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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ANALYSES

The Syrian Civil War: A “Geopolitical Chernobyl”

Dr. Spyridon Plakoudas

Research Paper No. 11

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The Syrian Civil War: A “Geopolitical Chernobyl”

Dr Spyros Plakoudas

The Syrian War: By-Product of the Arab Spring

Without doubt, the Syrian Civil War currently amounts to the most violent war in the Middle East and beyond. Indicatively, by the end of 2015 this conflict had claimed the lives of over 250,000 people and caused the internal displacement of over 7,500,000 individuals and the migration of roughly 4,000,000 persons since 2011 (out of a total population of nearly 20 million in 2010).¹ However, this conflict has not earned an unfavourable reputation just by its bloody nature.

This conflict engendered a perfect storm of calamities for peace and stability in the Middle East and beyond as the refugee crisis in Europe and the rise of the Islamic State attest to eloquently. However, the Syrian War did not appear to be a cataclysmic development from the outset. Initially, the Syrian (Civil) War represented yet another episode in a series of wars and revolutions that rocked the Middle East from December 2010 until mid-2012². This upheaval was symbolically termed the “Arab Spring” in analogy to Europe’s “Springtime of the Peoples” in 1848 – the chain political revolutions that shook the monarchist regimes of the Old Continent and paved the way for the democratization of Europe.³

The Arab Spring encompassed political processes that differed in space (from Libya to Bahrain), time (from 2011 until 2012), objectives (from basic political freedoms to autonomy), strategy (from peaceful protests to armed insurrections), actors (from civil society to Islamists) and outcomes (from civil war to overthrow of autocracies).⁴ However, the Syrian War eventually overshadowed the Arab Spring (i.e. the very cause of the war) and engineered its own special dynamics.

The Syrian War: “Proxy War”

¹ Sophia Jones: “Syria’s Death Toll”, *Huffington Post*, 11/3/2015; Karen Yourish, K. K. Rebecca Lai and Derek Watkins: “How Syrians Are Dying”, *New York Times*, 14/9/2015.

² By mid-2012, the Arab Spring was rapidly replaced by an “Arab Winter”. John R. Bradley: *After the Arab Spring: How the Islamists Hijacked the Middle East Revolts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

³ Marc Lynch: *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).

⁴ Lorenzo Kamel and Daniela Huber: “Arab Spring: A Decentering Research Agenda”, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2015), pp. 273-280.

Syria did not escape the Arab Spring as popular rancour for the oppressive regime had been escalating for years owing to various reasons⁵. Al-Assad initially strove to contain the peaceful protests since mid-March 2011 with repression and cosmetic reforms. The protests escalated unabated – as did the violent reaction of the regime. After all, repression amounted to the preferred “modus operandi” of the autocrats against internal (armed or unarmed) dissent. The despots of the Middle East, most of who army officers, ruled with an iron fist through their overgrown police and army (and most notably the ever-present secret services).⁶ In later months, the peaceful protests were succeeded by an armed uprising by a disaffected Sunni majority against a ruling Alawite (Shia) minority. Unlike the wars in Libya and Yemen⁷, the Syrian War quickly developed into a peripheral crisis.⁸

In short, the Syrian War has been transformed into a unique “war by proxy” waged at two levels at the very same time. At a micro level, the regional Sunni powers (Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar) and the champion of Shia Islam, Iran, vie for supremacy in the Middle East and, in broader terms, for influence over the “umma” (the community of believers).⁹ The pro-Assad camp includes the Alawites in Syria (and other minorities such as Christians), Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shia in Iraq and Iran and endeavours to defend the “Shia Crescent” in the Middle East against all odds.¹⁰ The anti-Assad camp, a heterogeneous faction from the outset, includes (apart from Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia) two former colonial powers with a centuries-old presence in the Middle East (Britain and France) and the world’s only superpower with a decades-old sphere of influence in the Middle East (the USA). The above countries agree on the core “objective” (the downfall of al-Assad and the dismantlement of the “Shia Crescent” in the Middle East) but disagree on the “method” – with some arguing in favor of an invasion (e.g. France) and some in favour of direct support to the armed opposition. Turkey, whose leader invested heavily in a quick victory of the

⁵ For example, climate change acted as a “force multiplier” by exacerbating the already severe political, socio-economic and environmental problems of an arid and over-populated region. Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia: “Conclusion” in Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia (eds.): “The Arab Spring and Climate Change” (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2013), p. 51.

