The Syrian conflict affects us profoundly: the images of destruction, the arrival of refugees, and, more recently, terrorist attacks which are the result of the deterioration of a situation which has been going on for over five years now.

We are therefore in need of understanding.

Journalists and university scholars, connaisseurs of the country, we wish to explore the situation further than media accounts which are sometimes misleading. We propose here to decipher the conflict, its causes, its phases and its protagonists. In short, we intend to provide some clear responses to legitimate questioning.

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The Syrian conflict for dummies  —  Bibliography

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Introduction

The need to understand the Syrian conflict is even more imperative since it has extended to Europe and is affecting us profoundly. The shock of the attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015, terrorist actions elsewhere and the growing flow of refugees towards Europe, bring us dramatically closer to this distant tragedy.

“Take a moment to learn” is what we propose here. We try to provide some answers, as simplified as possible, without being simplistic, by reviewing the different phases of this conflict which has continuously expanded and intensified over the past five years and by discussing frequently asked questions (FAQ) on the causes, nature, actors, stakes and possible outcomes.

“Recall, explain, and decipher” the facts, the dimensions and the stakes involved in the events which have occurred over the past five years in and around Syria is the objective of our initiative. To do so, we refer to dates, figures and information which have been verified and compared with many of the most reliable sources. We have grouped the questions in themes in order to facilitate the account of the events and their clarification.

Who are we? Syrian, French and Franco-Syrian journalists and university scholars who have closely followed the events in Syria and the region for many years. Without pretending to be neutral, we privilege an objective approach to the realities of the situation and we assume with lucidity our support to democracy for all Syrians.
I. From revolution to civil war
Brief reminder: Syria before 2011

The country has a population of 23 million and a surface area of 185,000 square kilometers. The current borders were fixed after World War I, when the French and the British obtained the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire by the San Remo Agreement in 1920. Under French mandate until 1946, independent Syria then alternated short periods of democracy marked with military coups d’état. The one of the Baath party in 1963 founded the current regime. In 1970, Hafez Al-Assad, Bachar’s father, seized power by a military putsch, got rid of all his adversaries and established a repressive dictatorship. Upon his death in 2000, the country’s constitution was modified to allow his son to succeed him. After a short period of détente and liberalization, mostly economic, Assad tightened up the regime, recreating an authoritarian system around a clan of family and military, both corrupt and profiteering.

How did it all start? How did this come to happen?

The contagious protest incited by the revolutions of the “Arab Spring” in the beginning of 2011 reached Syria in March, following Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrein and Yemen. The Syrians acclaimed the overthrow of Ben Ali and Moubarak. Like other Arab peoples, they also wanted to express their aspiration for change, to reclaim “liberty, justice and dignity” – the first watchwords of the Syrian revolution.

Why did the Syrian people protest?

The Syrians had many legitimate reasons to revolt against the tyrannical and corrupt government which had been imposed on them for over 40 years. When the Ba’ath party took power definitively in Syria, General De Gaulle was president of France! Democracy allowed the implementation of many reforms in France since that time. But in Syria no such evolution occurred. There comes a time when the exasperation of a people surpasses their fear. In 2011, that exasperation was at its
peak. Only the bourgeoisie of those cities close to the regime had benefited from the economic advancement it so bragged about – and so greatly exaggerated. The lavish lifestyle of the clan in power was scandalously exhibited. Corruption was widespread. A large part of the population was in great difficulty. The economic liberalization of the 80’s failed to privilege private economic activity or to create employment. The number of those unemployed and disadvantaged grew. Many young people, even those highly qualified, felt they had no future. The stifling and oppressive regime deprived individuals of their rights and prevented any kind of initiative. In the countryside, the population was also smitten by drought from 2006 to 2010, increasing prices and forcing 1.5 million people to flee to the suburbs of the larger cities. All the conditions for an explosion were reunited. Only the spark was missing.

What has ignited the fire?

In March 2011, some young students, adolescents at the age of transgression, wrote on the walls of the city of Deraa in the South of the country the slogan which they heard people shouting in all Arab streets: “The people want the fall of the regime”. The youngsters were arrested by security forces and tortured. After this act, demonstrations spread across the country by capillarity. Hundreds of thousands of peaceful demonstrators reclaimed democracy and the end of corruption. The forces of the regime responded systematically by firing on the crowds, killing and wounding people. At the same time, some young activists and other civilians were arrested and disappeared in regime prisons. The repression was more violent each day, provoking new demonstrations and demands for reforms. The cycle protest/repression continued for months. At the end of 2011, the UN had already announced 5,000 victims.

The protestors took up arms. Wasn’t that a crazy decision?

“Militarizing” the revolution was a very controversial turning point, even among members of the Syrian opposition. It began with the simple logic of protecting protestors from the bullets of the regime. Civilians began to take up arms to protect their districts and villages against the acts of the
army and the security forces. In addition, some army soldiers refused to fire on their fellow citizens. Some were executed by their superiors while others had no choice but to desert. On the 31st of July 2011, a group of officers who had deserted and fled to Turkey announced the creation of the Free Syrian Army and called other soldiers to join them. They had light weapons that they had brought with them and no other intentions but to defend the protestors. The Syrian army then replaced guns by canons. In February 2012, with the direct entry of the army into the cities, the militarization of the conflict intensified.

Then was it more of a civil war than a revolution?

This is a controversial question. It all depends on the definitions used. If we cannot refer to a popular uprising seeking to put an end to a dictatorship by overthrowing a dynasty in power for over 40 years as a “revolution”, then the word has no sense. Some say that the revolution evolved into an “armed insurrection”. Others consider that when there is an armed confrontation between forces of the same country on the same territory, one should speak of “civil war”. Battles between Syrians multiply as the number of deserters and armed civilians increase. These are of course unsymmetrical combats between the Syrian army with its tanks, its canons and its aviation and rebels armed with machine guns and occasionally rocket launchers. However, for others, the Syrian conflict has become a war against civilians, because of all the crimes committed by the regime and its allies.

Isn’t there also a confessional dimension to the conflict?

In fact there is. The Assad family belongs to the Alawite community, which represents about 10% of the Syrian population, but is heavily present in the army and security services. The demographer Youssef Courbage refers to a “a politically dominant demographic minority”.

The Sunni majority of the population (72%) resents political and military domination by a minority group, which denies them access to any
position of responsibility.

It is true that Alawites who are outside the inner ruling circle of Assad’s regime or who are critical of the regime suffer the same coercion as the members of other communities. The regime has tried to co-opt Sunni and Christian personalities. Community confrontation was exacerbated by the regime as well as by certain elements of the opposition, but especially by the intervention of regional alliances (see below).

How did the government lose control of parts of the territory?

As the revolt spread across the entire country and soldiers continued to desert, the regime no longer had sufficient troops to maintain its power everywhere. Its priority was then to prevent insurrection in the large cities by imposing a powerful security network. Thus, in Damascus, first manifestations were called “flying manifestations” because they would disappear very quickly before repression took place. It is mainly rural and semi-rural zones where groups of armed rebels were formed locally, which escape the control of the regime. A turning point occurred in 2012 when the brigades of the Free Syrian Army took over most of the working class districts of Aleppo, the second largest city and economic capital of the country. The regular army surrendered under the pressure of the rebel offensive, and also withdrew from large regions in the Northwest, around Aleppo and Idleb. The taking of several posts on the Turkish border by the Free Syrian Army facilitated access for the rebels to men and to arms and also the arrival of the first foreign soldiers. The zones “liberated” from the control of the regime are administered by the local population who created “Civil councils” to manage daily affairs. These zones are bombed daily by army aviation, provoking large destruction, but above all the departure of tens of thousands of refugees.

We’re a long way from the movement of 2011!

Yes and no. Yes, because on the ground, the Free Syrian Army, which best represented the rebellion, has lost a great deal of territory and the
other rebel movements have little or no democratic vocabulary. No, because the ideals of 2011 and part of those who shared them are still present. The insurgents who wish only to overthrow the dictatorship and allow the Syrian people to choose the government they want for their country are numerous. The civilian population remains active through diverse projects of organisation and resistance in the zones held by rebels. The young and less young who participated in the protest of 2011 are involved in these projects, or in any case those who are still there, because many have left the country because of the violence of which they were the target. Many others have been arrested, imprisoned, tortured or executed.

bbc.com – Syria: The story of the conflict

On the ground: Who’s fighting who? Who controls what?

