflict in Syria will decide if Iran’s investment in Syria in blood and treasure has been worthwhile, as well as decide the pecking order in the region for many years to come.

Iran and Israel are locked in mutual enmity. Israel views the Islamic Republic of Iran as its existential enemy and will do almost everything to rid the region of the incumbent regime, while an important element of the Iranian regime’s internal legitimacy is anti-Zionism. Iran’s anti-Zionist ideology reinforces and supports its geopolitical defensive posture vis-à-vis Israel. Because of this, Iran supports forces in the region, which refuse to accept Israel’s wish to incorporate as much of the West Bank as possible.

As long as Israel is dissatisfied with its borders and therefore has an aggressive posture towards states and actors countering this desire, the relationship between Iran and Israel will remain antagonistic. Both parties know that this conflict will be settled on the battlefield – whether it is the present ‘battlefield’ of shadow boxing or a real war. In this perspective it is of course important for Iran that Syria be governed by a friendly regime that remains a member of the so-called Resistance Alliance vis-à-vis Israel and whose other members are Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iraq under Shia-Islamist governance. The primary importance of Syria is that it constitutes the link over land to Hezbollah, who has had its weapons turned directly towards Israel and therefore contributes to deter Israel from attacking Iran. While Iran’s ability to supply Hezbollah by air via Damascus, it could very well want to reinforce this ability by securing a land route through Northern Iraq and Northers Syria, which would run counter to any effort for a conciliatory settlement with Sunni-forces in those regions.

Iran also sees the hand of Saudi-Arabia behind the Sunni-Islamist opposition to Asad and more generally behind the promotion of Sunni sectarian hatred against Shiites in the region. Conversely, Saudi-Arabia considers Iran as an existential threat, and its engagement in the fight against Asad therefore triggers Iran’s wish to support him in order to prevent a deterioration of its relative position vis-a-vis Saudi-Arabia. This is a typical case of the security dilemma, where both sees its own posture as defensive, while both also sees the other’s posture as offensive!

It is however not without problems for Iran to support Asad-regime at any cost. The stable and relatively well functioning Syria, which existed before 2011, does actually not exist anymore and it is therefore unrealistic that Syria may return to status quo ante. ‘In short, Asad is not any longer a guarantee for stability, which is important if Syria is to be of value for the Resistance Alliance. Also, the lack of a stable political regime in Syria is in fact a contributing factor to the growth of the Sunni-extremist organization, the Islamic State, which is known to consider Shiites as apostates and views Iran as an enemy to be fought. Therefore, Iran might possibly in principle prefer to have Asad replaced with a regime, which could guarantee Iran’s interests in Syria as well as represent a broader segment of Syrians and in this way better be able to govern Syria. However, within the structure of the present regional system, it does not seem plausible for Iran to take risks in working for such a solution rather than to take direct control of its security.
interests in Syria; in particular now when the incumbent American administration has made hostility towards Iran a center piece of its Middle East policy and which in turn has emboldened aggressive forces in Israel. As things stand now, Iran has only a choice between seeing Asad being exchanged with an Iran-unfriendly regime or to back him up 100%.

It was only after the 2016 nuclear deal that Iran began to reestablish diplomatic relations with the U.S. In theory, the US could have used the influence it gained by that to guarantee a deal between Iran and Saudi-Arabia regarding a negotiated solution to the conflict in Syria and to have pushed for a normalization of the Iran-Israeli relationship. However, the internal politics in the US did not allow Obama at the time to pursue this; and the new Trump administration has now given priority to support Saudi-Arabia against Iran in Yemen and elsewhere in the region. Such a negotiated solution would have been superior for all external actors than the present zero-sum game, where the overall situation deteriorates whenever each actor without coordination with the other actors pursues its own separate interests.

