



# War in Syria: risks and stakes of a normalization of the Damascus regime

## Recherches & Documents

N°06/2022

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April 2022

[www.frstrategie.org](http://www.frstrategie.org)

**FONDATION**  
*pour la* **RECHERCHE**  
**STRATÉGIQUE**

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## War in Syria: risks and stakes of a normalization of the Damascus regime

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Ten years after the beginning of the fighting in Syria, the option of normalizing diplomatic relations with Damascus is gradually making its way onto the agenda of Arab capitals. President Assad is eager to begin reconstruction work in Syria (estimated cost: \$250 to \$400 billion). Despite the continuation of the war and partial control of the territory (65 %), he hopes to capitalize on the resilience of his regime, which has refuted the analyses that predicted its collapse in the early months of the revolution.

The civil war has now congealed into a web of concentric military tensions, with no winner and no loser. In reaction to the inability of the parties to end the conflict, there is now talk of reopening embassies and border crossings, and of a return of Syria to the Arab League. Tunisie and Mauritania have sent ambassadors to Damascus. The Lebanese Prime Minister awaits international approval to meet with Assad<sup>1</sup>. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) calls for the lifting of economic sanctions. Cairo supports the movement because it sees an opportunity to close Arab ranks in the face of Turkish hegemonism. Baghdad, one of the few capitals to have never broken ties, is working to bring together two powers involved in this conflict: Iran, a loyal supporter of Damascus, and Saudi Arabia, a source of money for rebel groups at the beginning of the civil war. The Jordanian diplomacy is also mobilizing. King Abdullah II affirms the need for a “collective Arab role”<sup>2</sup> and develops the idea of a pre-agreement: alleviating US sanctions in exchange for a reduction in the Iranian presence in Syria. In addition to this, a series of initiatives were taken: the telephone call between Abdullah II and Assad, the reopening of the Jaber border crossing, and the reactivation of the Yarmouk agreement on water sharing.

While activities related to the Arab League have resumed in Damascus, limited to secondary programs<sup>3</sup>, its Secretary General, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, recalled that a return of Syria to the Arab world would require a “consensus”. For the time being, no official request has been made<sup>4</sup>. The League continues to receive delegations of the Syrian opposition and is also attentive to the lobbying of countries in favor of a normalization of Damascus, motivated by socio-economic considerations (Lebanon, Jordan, UAE), security (Iraq, Egypt) or pan-Arabism (Algeria, Mauritania). The option of a Syrian presence at the next Arab League summit in November 2022 in Algiers is currently being discussed. Damascus could be granted observer

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<sup>1</sup> “ميكاتي-لن-أزور-سوريا-من-دون-موافقة-المجتمع-الدولي” (Mikati: “I will not visit Syria without the approval of the international community.”), Syria TV, September 28, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> “الخارجية الأردنية: الحل في سوريا مرهون بحوار أمريكي-روسي ودعم عربي” (Jordanian Foreign Ministry: “The solution in Syria depends on a US-Russian dialogue and Arab support.”), *Enab Baladi*, September 23, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> “الجامعة العربية تنشط في دمشق والسفير الموريتاني يباشر مهامه” (Arab League activates in Damascus and Mauritanian ambassador takes office), *Asharq Al Awsat*, February 9, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> “أبو الغيث يحدد شرطاً لحضور النظام السوري القمة العربية في الجزائر” (Aboul Gheit sets a condition for the Syrian regime's participation in the Arab summit in Algeria), *Enab Baladi*, October 28, 2021.

status, a hypothesis indicative of the emergence of a majority current that favors breaking Syria's isolation.

## 1. In the absence of a victory

The advocates of normalization are receiving strong support from Russia. With the rescue of the Assad regime now complete, Moscow is mobilizing its diplomatic channels to win the support of all League member states.

The objective is twofold:

- After the deployment of a limited contingent without excessive loss of life<sup>5</sup> nor budgetary slippage – costs hover between \$1.5 to 2.5 billion per year –, Russia feels the time is right to develop its soft power<sup>6</sup>. Normalization would make it possible to preserve the gains from the conflict and to avoid the pitfalls of the Libyan affair, in which the Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport lost \$4 billion and the railway company RZD – \$2 billion<sup>7</sup>. In 2016, Moscow cautiously signed a \$950-million agreement to rebuild the country<sup>8</sup> to which will be added investment facilities in the energy and mining sectors<sup>9</sup>.
- Initiate a political transition. Bashar al-Assad was re-elected president in 2021 for a fourth term with 95 % of the vote. Moscow relies on this “legitimacy” to demand an end to the isolation of Damascus. Unlike the Gulf powers, who wanted to overthrow him by force of arms, Russia hopes for a change of government, by an opening of the political field and the creation of an internal dynamic for the renewal of Syrian elites, in support of UN Resolution 2254 and of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. This tactic – change without change – is accompanied by reservations about Assad. Moscow’s agents of influence regularly let the Kremlin’s annoyance filter through the press. Assad is blamed for his unpopularity<sup>10</sup>, his lack of ability, the racketeering of his clan. The latter has reportedly been the subject of a Russian demand for the reimbursement of \$3 billion, partially in response to his lavish lifestyle<sup>11</sup>.