The 4 principal forces on the ground

Daech and Kurdish forces have gradually joined the two initial actors in the conflict, the regime and the opposition, each with its own agenda.

1. **Governmental and forces loyal to the Assad regime** today include militia and other armed foreign groups in addition to the regular army. In continuous erosion, they control a little less than a third of the Syrian territory, essentially in the western part of the country, from Damascus, the capital, to Latakia, including the coastal zone and the major cities of Homs, Hama and half of Aleppo. This zone is the greater part of what some refer to as “Useful Syria” which gives the regime some territorial continuity. State agencies continue to function almost normally here where the population is spared from bombings, because the opposition forces have neither the will nor the means to attack. The pro-regime troops combat the different rebel forces on the ground, but mostly in the air, where they are clearly unchallenged. Their helicopters drop barrels of explosives daily on rebel controlled zones, causing many civilian casualties. The army of the regime also claims to combat Daech, but in reality these recent and much less frequent attacks, are conducted with much less determination and efficiency than those waged against Syrian
I. From revolution to civil war

2. The army of the Syrian opposition, first called the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and also called the “rebellion” or the “insurgents”, has never succeeded in constituting a centralized and coordinated force. Today it is composed of different groups and local brigades, originally formed by civilians who took up arms. Heavily dependent on outside aid for support and equipment, little by little the army became dominated by fundamentalists, that are more or less radical. Funding from governments and private sponsors of the Gulf countries largely contributed to this islamization. The brigades adopted Islamic denominations – in most cases without real conviction – in order to have access to this manna. With its limited means, ASL loses fighters who join Islamist brigades who can equip them and provide them with a stipend to support their families. ASL waited in vain for help from the West which would have helped considerably in preventing the radicalization of many soldiers.

After having controlled the greater part of the country until 2014, the opposition army has retreated continually since the Russian intervention in Autumn of 2015. After its loss of Aleppo in 2016, the opposition army is essentially present in the region of Idlib, in northwestern Syria along the Turkish border, and continues to control certain zones around the principal cities: the outskirts of Damascus, Hama, Latakia et Deraa in the South. Regularly bombed by the regime, these zones are particularly targeted by the Russian army since September 2015, leading a large part of their population to flee towards the interior or outside the country.

3. The Islamic State or Daech (its Arabic acronym). Present from the Spring of 2013, this formidable formation is composed of members who are 80% non-syrian, radical jihadists coming from all over the world. Its objectives are completely different from those of Syrian insurgents opposed to the regime of Bachar Al-Assad. In June 2014, Daech proclaimed a “Caliphate” covering a large part of Syrian and Iraqi territory. The Islamic State controls all eastern Syria near the Iraqi border, which is the cradle and the headquarters of the movement. It has established itself by force and terror, pushing out the Syrian opposition forces, and subjecting the local population to its rules by committing atrocities. Since summer 2014, Daech is attacked by air raids of the international coalition led by the United States, and since autumn 2015 by Russian, French and British air forces as well. On the defensive, Daech has perpetrated worldwide bloody and spectacular terrorist actions, particularly in France, but also in Tunisia, Egypt, etc… (see
4. **Kurdish Syrian Forces** control the zone in the Northwest at the Turkish border, occupied mainly by Syrian Kurds. Their military forces are composed of local combatants, members of the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the Syrian branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), the Turkish Kurdish party of Communist origin. In the summer of 2012, the withdrawal of the regime from Kurdish enclaves – the three cantons of Qamischli, Kobanî and Afrin – benefitted the PYD. These Kurdish forces struggle to regain their territory and autonomy, and are not considered as opponents to the Syrian regime. This PYD card is also used by the regime to weaken the CNK (Kurdish National Council) which works in cooperation with the Syrian opposition united in the Syrian National Coalition. However, at the opposition conference held in Riyadh on December 10, 2015, the Syrian National Coalition objected to the presence of the PYD, considering that its attitude was ambiguous, arguing that it was not fighting the regime and was opposed to the rebel groups. With the evolution of the conflict, the Kurds found themselves in the front line in the fight against IS in northern Syria. They led the great battle to defend and reclaim the city of Kobani. This action was made possible largely with the help of the international coalition who perpetrated air raids against Daech and armed the Kurdish forces, much to the chagrin of Ankara. In June 2015, Kurdish forces together with the brigades of the Free Syrian Army succeeded in ousting the Islamic State from the city and the region of Tall Abyad near the Turkish border.
On the political chessboard: understanding who is disputing Syria

Each of the three main actors – the regime, the opposition and Daech – projects total victory and thus the total defeat of the other two. This is the main explanation for the duration of the conflict in Syria.

1. The regime in Damascus

Is Bachar Al-Assad a modern secular leader, and a defender of minority groups?

Bachar Al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000. Thus, Syria and North Korea are the world’s only “hereditary republics”. The country is referred to as a “republican monarchy”. A medical doctor, Assad has no beard and speaks English: in short, he resembles us.

In reality, since he came to power, Bachar Al-Assad and his wife present an image calculated to seduce the West: that of a modern, civilized and occidentalized couple (they met in London where he studied ophthalmology). Bachar Al-Assad transforms each appearance in the media into an advertising campaign. This operation was successful for a long time with leaders and public opinion in the West.

As for his “secularity”, that would imply that democracy is not a prerequisite to secularism. Like his father before him, Bachar Al-Assad understood that he could benefit from the rise of fundamentalism by presenting himself as a rampart against it.

But the diverse communities which make up the Syrian population lived together in harmony before the arrival of the Assads. The Assad clan also recognized the potential of using the Palestinian cause to secure their own survival. They proclaim support to the Palestinian cause, although they did not hesitate to violently combat Palestinian groups in Lebanon in the 1980’s and in Syria during the Revolution, notably in the
camp of Yarmouk.

la-croix.com – Le régime de Bachar Al Assad protège-t-il vraiment les chrétiens ?
tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/rue89 – Assad et Daesh unis contre les Palestiniens de Damas

…Or a dictator and war criminal?

The Syrian president is responsible for the violence committed by his army, which led to the destruction of most of Syria, the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians and the displacement of millions of Syrians outside and inside the country. Moreover, the list of abuses and crimes committed by the military regime against the Syrian people has continued to lengthen since the beginning of the conflict. The massive use of prohibited weapons against the civilian population, including the gas used in the attack near Damascus in the summer of 2013, the disappearance or murder by torture of thousands of prisoners, are the most obvious examples. Like Stalin before him, Assad also organizes mass starvation, besieging cities that resist him. War crimes recognized and documented in reports by respected international human rights organizations and instructed by international prosecutors make Bashar Al-Assad eligible for trial in the International Criminal Court.

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What does the regime of Bashar al-Assad want?

To maintain absolute power at any cost is the consistent position of the Syrian regime since the beginning of the crisis in 2011. After 40 years as the head of a suppressive security system and a family clan monopolizing all the political and economic resources of the country, Bashar al-Assad refuses to give an inch. He has continuously rejected every reform reclaimed by the population since the beginning of the revolution, by responding with fierce and systematic repression. Calling all opponents “terrorists”, he allowed the use of all means to oppose the
protesters, especially the Democratic opponents whom he fears most. Today, the regime continues to reject any political compromise (see below).

**How has he been able to resist for five years?**

The escalation of military repression is the principal means of survival of the regime, which has stopped at nothing. The regime also instrumentalizes minority concerns and fears, enabling it to control individual groups, especially the Alawites, who, fearing for their future, have become hostages. It foments fear in the Western powers concerning the fate of Christians in Syria after Assad. However, the essential factor has been the support of its key allies, Iran and Russia, who have provided the regime with quantities of men, weapons and equipment, intervened directly in the field and supported it diplomatically in before the UN (see below).

**Can the Assad regime regain legitimacy?**

It seems difficult considering all that we just mentioned. For most of the Syrian population, who suffers the consequences of indiscriminate bombing and who has lost everything, it is impossible to accept to be governed by this regime once again.
2. The political opposition

It seems as if nobody could constitute an alternative force.