⁶ Eva Bellin: “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective”, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2004), pp. 139-157; Laurel E. Miller et al.: “Democratization in the Arab World” (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2012), pp. 35-43.

⁷ Yemen shares the same problems with Libya: an unfinished revolution, a ruinous civil strife, a failed state and a plethora of intervening actors. Christopher S. Chivvis, Jeffrey Martini: “Libya after Qaddafi: Lessons and Implications for the Future” (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2014). Sami Kronenfeld and Yoel Guzansky: “Yemen: A Mirror to the Future of the Arab Spring”, *Military and Strategic Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2014), pp. 79-99.

⁸ Jeffrey Martini et al.: “Syria as an Arena of Strategic Competition” (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 2013); Reva Bhalla: “The Geopolitics of the Syrian Civil War”, *Stratfor*, 21/1/2014.

⁹ Jeremy Bender: “Map of Saudi and Iran Proxy War”, *Business Insider*, 8/1/2016.

¹⁰ Pro-Iranian Shia parties currently exercise control over four Arab capitals (Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut and Sana’a) and ally themselves with Iran (the champion of Shia Islam), thus establishing a “Shia Axis”.

opposition, repeatedly implored the USA to undertake an armed expedition against al-Assad.¹¹ According to the award-winning journalist Seymour Hersh, Turkey went as far as to launch a “false flag operation” in Syria in the summer of 2013 to drag the USA into the Syrian War after president Obama declared the use of weapons of mass destructions as a “red line”.¹² Last but not least, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, already alienated by the rapprochement between the USA and Iran since 2015¹³, committed vast resources into achieving a rebel victory – even against the wishes of the USA.

The anti-Assad camp initially supported (in various ways) the Free Syrian Army, in effect an amalgam of numerous private armies with a strong presence of extreme islamists and even jihadists.¹⁴ However, the Free Syrian Army eventually proved an organisation susceptible to factionalism and partisanship – just like its political wing stationed in Turkey, the Syrian National Coalition.¹⁵ The champions of Sunni Islam (Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) soon threw their weight behind the jihadists who already outgunned and outnumbered the moderate factions within the FSA by 2014¹⁶. However, the ultra-fanatism of the jihadists and their propensity towards mass violence abhorred the USA and the West¹⁷.

At a macro level, the USA and Russia contend for power and influence in this geopolitically crucial region. The USA strives to preserve its sphere of influence in the Middle East in a rather odd way. On the one hand, the superpower committed itself steadfastly to the war against jihadists (most notably, the Islamic State) in Syria and the neighbouring countries since late 2014. On the other hand, Washington refrains from armed intervention against al-Assad (in the pattern of Qaddafi) lest the overthrow of the secular despot

¹¹ France and Turkey (the two former masters of Syria) argued in favour of non-fly zones within Syria administered by the international community, professedly for the protection of war refugees from al-Assad’s airforce that would constitute in effect the precursor to an armed intervention against al-Assad. Indicatively, see: John Irish: “France, Partners to Discuss Northern Syria ‘Safe Zone’: Hollande”, *Reuters*, 28/9/2015.

¹² The journalist argued that MIT (the Intelligence Services in Turkey) orchestrated an attack with chemical weapons at Gouta – a suburb of Damascus – which was later imputed to Assad. Seymour Hersh: “The Red Line and the Rat Line”, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 36, No. 8 (2014), pp. 21-24.

¹³ The sunni allies of the USA were estranged by the rapprochement between Washington and Tehran in the aftermath of the deal on Iran’s nuclear program.

¹⁴ Indicatively, the Free Syrian Army incorporates 30 military formations, whereas Jaysh al-Islam is comprised by 50 Islamist militant factions. Charles Lister: “Assessing Syria’s Jihad” in Toby Dodge and Emile Hokayem (eds.): *Middle Eastern Security, the US Pivot and the Rise of ISIS* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2014), pp. 71-98.