The Russian perception of the Syrian issue can be analyzed in terms of the temporal variable, the T factor. There is a tension between the past, the sequence of the Chechen wars, the

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<sup>5</sup> “فصائل الثوار تهاجم غرفة العمليات الروسية في إدلب وتوقع إصابات” (Rebel factions attack Russia's Operation Room in Idlib and cause casualties), *El Dorar*, February 7, 2021; “Russia loses 112 servicemen in Syrian war conflict”, *Pravda*, March 15, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Ruslan Mamedov, “Russia: Towards a Balance of Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean”, RIAC, 6 août 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Mira Milosevich, “The Role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa Region. Strategy or Opportunism?”, Institut Européen de la Méditerranée (IEMed), September 3, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> “Russia signs contracts worth \$950 million for Syria’s reconstruction”, *RT*, April 26, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Azzam Al-Allaf, Salam Said, “Russian Investment in Syrian Phosphate: Opportunities and Challenges”, Institut universitaire européen, avril 2021.

<sup>10</sup> “لماذا تتحدث موسكو عن “تدهور شعبية” الأسد؟” (Why Moscow talks about Assad’s ‘decline in popularity?’), *Asharq al-Awsat*, April 18, 2020 .

<sup>11</sup> Anton Mardasov, Kirill Semionov, “Russia without Assad”, *RIDDLE*, June 15, 2020.

memory of the exponential cost of an operation carried out “to the end”<sup>12</sup>, and the future, the fear of seeing the emergence of an ersatz Islamist Emirate in north-western Syria, fear that the absence of initiative from Damascus, the inertia of the political opposition and the freezing of the front lines will benefit the most radical and uncontrollable armed groups; Moscow does not want this.

In regard to the past, it should be remembered that the Russian Prime Minister who ordered the intervention in Chechnya in 1999 is the president who today supports Damascus in its “fight against terrorism” – an imprecise formula of the regime that indiscriminately designates political opponents and Salafist fighters. Moscow remembers that at the height of the Daech pseudo-caliphate, a quarter of the foreign fighters were of Caucasian origin<sup>13</sup>, some so dangerous that Moscow helped them to reach Syria to fulfill their martyrdom<sup>14</sup>. In 2015, a year when there seemed to be no stopping of the Islamist State, Dagestan conducted an opinion survey indicating that 8.1 % of young people were willing to join Daech and 30.8 % were undecided<sup>15</sup>. Although the FSB’s feared axiom of radical contamination in the Caucasus has not occurred, Russian forces are still working to contain the threat<sup>16</sup>. The FSB dismantles recruiting networks of Katiba al-Tawhid wal-Djihad – groups that transferred fighters to Syria from Russia<sup>17</sup>, arrests individuals suspected of hidden financing<sup>18</sup>, and oversees Malhama Tactical, a private military company founded by Uzbek Sukhrob Baltabaev, known as Abu Rofiq, a pool of Caucasian trainers who aspire to be the Blackwater of jihadism<sup>19</sup>.

Moscow is concerned about the rise of the armed group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS or Hay@) in Idlib province. This salafist group, which dreams of a Taliban-style victory<sup>20</sup>, promotes the idea of governance according to the mulk (rule, exercise of power<sup>21</sup>), both radical, resolutely

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<sup>12</sup> “We’ll shoot the terrorists right down the crapper” (Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister, October 1999).

<sup>13</sup> “Foreign Terrorist Fighters from the North Caucasus: Understanding Islamic State Influence in the Region”, *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, n° 4, 2017, pp. 69-88.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Tsvetkova, “How Russia allowed homegrown radicals to go and fight in Syria”, *Reuters Investigate*, May 13, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Mairbek Vatchagaev, Nick Sturdee, “ISIS in the North Caucasus”, *Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy*, October 26, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> “Опубликованы имена убитых при спецоперации в Дагестане – Источник” (Names of those killed during the special operation in Dagestan published), *Kavkazskii Uzel*, September 10, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> “لأمّن الروسي يعلن توقيف 31 عنصراً لـ”كتيبة التوحيد والجهاد” (Russian security forces announce the arrest of 31 members of the ‘Brigade of Tawhid and Jihad’), *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, August 25, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Alexei Kourilchenko, “ФСБ РФ обезвредила террористические ячейки в восьми регионах РФ” (The FSB of the Russian Federation has neutralized terrorist cells in eight regions of the Russian Federation), *TV Zvezda*, October 14, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Alessandro Arduino, Nordirbek Soliev, “Malhama Tactical: The Evolving Role of Jihadist Mercenaries in the Syrian Conflict”, *National University of Singapore*, June 22, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> “اي بوفوم اس إل ا” يذغى “قلودل” المقاتلون الأجانب جزء منّا وتنظيم: “ين الوجل ا” (Al-Jawlani : Foreign fighters are part of us, and ‘Islamic State’ fuels ‘Islamophobia’), *Enab Baladi*, September 6, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> The notion of rule (mulk) has long been disdained by Salafism despite the fact that it is the title of the 67th Sura of the Qur’an (Al-Mulk – The Kingship). In modern Arabic, the word induces notions of possession/control/power over a territorial space. In the concept of the ideal state developed by Taymiyya in *Siyasa shariyya* (Treatise on Legal Politics for the Reform of the Shepherd and the Flock), the exercise of power results from a double oath of allegiance, to God and to the community of men; this obliges a certain pragmatism, a lucid approach to the daily reality. The head of state (wali l-amr) – or the holder of authority – must resort to consultation (mushawara) in the exercise of governance as Muhammad did with his companions. The ruler must be consistent with maslaha, the principle of preserving the public interest in Islam and the preservation of five goods: religion, reason, morality, family (children), material goods.



