

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE WAR IN SYRIA

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Three-and-a-half years into the civil war in Syria, the conflict has become a humanitarian and strategic catastrophe. It threatens to tear the region apart along sectarian lines. It has injected new oxygen into groups and movements driven by violent Islamist ideologies, including but by no means limited to groups formally associated with al-Qaeda. Indeed, we are now faced with a sharp rise in violent extremism from within both the radical Sunni and Shiite camps. As Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently noted, we can expect an increase in political uncertainty and violence across the region in 2014.¹ There are many reasons this will be the case, not all of which are directly tied to the war in Syria.

Three types of fallout from the war in Syria in particular are certain to cause significant spillover of one kind or another. The first is the flow of foreign fighters to Syria from across the Middle East and the impact this dynamic is certain to have on regional stability. The second is the especially pernicious sectarian nature of the conflict at hand. The third is the sharp increase in dangerous macro trends, from refugees and population displacement to poverty, hunger, and lack of adequate health care, that create conditions conducive to violence and instability.

WHEN THE BOYS COME HOME

A rereading of a declassified August 1993 report, “The Wandering Mujahidin: Armed and Dangerous,” written by the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) foreshadows that,

some two decades hence, we might find ourselves dealing with a laundry list of difficult problems stemming from actions taken, or not taken, today.² The report’s subject was the possible spillover effect of Afghan *mujahedin* fighters and support networks moving on to fight in other *jihads* conflicts, alongside other militant Islamic groups worldwide. Much of the report could be applied equally well to the themes we find ourselves facing today.

Consider how fighters are traveling from around the world to go fight on either side of the increasingly sectarian war in Syria. Much of the discussion about foreign fighters traveling to Syria has focused on radicalized Muslim youth coming from Western countries, but the greatest numbers of foreign fighters, on both the Sunni and Shi’ite sides of the equation, have come from the Middle East. Indeed, it must be noted that while most people focus on the Sunni foreign fighter phenomenon, there are at least as many Shi’ite foreign fighters in Syria today. Most are from Iraq, but others have come from as far afield as Yemen, Afghanistan, and even Australia.

This spring, DNI Clapper estimated that more than 7,000 fighters have traveled to Syria from more than fifty countries.³ In an independent study conducted in December 2013, Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy estimated the numbers to be some 8,500 foreign fighters from seventy-four different countries. His estimates of the range of foreign fighters from across the region who have

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come to fight on the Sunni side of the war in Syria are equally telling:⁴

RANGE OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS FROM ARAB WORLD		
Country	Low	High
Kuwait	54	71
Lebanon	65	890
Tunisia	379	970
Jordan	175	2,089
Libya	330	556
Iraq	59	97
Algeria	68	123
Egypt	118	358
Palestine	73	114
Saudi Arabia	380	1,010
Sudan	2	96
Yemen	13	110
Morocco	76	91
United Arab Emirates	13	13
Mauritania	2	2
Qatar	14	14
Bahrain	12	12
Oman	1	1

The number has since increased to about 12,000 total fighters, exceeding the high-end estimates from the end of last year even amongst rebel in-fighting. While much of the focus on increasing numbers has been on western fighters, Arab fighters have increased as well. Some Middle Eastern security officials have even released official numbers: Algeria now estimates about 200 of its citizens have traveled to Syria, Morocco 1,500, Saudi Arabia 2,500, and Tunisia about 3,000.

On the Shi'ite side of the equation, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'ite militants from groups like Asaib Ahl al-Haqq and Kataib Hezbollah make up a majority of those fighting in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Some estimate that as many as five thousand members of Lebanese Hezbollah have been active in Syria, on a rotational basis.⁵ Iraqi Shi'ites fighting in Syria are also estimated to number as high as five thousand.⁶ Iranians are present as well in smaller support and advising roles. Shi'ites from Saudi Arabia, Côte d'Ivoire, Afghanistan, and Yemeni

Houthi fighters have also gone to Syria to fight on behalf of the regime.