¹⁵ Indicatively, Islamists are over-represented in the Syrian National Coalition, whereas the Kurds and Christians are under-represented – the Alawites are excluded a priori. In addition, splits have emerged between moderates and hard-liners and several factions have surfaced that claim allegiance to different foreign patrons: the pro-Turkish faction, the pro-Qatar faction, etc. Aron Lund: “Divided They Stand: An Overview of Syria’s Political Opposition Factions” (Uppsala: Olof Palme International Center, 2012).

¹⁶ Even the IHS Janes, a defence consultancy in the UK, admitted that nearly half of the insurgents belonged to jihadist or hard-line islamist groups. Ben Farmer and Ruth Sherlock: “Syria: Nearly Half the Rebel Fighters Are Jihadists or Hardline Islamists, Says IHS Jane’s Report”, *Telegraph*, 15/9/2013.

¹⁷ The Islamic State, in particular, perpetrated atrocities of such savagery and scale against the Yezidi Kurds (an ancient religious sect in northern Iraq) in the summer of 2014 that the UN recognised these acts of mass violence as “genocide”. Nick Cumming-Bruce: “United Nations Investigators Accuse ISIS of Genocide over Attacks on Yazidis”, *New York Times*, 19/5/2015.

should open the gates of Damascus to the jihadists.¹⁸ However, these policies of president Obama frustrated the regional Sunni allies of the USA (most notably, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) which follow their own sectarian agenda – even against the wishes of Washington¹⁹.

In contrast, Russia adopted a consistent policy since 2011 that aspires to achieve two inter-related objectives: first, extend its influence in the Middle East at the expense of the US sphere of influence and, secondly, exterminate the foreign jihadists (many of whom from Chechnya and the Caucasus) in Syria and defend the Caucasus and Russia from Islamic extremism. Ergo, Russia intervened militarily in support of al-Assad in September 2015 – despite the obvious challenges for Russia’s first military operation outside the periphery of the former Soviet Union since 1989. Putin did not want to repeat the mistake of Libya, where Qaddafi was overthrown in 2011 by NATO without a resolute reaction by Russia.²⁰ Putin in effect intends to upgrade Russia into an international actor of such power that the USA (and the West) will be compelled to seek terms with Moscow in Ukraine, Iran and elsewhere.²¹

Spill-Over of the War into the Periphery

The Syrian War spilled over to neighbouring countries and dramatically exacerbated the pre-existing instability within the latter. Lebanon, a country still recuperating from a vicious sectarian conflict which raged for 15 years, has been sorely affected by the war in Syria. Apart from experiencing a refugee crisis of an unprecedented scale which upset a sensitive demographic equilibrium, the country steadily descends into chaos as pro-Assad and anti-Assad militant factions fiercely clash within the country’s towns and the jihadists (most notably, the Islamic State) expand their activities.²²

Iraq, the epicentre of instability in the Middle East since the US-led invasion in 2003, did not stay immune to the war in its neighbour. Iraq witnessed a vicious internal war from 2003 until 2014 which was marked, inter alia, by a savage sectarian conflict between the Shia majority and the Sunni minority. The country was fractured into three zones (the semi-independent Kurdish statelet in the north, the rebellious

¹⁸ On the policy of the USA in the Syrian War, see: Jeremy Shapiro and Miriam M. Estrin: “How the U.S. Saw Syria’s War”, *Foreign Policy*, 5/12/2013; David P. Forsythe and Mahmood Monshipouri: “ISIS and the Civil War in Syria: The Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy”, *Georgetown Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2015) pp. 1-10.

¹⁹ Tamara Cofman Wittes: “The Regional Impact of the U.S. Policy toward Iraq and Syria” (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute, 2015); Krishnadev Calamur: “U.S. Syria Policy Is Under Fire From Allies”, *Atlantic*, 10/2/2016

²⁰ For an analysis of the genuine motives behind Putin’s armed intervention, see: Spyros Plakoudas: “Why did Russia Intervene in Syria”, (Athens: KEDISA, 2015).

²¹ Samuel Charap: “Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention”, *Survival*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2013), pp. 35-41; Aron Lund: “Evaluating the Russian Intervention in Syria” (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 2015).

²² Hilal Khasan: “Will Syria’s Strife Rip Lebanon Apart?”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2013), pp. 75-80.