fighting, and pragmatic, realistic and in rupture with the barbarity of his peers. HTS shows signs of goodwill. In the rebel zone, the day-to-day business in Idlib is handed over to a secular government. The morality police (Markaz al-Falah-Center of Falah) is dissolved. The group expels refractory imams<sup>22</sup>, tolerates demonstrations, leads a policy of reconciliation with the tribes and founded a monetary agency that replaced the Syrian pound (SYP) with the Turkish pound (TL). The group fights against al-Qaeda activists and hunts Chechen fighters with the risk that they return to fight in the mountains of the Caucasus.

The Salafism of HTS is an obstacle to the process of normalization of Damascus, the counterpoint to the doxa of Damascus, which would like the country to be pacified. It is therefore a matter of reaching an Arab consensus in order to isolate this organization, to prevent it from sanctuarizing an Emirate that will demand its removal from the blacklist of terrorist organizations, which the radical underground would not fail to greet as a new victory over the “godless” world, after the Iranian revolution (1979) and the fall of Kabul (2021).

## 2. Getting out of a hybrid war

Although the risk of getting bogged down is low in view of the forces involved, the Russian army is experiencing the operational challenges inherent to any hybrid war, in which stubbornly maintaining troops in contact with the enemy, even with increasing firepower tenfold, is no longer a guarantee of victory.

Deciding on the conditions for a “political settlement”<sup>23</sup> of the crisis makes it possible to extract oneself from a conflict where the mapping of the fighting forces is characterized by its high volatility. In addition to conventional forces, dozens of groups are created, dissolve or join in operation rooms<sup>24</sup>, themselves subject to instability due to various reasons: quarrels between leaders, shura discords, resignations due to insufficient salary payments, rivalries in obtaining arms and ammunition, etc. Not without effort, Russia has managed to impose itself on this crumbling battlefield, weaving alliances amid tactical confusion with fighters whose motivation emanates from enigmatic alchemies of political, religious and financial claims (pay, booty, racket).

Three types of difficulties are encountered:

- Alliances and misalliances. In Syria, war is fought against or with armed groups; never without them. The most successful Russian experiment had to be the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps, co-founded with Damascus in 2016, a conglomerate of katibas and militias loyal to the regime. The initial idea was to provide former rebels with a place to retrain and be mentored, paid and given missions to work on restoring peace in the country. The

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<sup>22</sup> “تحرير الشام..البراغماتية لا تحتل المساجد” (Tahrir al-Sham ; pragmatism does not tolerate mosque preachers), *Almodonline*, September 30, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> “لافروف: روسيا حافظت على المسيحية في سوريا” (Lavrov: Russia has preserved Christianity in Syria), *Syria TV*, September 1, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> “الجبهة السورية للتحرير الوطني تندمج ضمن فصائل في الجيش 5” (Five factions of the National Army merge into Syrian Liberation Front), *Nedaa Post*, September 9, 2021.

task proved to be eminently difficult. In combat, chains of command are vague, and alliances are volatile, even fratricidal. On two occasions since the beginning of the year, the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps exchanged fire with elements of the Syrian army, theoretically its ally. Tactical disagreements interrupted a sweep operation with pro-Iranian militias, again supposed allies (Badia, 2021<sup>25</sup>). The incidents are multifaceted: opening fire on a Russian patrol by a pro-Iranian militia (Deera, 2019<sup>26</sup>), refusal to comply by a militia (“Clan Lions”, Sukhna Desert, September 2021<sup>27</sup>), rivalry in recruitment with the 4<sup>th</sup> division commanded by the President’s brother. As a result, Moscow is distancing itself from this model of cooperation.