The non-emergence in Syria of a coherent and clearly identifiable political opposition is an essential problem which has prolonged the conflict. Even though they constitute a majority of the population and of those who have left the country, Syrians who demand the fall of the Assad regime have yet failed to form a representative and united political front, with a clear and realistic strategy. This weakness is primarily the result of over 40 years of dictatorship under which freedom of expression and all political activity was forbidden. The fact that the members of all the factions of the Syrian opposition lack experience and knowledge of politics has proven to be a very serious handicap, considering that the complexity of the crisis requires exceptional political, diplomatic and
strategic skills. The lack of support from the potential allies of the opposition and the determination of the allies of the regime add to the difficulties.

**The opposition is divided**

This argument is often brandished by Assad’s regime, his allies and supporters to minimize or discredit the opposition. Indeed, the opposition, like the French resistance in 1940, includes as many young protesters from the first hours of the revolution as politicians and political groups in exile. It is composed of a wide range of trends and political movements, from the Muslim Brotherhood to secular democrats as well as liberals and communists. It is a plural opposition and this is a democratic feature of it. The geographical dispersion and especially the stakes involved explain the divisions and the different approaches. However all of them are committed to a short term objective which is political transition in Syria.

...And it is under foreign influence

This is the theory of the Syrian regime. Since the first days of the revolt, the government denounced a conspiracy, accusing “terrorists, extremists working for foreign powers.” The claim that Gulf and Western countries were behind the protesters was unfounded: there was no need for foreigners: the explosion in Syria, as we have seen, was for internal reasons. With the militarization of the conflict, weapons started to arrived from abroad, first through Lebanon and then via Turkey. Financial support for insurgent groups gained momentum beginning in 2012, coming from private Syrian and Arab sources, followed by the arrival of private funds from fundamentalist groups in the Gulf countries. The opposition found itself increasingly dependent on these countries because it had been abandoned by the rest of the world. The group “Friends of the Syrian People”, which counts more than one hundred Arab, Western and other countries has continuously failed to meet its obligations. Promises of political, military and even humanitarian support have seldom been kept.

**The main constituents of the opposition:**

- **An official group: the National Coalition** for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, created in November 2012, reunites most opposition movements and personalities. All Syrian
regions, communities and political movements are represented. Its objective is the overthrow of the Assad regime and the establishment of a secular democracy. It is recognized as legitimate and the main representative of the Syrian opposition by several Arab and Western countries and the UN.

- **The provisional government**, set up by the Coalition in 2014. It manages the affairs of Syrians in exile or living in territories no longer controlled by the regime, notably concerning matters of health and education. Its agencies and services are based in Turkey.

- **Other small groups**, which are not part of the Coalition, represent various trends. The most important among them is the National Coordination Committee which brings together intellectuals inside and outside Syria. Some of its members have been arrested. Other intellectuals and influential personalities have also created different minority parties or opposition movements.

- **The “High Negotiation Committee”, a new group**, was formed in December 2015 at a meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in preparation for peace talks planned under the auspices of the UN. It brings together a hundred delegates representing all the formations and above-mentioned groups, fighting forces on the ground, as well as independent opposition figures. An agreement was reached to create a platform to negotiate with the representatives of the regime the plan for a political transition put forward by the Vienna agreements (see, below). The final statement states that the participants “are ready to enter into negotiations with representatives of the regime based on the “Geneva 1” agreement that is to say on the principle of a political transition. The departure of the Syrian president is no longer a prerequisite, though it is noted that it should intervene early in the transition.

**Meanwhile, a whole population in resistance**

Of course, the overwhelming majority of those Syrians mobilized to replace the dictatorship of Bashar Al-Assad by a democratic system are not part of any of the political structures of the opposition. Some are passive but others are actively engaged on the ground, working with the civilian population in a variety of ways to try to bring about the advent of a new Syria.
Civil society associations and organisations: thousands of such organizations exist inside and outside the country. They have different sizes, objectives and fields of competence. Medical organizations set up by expatriate and resident Syrian doctors do a tremendous job in often dramatic conditions, treating the wounded and setting up public health services in areas outside government control. Many groups founded by women and young people intervene through humanitarian and educational programs and increasingly by the creation of micro-economic projects aimed at helping families to survive. All these informal initiatives demonstrate the vitality and resilience of Syrian civil society.

The Syrian White Helmets: a Syrian model of peaceful management. This civil defense organization, created in response to the bombing, including the use of explosive barrels by the regime, extracts the victims from the rubble and administers first aid. First incorporated in Idlib, today this organization is present on 117 sites. Its members have saved 35,000 wounded, often risking their lives: 106 white helmets have been killed since the inception of the organization.

Local councils: In most districts and villages situated in territories controlled by the opposition, residents have set up civilian councils to manage everyday life: municipal services, justice, health, aid distribution. Some have inaugurated unprecedented democratic practices organizing elections and collective decision-making systems.

Intellectuals: it is important to highlight the fact that the majority of the dynamic forces of the country – young people, intellectuals, writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, etc., those who contribute to the creativity of a nation and its hopes for the future – have supported the opposition. They chose to freely express their creativity and their opinions through their literary or artistic works, which is why there has been a tremendous development of artistic creativity of all kinds since the beginning of the revolution. Many of these intellectuals have since had to leave the country because of fierce repression. France has welcomed a number of them.

3. The emergence and development of Daech

Daech (the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant),
finds its origins in the Islamic State in Iraq in 2006, following the American intervention in Iraq in 2003. At that time, ISIL was the representative of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia.

In April 2013, Al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), announced – a little too hastily – the fusion of Jabhat al Nusra group (JaN) and ISI to establish the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The next day, JaN denied the decision and confirmed its allegiance to Al Qaeda, while ISIL, Baghdadi’s faction, separated and renounced Al Qaeda. The two groups are now adversaries and sometimes confront each other directly.

The following month, ISIL took control of Raqqa, the first major city liberated by Syrian armed opposition to the regime. It was clear that this group, mainly composed of non-Syrians (75% of its combatants are foreigners), had a different agenda than that of resistance to the Assad regime. The Jihadists are immediately rejected by local populations because of their radical ideology, which they impose with brutality. In January 2014, the revolutionary groups succeeded in driving ISIL out of the regions of Aleppo and Idlib and into the northwestern region of Syria. The Jihadi troops group together in Raqqa, eliminating other opposition forces in the city and the surrounding region.

In June 2014, the IS launched a massive offensive, taking control of large territories in Syria and Iraq, including Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city. The IS met with little resistance on the part of the Iraqi army, and laid hands on important quantities of modern military equipment which the poorly trained and weakly motivated Iraqi soldiers had received from the Americans. Daech also seized the contents of the banks in Mosul and the region’s oil wells.

Thus, at this point, the IS is doted with state of the art military equipment, massive funds and resources. During the June offensive, the IS occupied Syrian territories along the Iraqi border, notably the oil-rich region of Deir-ez-Zor. Thus endowed, on June 29, Daech proclaims the re-establishment of the “Caliphate”, to which it exhorts the world’s Muslims to pledge allegiance. Raqqa becomes the capital of this territory the size of Great Britain, straddling Syria and Iraq. The IS imposes its laws on the populations it controls by acts of violence and terror. A large number of Syrians from these regions flee their towns and cities to seek refuge, mainly in southern Turkey.
In August 2014, confronted by the risk of losing Bagdad to the Jihadists, a coalition directed by the United States, of which France is a member, intervenes by bombing the positions of the IS in Iraq and then in Syria (beginning of September 23). This military action succeeds in curbing the phenomenon. However despite the loss of part of its territories, in May 2015 Daech leads a devastating offensive against the city of Palmira without encountering any bombing from either the international coalition or the regime. The IS enters the city with no resistance from the forces of the Syrian army. In fact, these forces had already abandoned the antique city: Palmira was practically an “open city”. The story of the strange siege of Palmira, taken without a struggle, is yet to be written. The city was taken back from the Jihadists in March 2016, by virtue of a Russian offensive where the forces of the regime, bled dry, put up little of a fight.

In Iraq, in October 17, 2016, an important battle to take back Mosul is launched. The Iraqi forces, trained by the coalition, play an important role. The aviation of the coalition also participates. By the beginning of November, the villages surrounding the city are liberated. In the beginning of February Western Mosul is taken but progression in the old city is slow and very difficult. Europe, and notably France, insists that the liberation of Raqqa in Syria be part of the campaign in order to block the route of Jihadists fleeing Mosul. This action is led on the ground by an arabo-kurdish force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), made up of combatants close to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and a minority of arab rebel groups. The campaign is announced on November 6. 30,000 men are mobilized. The day after his election, Donald Trump announced his intention to take back Raqqa with the support of the Kurdish forces of the PYD and their Arab allies.