Sunni triangle in the centre and the vast Shia territory in the south) and weakened by chronic pathogenies (most notably, corruption and sectarianism)²³; unsurprisingly, Bagdad easily succumbed to the onslaught of the Islamic State. The latter seized vast swathes of territory in northern and central Iraq in a jihadist blitzkrieg in mid-2014 and even threatened Bagdad and Erbil – the Shia and Kurdish seats of power in Iraq. Only the intervention of Iran and the USA saved the Iraqi Shia and Kurds from annihilation.²⁴ The Islamic State, which once controlled $\frac{1}{3}$ of Syria and Iraq, now struggles for its own survival as the Iraqi Kurds and Shia tighten the noose around Mosul – the jihadists’ remaining stronghold.

The Islamic State, in effect, abolished the artificial borders delineated by the Sykes-Picot Treaty in 1916 between Britain and France for the post-Ottoman Near East by uniting the Sunni Arab tribes in the deserts of Iraq and Syria under one authority – the so-called “caliph” al-Baghdadi. The Kurds in Iraq and Syria demonstrate a similar zeal in disbanding the artificial borders of Iraq and Syria. The Arab Winter was succeeded by a Kurdish Summer as the Kurds in the Middle East (with the exception of Iran) rose up in arms in pursuit of independence (Syria and Iraq) or autonomy (Turkey).²⁵

The Iraqi Kurds capitalised on the collapse of the Iraqi state and security apparatus in 2014 to seize control of the disputed city of Kirkuk (the Iraqi Kurds’ “Jerusalem”) and secure a de facto independence from Bagdad²⁶. Their co-brethren in Syria achieved much greater gains. The PYD, the most powerful organisation of Syrian Kurds, adopted a realpolitik since mid-2012 that enabled the party to establish a de facto autonomous Kurdish enclave in northern Syria. The PYD overcome the insurgent proxies of Turkey in northern Syria one by one – first the islamists and later on the jihadists; from 2012 until now, the party transformed itself from a guardian of three Kurdish-majority towns along the long frontier with Turkey to

²³ Indeed, Iraq suffered from chronic pathogenies long before the blitzkrieg of the Islamic State in 2014: corruption, sectarianism, overpopulation, desertification, instability, poverty and under-development. Rolf Schwarz: “Iraq: From Rentier State to Failed State” in Rolf Schwarz (ed.): *War and State Building in the Middle East* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), pp. 31-57; Loren Thompson: “Failed State: Five Reasons Iraq Can’t Be Fixed”, *Forbes*, 29/3/2015.

²⁴ The intervention of Iran and the USA in Iraq illuminates the priorities of the two powers. The USA intervened in support of the Iraqi Kurds, not the Shia-dominated state authority of Iraq, and abandoned the defence of Bagdad to Iran – which, ironically, Washington strove to shut out of Iraq. Toby Dodge and Becca Wasser: “The Crisis of the Iraqi State” in Dodge and Hokayem (eds.): *Middle Eastern Security*, pp. 13-38; Patrick Cockburn: *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015).

²⁵ Two semi-independent Kurdish states currently exist, one in northern Syria and another in northern Iraq, which expand continuously at the expense of the Islamic State, thus paving the way for the cessation of the Kurds from the weak central governments of Iraq and Syria and the eventual unification of their autonomous entities. Michael M. Gunter: *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in War and Peace* (London: Hurst, 2014); Michael Stephens: “Facing ISIS: The Kurds of Syria and Iraq” (Barcelona: IEMED, 2015).

²⁶ The Iraqi Kurds, who suffered genocide at the hands of Saddam Hussein in the Al-Anfal Campaign, wanted to set up their own state ever since the fall of the dictator in 2003; in 2012, a standoff between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi State lasted for days before the USA mediated. The onslaught of the Islamic State offered Iraqi Kurds the awaited opportunity to establish their independence. Mohammed Shareef: *The United States, Iraq and the Kurds: Shock, Awe and Aftermath* (London: Routledge, 2014); International Crisis Group: “Arming Iraq’s Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict” (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2015).

king-maker in northern Syria.²⁷ Jealous of the resounding success of its offshoot in Syria, the PKK (the most powerful organisation of Turkey's Kurds that has been waging a separatist insurgency since 1984) tried to set up its own statelet in south-east Turkey. The campaigns of the PKK in 2012 (the most vicious since 1994) resulted in a stalemate and the two sides initiated a precarious peace dialogue in 2013 – partly thanks to the mediation of the PKK's jailed leader, Öcalan. However, the prospect of an independent Kurdish statelet in northern Syria under the aegis of the PKK perturbed the Kurdo-phobic Turkey and the war in south-east Turkey resumed in earnest in mid-2015.²⁸ Ankara even intervened militarily in northern Syria in late August 2016 (Operation "Euphrates Shield") to prevent the establishment of a continuous Kurdish state in northern Syria²⁹.