- Lack of authority. The Russians struggle to make themselves heard. Not only is there little compliance with agreements, but Moscow's remedies are also met with disregard. Case in point, the decision in 2018 to create a “Sunni buffer” zone to repel pro-Iranian militias that threatened to open a front against Israel. Damascus, although a signatory, is bogging down the project to satisfy Iran. Russia’s calls to order have no effect, the buffer zone project exists on paper only<sup>28</sup>. Two years later, Putin and Erdogan reach an agreement, and Turkey undertakes to influence the opposition toward ousting the radical groups. Ankara opens a round of consultations with the rebellion, but instead of proceeding to weed out the radicals, it reorganizes the armed groups at its convenience, with a strong bias towards the HTS Salafists. Since then, Moscow has continued to demand compliance with the agreement, in vain.
- Deadlocked confrontation. Although the Russian army had capitalized on its experience and despite all its achievements, Lieutenant-General Nikiforov was unable to lead his men to victory. Meanwhile, there is no lack of initiatives and ideas such as training the 25<sup>th</sup> special forces division in helicopter-borne projections in mountainous areas dotted with enemy posts to move existing lines and improve mobility<sup>29</sup>. So many costly efforts for hypothetical, and Pyrrhic victories.

Based on these elements, Russia is trying to close its military operation, currently budgeted at a minimum, to demonstrate extractive skills of a hybrid war where others have failed, namely the United States in Afghanistan.

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<sup>25</sup> “تفاصيل الخلاف بين اللواء الثامن وميليشيات إيران في البادية” (Details of the dispute between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the Iranian militias in Badia), Syria TV, May 9, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> “تفاصيل استهداف ميليشيات إيرانية لدورية روسية في درعا” (Details of the Iranian militia that targeted a Russian patrol in Deraa), *Orient Net*, July 14, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> “بعد نقضها الوعود التي أطلقتها لهم.. عناصر “أسود العشائر” غاضبون من القوات الروسية” (After breaking promises made to them, the ‘Lions of the Clan’ are angry with the Russian forces), *The Euphrates Post*, September 16, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> “القيادة في تحذيرية منشورات تلقي إسرائيل.. القصف من ساعات بعد” (Hours after the attack, Israel drops warning leaflets in Quneitra), *Baladi News*, August 18, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Thaer Al Muhammed, “الجوء روسيا إلى تكتيك الإنزال الجوي في إدلب احتمال وارد أم رهان خاسر؟” (Airdrops in Idlib. A possible or losing bet?), Syria TV, October 9, 2021.

### 3. Ankara, the ally without an alliance

Tensions within armed coalitions are well documented – as illustrated in the Second World War. The initial objective of war was nonetheless never affected: final victory. The Syrian case presents the exact opposite to a shared final victory. Apart from the eviction of American forces from the Middle East, there is no common objective for the Russia-Iran-Turkey axis. The word “peace” is a source of otherness between the *Pax Russica* inherited from the geopolitics of the basic alliances of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the revolutionary corpus of Iran – which fights without an agenda since the real stake is the victory of God on Earth –, and Turkish syncretism structured around internal considerations: Turkish suprematism over the Kurdish populations, and external considerations: a policy of neo-Ottoman inspiration which restores a presence in the satellites of yesteryear (Libya, Syria), guardian of the Turkmen identity to the borders of Central Asia.

Turkey perceives Damascus’ normalization project as a risk challenging its territorial gains in Syria. The terminology officially used to designate the areas where its military authority is exercised is “area of operation” (*harekat alanları*), inducing the notion of a temporary presence<sup>30</sup>. However, no withdrawal of Turkish forces has been announced or planned. Ankara is engaged in a long-term hybrid war, in accordance with the Davutoglu doctrine which is intended to herald new geopolitics in the Middle East and in the world.

Defending the Assad clan is understood as a rescue plan for an old model, that of the great power and the servile ally. For Ankara, the shockwave of the 2011 Arab revolts has not yet delivered all its lessons. Paradigms are changing. It is now a given that government experiments inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood have failed. Palestine has become an allegory of the past for disinvested Arab countries. The unbreakable alliances (Jordan/USA) are weakening. The Israeli taboo is falling (Abraham Agreement). All these elements, sifted through the Turkish analysis, reinforce the presumption of geopolitics in mutation, of a planisphere where soon the divisions will no longer be vertical (block, border) but horizontal (sphere, era), which is in line with the Islamist thought according to which the nation state, *per se*, does not really exist. Only the *ummah islamiyya*, the Muslim community, dominates; the conviction that one day the borders will no longer be unified, but civilizational.

Turkey’s objective is less territorial than societal. At the Sochi negotiations in September 2021, its diplomats refused a draft secular Constitution for Syria and demanded that the Hanafi rite be made the official religion and Turkmen the official language. Ankara is establishing its strategic depth by imposing its *credo* and its methods. In the Syrian theater, the national army (TSK) sends official or induced political messages. Thus, before a summit devoted to the appeasement of tensions, 4,000 soldiers supported by 300 armoured vehicles were sent to the area – a defiant posture if ever there was one from an executive that intends to free itself from agendas that are not its own. When the argument in favor of Damascus’ normalization is based on a – hypothetical – pacification of Syria, its program of building military bases is maintained as is, with 79 bases, to which are added outposts that

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<sup>30</sup> Turkey conducted four operations: Euphrates Shield (2016), Olive Branch (2018), Spring of Peace (2019), Spring Shield (2020).



do not seek to establish lines but to spread its presence over vast geographical areas<sup>31</sup>.