The coalition covers this battle by bombarding. Several errors result in the death of civilians and combatants of the FDS. Combats raged around the Tabqa dam on the Euphrates. The bombing by the coalition raised fears of a disaster if the dam should burst and flood the Euphrates valley inhabited by tens of thousands of Syrians. On April 24, 2017, the arabo-kurdish forces, covered by the raids of the coalition, enter Tabqa, a strategic point 55 kilometers west of Raqqa, the capital of IS in Syria. The jihadists are cornered.

In the case of Mosul, as in that of Raqqa, the question of defining a political strategy for the period after Daech was not raised. Who will occupy the territories taken from Daech?
The question is all the more crucial considering that the IS sends its emissaries to commit terrorist acts in Europe.

France has been particularly hit hard: several attacks between the 7 and the 9 of January 2015 in Paris and its suburbs cause 17 deaths; those of the 13 of November of the same year 130 more. The terrorist action in Nice on July 14, 2016 takes a toll of 86, followed by the bloody murder of the priest of the church of Saint Etienne de Vouvray in Normandy on July 26 and the murder of a policeman on the Champs Elysées in April 2017. All these attacks were claimed by the IS, except that against the journalists of *Charlie Hebdo*, which was claimed by a branch of Al Qaeda in Yemen. Deach also claimed the attack at the Brussels airport on March 22, 2016 which took 35 lives, the attack on the Christmas market in Berlin on December 19 where 12 persons died and a shooting in a discothèque in Istanbul on January 1 where 39 people were killed. In addition to these tragedies there are sporadic aggressions which are the response to Daech’s call to kill all infidels by any available means – rocks, knives…

The United States has not been spared. Killings took place in San Bernardino, California in December 2015 and in Orlando, Florida in June 2016. Five continents are hit as the IS progressively extends its battlefield. It has at its disposition very active local groups.

These attacks are at the heart of the Syrian conflict, because it is in Syria that this group, which originated in Iraq, was able to develop, benefitting from the pervading chaos.

Remember that the Syrian regime encouraged this strategy in 2011 and 2012 by liberating many islamists who had been imprisoned by the security forces. Many radical groups such as El-Nosra were formed by these ex-prisoners, some of whom later joined Daech.

It is also to Syria that young Europeans flee, seduced by the idea of the Jihad and extreme violence. It is in Raqqa that the IS prepared its offensive on Mosul as well as its attacks in Europe. With its expansion, it secured the allegiance of diverse local groups: in the Maghreb, notably in Libya, where the reigning chaos serves the most violent strategies, and in other African countries. We can therefore deduce that the best way to combat the IS is by finding a solution to the Syrian crisis.
4. The Syrian Kurds

As non-Arabs, the Kurds have been persecuted and discriminated by the Syrian regime for decades. Under Bachar Al-Assad, explosions of discontent in Kurdish regions, like in Qamichii in 2004, were violently repressed. At the beginning of the revolution, the regime granted the Kurds rights that they had been refused in the past, in order to prevent them from joining the insurrection. The regime also eliminated Kurdish dissident leaders like Mechaal Tamo, assassinated in October 2011. As a result, although part of the Kurdish community joined the revolution, in majoritarily Kurdish regions, like Jazira, the Kurds compromised with the regime.

The veritable entry of the Kurds in the Syrian conflict began with the battle of Kobanî, where the YPG – the military branch of the PYD, the Syrian equivalent of the PKK in Turkey – led a spectacular combat against Daech (September 2014 – June 2015): this battle was the object of heavy media coverage and reinforced the positive image of the Kurds in the West. The victory of the Kurds at Kobanî has two consequences:

The first is that the Kurds of the PYD were thereafter determined to create a Kurdish state (the “Rojava”) in Syria, at the Turkish border, reuniting what is traditionally referred to as the three “Kurdish cantons” (Jazira in the Northeast, Kobanî and Afrin in the region of Aleppo).

The second is that the Americans were henceforth convinced that the members of the YPG were indispensable in the war against the Islamic State, despite the fact that the PKK is considered as a terrorist organization by Washington. In order to take over territories conquered by Daech in Syria, the Americans strongly advocated the formation of the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Forces, bringing together the YPG and other armed Arab groups hostile to Daech and the Syrian regime. Today, the SDF are at the center of the Western strategy to take over Raqqa, the Syrian capital of Daech.

The role accorded to the Kurds by the Americans is problematic. In the region of Aleppo, unities of the YPG armed by the Pentagon have been known to combat armed rebel groups trained and armed by the CIA. Also, Turkey is concerned by the growing influence of the YPG, which it considers to be a branch of the PKK. Lastly, Kurdish factions close to the PKK are accused by the rebels of complicity with the regime.
In November 2016, the Kurdish forces of the YPG, took advantage of the weakness of rebel forces who were submitted to Russian bombardments and regime forces’ military fire. They occupied some sectors that the rebels held, especially in districts of Aleppo. These areas are not traditionally Kurdish. Thus, in this battle of Aleppo, the YPG brigades were very clearly allied with the Syrian regime and its allies against the rebels. The eastern part of the city of Aleppo, which was held by the insurgents since August 2011 fell to the regime and its allies in mid-December.

In fact, the relations between the PKK, or the PYD for its Syrian wing, with the Syrian regime have always been most ambiguous. The movement of Abdullah Öcalan had been long protected by Hafez Al-Assad. It was finally driven out of Syria in 1998, following Turkish threats. However, communication channels have never been totally interrupted. The PKK or PYD was allowed to return gradually into Syria since the Summer of 2011 in “Kurdish” territories, where it is becoming progressively dominant, by force if necessary. Many Kurds, who were trying to join the rebellion against the regime – some were members of the rebel brigades – were forced to cease all anti-Assad activities.

Henceforth, in the absence of cooperation, a certain neutrality is the most that can be expected of the Kurds. In the last battle of Aleppo, the support of the regime of Damascus by the PYD military brigades was very obvious indeed.
II. From civil war to regional confrontation
Following the initial legitimate demands of the Syrian people, the conflict took on the regional and international dimensions of a long term conflict.

Are neighboring countries destabilized by the Syrian situation?

Yes, of course, because of the number of Syrian refugees* who are now in Turkey (2,973,980), Lebanon (1,011,366), Jordan (658,015), Iraq (236,772) and, to a lesser extent, in Egypt (120,154).

The situation is different in each county. Turkey and Jordan organized the reception of refugees in camps near the Syrian border** while in Lebanon, the growing numbers of refugees have led the Lebanese authorities to take measures making it very difficult for Syrians to enter the country.

While Lebanon and Jordan apply a policy of reserve, Turkey has been very implicated in the Syrian crisis and assumes an assertive policy.

Countries bordering Syria have taken over the mass of refugees with heavy consequences on their societies and economies, while the European countries have largely closed their doors, allowing entry to only small numbers of refugees. Countries of the European Union have thus accepted only 884,461 refugees between March 2011 and October 2016, of which France only 14,265.

* UNHCR figures for April 2017

*Statistics UNHCR April 2017

** It must be noted that today the majority of Syrian refugees in Turkey live in cities and not in camps. This is increasingly probably becoming the case in Lebanon also.
Which countries support the regime of Bashar Al-Assad?

Since the beginning of the revolution, Iran has given unfailing political, financial, diplomatic and military support to the regime because Tehran wants to avoid, at all costs, the establishment in Damascus of a Sunni government eventually backed by the Gulf oil-monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia.

For Iran, it is important to have this strategic continuity between Tehran / Baghdad / Damascus/ Hezbollah. That is why we speak of the “Shiite axis” versus the “Sunni axis” formed by Riyadh, Cairo and Ankara with the oil-monarchies of the Gulf.

On the ground, the Iranian presence is composed of several hundred advisors and paramilitaries and also the Al-Quds force. In December 2013, after an escalation with the perspective of the Geneva II negotiations, the Iranian presence in Syria was estimated at 10,000 (see this article). In 2015, Syrian security sources revealed that 7,000 to 10,000 soldiers from the Al-Quds brigade alone had been deployed around Damascus to protect it after the takeover of Palmyra by the IS.