In other words, the Syrian War spilled-over to Turkey as well. In fact, the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Turkey stand out as communicating vessels: the outcome of the conflicts in the above countries with the sizable Kurdish populations will undoubtedly shape the course of the Kurdish Question in the Middle East and redraw the map of the Fertile Crescent.

Spill-over in the World

Unlike other conflicts (e.g. the separatist Maoist insurgency in north-east India), the Syrian War set in motion certain phenomena with global and far-reaching implications.

A. Jihadist Terrorism

Similarly to the Afghan War (1979-1989) against the USSR, the Syrian War has grown into a seed-bed for jihadism. Indeed, the greatest jihadist groups in modern history (i.e. the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra) were born in the battlefields of Syria. Most notably, by December 2014 the Islamic State had acquired $\frac{1}{3}$ of Syria and Iraq by 2014 and expanded its activities and influence to Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, Libya and the Balkans – as well as the EU; indicatively of the vast human and material resources

²⁷ Robert Lowe: "The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria" in David Romano and Mehmet Gurses (eds.): *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds in the Middle East* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 225-248; Cale Salih: "Turkey, the Kurds and the Fight against the Islamic State" (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015).

²⁸ Ali Sarihan: "The Two Periods of the PKK Conflict: 1984-1999 and 2004-2010" in Fevzi Bilgin and Ali Sarihan: (eds.), *Understanding Turkey's Kurdish Question* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 89-102; Güneş Murat Tezcür: "The Ebb and Flow of Armed Conflict in Turkey: An Elusive Peace" in Romano and Gurses (eds.): *Conflict, Democratization*, pp. 171-178.

²⁹ Maximilian Popp and Christoph Reuter: "Turkish Invasion Highlights Rapidly Shifting Alliances", *Spiegel Online*, 26/8/2016.

at its disposal, the movement's total military forces exceed 25,000 men despite the devastating defeats in recent years in Iraq and Syria.³⁰

The jihadists and, most notably, the Islamic State draw support from two core sources: a) the Sunni (Arab) tribes in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan b) the second-generation Muslim immigrants in Europe and the West. The first group involves tribes who either oppose the rule of the Shia Arabs (Iraq, Syria and Yemen) or subscribe to an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam (Libya and Afghanistan)³¹; the second group encompasses the individuals that have been alienated by the Western values and ideals.³² Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, three Muslim-majority countries in the Balkans, form a unique category: the recent violent wars in Yugoslavia and the missionary zeal by Turkey and Saudi Arabia (the two champions of Sunni Islam) have led to the rapid spread of religiosity and extremism among the native Muslim populace.³³ The Islamic State fostered close ties with the local mafias that wield immense power in the post-communist Balkan countries.³⁴ Kosovo, which has been labelled a "mafia-state", now hosts the top operatives of the Islamic State in the Balkans.³⁵

The jihadists currently pose a serious threat to the security and stability of the West thanks to several developments: the almost inexhaustible pool of potential recruits (from the Middle East and the West), the easy access to weapons (primarily due to a vast black market), the effective use of new technologies (the internet and social media) for propaganda and recruitment, the substantial economic resources (primarily due to drug and human trafficking) and, finally, the informal cooperation between jihadist groups and the far-left terrorist or anarchist groups across the West.³⁶ Unsurprisingly, the West recently woke up to the new cycle of violence by jihadists. Since 2014 jihadist terrorists ("lone wolves" or members of a network)

³⁰ "ISIS's Financial and Military Capabilities" (Tel Aviv: Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2014); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross: "How Many Fighters Does the Islamic State Really Have?", *War on the Rocks*, 9/2/2015. Indicatively, nearly 6,000 Muslims from Europe joined the ranks of the Islamic State. "More than 6,000 European Jihadists in Syria, EU Official Says", *Telegraph*, 13/4/2015.