It is indeed crucial to understand the relationship between the game-strategic context (negative- or positive-sum game) and its effect on how the parties pursue their interests in the Syrian conflict. The recent agreement on Iran’s nuclear program did not radically change Iran’s alliance with Syria, but might at least have increased Iran’s interest in contributing to a negotiated solution in Syria as a way to stabilize the situation there. These changes will however remain limited as long as Iran also has an antagonistic relationship with the U.S. and Israel, which will justify the continuation of the Resistance Alliance and which also limits the degree to which the U.S. can normalize its relationship to Iran due to the influence of the Israel lobby on American foreign policy. Iran will want to continue the resistance alliance as long as it perceives itself as surrounded by deadly enemies, who wants to overthrow its regime and as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is unsolved. The expectation that the US as well as Israel will rescind their hostile policy towards Iran and to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are decidedly not good at present.

If Iran’s strategy of securing its security interests and not take risks favors repression of dissidents to Asad in Syria at the cost of continued low-level instability, this will be at odds with Turkey’s as well as Russia’s interests in a more balanced settlement and therefore also be a source of conflicts between these regional powers and Russia in the coming years.

**Turkey**

Turkey’s policy towards the conflict in Syria has been abundantly clear until recently. Turkey was on the side of the opposition and wanted the Asad regime to be replaced by a new regime. As a country which combines an Islamic identity with democracy, market economy and an alliance with the Western countries, Turkey was initially a leading star for the moderate Islamist opposition during the Arab Spring; not least in Syria. In addition to the soft power which this gave the country, Turkey had also a strong and efficient military. Given its support of the Syrian diaspora organizations like the Syrian National Council and the Syrian exiled Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey was a key regional actor during the first phase of uprising.

For Turkey there was however been several factors which since then has limited its enthusiasm for intervening in Syria. Firstly, Turkey did not want a confrontation with Russia, which had become more directly and actively engaged on the side of the Syrian regime. In November 2015 Turkey shot down a Russian jet in the border area between Turkey and Syria. The ensuing saber-rattling from both parties gave an indication of the degree to which Turkey’s policy could jeopardize its good and advantageous
relationship with Russia and made Turkey much more cautious in its approach to Syria. After Russia intervened on a grand scale in Syria, Turkey also needed Russia’s cooperation to prevent the creation of a PKK-linked Kurdish entity in Northern Syria. Secondly, Turkey also had good and advantageous relations with Iran, which it was also potentially jeopardizing by supporting the opposite side of Iran within Syria. Iran is Turkey’s second most important supplier of natural gas and delivers more than 40% of its oil. Likewise, Iran is a main buyer of Turkish manufactured goods. Thirdly, and finally, there is significant opposition in Turkey against its activist policy towards Syria, not least from the large Alevi minority and from the secular parties. This opposition is further strengthened by the increasing number of terror attacks conducted by extremist Syrian rebel organizations inside Turkey.

At the same time, Turkey’s ability to play an important role in Syria became increasingly difficult for several reasons. Firstly, because of the de facto collapse of the moderate Syrian National Council, where the exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey’s initial main surrogate in Syria, played a decisive role. Secondly, because of the increased dominance of the extremist organizations on the battle field in Syria and finally, because of Asad’s partial success in reconquering parts of Syria.

To-day Turkey’s role inside Syria consists of the presence of the Turkish army in the area dividing the Eastern enclaves of Syrian Kurdistan from its Western enclave. But it also plays a role in facilitating the provisioning of rebels in its’ last stronghold, Idlib Province, which borders Turkey’s Hatay province. Turkey’s de facto ability to decide whether the opposition will continue the fight from Idlib, may very well prove to be its strongest card in the quid-pro-quo negotiations with Russia and Iran over Syria’s future.

Finally, Turkey’s conflicting interests with Iran is not restricted to Syria, but exist also with regard to the future of what was the Islamic State Kalifate: Northern Iraq (Mosul) and the connecting Eastern Syria, including Raqqa. Will this be a de facto Iranian controlled area (but formally under respectively Iraqi and Syrian sovereignty), a semi-autonomous Sunni-dominated area under Turkish tutelage or an area under joint Turkish-Iranian control? Such questions reveal that for the regional actors, the conflict in Syria is much more about the future balance of power between the great powers of the region.