The second actor in this strategic diffusion (a strategy for spreading the Turkish model) is the MIT intelligence service. Its liaison officers are not content with securing mobility in rebel zones through informal channels<sup>32</sup>, they also spread the influence of the Erdogan regime by working to unify the armed groups<sup>33</sup>, the professionalizing of its personnel within a so-called “national” and supposedly Syrian army; about 70 to 80,000 men linked to Ankara’s interests. After ten years of experience in the Syrian pandemonium, the MIT knows how to maneuver among legions, brigades, militias and other warrior groups. Close to the Turkmen communities, the MIT plays along ethnic subtleties, resolves tensions between leaders, solves quarrels over appointments and soothes thwarted ambitions. MIT is the linchpin that dissolves the *shuras*, establishes the organizational chart of a military council<sup>34</sup>, shapes an alliance, delivers training to the al-Mastouma camp<sup>35</sup> or is involved in the construction of a center in the vicinity of a front line. Its strength is above all its operational omnipresence.

The most intuitive Salafist groups, also in search of normalization, are seizing this opportunity to make a change, this time to free themselves from the garb of the terrorist organization and hope for the classification of “non-state actor”, which includes the notion of a protest movement in the broadest sense of the term. As part of this process, HTS has decided to abandon suicide operations in favor of thermal precision shooting training. While the Islamic State persists in blurring its messages on *Rocket Chat Messenger*, the group communicates in clear on Telegram, trivializes its propaganda themes. Still under Turkish influence in 2020, it began to rethink the organization of its forces. An organizational chart recently distinguished the fighting units of the special forces (Abu al-Yaqzan al-Masri) and administrative departments (health, recruitment, etc.).

Turkey has found its point of equilibrium on the Syrian-Iraqi axis, where it fights Kurdish irredentism with impunity and removes the factors of instability on its borders (PKK, migrants) by establishing a buffer of geographic depressurization. It would have no interest in giving up the current situation, except to risk weakening the alliances patiently built with the Salafist groups. Balances are precarious; the symmetry of the balance of power is often uncertain. For example, Ankara is not weakening HTS, as this would favour an offensive by Damascus. Nor does it strengthen it, as its leader, al-Jawlani, is known for his independence of mind. After breaking with Daech and Al-Qaeda, he is not a man to be impressed by the *little sultan*<sup>36</sup>. For its part, HTS gives half-hearted guarantees. It is expelling foreign fighters but is careful not to attack them all at once. On the one hand, to avoid creating an intra-jihadist front, on the other to keep a joker in its sometimes stormy relations with the MIT,

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<sup>31</sup> “Turkish forces increase their bases in Ain Issa and Gire Spi”, *Hawar News Agency*, August 17, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> “First Turkish military convoy enters Syria’s Idlib”, *Reuters*, October 12, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> “النظام التركي يسعى لدمج “النصرة” في ميليشياته بإدلب لإبقائها في محيطها ... شكري: سورية جزء لا يتجزأ من الأمن القومي العربي ..” (Turkish regime seeks to integrate al-Nosra into its militias in Idlib to keep it close to ‘M4’... Shoukry: Syria is an integral part of Arab national security... Lavrov: We insist on implementing our agreement with Ankara), *Al Watan* (Syria), October 5, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> “اجتماع بين ضباط أترك وفصائل المعارضة” (Meeting between Turkish officers and opposition factions. The reasons), *Ugarit Post*, October 4, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Training: firing of thermally guided anti-tank missile launchers.

<sup>36</sup> Nickname of President Erdogan.

finally, to polish its media image as a partner committed to the “anti-terrorist” struggle. Skillful, HTS keeps its freedom of action (either to continue its mutation or to return to the ultra-radical fold).

For the time being, Ankara is not commenting on the plan to return Damascus to the Arab League. To Turkish political formations, İyi Party and the Republican People’s Party, which suggest a resuming of diplomatic relations to lower tension and try to resolve the migration crisis (3.7 million Syrian refugees), no answer is provided. Priority is given to the coercive management of “threats”. Armed operations against the PKK are continuous and migration flows are dealt in the hard way. The army destroys tunnels dug by traffickers who thrive from a revenue of \$1,000 for each illegal immigrant<sup>37</sup>. Young teenage “smugglers” are arrested, some of them disappear in unresolved circumstances<sup>38</sup>. Border guards make arrests<sup>39</sup> sometimes sanctioned with live fire on refugees<sup>40</sup> or civilians<sup>41</sup>.

#### 4. The permanent war

Of the countries involved in the Syrian conflict, Iran is the least inclined to normalization. It will not oppose it – would it have the means to do so? – but will not undertake anything to facilitate it.

Tehran’s ambitions go beyond the survival of the Assad clan. Syria is perceived as the “35<sup>th</sup> province of Iran”<sup>42</sup>, which must be protected by arms, the “golden ring of resistance against Israel”<sup>43</sup>. The urgency is to drive out American forces and takfirist groups. In the long term, the aim is to bring to life the revolutionary ideal of Ayatollah Khomeini's *wilayat al-faqih* doctrine, a mode of governance organized around a jurist (faqih) invested with the prerogatives of a messenger of God<sup>44</sup>.