Originally an actor in the field, Iran has progressively become a diplomatic actor. The important turning point was the signature of the Iranian nuclear agreement on July 14, 2015 because all Washington’s efforts were concentrated on achieving this agreement which was a priority for Barack Obama. Some observers believe that in August 2013, the American presidency renounced a possible intervention in Syria so as not to hinder the discussions with the Iranians.

Until then, the Iranians had been marginalized in the first round of negotiations for a peaceful solution to the conflict. The diplomatic appeasement of July 14, 2015 reintroduced Iran into the game. It was necessary to integrate Iran into diplomatic negotiations; but it was probably not sufficient.

“The Shiite jihadists, the other threat to the future of Syria and the Syrians (3/3)”

In addition to the Iranian forces, many Shia militias (Iraqi, Lebanese, Afghan, Pakistani …) came to fight in Syria on behalf of the regime. The
Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah supported by Tehran has been involved in the conflict alongside Al-Assad’s forces for a long time. On June 5, 2013, it officially entered Syrian territory and took over the border town of Qusayr from the insurgents, avoiding a defeat for the regime that might have been the prelude to its collapse. Lebanese Hezbollah troops in Syria have between 5,000 and 8,000 fighters. The Syrian regime can also count on Iraqi Shia militia (about 80), which are said to have from 20 to 25,000 combatants, and the list goes on… (see the synthesis of Jean-Pierre Perrin).

These forces support a feeble, dilapidated and disunited army, with dissention in its ranks concerning military objectives or the strategy to be adopted. They have repeatedly allowed the regime to avoid collapse. They were on the front line during the takeover of Aleppo in December.

(“These foreign militias who reconquered Syria for Bashar al-Assad“).

Which countries support the opposition?

Turkey has a major role in the Syrian conflict. First of all for geographic reasons, since it shares around 900 kilometers of borders with Syria. Turkey is the principal destination for refugees who have fled bombings throughout the years of conflict. All goods, medical and humanitarian aid as well as arms in direction of northern Syria pass by this border. Southern Turkey is the rear base for both international humanitarian organizations working in Syria and the Syrian political and military opposition. But the Turkish government has also been accused of a lax attitude towards jihadists, letting troops and weapons enter into Syria.

Turkey has also been a leading political actor at various stages of the Syrian conflict. In March 2011 when the Syrian regime repressed pacific demonstrations, it tried to mediate in order to convince Bashar Al-Assad to implement the few reforms demanded by the demonstrators. When he refused to do so, and because of the persistent repression, the Turkish government openly took a stand against the regime and supported the opposition, welcoming its first meetings and all of its institutions and organizations.

As a member of NATO and because of its good relations with the Gulf
Arab countries, Turkey has long reclaimed a more assertive Western involvement in Syria. In particular, it called for the establishment of no-fly zones in northern Syria to protect the population from bombing and to contain the rush of refugees across the border. However, concerning this point and others, disagreements between Turkey, the European Union and the United States have continued to increase.

The Turkish position evolved as the regime of Erdogan hardened. The attempted coup d’état in July 2016 changed Erdogan’s priorities. Moving closer to the Russians, he has considerably attenuated his opposition towards the Syrian regime. An agreement concluded with Putin in the Summer of 2016 allows Turkish forces to conduct a military operation to drive Daech off of the Turko-Syrian border. The operation “Shield of the Euphrates” led by the Turkish army and armed Syrian opposition groups resulted in the liberation of the cities of Jarablus and then of Al-Bab in northern Syria, completely eliminating Daech from the region.

This Turkish military operation also aimed at preventing the Syrian Kurds from taking over that portion of territory that would have enabled them to achieve a continuity of their autonomous territory along the Turkish-Syrian border. The Kurdish factor is indeed the major guide of Turkey’s policy. The Turkish government fears that the autonomization of Syrian Kurdistan will reactivate the tensions within its borders. Regarding this point, Western countries offer Turkey no garanties.

Like Turkey, the Gulf’s oil-monarchies quickly took a stand against the Syrian regime and supported the opposition which was seeking to overthrow it. But for them, it was more to gain regional influence, especially in the face of the Iranian adversary, than to support the democratic demands of the Syrian revolution.

The political, diplomatic, financial, military and humanitarian aid of these Arab countries has been vital to the Syrian opposition and population throughout these years of conflict. However, it lacked coordination and coherence because of rivalries between the different countries, each with its own agenda.

Thus, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the two countries that are the most committed to the opposition, played their own roles, often causing divisions. With the ambition to impose itself as the true godfather of the Syrian opposition, Qatar has privileged the Islamist political and military
groups. Saudi Arabia has played a stronger political role since King
Salman came to power in 2015. Riyadh organized a meeting in
December of that year to form a broad platform of political and armed
opposition. The High Committee of Negotiations was thus formed and
has since led talks in Geneva under the patronage of the United Nations.

How does Israel see the Syrian conflict?

Israel obviously follows with great attention everything related to
neighboring Syria. Even if Israeli warplanes conducted several airstrikes
– on 30/01/2013, 3/05 and 5/05, 5/07, 31/10 – against military research
centers near Damascus and against convoys of the Hezbollah, Israel has
no real influence in the conflict. It is above all concerned about the Syrian
arsenal of chemical weapons and the risk that it falls into the hands of
radical rebel groups or the Lebanese Shiite militia. Prime Minister
Benjamin Netanyahu remarked: “We conduct occasional operations in
Syria to prevent the country from turning into a warfront against us.”

Israeli officials are divided on the future of Syria. Some would
accommodate to keeping Assad in power because they know him well
and realize that they can count on him to control the border (which he
does actually despite certain declarations made since 1974), while others
believe that a Sunni jihadist power in Syria would lead to a profitable
chaos and weaken their enemy the Hezbollah.
III. From regional confrontation to international conflict
Superimposed on the regional conflicts are the agendas of the different world powers which amplify the complexity of the crisis.

Source: “Understanding the Syrian situation in 5 minutes”, Le Monde, October 2015

What is Russia’s position?

Russia has been an ally of Syria since the 1950s. A first arms deal was signed between the two countries at the height of the Cold war in 1956,
establishing a strong economic and political cooperation. After the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, Russian support to Syria declined but when Putin came to power, the relationship regained impetus because the Russian leader sought to assert his country’s presence in the Middle East. Moscow has supported Assad since the outbreak of the revolution, as Syria is its last ally and main client in the region. As a member of the Security Council of the UN, the Russians vetoed any punitive action against the Assad regime, paralyzing all international initiative to resolve the crisis. Taking advantage of American indifference, Moscow has organized meetings with some Damascus-approved “opponents”, in order to try to find a political solution, but they have never given any results because the members of these delegations are not representative of the opposition and lack legitimacy.

The emergence of radical groups and of the Islamic State has reinforced and facilitated Russian support to the Syrian regime, because Russia so fears radical Islam will attain the Central Asian republics: the memory of Chechnya is still fresh. Moscow has recently shown a certain lassitude towards Assad, but nevertheless remains closely attached to he who seems to incarnate the vestiges of a declining state.

In September 2015, Russian implication in the Syrian conflict crossed a new threshold when Moscow decided to bomb certain sites on the ground directly, officially as part of the war against terrorism. In reality, the majority of these attacks concern moderate rebel groups opposed to the regime, including those backed by the Americans. It used its air force to bomb civilian areas (Aleppo in particular), not hesitating to target hospitals though denying it, and to back up the regime troops that are its allies (Hezbollah, Shiite militias, Iraqi and Afghan Hazaras). Next to its ancient base in Tartous, it opened an air base in Hmemim. This growing commitment greatly strengthens Bashar al-Assad – who was in difficulty – but fails to secure his victory.

lejdd.fr – Syrie : l’appel de détresse des humanitaires

In modifying the power relations on the ground, the Russian attacks were also the prelude to future negotiations. The marking of victories before coming back to the conference table was calculated to permit the Syrian regime to impose its conditions, which proved clearly to be the case during the negotiations in Vienna which resulted in the UN resolution 2254: the question of maintaining Bachar Al-Assad in power – the fact that he is responsible for general instability and the massacre of civilians
and the flight of refugees — was scrupulously avoided.

Moscow also seeks now to instrumentalize the general preoccupation with the war against terrorism, at its apogee after the attacks in Paris, to rehabilitate Al-Assad and associate him with the coalition against the IS, thus exonerating the regime of its responsibility in the development of jihadism in the country.