In Syria, these foreign fighters are learning new and more dangerous tools of the trade in a very hands-on way, and those who do not die on the battlefield will ultimately disperse to all corners of the world, better trained and still more radicalized than they were before. The majority of radicalized fighters are likely to return home and attack their own homelands even before they seek to strike the United States, in large part because the events that have followed the Arab Spring have created conditions favorable for militant Islamist revival.

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Consider just a few regional reverberations of the Syrian *jihad* already being felt today:

- For many in the region and beyond, going to fight in Syria is a natural and unremarkable decision; the fight in Syria is a defensive *jihad* to protect fellow Sunni Muslims—women and children—from the Assad regime's indiscriminate attacks on civilian population centers. And so it is that Ahmed Abdullah al-Shaya, the poster boy for Saudi Arabia's deradicalization program—which boasts a tiny 1.5 percent recidivism rate from among its 2,400 graduates—has now turned up on the battlefield in Syria.⁷
- “Tunisia’s revolution and those in Syria, Egypt and Yemen, and Libya gave us a chance to set up an Islamic state and sharia law, and in the Maghreb first,” explained a young Tunisian Salafist in Tunis, Abu Salah. “We want nothing

less than an Islamic state in Tunisia, and across the region. The first step must be Syria. I am proud of our brothers in Syria, and I will go there myself in a few weeks.”⁸

- Another young Tunisian, Ayman Saadi, who was raised in a middle-class family with a secular tradition, was stopped from going to fight in Syria several times by his parents before he finally snuck out of the country to Benghazi. He trained there for a short time, but instead of going on to Syria, he was instructed to go back to Tunisia to carry out a suicide attack at a presidential mausoleum; when he proceeded to do so, Saadi was tackled by guards before he could trigger his explosives.⁹
- In August 2013, a new, fully Moroccan *jihadist* organization called Harakat Sham al-Islam was created in Syria. The group reportedly aims not only to recruit fighters for the Syrian war but also to establish a *jihadist* organization within Morocco itself: “Although the [group’s] name refers to Syria and its theater is Syria, the majority of group members are Moroccans. The group’s creation was also announced in the Rif Latakia, where most Moroccan *jihadists* who go to Syria are based.”¹⁰
- In Egypt, the government is facing high levels of violence largely in reaction to the ouster of former president Muhammad Morsi. The Sinai militant group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis attracts many returnees and has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks in recent months. In September 2013, following his return from Syria, Walid Badr, a former Egyptian army officer, conducted a suicide attack that narrowly missed Egyptian interior minister Muhammad Ibrahim, instead injuring nineteen others.¹¹
- In February 2014, an Israeli court convicted an Israeli Arab citizen of joining Jabhat al-

Nusra. The presiding judge expressed concern over the danger posed by Israeli citizens who join the war in Syria and return home, where “they could use the military training and ideological indoctrination acquired in Syria to commit terror attacks, indoctrinate others or gather intelligence for use in attacks by anti-Israel organizations.”¹²

- Also in February, an Iraqi newspaper ceased publishing after receiving death threats from the Iranian-backed Shiite militia Asaib Ahl al-Haqq. Two bombs were placed in its office in Baghdad, and protestors carrying photographs of Asaib Ahl al-Haqq’s leader demanded the paper be shut down. Members openly admit to “ramp[ing] up targeted killings.”¹³ The militia has been active in Iraq since the American-led war, in which it carried out thousands of attacks on U.S. soldiers, and currently has forces in Syria.¹⁴

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None of this should surprise. Twenty-one years ago, INR’s study of Afghanistan’s spillover similarly reported that “the support network that funneled money, supplies, and manpower to supplement the Afghan Mujahidin is now contributing experienced fighters to militant Islamic groups worldwide.” When these veteran fighters dispersed, the report presciently predicted, “their knowledge of communications equipment and experiences in logistics planning will enhance the organizational and offensive capabilities of the militant groups to which they are returning.” A section of the 1993 report, entitled “When the Boys Come Home,” noted that these veteran volunteer

fighters “are welcomed as victorious Muslim fighters of a successful *jihad* against a superpower” and “have won the respect of many Muslims—Arab and non-Arab—who venerate the *jihad*.”¹⁵