Apart from its existential interest in preventing a separatist Kurdish entity on its southern border, Turkey is not directly enmeshed in the two conflict structure of the region: the Israeli-Arab conflict and the Iran-Saudi-Arabia conflict. In combination with its asset of being a sort of buffer state (at the same time as being part of the Middle East RSC) between Europe and the Middle East and playing an important role in preventing refugees to reach Europe, gives Turkey flexibility in dealing with all other external in the Syrian conflict and should enable it to successfully pursue its interests; in particular regarding the Kurdish issue.

Israel

Technically, Israel and Syria are still at war. There is a ceasefire regarding the Golan, but not a peace agreement. At the same time, Syria has facilitated Hezbollah’s ability to deter Israel from attacking Iran. Israel has therefore no warm feeling towards Asad’s Syria, even though the iron fist of the regime has delivered stability and peace between the two countries on the Golan until the uprising started in 2011.

If the alternative to Asad was a moderate, Western oriented (and ipso facto non-Iran allied) and well-consolidated regime with support from the Sunni-Muslim majority in Syria, this would of course be preferable for Israel. But the alternative to Asad is not any longer such a moderate regime. On the
contrary, the alternative to Asad is now an implosion of the Syrian state which would give a free hand to extremist groups to compete as to which was the most anti-Zionist. Such an alternative is clearly even worse for Israel than Asad’s survival as a much weakened actor.

Israel is a pariah-state in the Middle East and any political actor seeking influence in Syria that allied with Israel would be de-legitimized. As a result, Israel has no network relationships within Syria, which means that it is without effective means to influence the conflict there indirectly (Simon et al 2014:2). However, the presence of Hezbollah in the Golan Heights and the possible prospect of direct Iranian influence right on its border, has made Israel increasingly resort to direct military intervention in Syria by bombing Hezbollah positions and assassinating Hezbollah commanders inside Syria.

Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has lately made several visits to Moscow to have Russia use its influence to counter rising Iranian and Hezbollah influence in Syria (Trenin 2017-1). Once again, this puts Russia in a pivotal role as the mediator between Iran and Israel and gives it a chance to pressure Israel into treating Iran as a normal regional state with legitimate security interests, as well as pressuring it to be more accommodating towards the Palestinians.

**Saudi-Arabia**

Saudi-Arabia is one of the regional major powers. It is a relatively well-consolidated country with control of its territory and its population, the state is well-financed and the country is in a close alliance with the U.S.

Saudi-Arabia has three major interests in this conflict. Firstly, Saudi-Arabia feels its status in the Persian Gulf is threatened, not least by Shiite Iran’s potential to instrumentalize the significant Shiite minority in Saudi-Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain against Saudi and GCC interests as a prop for its security strategy. Secondly, Saudi-Arabia has an interest in isolating Iran in order to prevent any Iranian challenge to its position as the Gulf hegemony, by virtue of its status as the no. 1 global oil-producer and its close alliance with the U.S., which in keeping with the Carter doctrine has turned the Persian Gulf into a de facto American sovereign lake by means of the American fleet stationed in Bahrain (Bacevich 2017). The intention to limit Iran’s regional influence is therefore the reason why the Saudi state supports the rebels in Syria. Thirdly, Saudi-Arabia seems to have an ideological interest in strengthening sectarian Sunni-actors in Syria.

The political coalition behind the Saudi state is made up of the numerous al-Saud family and the Sunni-fundamentalist Wahhabi clergy. The Wahhabi clerisy and its network inside Saudi-Arabia see itself as a representative of true Sunni-Islam, and therefore in contrast to and even in direct conflict with Shia-Islam. The material and political support of this clergy for other Sunni-fundamentalist movements in the Islamic world is an important reason why sectarian hatred and terrorism is gaining ground in the Muslim world today. Even if Saudi-Arabia as a state wisely abstinences from supporting these activities, it is has not prevented its citizens and its religious networks to do so; and in this way it of course becomes de facto responsible.

