



WHO WANTS WHAT IN SYRIA

370
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Nicolás de Pedro, Research Fellow

Eduard Soler i Lecha, Research Coordinator CIDOB CIDOB

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Pace, but not at any price. So goes the rationale guiding the actions of the multiple actors involved in the Syrian conflict. The war is in a phase of metastasis. Nobody wants to lose and nobody appears able to fully take control. What began in March 2011 as another of the Arab Spring's popular protests has degenerated into a bloody civil war with regional extension and which involves the main global actors. And just when attempts to reach a diplomatic resolution began to take shape in the Vienna talks, Turkey shot down a Russian fighter bomber, which threatens to introduce new points of tension.

This incident may be added to another three factors that, in the past six months, have changed the perception of the conflict and its dynamics. First, the humanitarian crisis has worsened and acquired a more dramatic dimension with hundreds of thousands of (the more fortunate) refugees arriving on Greek coasts intent on reaching the heart of Europe. Second, Russia has burst onto the scene, giving decisive support, both military and diplomatic, to Bashar al-Assad's regime. And, third, with the Paris November 13th attacks, Daesh (Arabic acronym for ISIS, the so-called Islamic State) has taken the internationalisation of terror a step further and changed the agenda for France and other European states, as the rapprochement between Paris and Moscow clearly shows.

Russia's official line is that it is in Syria to fight Daesh and understands its intervention to be the only one that is legitimate and backed by international law. From the very start, the Kremlin has given diplomatic and material support to Assad's regime: portraying it as a protective wall against terrorism, it bombs the rebels just as heavily – if not more so – as it does Daesh. But immersing itself in a regional war with an uncertain outcome is not Russia's goal: the incentives are few and the risks are very high. For that reason, its intervention will not go much beyond buttressing Assad.

In so doing, Russia protects its only remaining ally in the Middle East and preserves its naval base in Tartus – the only one outside the post-Soviet space and the one that gives it greatest capacity for projection into the eastern Mediterranean. But Moscow's objectives go far beyond Syria. Above all, Russia wants a bargaining chip to renegotiate its position with the West – with the sanctions, Crimea and Ukraine as central issues – and, more generally, to force through its acceptance as an indispen-

sable global player. Thus, beyond the Kremlin's aggressive rhetoric (incendiary in its media), Moscow's reaction to the downing of the Su-24 has been prudent, confining it, for the time being, to its bilateral relationship with Turkey and thereby minimising the issue's implications for NATO. Nevertheless, with the deployment of its sophisticated S-400 anti-aircraft system it is sending a clear message to both Ankara and the Atlantic Alliance as a whole. In its questioning of the international post-cold war order and US hegemony, Russia also counts on the sympathy and implicit support of China, which, though it watches Syria's evolution from afar, does so attentively.

Of all the actors in play, Turkey is the one risking most and the one that may end up worst off. Above all, this is because, unlike the other regional powers, Turkey has a long (822km) border with Syria. This has meant the arrival of two million refugees, border skirmishes with Assad's army, fear that Daesh could act on Turkish territory (as it actually did in Suruç in July and Ankara in October) and, no less important, anxiety about the creation of a self-governed space for the Kurds in northern Syria.

From the start the Turkish government has been very active in organising the political opposition to Assad and providing cover for the armed rebellion. It has been one of the most vehement of the actors condemning Assad and seeking international intervention. With the refugee crisis and after Erdoğan's recent electoral victory, the Turks felt strong and indispensable. But the Paris attacks have turned the tables and Ankara is visibly bothered by the rapprochement between Moscow and Paris. It fears that Assad and his allies will win the day and, with operations such as the downing of the Russian warplane, is testing out its boundaries and seeing who it can count on.

Iran has been a fundamental supporter of Damascus, before and since 2011. It is an alliance in which the Lebanese Shiite militia, Hezbollah, must be included, which is built on an anti-imperialist agenda (it calls itself an axis of resistance) and which is key to Iran projecting its power to Mediterranean coasts. For Tehran, the political survival of Assad is not fundamental, but the preservation of a friendly regime in Damascus is.

And it is precisely in relation to Iran that Saudi Arabia's policy in Syria must be read, which is shared (with some slight variations) by the rest of the Gulf states. Their military and financial support for the rebels seeks to deliver a decisive blow to the Ayatollahs' regime and not (obviously) to aid the flowering of democracy in the region. For this reason, until relatively recently, neither Saudis nor Qataris looked on the rise of radical Sunni groups such as Daesh with particular concern.

Israel's position in this conflict is so discrete as to be easily overlooked. It is experiencing the war in Syria with great discomfort because, although Assad is a rival, at least he's predictable. And its border with Syria (including the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since 1967) was until now one of its most stable. Israel cannot support Assad but neither can it see a clear alternative to his regime. Thus, it opts for containment and damage control, hoping that its enemies weaken each other and that the war in Syria keeps Hezbollah busy.

The United States has attempted to combine principles and interests with little success. On the one hand it wanted to protect those calling for democracy and freedom on the streets of Syria. Having let its old ally Hosni Mubarak fall, why should it be more generous to Assad? And yet, there are three limitations to its support: getting drawn into a new failed operation in the Middle East (Iraq syndrome), giving oxygen to radical rebel groups that may turn against it (Afghanistan syndrome) and putting the security of Israel at risk. Currently, Washington's priority is to work towards successful Vienna talks and, in parallel, reverse the expansion of Daesh in both Syria and Iraq.

In contrast to Washington's position, Europe's perception of the conflict is marked by its proximity. With the refugee crisis and the Paris attacks, it has become evident that what is happening in Syria has direct effects on Europe. But Europeans give knee-jerk reactions to each crisis and, as normal, are seized by divisions and lack of strategy. France is at war and wants everyone else to join it. But not all are as keen to get involved militarily, neither do all share the same view of Assad's role in Syria's future or how to effectively fight the terrorist threat.

Ultimately, matching all the vital interests of the actors involved will not be an easy task. The risk is that they'd prefer Syria to keep burning than for their rivals to come out on top.