In fact, the determination of Vladimir Putin has met no opposition. He occupies the void left by the lack of Western implication in the Syrian crisis. Thus, on the 19 of December, he declared his intention to augment his military engagement in Syria without arousing any real attention.

On March 14 2016, Russia announced its withdrawal from Syria. In fact, this “withdrawal” proved to be no more than a limited reduction of forces, which did not significantly diminish the overall strike force. One can deduce that this announcement was the result of political considerations, either interior – to avoid giving the Russian people the impression that Poutine was embarking on a second campaign like in Afghanistan – or exterior – to pressure Bachar Al-Assad into accepting to negotiate at “Geneva III”.

In any case, Russia is still present in Syria. There is no doubt that Russian intervention saved the regime, which, despite aid from Iran, was losing ground. While declaring, like Barack Obama, that the only possible solution was a political one, Vladimir Poutine was clearly counting on a military solution in order to obtain the political solution it favoured. The Russians forced the United States into accepting them as an indispensable partner in Syria.

During the summer of 2016, Vladimir Poutine and Tayyip Erdogan, the President of Turkey, sealed their reconciliation (the falling out was over the fact that the Turks had shot down a Russian plane on mission in Syria). Russia called for the entry of Turkey in Syria and in doing so abandoned the Kurdish forces of the PYD.

By the end of 2016, Russian bombardments had largely contributed to the fall of East Aleppo. Then it was Russia itself, together with Turkey, who negotiated a truce (extended to Iran during the Astana negotiations in January). Finally, Russia and the UN (via Staffan de Mistura) led negotiations in Geneva once again in February 2017, taking advantage of the US withdrawal after the election of Donald Trump.
Since then, Vladimir Putin intends to capitalize on the fall of East Aleppo, which he considers as a great victory. Unlike the Assad regime and Iran, his priority is not a total takeover of Syria, but the negotiation of a political solution. This would allow him to consolidate what he has acquired since Russia’s intervention in September 2015 at a moderate human (albeit undoubtedly underestimated) and material cost.

Putin’s aims were: (1) to stabilize the Assad regime which was about to collapse before its intervention (2) to restore Russia to its former position as a major player in the international arena (3) to break with the isolation resulting from sanctions which followed the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. The first two objectives were achieved. Putin, who is preparing for a presidential election next year, knows that any prolongation of the war in Syria is likely to be perceived badly by the Russian population (20% of Russians today think that the military engagement of their country in Syria does not make sense: see this article, [US Attack on Syria Cements Kremlin’s Embrace of Assad](#)).

Despite this political objective, Russia continued to help the regime militarily by bombing rebel positions in the region of Idlib and also in the suburbs of Damascus, southern Syria and the region of Hama.

This is what makes some Russian analysts say that the more Russia supports Assad, the more it depends on the Syrian regime. It is clear that Russia is not in a position to impose its will on the Assad regime, in particular because it runs up against Iran whose objectives are not the same. In Geneva, Russia has not obtained any concessions from Bashar Al-Assad, who does not intend to leave power after the transition period. Russia, which had been thought to be more flexible a few months ago, now seems to defend this line.

The chemical attacks by Assad in Khan Cheikhoun incontestably weakened Russia’s position. Firstly, because the Russians, who were present on the base of Chayrat, were then suspected of having dissimulated the fact that regime had maintained stocks of sarin gas there in violation of the agreement forbidding the stocking of chemical weapons. Russia was also held liable because it had signed the agreement of 2013 which decreed the destruction of all stocks of chemical weapons. Secondly, the American intervention on April 6, though limited, signalled that Russia would no longer be free to intervene in Syria as it wished, but must henceforth take into account the position of America.
In addition, Russia must deal with two countries it believed to have rallied to its cause: Turkey and Israel. The first had accepted to overlook the fall of East Aleppo in exchange for the intervention which prevented the Kurdish PYD from controlling the liaison between the three Kurdish “cantons” in Syria. However, the entry of the Russians in Afrin (the most eastern canton, near Aleppo) on March 21 prevented Turkey from extending its positions towards the West. Israel seems to have concluded a tacit agreement with the Russians since the beginning of their intervention, allowing them to bomb Syrian convoys protecting the Hezbollah. However, on March 17, Damascus responded to an Israeli attack by launching three missiles. Russia showed its discontent by summoning the Israeli ambassador in Moscow. One also wonders whether Turkey and Israel are not both rejoicing at the prospect of the return of the Americans in the Syrian conflict.

The red line and the United States

The United States and the European countries quickly deducted that in order to end the violence raging in the country, Assad must leave. In 2012, Washington and some other capitals wished to organize support to the rebellion, but groups on the ground never received the promised aid.

The inconsistency of the US position was confirmed after the use of chemical weapons by the forces of Assad near Damascus on August 23, 2013, killing 1,700 civilians and marking a turning point in the conflict. Barack Obama had said that the use of chemical weapons by the regime would be considered the red line and that as soon as there was evidence of chemical warfare, strikes would be launched against specific targets. But as the world awaited these strikes against Assad in September 2013, the US President reversed his decision, thus conferring Assad with the “right to kill”. Late in 2014, Obama admitted publicly “The United States has no strategy for Syria”. Since the agreement to destroy chemical weapons, and despite UN denunciation of these crimes, Assad’s Army has continued to bomb localities with explosives containing chlorine.

See the video of an American senator denouncing his country’s strategy in Syria

This indifference is due to the refusal of the American president – elected on a promise to bring back US troops from Irak and Afghanistan – to
implicate his country in the Middle East. Thus aid to the Syrian opposition is both symbolic and minimal.

If Barack Obama lacks commitment with regard to the Syrian crisis, he is nevertheless obliged to implicate his country in one of its dimensions: the development of jihadism. The execution of the American James Foley in August 2014 was a shock. The next month, the US began bombing the IS in Iraq and Syria. This campaign, however, only succeeded in reducing the territorial expansion of Daech and was not part of any particular political strategy.

At the end of 2015, confronted by the situation on the ground, which was blocked, and Russian determination to support Al-Assad, a return to the negotiating table was necessary. John Kerry realized a series of consultations and went to Moscow. The Americans reduced their demands in order to bring their position closer to that of the Russians. This permitted the creation of a calendar for a political transition, vague enough (notably with regard to the role of Bachar Al-Assad) to receive the approval of all the members of the UN Security Council. John Kerry has admitted that many doubts remain concerning the application of the agreement.

In 2016, the United States pursued its ambiguous policy in Syria. Though the Americans persist in declaring that Bachar Al-Assad cannot remain after the transition period, they continue to negotiate with the Russians, who advocate maintaining Bachar Al-Assad in power (there have been numerous meetings between Kerry and Lavrov in the past months). After the failure of the truce concluded on September 9 2016 under the auspices of Washington and Moscow, the United States appeared more and more withdrawn.

The Americans also ceased delivering weapons to the armed opposition several times in order to force the political opposition to take part in “Geneva III”. In spite of incessant bombings of hospitals and of the civilian population, they persistently refused to give the rebel combatants the Manpads which would have permitted them to defend themselves.

For the United States, the priority remains the war against Daech. In pursuing this policy, the Americans quickly made agreements of “unconflict” with the Russians in order to avoid air collisions. They also chose to support the Kurdish forces of the YPG and the “Syrian Defense Forces” (Kurds and Syrian Arabs) rather than the insurgents. This
decision has been problematic as the YPG have attacked rebel groups backed by the CIA.

The other priority, only suspected until now but recently confirmed by an Obama advisor, was the Iranian nuclear agreement. This factor has always predominated the Syrian conflict for the Americans and had dissuaded Obama from acting because he feared that an action in Syria overtly hostile to Al-Assad would lead to Iran leaving the negotiation tables, and denouncing the nuclear agreement. The only time the Americans directly menaced the regime was in the region of Hasakah when Syrian aviation attacked a group of Kurds who were accompanied by American advisors.

Obama’s policy did not receive unanimous support. 51 American diplomats signed a text manifesting their disagreement with the government’s action in Syria and advocating threatening the regime with military intervention. See the text [here](#).

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in November led to the marginalization of the United States in favour of Russia. The Americans stood by when East Aleppo fell, and they did not take part in the truce concluded by the Russians and the Turks, occupying only a side seat at the Astana and Geneva negotiations.

The American position under Trump seemed to:

1) Give priority to the battle against Deach, notably by initiating the operation to take back Raqa;

2) Let the Russians manage the Syrian crisis.