From the very beginning of the civil war in Syria Saudi actors have actively supported Salafist forces in Syria with weapons, money and a stream of young war-happy jihadists. Saudi Arabia has become a safe-haven for some of the most sectarian, hatemongering Sunni-fundamentalists preachers; like the popular Syrian Television preacher Adnan al-Aaroo, who is a spiritual father for the Salafist groups in Syria. Even if the Saudi actors apparently do not directly support either Al-Qaeda in Syria or Islamic State, there is no doubt that the support which comes from Saudi-Arabia to the Salafist groups de facto has allowed these groups to become as important as is the case to-day.
In the spring of 2014 Saudi-Arabia reviewed its policy towards Syria fearing the blow-back, which the emergence of extremist groups may be expected to bring to Saudi-Arabia and the Saudi monarchy itself as the Islamic State has a clear trans-national perspective, which also includes fighting what it considers the illegitimate Saudi monarchy. In April 2014 the chief of the Saudi intelligence services and the brain behind the activist policy of Saudi-Arabia in the Syrian conflict, the influential prince Abdul-Aziz bin Bandar, was fired and replaced with Prince Khalid bin Bandar. At the same time, Saudi-Arabia announced that its main priority was now to fight Al Qaida’s growing influence in its different shapes and forms in the region, although this strategy has yet to be implanted in practical steps.

However, an important question is what are the real capabilities of Saudi-Arabia on the regional scene? Or put differently: Can Saudi-Arabia be viewed as a strong state, or would it indeed be more correct to see it as a colossus on clay feet? The Saudi state seems indeed rather vulnerable, as it has no genuine political institutions or efficient executing state agencies and therefore to a large degree has to depend on its checkbook to wield influence in the region. A compounding factor to its weakness is the present low oil-prices, which have left a gaping hole in its public finances (IMF 2015). As a consequence of the innate weaknesses and the in-built contradictions in its foreign policy—which itself is rooted in the conflict between reason of state and the religious clergy’s promotion of sectarian hatred again Shia-Islam,—there will be limits as to how much leadership and thereby regional influence, Saudi-Arabia will be able to yield (Ayoob 2014:89).

Finally, Saudi-Arabia has engaged itself in the complex civil war in Yemen – and helped by the US in this –, where it sees Iran’s behind the coalition between the former president, Ali Abdullah Salih and the Houthi rebels. This has further weakens Saudi-Arabia’s ability to project influence in Syria. As an indication that this is actually what is taking place, Saudi-Arabia was not even invited to the recent peace talks in Astana, sponsored by Russia, Iran and Turkey. In relation to Syria, Saudi-Arabia may indeed not any longer count as a great regional power.

Other Regional states and actors

Hezbollah

During the first year of the conflict Hezbollah tried not to intervene actively. However, after the killing of four important persons of the Asad regime (including the minister of Defense and the brother of law of the President) in the summer of 2012; i.e. at a time when the rebels seemed to gaining the upper hand, Hezbollah chose to engage itself more actively. And it was thanks to Hezbollah’s help to the Syrian regime, that Asad in May 2013 was able to reconquer the strategic important border town, Qusayr, and in Spring 2014 to reconquer the equally strategically important Qalamoun mountains, which secured the area between Lebanon and Syria for the regime. Several thousands of Hizbollah fighters have been killed in the Syrian conflict.

Hezbollah represent the Lebanese Shiites, who belong to the orthodox Twelver branch of Shi’ism, of which there are very few in Syria (the Alawites belong to a heterodox branch, with only a tenuous affinity with Twelver Shi’ism). Like Iran, neither had Hezbollah any independent network within Syria and their influence was initially exclusively channeled through the regime. However, in recent years, it has organized, trained and led several pro-regime militias which might now be considered to be its clients.

