

6. Nov. 2015

von hkhatib

in Bürgerkriege,
Flüchtlinge,
Terrorismus

Kommentare (0)

What is that Syrian about the Syrian war?

By *Hakim Khatib*

After five years of the Syrian war, we can recognize “four” conflicting parties on the ground – Assad, ISIS, rebel groups and the Kurds. Each one of these conflicting parties has regional and international backers, who ironically do not agree with each other about whom they are fighting for or against. The Syrian regime is backed by Iran, Russia, Hezbollah and Iraqi militias. ISIS is backed by the flood of global Jihadists from all over the world. Rebel groups are backed by Gulf States, Turkey, Jordan and the US. The Kurds are supported by the US. While in the media, we always say “the Syrian conflict, crisis or war”, I wonder what makes this war that much Syrian. It is rather a war on the land of Syria, in which more than 50% of Syria’s population have been displaced, over 220 thousand have been killed, and many more have been injured or imprisoned. According to Amnesty international, **more than 12.8 million Syrian people** are in “urgent need of humanitarian assistance”. In addition to this humanitarian catastrophe, most of the Syrian land and infrastructure have been destroyed. So what is that Syrian about the Syrian “war”?

In March 2011, when people engaged in peaceful protests against the regime, security forces and lawless secret police (*Shabbiha*) confronted them with brutality and killed hundreds of civilians in the first few weeks to ignite a beginning of an increasingly bloody death toll. The drivers for protests were neither ideological nor religious, but rather common people stood for their rights because they have suffered from political oppression, social injustice, economic hardship, human rights violations, unemployment, poverty, corruption etc.

While intelligence apparatus and *Shabbiha*, police and the army have become notoriously involved in the crackdown of peaceful demonstrations, a series of defections in the army, police, intelligence and security forces followed to form the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) to confront the regime’s brutality. The Free Syrian Army began to take all those who were willing to fight against regime forces under their command. At this moment, the uprising in Syria had turned into a civil war.

Prompted by ideological mobilization in 2012, Jihadists and extremists from around the world started travelling to Syria to join the rebels. **Assad encouraged this activity by releasing Jihadists** from jail to vilify rebel groups, especially after the regime had lost control of the northern borders. In the same year in January, Al-Qaeda formed a branch in Syria called Al-Nusra Front to fight against the regime. Around that time, Kurdish groups took up arms to defect from Assad’s rule in a search for autonomy. This year marked the beginning of the proxy war in Syria.

Iran, Assad’s strongest ally, intervened to help Assad. By the end of 2012, Iran was sending daily cargo flights with hundreds of officers on the ground. Iran has also provided a significant logistic, technical, financial and military support to Assad. It is estimated that by December 2013, **Iran had approximately 10,000** operatives in Syria, including thousands of Iranian paramilitary Basij fighters, Arabic speaking Shiite volunteers and Iraqi Shiite

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combatants. In mid 2012, Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iranian frontline against Israel, joined the combat against the rebels in Syria. Hezbollah took an active role in battlefields such as in Al-Qusair battle (19 May 2013—05 July 2013) between the rebels, mainly the FSA and Al-Nusra on one hand, and Hezbollah and the regime's troops on the other.

In return, Gulf States, namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar were sending money and weapons to rebel groups, mainly through Turkey and Jordan. Saudi Arabia supports Salafist and ultra conservative insurgent groups such as "The Army of Islam" (*Jaish Al-Islam or JAI*) under the command of the Salafist Zahran Aloush. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Qatar has exerted enormous efforts to support the Muslim Brotherhood and more radical rebel groups with Al-Qaeda ties in Syria. **In order to counterbalance the Saudi influence in Syria**, Qatar along with Turkey backed up the ultra conservative Ahrar Al-Sham (10,000—12,000 fighters), which is part of the Syrian Islamic Front (30,000 fighters) under the command of Hassan Aboud. However, Gulf States saw eye-to-eye concerning the crisis of Syrian refugees. According to **Amnesty International**, Gulf States offered ZERO resettlement places to Syrian refugees. However, this division between Sunni-majority powers supporting opposition on one hand and Shiite powers supporting Assad regime on the other has marked the sectarian dimension of the conflict.