Iran’s rhetoric has changed significantly since the summer of 2015, when General Soleimani warned the Russians of the disaster that the collapse of Damascus would represent<sup>45</sup>. At the

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<sup>37</sup> “وفد روسي يزور بلدات ريف درعا الشرقي والبحث عن أنفاق شمال إدلب” (Russian delegation visits eastern Deraa countryside and Turkish army searches for tunnels in northern Idlib), *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, August 12, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> “أطفال في إدلب يعملون في تهريب البشر تحت إدارة مهربيين” (Children in Idlib work in human trafficking under the direction of smugglers), *North Press Agency*, October 11, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> “تركيا تُلقي القبض على عشرات من طالبي اللجوء السوريين والأجانب” (Turkey arrests dozens of Syrian and foreign asylum seekers), *Nedaa Post*, September 27, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> “Syria-Turkey border strip | Turkish Jandarma continue assaulting Syrian people fleeing from dire living conditions”, *SOHR*, September 20, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Ali Darwish, “Silent death within Idlib’s border by Turkish border guards”, *Enab Baladi*, October 9, 2021; “مرضى سوريون يشتكون آلية العبور الجديدة من “باب الهوى” للعلاج في تركيا” (Syrian patients complain about new Bab Al-Hawa crossing mechanism for treatment in Turkey), *Al Souria*, September 27, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Ashfon Ostovar, “Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards”, Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Ali Akbar Velayati, *Nasim Online*, March 27, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> “دراسات في ولاية الفقيه وفقه الدولة الإسلامي” (Studies on the Guidance of the Jurist and the Law of the Islamic State), al-Dār al-Islāmiyya Publishing, 1988.

<sup>45</sup> Laila Bassam, Tom Perry, “How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow”, Reuters, October 6, 2015.

time, it was a question of military engagement controlled over time, of operational cooperation with a view to ending the conflict. Six years later, Iran is still carrying out its settlement programs on the Syrian soil without any desire to leave<sup>46</sup>. Its foundations, educational centers and associations propagate the discourse of the Islamic revolution. Free Koran memorization courses are given to children; Farsi is taught<sup>47</sup>. In Deir Ezzor, the community spaces (*Al Husseiniya*) tell the story of the Fatimid Empire that influenced Syria in the year 1000, suggesting historical precedent to the current-day situation. The scouts of Imam al-Mahdi supervise the youth. In “leisure camps”, meetings to raise awareness of “Wahhabi terrorism” are organized in the presence of warlords affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards.

Unlike Russia’s pyramid approach, the pro-Iranian forces are advancing from the base, in line with the strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood, establishing themselves as close to the people as possible through micro-economics, associative life and religious clientelism. Not a week goes by without “Iranian volunteers” buying farms in the Euphrates valley, apartments near religious shrines to contribute to the Shiite population of the country. Tehran-sponsored armed groups offer jobs to Shia youth and welcome, when necessary, Pakistani, Afghan or Iraqi fighters, also Shiites. This proselytizing, coupled with the ethnicization of recruitment, is of concern to Moscow. General Sergey Chvarkov, former head of civil-military operations in Syria<sup>48</sup>, believes that “Iran’s financing of Shiite groups and attempts to spread Shiism in traditionally Sunni territories may lead to a worsening of relations with Sunnis and Kurds inside Syria”<sup>49</sup>.

The Assad regime has also expressed signs of irritation, demanding the dismissal of the powerful General Javad Ghaffari, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who has been accused of favouring Iran’s interests, the continuation of the war, without integrating the normalization process under way<sup>50</sup>. Other reasons for annoyance include:

- Pro-Iranian activism provokes retaliation by the Israeli army. The missiles damage Syrian infrastructure and cause casualties.
- The al-Quds force launches operations without consultation with Damascus. A drone strike on an American base on October 20, 2021 provoked the ire of the Syrian authorities.
- The clandestine import of products manufactured in Iran and distributed on the Syrian black market has the effect of increasing the deregulation of an already very weakened economy.

Despite the reduction of its military efforts in 2020<sup>51</sup>, Iran supports the intransigence of

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<sup>46</sup> “سياسي سوري: الدور الإيراني يعمل على إبقاء سوريا بعقلية ما قبل عام 2011” (Syrian politician: ‘Iran’s will is to keep Syria in the pre-2011 mentality’), *North Press Agency*, September 1, 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Khaled Matar, “دورة لتحفيظ القرآن مدعومة إيرانياً تثير الجدل في ريف جبلة” (Iran sparks controversy in Jableh campaign), *Syria TV*, August 24, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> From May to September 2016, General Sergey Chvarkov was the head of the Coordination Center for Reconciliation of the Warring Parties in the Syrian Arab Republic.

<sup>49</sup> Kirill Semenov, “Confrontation between US, pro-Iranian groups in Syria and Iraq poses challenges for Russia”, *Al Monitor*, July 12, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> The Iranian authorities have not officially confirmed the information.