Hezbollah’s situation is very similar to Iran’s. Its interest in Syria is partly to avoid having an unfriendly Sunni-Islamist regime as its neighbor; partly to secure Syria as a member of the resistance alliance vis-à-vis Israel. For Hezbollah there is a close connection between the two objectives. And neither for Hezbollah
does it make sense to consider alternative options than the current choice between fully to support Asad at any cost or to see its enemies threaten not only Hezbollah’s relative power position, but its very existence. However, also for Hezbollah, Asad is only its second best option, and a more legitimate and therefore more stable regime in Damascus combined with guarantees for its own strategic security interests (not least its supply of arms from Iran) would be preferable. If there would be a solution, which could satisfy Hezbollah’s security interest vis-à-vis Syria as well as lead to a more stable Syria, Hezbollah could most probably accept to see Asad go. However, as with Iran, the way Hezbollah calculate its security interests can only change, if the overall game-strategic situation changes, which as argued above is presently highly unlikely.

Lebanon

Lebanon is a weak multi-religious state, which through all its history has survived as a state by keeping clear of the big conflicts in the regions; whether Nasser’s conflict with the conservative Gulf-states, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or the current cold war between Iran and Saudi-Arabia. The Lebanese politicians seem very determined to make sure that internal Lebanese conflicts don’t get out of control and become linked with the conflict in Syria. In April 2014 the political parties therefore made an agreement, the so-called Security Plan, which gave the Lebanese military and the security services a green light to arrest sectarian extremists and to take necessary security measures in areas of high tension, like Tripoli and Arsal (ICG 2014:10).

Lebanon is not expected to play any independent role in the Syrian conflict as long as Hezbollah’s role inside Syria does not affect the delicate power balance inside Lebanon, where Hezbollah also plays a crucial role.

Iraq

As a weak state Iraq, is to-day more a subject of external actors’ (Iran, Saudi-Arabia, Turkey, international jihadists and the U.S. in particular) influence on the development of the country than an autonomous power center with an ability to influence regional events (Ayoob 2014). Iraq is presently engaged in a serious internal conflict about the distribution of power in the course of which large groups of Sunni-Muslims have allied themselves with the transnational extremist Islamic State (Khedery 2015). It is to be expected that this internal conflict will continue for many years and in the meantime the Iraqi state will not be playing any significant role in relation to the Syrian conflict; except to continue to allow Iranian flights to use the Iraqi air space to supply Damascus with arms. The support of the Iraqi Shiites to the Syrian regime has grown over time in spite of the fact that Shia-Islamists’ militias naturally gave priority to its fight against Islamic State in Iraq.

Qatar

Qatar is a very rich and very small state on the Arabian Peninsula. During the Arab Spring it chose to use some of its riches to support Islamist movements; and not least the Muslim Brotherhood. This is also the case in Syria.

Qatar plays an important role as home to the satellite channel, Al Jazeera, which has been instrumental in allowing the Arab Spring to spread as quickly as it did over the whole Arab world. Al Jazeera also gives voice
to the popular Islamist preacher, Youssef Qaradawi, who is viewed as the spiritual father of the Muslim Brotherhood and who called for Asad to be overthrown

Qatar’s role in the Syrian conflict has lately been in trouble. Partly, because the rebel groups which are related to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, have been outcompeted by more extremist movements; partly because Qatar has been in conflict with Saudi-Arabia over its support to the Muslim Brotherhood, which Saudi-Arabia now views as a terrorist organization. As a very small state on the Arabian Peninsula, there are limits as to how far Qatar may differ from Saudi-Arabia's policy and for that reason Qatar now seems to have accepted playing a secondary role in the Syrian conflict.

Islamic State

Contrary to the Al Qaida subsidiary in Syria, Islamic State is recruiting its warriors on a transnational basis and has a global objective - establishing a caliphate for all Muslims in the world. However, it may at the same time be considered as a proto-state. It is in this last capacity that it will be analyzed here.