Allegedly horrified by Assad atrocities against his own people in 2013, the US authorized the CIA to train and equip Syrian rebels to fight against Assad. The US has become actively involved in the war on the ground. Controversially, while the US was urging Gulf States to stop supporting extremists in Syria, Saudi Arabia bought **more than \$90 billion worth** of arms from the United States between 2010-2015, according to the latest figures provided by the Congressional Research Service. In the same year, Assad used **chemical weapons against** civilians in rebel-held areas. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons reported to the UN that "chlorine has been used repeatedly and systematically as a weapon" in Syria. In September 2013, **Obama remarked**: "Men, women, children lying in rows, killed by poison gas... It is in the national security interests of the United States to respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons through a targeted military strike."

A response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons became irrelevant when Russia, Assad's long-standing ally, proposed that Assad surrenders the control over chemical weapons to the international community to be eventually dismantled. This has marked the depth of the power dispute between Russia backing Assad and the US against him.

In February 2014, ISIS, previously based only in Iraq, took control over areas in Iraq and Syria attracting foreign fighters from all over the world and ironically becoming Al-Qaeda's enemy. Indeed, ISIS doesn't fight Assad, but the Kurds in the north and other rebel groups. By 2014, foreign Jihadists were estimated to be between **10,000 and 12,000**, with more than 3,000 coming from western countries. Consequently, accompanied with constant calls of, mainly non-Syrian, Sunni clergymen for "material and moral" support to the Syrian rebels, thousands of foreign fighters flood into Syria for Jihad every year.

In September 2014, a few months after the formation of ISIS, a coalition under the leadership of the US launched airstrikes against ISIS on the Syrian land. Again, the CIA came into play when they sponsored the training of Syrian fighters, who only fight against ISIS on the ground. While the US and other western countries made it very clear that they oppose ISIS more than Assad, Turkey started bombing Kurdish groups in Turkey, Iraq and Syria, although the Kurds have been fighting against ISIS since its formation. Based

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on tensions between Turkey and the US about who is the primary enemy in Syria, Turkey doesn't bomb ISIS.

While Assad has been losing ground to ISIS and the rebels, Russia intervenes on his behalf to bomb ISIS. On the ground, Russia **has been bombing anti-Assad rebels** including those backed by the US.

While Syrians are not much heard outside refugee camps, Americans, Europeans, Russians, Turks, Iranians, and Arabs hold meetings, agree and disagree, cooperate and coordinate, and coalesce and collide to find a solution for the "Syrian conflict". According to the US Department of Defence, only the coalition airstrikes conducted in Syria reached 2,680 in 2015, from which 2,540 were conducted by the US and 140 by the rest of the coalition (Australia, Bahrain, Canada, France, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and UAE). The fact remains that almost no single Syrian citizen was left unaffected by the crisis, leaving Syria in a bloody war with no prospects of reconciliation in sight. So what is Syrian about the Syrian war? Perhaps, it is only the humanitarian catastrophe.

Hakim Khatib is a lecturer in journalism, intercultural communication and the politics and culture of the Middle East at Fulda and Darmstadt Universities of Applied Sciences and Phillips University Marburg. He specializes in the application of religion into political life and discourse in the Middle East and the editor-in-chief of the Mashreq Politics and Culture (MPC Journal).

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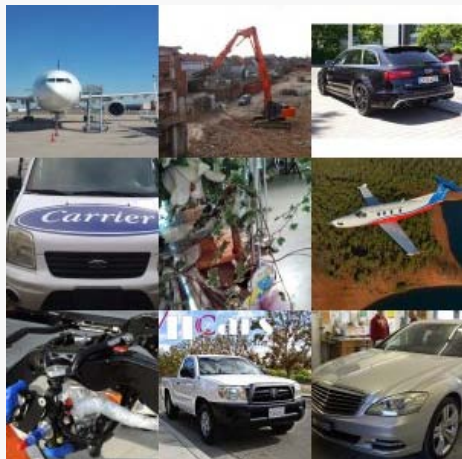
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