<sup>51</sup> Ron Ben Yishai, “مدعو السيבות آله. השתפר הביטחוני המצב: ל” צה של השנתית המצב הערכת” (IDF’s annual assessment of the situation: reasons for the improved security situation), *Ynet*, November 17, 2021.

Damascus in its refusal to accept the disintegration of its territory, which amounts to maintaining three areas of conflict. One against Turkey, to recover the province of Idlib. One other against the Kurds, Rojava. Yet another against Israel, which occupies the Golan Heights. This is the point of vulnerability of this Russia-Iran-Damascus alliance, which was conceived as an agreement of non-interference between allies, based on fundamentals such as the departure of the Americans from the Middle East, but which, when put to the test, is riddled with deep disagreements that make the conflict even more complex. Iran criticizes Russia for not protecting its bases targeted by Israel<sup>52</sup>. Moscow suspects Damascus of preventing the smooth running of its civil-military operations with the civilian population<sup>53</sup>. Damascus wonders how to normalize if, at every resumption of dialogue, the alleviation of an Iranian presence is demanded.

## 5. The case of Bashar el Assad

Damascus celebrates each reconciliation with an Arab country as a success that proves the validity of President Assad's policy. However, this process is not without uncertainties. The regime's return to Olympus, applauded by its former detractors, is above all an obligation to assume its responsibilities. The propaganda praising a peaceful Syria, a state capable of rebuilding itself, of welcoming its refugees<sup>54</sup> and of attracting investors deserves to be reassessed in the light of the current situation.

Much of the data collected on the ground belies Damascus' optimism.

- Security developments, refugee file. Every week, men die in battle in Syria. The United Nations advise against the return of refugees. Many primary sources report border arrests, some accompanied by arbitrary detention and torture<sup>55</sup>. Back home, Syrians are victims of property spoliation and loss of land put up for auction by the state. The bread crisis, the cost of living and insecurity push Syrians on the roads of internal exile<sup>56</sup>, sometimes in rebel areas considered safer<sup>57</sup>.
- A weak and undisciplined army. Without foreign support or recourse to militias (Jaysh al-Shaabi), Damascus is not able to guarantee the relative safety of its citizens. In 2019, Damascus launches an offensive to recapture the northwest of the country. The Turkish

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<sup>52</sup> Ouadih El Hayek, "Lebanon's ambassador switched from diplomatic language to humanism", *No-vaya Gazeta*, August 15, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Kirill Semyonov, Anton Mardasov, "Russian operation goes 'offshore' in Syria", *RIDDLE*, August 17, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> "Syria Makes Tremendous Efforts for Refugees Return: Mekdad", *The Syrian Observer*, November 19, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> "عباس إبراهيم أؤيد فتح حدود لبنان مع سوريا وأنتقي بمملوك والأسد دوريا" (Abbas Ibrahim: "I support the opening of Lebanon's borders with Syria, and I meet regularly with Mamlouk and Assad"), Syria TV, September 20, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> "Bread crisis | Long lines in front of bread bakeries continue in regime-controlled areas, while the price of pack of bread reaches 1,500 SYL", *SOHR*, October 18, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Khaled Al Khatib, "هجرة السوريين عبر الخطوط شراكة غير معلنة بين الرابعة وفصائل في المعارضة" (Syrian emigration across the lines... An undisclosed agreement between 'Rabaa' and the opposition factions), *Shaam Network*, September 27, 2021.

army is blocking; 2,100 Syrian soldiers are killed, 300 vehicles destroyed, including 94 tanks, 37 artillery pieces and 28 rocket launchers<sup>58</sup>. The attack was ill-prepared, the operations conducted without tactical relevance or effectiveness under fire; the dysfunction of unclassifiable entities such as the 4<sup>th</sup> Division, an army within an army, close to Iran and commanded by the brother of the president, led it to nearly fall. It excels, however, in cigarette smuggling<sup>59</sup>, rackets at checkpoints<sup>60</sup>, extortion, etc.

- Ethics and international relations. Damascus refuses to grant visas to UN teams investigating chemical weapons. The regime is diverting humanitarian aid by arbitrarily modifying exchange rates for dollar-pound conversions, *i.e.* 51 cents for every dollar<sup>61</sup>. As for the issue of pan-Arab solidarity, supposedly the new adage of the Assad regime, it should be noted that Iraqi trucks crossing Syria to supply Lebanon are heavily taxed – at roughly \$4,000 per vehicle<sup>62</sup>. Money is taken at border crossings<sup>63</sup> or at private checkpoints set up by businessmen close to the government<sup>64</sup>.
- A power with no room for change. The siege of Deraa (summer 2021) was a reminder of the regime's brutality and its inability to resolve the crises it has initiated, forcing the intervention of Russian negotiators to avoid a new humiliation. Despite the prospects for normalization, and, imaginably, obtaining an observer seat at the next Arab League summit, Damascus remains on edge. Rare changes, such as the appointment of Fadi Salti Al-Khalila as head of the Planning and International Cooperation Commission, are no match for the stakes for Syria. The recent photographs of the wealthy Ali Makhlouf, the president's cousin, driving a Ferrari in Beverly Hills, accompanied by a young model, confirm that not all Syrians are equal in the face of war.