Islamic State rapidly grew in importance because it was able to ally itself with Sunni-Muslim forces in the North-Western Iraq and Eastern Syria. Its strategy is very opportunistic, as it basically conquers territory from other rebel groups, when these have been sufficiently weakened by Asad. At the height of its success, it controlled roughly one third of the Syrian territory and one fourth of the Iraq territory with a population of more than 5 million. Together with Syrian al Qaida (which it has ousted from the oil-rich region of Deir Ezzor) it is considered as amongst the most potent rebel groups in Syria (Cockburn 2014). While Islamic State has no allies amongst the states in the region, an international coalition led by the U.S. is now closing in on its headquarters in Mosul and Raqqa and may shortly be expected to be defeated military. It is not to be expected that IS will disappear because of its territorial defeat, but rather resurrect as a terrorist organization with an important diffused presence in the region as well as in cyberspace.

In the regional game, Islamic State’s initial success on the battlefield proved to be sort of a game-changer. As a jihadist movement, the Islamic State was not only a threat to the Syrian and Iraqi regimes, but also to Saudi- Arabia and Turkey. The advent of the Islamic State has already contributed to Turkey redirecting its support from the battle against Asad to that against IS (as well as against the Syrian Kurds). A major unresolved question is, who will control the area now controlled by IS, when it is defeated: Iran, Iraq, the Syrian Kurds, the Iraqi Kurds, the Sunni tribes of the area, Turkey or Asad in alliance with Russia?

Rojava or Syrian Kurdistan.

Like the Islamic State, Rojava is a proto-state inside Syria. It controls a 250-mile-wide stretch of Syria between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the North-East of Syria with a population of about 2 million people and consists of the interconnected cantons, Kobani and Jazira, as well as the Afrin canton, which is separated from the other two cantons by a stretch of 100 km. Rojava is controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG); which is viewed by Turkey as a subsidiary of the separatist Turkish Kurdish organization PKK. In addition to its enmity with Turkey Rojava is also on bad terms with Iraqi Kurdistan and its military wing, the Peshmerga. Finally, Rojava is viewed with suspicion by other Syrian rebel factions, due to its partial cooperation with the Asad regime, with whom it co-manages the towns of Hasake and Qamishly (Steele 2015).
Rojava has received aid from the US in the form of military supplies, air-support for the reconquering of the border-city Kobani and stationing of US Special Operations Forces in an advising and assistance role. Together with Arab rebel groups PYD has formed the Syrian Democratic Forces, which the U.S. wants to play a major role in capturing Raqqa from IS. This is of course vigorously opposed by Turkey.

**Jordan**

Jordan is for several reasons a cautious actor in the game about Syria's future. On the surface, Jordan seems to be a well-consolidated state with a possibility to play an active role in the region; but under this surface Jordan is much less consolidated. The Jordanian monarchy has over the years only survived because of its ability to balance between the centrifugal forces in the kingdom: Palestinians, the tribes, Islamists and secularists; while its legitimacy to rule is challenged because of its close and unpopular relationship with the U.S. and its peace agreement with Israel. Like Lebanon, it is thus crucial for Jordan not to expose itself by siding too overtly with one side or the other in order not to stir up conflicts inside Jordan; in particular when it is unclear what the end-game will be in Syria. This has led Jordan to tightly control the rebel forces, which it supports in southern Syria, the effect of which has been to neutralize southern Syria from the wider struggle within Syria. Since 2015, Jordan has had an agreement with Russia to coordinate their military activities in relation to Syria.

**Conclusion**

The conflict in Syria is a civil war and unlike wars between states, civil wars weaken states’ control over their societies and their citizens. Syria is therefore to-day subject to massive interventions from external actors. The vacuum of power, which the civil war creates, attracts automatically one or the other external actor, since the security dilemma of refraining from involvement would allow rivals to prevail.

In a civil war external actors are dependent on network relations with local actors – whether sectarian, ethnic or ideological. This means that states, which do not have such network relations, like Israel, have difficulties in impacting the conflict, although less so now where external actors are increasingly intervening themselves directly and rely less on proxy internal forces. A condition for intervening is of course that the external actor is in sufficient control of its own territory and its population. This excludes weak states like Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan; and lately also Egypt. Finally, very small states like Qatar will get into trouble if they cross strong neighbors like Saudi-Arabia, which themselves have been weakened lately. In contrast, Turkey and Iran are well-organized and economically and militarily strong states and therefore will be crucial to stabilize the situation in Syria.