³¹ Charles R. Lister: *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

³² Over 20% of young Muslims in Britain and France (the two capital sources of jihadists in Syria and Iraq from Europe) support extreme Islamic ideologies. Robert S. Leiken: *Europe's Angry Muslims: The Revolt of the Second Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 261-269.

³³ Julian Borger: "ISIS Targets Vulnerable Bosnia for Recruitment and Attack", *Guardian*, 25/6/2015; Christos Tellides: "Kaçanik Scares the Balkans: A Village of Jihadists ... Two Hours from the Border", *Ethnos*, 30/8/2015

³⁴ In several post-communist Balkan countries such as Albania and Bulgaria, mafias control almost 30% of the economy and penetrate every security and state organ. Misha Glenny: "Criminal Gangs Running the Balkans", *BBC News*, 28/4/2011.

³⁵ Moisés Naim: "Mafia States: Organized Crime Takes Office", *Foreign Affairs*, 25/4/2012.

³⁶ Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker: *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2009), pp. 125-140; Spyridon Plakoudas: "Insurgency: The Orphaned Child of Strategy" (in Greek), *Joint Force Journal*, No. 30 (2015), p. 18.

have monopolised the terrorist trade in the West. The terrorist strikes in the EU were followed by a wave of attacks in the USA and elsewhere in the world against Westerners (e.g. in Thailand)³⁷.

B. Weapons of Mass Destruction

The wars accompanying the Arab Spring engulfed three countries that developed weapons of mass destruction: Iraq, Libya and Syria. The latter have declined into failed states due to the ferocious sectarian conflicts and, although Iraq does not currently possess any weapons of mass destruction, the fate of the stockpiles of Libya and Syria constitutes a distressing concern for the security of the Middle East and the world. Syria, in particular, stands out as a unique case since weapons of mass destruction (chemical gas) were used in the war.

In August 2013, the opposition accused al-Assad's army of attacking the Free Syrian Army and its civilian supporters in Ghouta with chemical gas. This attack, regarded as the deadliest use of chemical weapons since the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), shocked the world public opinion; the opposition and its allies (NATO, the Arab League and the EU) readily indicted al-Assad for this atrocity, whereas the allies of Assad (Russia and Iran) imputed the blame to the opposition. Tensions rose sharply and certain NATO member-states reflected on the possibility of intervention against al-Assad. Eventually, a US-led military intervention was averted when al-Assad accepted a joint Russo-American tender to deliver his chemical weapons to an external agency for destruction.³⁸ Syria complied and, in October 2013, started delivering its chemical weapons to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons; by August 2014, the chemical weapons of Syria had been destroyed aboard the US navy fleet.³⁹

C. Organised Crime

The conflicts in Libya, Iraq, Yemen and, above all, Syria opened Pandora's Box and, predictably, the organised crime in the Middle East and Europe thrives. The situation in the Near East and Syria resembles alarmingly the state of affairs in the Western Balkans during and after the Yugoslav Wars (1992-1995, 1999). Human trafficking, weapons smuggling, drug dealing and kidnappings for ransom occur at a vast

³⁷ Paul L. Moorcraft: *The Jihadist Threat: The Re-Conquest of the West?* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military, 2015); Andrew Watkins: "Losing Territory and Lashing Out: The Islamic State and International Terror" (Washington D.C.: Combating Terrorism Center, 2016).

³⁸ Eline Gordts: "Syria Will Sign Chemical Weapons Conventions, Declare Arsenal, Foreign Ministry Says", *Huffington Post*, 18/9/2013.

³⁹ Alan Rappeport: "Syria's Chemical Arsenal Fully Destroyed, US Says", *New York Times*, 18/8/2014.

scale in Syria – a country where many regions are currently ruled by warlords.⁴⁰ The effects of human trafficking would be soon felt in Europe.