These elements raise questions about the prospects for normalization. Would it validate the habitual methods of the regime? Would criminal responsibilities be ignored? France has chosen to fight against impunity for crimes committed in Syria since 2011<sup>65</sup>. For Paris, human rights must not be sacrificed on the altar of *realpolitik*. It is a clear and strong diplomatic orientation; in contrast to the business of a China determined to capture the contracts of Syrian reconstruction.

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<sup>58</sup> President Erdogan, February 29, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> "حرب تهريب الدخان تشتعل بين الفرقة الرابعة والمهربيين في حمص" (Conflict between the 4<sup>th</sup> Division and smugglers in Homs), Syria TV, October 18, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> "Human trafficking for 200 USD | 4th Division allow civilians to leave regime-held areas through Euphrates River", SOHR, October 5, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Natasha Salle, "How the Assad Regime Systematically Diverts Tens of Millions in Aid", CSIS, October 20, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> "لبنان يكشف قيمة الرسوم المدفوعة لنظام الأسد لنقل الوقود من العراق" (Lebanon reveals value of fees paid to Assad regime to transport fuel from Iraq), *Al-Souria*, September 21, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Azza Hajj Hassan, "لبنان المحاصر من سوريا 'يستجدي' خفض الرسوم على بضائعه" (Lebanon, besieged by Syria, 'begs' to reduce taxes on its goods), *Al Modon*, October 12, 2021; "سائق يفصح كذب النظام واستغلال ميليشياته" (Driver exposes regime's lies and militia exploitation of road to Jordan), *Orient News*, May 10, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> "Checkpoints Stationed at Lebanon Border Removed by Fourth Division", *The Syrian Observer*, June 29, 2021.

<sup>65</sup> "Syria – Joint Tribune by Jean-Yves Le Drian and 17 of his European counterparts on the fight against impunity for crimes committed in Syria", French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, March 31, 2021.

## 6. The camp of refusal

In Israel, the word “normalization” will only make sense the day the last pro-Iranian fighter leaves. Not before. The hypothesis of a normalized Syria becoming Tehran’s backyard is not acceptable. Despite a secret meeting at the Russian base of Hmeimim between Syrians and Israelis in December 2020, Tel Aviv continues its air strikes against pro-Iranian positions and human targets<sup>66</sup>. Moscow’s media outbursts in which it declares it is “losing patience” do not help<sup>67</sup>. Israel is determined to constrain any Iranian sanctuary on its northeastern border, and to prevent a coordinated attack by pro-Iranian groups based in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Gaza. The Iron Dome missile shield could then only partially stop a simultaneous salvo.

The United States is also opposed to Syrian normalization under the current regime and its methods. In the aftermath of August 15, 2021, the day Kabul fell, there was speculation about a possible domino effect leading to the departure of the 900 American soldiers stationed in the area. Antony Blinken denied any such intent. America is staying. A firm position, in no way altered by the draft resolution of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, 120 members of the House led by Jamaal Bowman, who call for a withdrawal from Syria.

It should be noted that Russia does not comment much on this American presence, which gives rise to some friction on the ground, without consequence. Washington and Moscow share some elements of analysis, admittedly tenuous, but which should be mentioned: Bashar al Assad is not the right man for the job (analyses differ on the future to be reserved for him, but his unfitness for governance is admitted); Turkey’s equivocal game with Salafist armed groups (HTS) is a problem; economic sanctions are a burden on the Syrian people, *ad hoc* adjustments can be considered.

There remains a deep and major divergence between actors on normalizing the Damascus regime without the hope of obtaining a just and equitable peace. Three consequences stemming from such an outcome are feared:

- Freeze the civil war. Establishing a “status quo” that will generate future confrontations.
- Contribute to the perpetuation of a regime that is highly responsible for the Syrian drama.
- Maintain in the heart of the Middle East a hotbed of instability that propagates radicalism.

Ultimately, this situation puts into question the position of countries that support the end of Syria’s isolation, concerned with benevolence towards a traumatized and bruised people, but which, through acceptance, prefigures the Middle East of tomorrow. A regional space that will remain under the yoke of powers, great or in the making, geopolitics made of alliances

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<sup>66</sup> “How Israel and Russia forged unlikely partnership in Syria”, *Ynetnews*, November 1, 2021.

<sup>67</sup> “موسكو تصعد تحركها ضد الغارات الإسرائيلية على سوريا” (*Moscow steps up action against Israeli raids in Syria*), *Asharq Al-Awsat*, July 24, 2021.



without agreement, with their share of conflicts through armed groups that will continue the fragmentation of territories and the ethnicization of power relations. Is not the normalization of the Assad regime a matter of trivializing an unresolved war? Syria is a country whose territory is largely run by neighbouring countries and groups, with Damascus as the ivory tower of a dominant clan.

In Syria, nothing is settled. The war continues.

*Les opinions exprimées ici n'engagent que la responsabilité de leur auteur.*