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which greatly benefitted Iran, the relative pull-back of the U.S. from the region and Saudi-Arabia’s weakening, the old pecking order amongst the members of the Middle East Regional Security Complex has come apart. The settling of the Syrian conflict is where a new pecking order is being established, which is why so much is at stake for all parties.

While the U.S. had firm and permanent alliances with Saudi-Arabia and Israel, Russia is in much more flexible position vis-à-vis all regional parties engaged in the Syrian conflict; as well as in relation to the U.S. Russia may e.g. cut a deal with the U.S. on issues unrelated to the Middle East and in return try to stop Iran from moving its front with Israel towards the Golan Heights, which may also be used as a bargaining chip in relation to Israel, who in return could be pressured into being more accommodating vis-à-vis the
Palestinians as well as Iran. And Russia may assist the Kurds to establish a Northern autonomous Syrian region if Turkey is not forthcoming on other issues.

Russia’s intent seems to use this advantageous bargaining situation to ensure, that all external actors intervening in the Syrian conflict should leave—except for Russia (Trenin 2017).

At the same time, the new Trump administration’s overarching objective in the Middle East seems to be to push back Iran in any possible way as well as to support a more expansionist Israel. In this situation, Iran may be less prepared to take any risks by being helpful in stabilizing Syria by agreeing to some sort of negotiated political settlement and instead be hedging its interests by permanently stationing Hezbollah or other Iranian proxy troops in Syria (and Mosul).

Much also depends on who will control Mosul and Eastern Syria after Islamic State has been beaten. Will this area be controlled by Iran through Iraqi and Syrian surrogates? Or will it be controlled by Turkey, become some sort of autonomous Sunni region, be controlled by the Kurdish YPG or the Syrian regime? The answer to this question will also weigh heavily on the likelihood of Russia being successful in fully establishing itself as the new central power of the Middle East Regional Security Complex.

The new Middle East RSC will no longer be dominated by the one remaining true global power, the U.S., as it was in the past, but will be much more defined by the relative power relations amongst the Middle Eastern regional great states: Turkey, Iran and Israel. While the U.S. was handicapped by its fixed alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia, Russia as a returning great power to the Middle East will be a much more flexible player and be able to make use of the crisscrossing amity-enmity relations amongst the states of the region; in particular between Turkey, Iran and Israel, who all three will be crucial for stabilizing Syria. All three of these actors will have plenty of opportunities to spoil an agreement to which they don’t agree, while the deft cooperation of the new Trump administration also is necessary. But will Russia in the long run be able to sustain this more demanding role as a pivotal actor in the Middle East? A prerequisite for this is that Russia is recognized as a Great Power, with intervening rights and abilities in a neighboring regional security complex. But with a decreasing population and an economy dependent on natural resources and weapons industries, Russia might not be treated as an equal by other Great Powers and therefore continued to be isolated internationally until it accepts its new lesser status.

While the Middle East RSC before 2003 had two relatively independent major amity-enmity relations: the Israel-Arab conflict and the struggle for dominance of the Persian Gulf. Since 2011 the Syrian conflict has been added as a third major regional conflict, as well as interlinked all three conflicts in an all-out regional contest for power and influence. The stakes are high as are the uncertainties on how this will play out.

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1 An opinion poll (World Public Opinion.org) from 2007 showed, that 79% of respondents from Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan and Indonesia agreed with the statement, that the U.S. had the intention to ‘weaken and divide the Islamic world; and a similar percentage found that the U.S. wanted ‘control of the oil resources of the Middle East’. Finally, 64% found, that the U.S. wanted to spread Christianity to the Muslim countries and 75% wanted U.S. troops to leave the region.