The EU currently experiences a migration crisis of an unprecedented scale. In just two years (2014 and 2015), Europe has admitted over one million persons from the Middle East – the vast majority of whom Muslims. Although this figure may not appear high in a continent inhabited by 740 million people (508 million people within the EU), this number of immigrants can upset the sensitive demographic balances in the continent in a dramatic way. Europe still remains a mosaic of varied (and often rival and hostile) nation-states that share only one common trait: Christianity.⁴¹ Most of the nation-states in Europe enjoy an internal homogeneity in terms of race, religion and culture despite the fact that globalization, migration and multiculturalism have markedly eroded this uniformity.⁴² However, such internal homogeneity was not accomplished instantly or peacefully; rather, the homogeneity of the current European nation-states constitutes the outcome of a prolonged and, on many occasions, violent process.⁴³

Unsurprisingly, several member-states of the EU (most notably Britain) voiced their concerns that the recent flow of immigrants will simply increase the popularity of jihadism and crime rates within their sizable Muslim populations. Other countries, primarily in the southern and eastern fringes of the EU (e.g. Poland), worry that this flow could undo their racial, religious and cultural homogeneity – a uniformity achieved in many cases after World War II and with a fair measure of violence. Some EU countries with a long history of war and violence against Muslims (e.g. Hungary) even declared their preference for non-Muslim immigrants.

⁴⁰ Peter Apps: “Arab Spring Fallout Fuels Mediterranean Smuggling Rise”, *Reuters*, 8/11/2013; Neil Thompson: “A New Enemy: How Conflict in the Islamic World Is Driving International Organized Crime” (Zurich: International Relations and Security Network, 2015).

⁴¹ However, certain states in Europe share more than just common religion. Certain states share a common language (e.g. Austria and Germany), a common race (e.g. the Slavic countries in Central and Eastern Europe) and a common culture (e.g. Spain and Italy). In general, the countries of Europe once included under the Roman Empire share the following common characteristics: the Greco-Roman civilization, the Christian religion and an Indo-European ethnic origin.

⁴² Despite the allegations of several scholars that globalization and multiculturalism have signalled the irreversible decline of the nation-state as an institution in the international system, the nation-state has not yet died off as the creation of new nation-states at the dawn of the 21st century clearly demonstrate. Nilüfer K. Göksel: “Globalization and the State”, *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2004), pp. 3-7.

⁴³ The process of nation-building often involved radical top-down policies by the central state authorities to instill a uniform national identity to every citizen of the country. In Italy and France, for example, the central state authorities undertook vigorous campaigns to impose a linguistic uniformity throughout each country respectively since modern French and Italian were spoken by a minority of the population at the end of the 19th century. Eric C. Hobsbawm: *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). However, the creation of nation-states has been often accompanied by ethnic cleansing and genocide. Typical examples include the genocide of the minority Christian populations by the Turkish national movement during World War I and the Turkish War of Independence and, recently, the ethnic cleansing of Georgians by the Abkhazian separatist insurgents during the War in Abkhazia (1992-1993) Benjamin Lieberman: *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe* (Chicago: Ivan D. Ree, 2006).

Syria: The Powder-Keg of the Middle East and Beyond

Currently, the various factions in Syria are interlocked in a “bellum omnium contra omnes” (or a war of all against all): the Kurds, the Islamic State, the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian Arab Army, Iran, the Iraqi Shia militias (e.g. the Mahdi Army), other jihadists (e.g. Jabhat al-Nusra), the US-led international coalition, Turkey and Russia. The Syrian War, in effect, degenerated from an intra-state sectarian conflict into a “war by proxy” of a regional and even international scale. In fact, the rising tensions between the regional and international actors involved in this conflict threaten to plunge the Middle East into a total war of unimaginable destructiveness. The diplomatic crisis in August 2013 between Russia and the USA over al-Assad’s chemical weapons resembled the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 between Washington and Moscow – though far less severe than the one in the Cold War.

As former General David Petraeus pointedly stated: “Syria today is a geopolitical Chernobyl spewing instability and extremism over the region and around the world”⁴⁴. The Syrian War opened “Pandora’s Box” and transnational organised crime, transnational (jihadist) terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and migratory flows spread in the Middle East and, its neighbour, Europe at an alarming rate. Last but not least, several states adjacent to Syria (Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey) currently witness internal conflicts since the Syrian War inescapably spilled over to them. Therefore, an end to the Syrian War will not only avert a regional war (and even an international crisis) but also drastically curtail the asymmetrical threats to the national security of the countries in the Middle East and Europe.

⁴⁴ Laeigh Sales: “Syria is ‘a geopolitical Chernobyl’ says former US army chief”, *ABC News*, 5/9/2015