A SECTARIAN PROXY WAR IN THE LEVANT

The Syrian war is also a classic case of a proxy war, in this case between Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf states on the one hand, and Iran on the other—with the additional, especially dangerous overlay of sectarianism. The sectarian vocabulary used to dehumanize the “other” in the Syrian war is deeply disturbing, and suggests both sides view the war as a long-term battle in an existential, religious struggle between Sunnis and Shiites.¹⁶

Furthermore, the war in Syria is now being fought on two parallel planes: one focused on the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, and the other on the existential threats the Sunni and Shi’ite communities each perceive from one another. The former might theoretically be negotiable, but the latter almost certainly is not. The ramifications for regional instability are enormous, and go well beyond the Levant. But they are felt more immediately and more powerfully in Lebanon to the west and Iraq to the east than anywhere else.

TRENDING TOWARD INSTABILITY

The humanitarian crisis resulting from the Syrian civil war is a catastrophe that grows worse by the day. In a region long known for its instability and sparse resources, Syria’s neighbors are simply not equipped to handle 2.4 million registered refugees. Lebanon has taken in Syrians equal to at least one fifth of the country’s population, a refugee camp is now Jordan’s fourth-largest city, and on average 13,000 new refugees are registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) every day. Within Syria itself, more than 6.5 million have been displaced and more than nine million need humanitarian assistance.

Such numbers are more than just a depressing snapshot of the situation on the ground; they suggest a

long-term outlook that is no less dire. Taken together, the Syrian crisis and its secondary and tertiary effects create a set of “looming disequilibria,” to borrow a phrase from the National Intelligence Council’s (NIC’s) excellent study entitled *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*.¹⁷ Consider, for example, the combined impact on the region of a years-long conflict, exacerbated by sectarianism and fueled by funds and weapons from the backers of respective proxies. From education, health, poverty, and migration patterns to humanitarian assistance needs and the economic impact on fragile economies, the consequences of the Syrian war for the region would be massive even if the war itself ended tomorrow.

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Refugee migrations have long been noted as factors that increase the likelihood of militant disputes.¹⁸ In today’s migration displacements, the vast majority of refugees are Sunni Muslims, posing a serious threat to the sectarian balance of the region, especially in Lebanon. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have moved into Jordan’s cities and put a heavy strain on local economies. Neither country can sustain for long the added burden to public services, from water and electricity to health care and education. This stress can open doors for externally financed terrorist organizations to take the place of the state, as was the case with Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s. Without considerably more international aid, the entire region could well be facing increased instability and opportunities for extremists for the foreseeable future. Indeed, according to one study, “hosting refugees from neighboring states significantly increases the risk of armed conflict.”¹⁹ Refugee camps provide militant groups with recruits and supplies, and refugee flows include within them fighters, weapons, and radical

ideologies. In the case of Syria, these researchers found, refugee influxes to Lebanon raise its risk of civil war by 53.88 percent, and raise Jordan's conflict risk by 53.51 percent.²⁰

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DOWNWARD SPIRAL

There is no question that the ongoing, deeply sectarian proxy war in Syria will undermine regional stability, and do so in ways that are both predictable and unexpected. But even before the current conflict became as severe as it is today, it was possible to envision the general—negative—direction of regional trends. As the NIC put it:

Chronic instability will be a feature of the region because of the growing weakness of the state and the rise of sectarianism, Islam, and tribalism. The challenge will be particularly acute in states such as Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria where sectarian tensions were often simmering below the surface as autocratic regimes co-opted minority groups and imposed harsh measures to keep ethnic rivalries in check. In [the] event of a more fragmented Iraq or Syria, a Kurdistan would not be inconceivable. Having split up before, Yemen is likely to be a security concern with weak central government, poverty, unemployment [and] with a young population that will go from 28 million today to 50 million in 2025. Bahrain could also become a cockpit for growing Sunni-Shia rivalry, which could be destabilizing for the Gulf region.²¹

That assessment has, sadly, proven all too prescient. ■

ENDNOTES

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