3 Former deputy US Special Envoy for Middle East Peace (under Senator George Mitchell) Frederik Hof relates his impressions from track-two conversations with prominent non-governmental Iranians as follows: ‘All our interlocutors agreed that Iran’s preeminent national-security objective with respect to Syria is actually inside Lebanon: the Hezbollah strategic deterrent and retaliatory force located in southern Lebanon. For an Iran threatened by prospective
Israeli air attacks on its nuclear facilities; Hezbollah is its first line of defense. Iranian leaders believe that any Israeli leader contemplating such attacks should also consider the possible impact of missiles on Israeli cities, economic infrastructure and military bases. (Albright & al 2014:6).

The former American ambassador to Saudi-Arabia, Ford M. Fraker, says this about his impression of the views of Saudi-Arabia on Iran: 'The Saudi position on Iran was crystal clear. The Saudis would have liked to see the United States bomb/invade Iran, as they consider Iran their existential threat.' (Albright et al 2014:209)

According to the International Crisis Groups 'Regime ties to large sectors of society are broken, it’s hold on broad swathes of its territory at best tenuous. Even if it survives the crisis, it likely will not recover the ability to govern effectively and will enjoy few options but to rule through terror.' (ICG 2013:5)

Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis said e.g. in April 2016 at the Center for Strategic Security & International Studies: “recognize that Iran is not a nation state, rather, it’s a revolutionary cause devoted to mayhem” while the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in the US Congress in 2015: Iran and the Islamic State are competing for the crown of militant Islam. One calls itself for the Islamic Republic. The other calls itself the Islamic State. Both want to impose a militant Islamic empire first on the region and then on the entire world. They just disagree among themselves who will be the ruler of that empire. In this deadly game of thrones, there’s no place for America or for Israel, no peace for Christians, Jews, or Muslims, who don’t share the Islamist medieval creed, no rights for women, no freedom for anyone.”

In the beginning of the conflict there was a chance for a kind of pact between Asad and the moderate opposition. But that opportunity was scuttled by the dictator and since then, it has been unrealistic that he might me replaced by moderate and secular forces.

The United Arab Emirates also plays a role in the conflict, but in almost all aspects does it play this role in close association with the hegemon on the Arab peninsula, Saudi-Arabia. This is why I have not found necessary to treat the U.A.E. in a separate and independent section (For more on U.A.E. see Cook 2014).

Which is the main reason for the U.S. to be allied with Saudi-Arabia.

The Carter doctrine from 1980, that the U.S. would use military force if necessary to defend its national interests in the Persian Gulf.

This seems also to be the view of Hillary Clinton. See http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/242073.

Richard Dearlove, the former M16 chief, said in a speech in London in July 2015, that Saudi and Qatari help was crucial in making it possible for the Islamic State to conquer Sunni-Muslim governorates in Northern Iraq (Cockburn 2014:5).

This blow-back phenomenon is similar to what happened, when Saudi-Arabia (and the U.S. and Pakistan) supported extremist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to fight the regime in Kabul and then only a few years later to find themselves in the hair-cross of these same groups.

An observer described this relationship to the International Crisis Group like this: ‘Who are the backers of the Syrian opposition? They are the (Saudi and Western-backed) March 14 alliance, the U.S., France, Saudi Arabia. They all belong to the camp that plotted against us in 2006 (Israel’s stack on Lebanon). Even if I don’t like Assad, I find no choice but to support this regime.’ (ICG 2014:4)

For some time, the Shia-Islamist Sadr-movement has sent volunteers to Syria to defend Shia religious interests like the Saida Zainab mosque outside Damascus, but has not played a proper military role.

YPG was until very recently on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations.

Turkey bombed YPG forces in October 2015, when they tried to cross the Euphrates and conquer the territory between Afrin and the other two cantons. This area is presently controlled by Islamic State.

As an indication of Jordan’s reluctance to get engaged too heavily in the Syrian conflict, in January 2014 Jordanian jets attacked Syrian rebel vehicles who tried to enter Jordan from Syria. (New York Times, 16.1.14)

Bibliography