Several facts and declarations indicate that the Americans have modified their policy in Syria (under Obama they had nevertheless, if only rhetoricaly, maintained the idea that Al-Assad should leave). American aviation helped the Syro-Irano-Russian troops to take back Palmyra on March 2, 2017 and American troops intervened between Turks and Kurds at Manbij on March 4, 2017, preventing the advancement of the operation “Shield of the Euphrates”. In addition, at the end of March, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared that it was up to the Syrians to decide the fate of Al-Assad, and Nikki Haley, the American ambassador to the UN, repeated that the priority of the Americans was no longer Al-Assad’s departure.
Everything suggests that the Syrian regime interpreted this position as the acceptance by the United States of the state of affairs it had created with the help of its Iranian and Russian allies. Which explains why it went ahead with the sarin gas attacks at Khan Cheikhoun on April 4, 2017 (see this article). The regime obviously had not envisaged the indignation fomented by these attacks using forbidden arms that it was supposed to have destroyed since the agreement of September 2013, neither had it expected the Americans to lance 59 Tomahawk missiles on the base at Chayrat, where the sarin gas was stocked and from where the planes that bombarded Khan Cheikhoun had taken off.

This rapid retaliation, firm and precise, marked the end of six years of American inaction. The attack provoked divergent reactions within the administration: Ambassador Haley went so far as to speak of a need for a change of regime in Syria, but since the attacks the American position seems to be mostly one of prudence. Relations with Russia seem to have become cooler, contrary to what the Russians were expecting with Donald Trump, without forasmuch reaching a breaking point – the “deconfliction” agreement destined to prevent collisions between aircraft of the international coalition targeting the IS and Russian aircraft was re-established so rapidly that it was never actually suspended.

Today the United States must decide:

1) Whether they will attack in Syria each time there is a new violation of international norms or if the attack on Chayrat was just an isolated incident.

2) Whether as it would seem probable, they plan to return to the negotiating tables in Geneva or Astana to take an active role in the elaboration of a political solution to the Syrian conflict

3) What they plan to do regarding the zones along the Euphrates taken back from the IS. Before April 4, many signs led us to believe that these territories would be returned to the regime. Now that no longer seems so certain, as the Americans could decide to confer the administration of these zones to moderate local forces hostile to the regime.

4) Whether they decide to support the opposition rather than those brigades selected and formed by the CIA and the Pentagon.

All of these issues should be followed closely in the weeks to come.
The cost of non-intervention

We often hear that France’s intervention in Libya justifies non-intervention in Syria. However, a comparison of the following statistics leads one to a different conclusion:

The Syrian conflict has resulted in 60 times more deaths and 600 times more refugees than in Libya.

Sources:
(1) The Libya Body Count Project
(2) Chiffres de UNHCR fin 2014
(3) Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, août 2015
(4) Chiffres de UNHCR août 2015

And Europe? What is France’s position? Why is France concerned by the Syrian crisis?

It has become more and more apparent that the Syrian crisis is being administered by two major powers: Russia and the United States. Each one seems to want to deal exclusively with the other, excluding all other actors. But this duo is profoundly unbalanced. Eager to put Russia back at the centre of the geopolitical chessboard, Vladimir Poutine used the Syrian crisis to obtain a regular dialogue with the United States on a basis of equality. Obama willingly left this role to Russia, who took the lead in managing a crisis which the American president considered secondary.

In this context, what becomes the role of Europe? Of France?

Europe is divided concerning the position to adopt towards Syria. In the absence of a consensus, all action is paralyzed.

France therefore defines its policy alone. The country has a particular
role to play and a genuine knowledge of Syria and its regime. The French have tried several times to revive the dialogue, but without success. They are conscious of the limits of this approach and of the incapacity of the regime to make reforms.

France was an important voice in the first months of the conflict. The French firmly condemned the repression of the demonstrations by Bachar Al-Assad and recognized the Syrian opposition (the Council, then the Coalition). Generally speaking, France has assumed a consistent policy of political realism, maintaining that Bachar Al-Assad is incapable of bringing political stability to the region, of ending the civil war and of defeating Daech.

France seems to have partially convinced its Western allies to adopt the principal of “Neither Bachar nor Daech”. However, the crisis of Summer 2013 clearly showed that France lacks the means to act alone. When strikes were envisaged in August/September 2013 as a response to chemical attacks waged by the regime, France was prepared to intervene but then renounced, forced to follow the decision of the Americans.

Maintaining a position perceived as intransigent, plagued with the problem of terrorism, France became more and more isolated. Following the terrorist attacks in Paris in January and November 2015, and confronted by the influx of refugees, the French were forced to revise their position in order to respond to public opinion. In September 2015, they began air attacks in Syria against the IS, but they have not been able to establish a global strategy.

lexpress.fr – Intervention française en Syrie: “Les frappes contre Daech sont contreproductives”

The question of the departure of Bachar Al-Assad no longer appears to be a priority. His departure is still envisaged, but at the outcome of the process of negotiations and not before.

Today France is excluded from the settlement of the Syrian crisis. In September 2015, during the UN General Assembly, Bang Ki-Moon declared that the five nations detaining the keys to the resolution of the Syrian conflict were Russia, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. France is not represented and has not participated in the last rounds of negotiations in Lausanne.
Considering France’s diagnostic of the Syrian crisis, its comprehension of the country, the afflux of refugees and terrorist attacks, it cannot disengage from this crisis. France must convince its partners of the urgency to end this conflict whose consequences in Europe are increasingly dramatic.

The Arab League and the UN: why have different international mediations failed?

The radical position of the regime currently prevents the culmination of any mediation. The first plan proposed by the Arab League in November 2011 asked the regime to begin serious discussions with representatives of the opposition. In February 2012, Turkey recommended an international initiative supporting the people and not the Syrian regime by proposing a political transition. In June 2012, the member states of the Action Group on Syria (China, USA, France, United Kingdom and Russia as well as Turkey, Kuwait and Qatar) agreed on the basis for a political transition led by the Syrians: the formation of a government of national unity, the implementation of constitutional reforms and the organization of free and fair elections. This communiqué was signed at the first international conference on Syria, referred to as “Geneva I”.

A second meeting was held in Geneva in February 2014. The two Syrian delegations had agreed to use the Geneva I document as the basis for the talks, but the delegation of the opposition wished to begin negotiations by the issue of the set up of the transitional government while the representatives of the regime had fixed terrorism as the sole subject of talks, thus bypassing the veritable objective of the meeting: to find a solution to the Syrian conflict. The delegation of the regime thus completely undermined the negotiations, calling its adversaries “insects” and “terrorists” guilty of “contaminating” a country which now needed to be “cleansed”. A vocabulary which recalls the darkest hours of European history, and certainly kills all possible initiatives to reach an agreement.

In October 2014, Staffan de Mistura, who had been named UN special envoy for Syria in July, suggested the creation of “battle-freeze” zones in Aleppo, the implementation of the resolutions of the UN Security Council
and the deployment of international efforts against terrorism in Syria and the region. He announced the organization of new separate consultations, starting in early May, with representatives of the regime, the opposition and civil society as well as regional stakeholders. Iran, who had been excluded from the two previous two international conferences in Geneva, would be invited.

Staffan de Mistura was the third UN envoy to Syria, succeeding Lakhdar Brahimi and Kofi Annan. The latter resigned five months after his nomination after proposing a six-point plan providing for a ceasefire and a political transition. However, in the absence of international support – Russia and China used their vetoes – the former Secretary General of the UN preferred to withdraw.

As for Lakhdar Brahimi, UN and Arab League envoy responsible for the file from August 2012 until May 2014, he finally renounced his mission because he felt that "the principal protagonists inside Syria – but also outside Syria – would accept no objective other than total victory".

IV. What has become of Syria and the Syrian people?
The victims of the conflict: who’s killing who?

First of all, how are the statistics concerning the number of victims collected? Are they reliable?

They constitute an army on the ground: armed not with weapons but with pens, notebooks, smartphones or cameras. They collect, register, photograph. In constant danger, in the middle of bombarded civilian zones, they often lose their lives, to be replaced by other volunteers. They work for different organizations: the Violations Documentation Center*, created at Douma in Syria in April 2011 by Razan Zaitouneh**, a lawyer and human rights activist (VDC: http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/), the Syrian Network for Human rights, created in June of the same year (SN4HR: http://sn4hr.org), the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights based in London (OSDH: http://www.syriahr.com/en/) and others.

The OSDH, who communicates little information on its methodology, affirms disposing of a rather vast network of correspondants all over Syria, while the VDC and the SNHR work only in zones controlled by the rebellion. The methodology of these two organisms consists in sending volunteers on site immediately after an attack to register the number of victims and the circumstances of their death. They inquire at hospitals and question Imams who pronounce funeral rites. These numerous citizen-journalists across the country are able to cross-check data from different sources.

Example of data collected by VDC:

[Table id=4]

All sorts of information is collected: circumstances, identification of arms, origin of the attacks, etc. Civilians must be distinguished from combatants. See the very precise questionnaire used by the members of this organisation***.

The impossibility of an exact count…
We must note that victims in the zones controlled by the regime as well as those controlled by Daech are not included in the statistics as these territories are difficult to penetrate and neither IS nor the regime communicate this information. Only the OSDH provides a global figure for the number of victims of all parties – a figure whose reliability cannot be evaluated.

In spite of these limitations, the UN has affirmed the reliability of these organizations and has often relied on them itself to estimate the number of casualties. However, in April 2014 the UN decided to stop the counting, as it had become impossible to produce a real figure due to the complexity of the situation on the ground and the difficulties in the collection of data. The UN maintains the figure of 260,000 deaths, unchanged for over a year…The figures which circulate are most often those of OSDH. According to the newspaper Le Monde of August 8, 2016, the NGO announced the figure of 292,817 deaths as of July 31, 2016: 84,472 civilians, 50,548 insurgents including Kurdish combatants, 49,547 jihadists, 104,656 members of the loyalist forces of which 57,909 were soldiers. The organism announced 9,000 additional deaths on September 13, bringing the total number to 300,000 victims, but it estimates that the number is larger in reality. The impossibility of an exact count obliges us to remain cautious.

We must just retain an order of magnitude. Unofficially, among UN organizations, the figure of 300,000 victims is considered realistic.

Exact statistics will certainly be known after the war. It must include all indirect casualties due to the lack of food and medical care, as well as those disappeared, for the most part persons arrested by the forces or secret services of the regime. The local councils who manage the towns have also kept statistics that will one day be a great help in establishing the truth.

* The abbreviations are in English
** Razan Zaitouneh was abducted in Douma in December 2013, most likely by the extremist islamist organization Jaysh al Islam. There is no news of her since that date.
***The information collected by these groups could be used during future trials of the authors of these atrocities and for the establishment of a memorial for the victims of the repression and the war in Syria.

Who is responsible for the death of civilians and who is killing who?
The proportions vary from source to source, but they all agree that the overwhelming majority of civilian deaths can be attributed to the Syrian regime. See the data collected by the SNHR who established the chart of civilian victims living in zones controlled by the rebellion below. It covers the period from March 2011 to October 2016, five years of conflict. It is most certainly incomplete due to the difficulties enumerated above, and note that it does not include civilian victims on the side of the loyalist forces. Here again we are obliged to be cautious. In any case, the predominance of the responsibility of governmental forces and their allies in the death toll of the war is evident.

The SNHR also produces a monthly count. In August 2016, it tallied 1,521 civilians killed (far from the 9,000 accounted for by OSDH, because it only takes into account those victims noted by the organization). 1,082 were killed by the forces of the regime (or of Russia:189). The remaining victims were killed by IS (148), and other rebel groups (179). In addition are those killed by Kurdish groups and other brigades. The SNHR declares that for that month there were considerable difficulties in the collection of data in the specific territory covered. This means that the figures are higher and that the distribution among the authors of the killings may vary. However, whatever the figures or the organizations collecting the data, the Syrian regime is invariably identified as the one principally responsible for death and destruction.
This fact is not surprising. With its allies, the Syrian regime has considerable supremacy in military assets. No other group involved in ground combat is doted with aviation. According to VDC, more than a third of the civilian victims of August 2016 were killed by air attacks.

The incessant bombing of residential zones since the beginning of the bombarding in Summer 2012 has not only resulted in a great number of civilian victims, but has deprived the population of shelter, economic ressources and medical care (hospitals are deliberately targeted as well as economic infrastructures and cultivated fields at harvest time) all leading to a number of indirect casualties which cannot be evaluated. A UN communiqué of September 6, 2016 concerning the bombing of Aleppo by Syrian and Russian aviation notes : "While many lose their lives under the bombs, others die from the lack of medical structures – the result of the destruction by pro-governmenal forces of 20 hospitals and clinics in the region of Aleppo alone since the beginning of the year."

We know from the Caesar Report that at least 11,000 people have died under torture (the photos exist to corroborate this fact: see Opération Caesar by Garance Le Caisne, Stock, 2015). This report was instructed by international experts (medical examiners, public prosecutors...). Among them, David Crane, former chief prosecutor for the special court of Sierra Leone, affirmed that the images of the bodies of the starved and tortured were only comparable to those of Auschwitz. He added “as prosecutors we rarely have acces to proof of crimes against humanity so direct and precise” and that these documents only represented “the visible part of the iceberg because they concern only three detention centers and there are fifty” in all of Syria.

More recent reports have pointed out possible crimes in the prison of Sednaya, 30 kilometers from Damascus. Between 5,000 and 13,000 prisoners were hung between September 2011 and December 2015. For Amnesty International the prison can be likened to a “human slaughterhouse”. Read the report here.


Over 5 million refugees*
Why do they leave? … “They flee Daech”…

We have all heard this phrase in conversations or in the media (see a reportage on France 2 concerning the exploitation of Syrian children in Turkey, June 21, 2016).

Because of the omnipresence of the terrorist organization and its exactions in the media and in the collective mentality, for many people its seems evident that the Syrians flee only to escape from Daech. Many non-rigorous journalists nourish this simplistic explanation. In fact, this idea serves the interests of the leaders of the regime and lets them get off easily.

A few figures and dates allow to rectify the situation. The djihadi group IS became established in Syria in April 2013, but it did not exercise destructive power on the population until Summer 2014, after the siege of Mossoul in Iraq, which allowed the group to consolidate its power in the zone under its control between Iraq and Syria. However, at the end of 2013, the UNHCR had already registered 2,5 million refugees – refugees who had fled for reasons which had little to do with Daech.

The reasons these Syrians had fled were exposed in a UN report: “The deliberate targetting of civilians and the incapacity of all the actors of the conflict to protect civilians are known to be the principal causes of displacement. Populations are more and more frequently forced to flee the closing down of services, notably the health system, and the loss of all means of subsistence.”

Thousands of Syrians who took the road to exile this summer at the beginning of the battle of Aleppo fled for the same reasons: incessant bombing by Russian and Syrian aviation, the destruction of homes, hospitals and other infrastructures, a total lack of resources and the exorbitant prices of food.

The geographical origins of the refugees gives a clear indication of the cause of departure. Daech occupies essentially certain pockets of northeastern Syria, like Raqaa and Deir ez-Zor. The families who come from these zones flee most certainly the persecution of Daech. But those from Aleppo, Homs, Damas or Latakia leave their native towns for the above-mentioned reasons. As for young people who leave the zones controlled by the regime, they flee conscription, which is a problem for the Syrian army which is weakened and has great difficulty recruiting.
If IS is driven out of Syrian territory, we cannot expect a massive return of refugees. However, the end of the combats or the establishment of a “no-fly zone” would enable the return of a certain number of them.

*number of Syrian refugees enregistered by the HCR in Avril 2017
**
http://www.refworld.org/publisher,UNHCR,COUNTRYPOS,SYR,5641ef894,0.html

The destruction of the health system

Medical and paramedical personnel have been particularly targeted: 654 deaths (93% at the hands of the regime). 15,000 others have left the country.

Hospitals are systematically bombed, both by the regime and the Russians: 12 hospitals were attacked in October 2015. It is estimated that 26% of Syrian hospitals are no longer functioning and 33% function only partially.

Eleven million people are in need of medical care. Today only half of Syrian children are vaccinated, resulting in the resurgence and propagation of contagious diseases which had been previously eradicated in the country: polio, leishmaniasis, measles, typhoid, and even cholera.

Due to the lack of care and drugs, those afflicted with chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure or cancer represent other victims and augment the toll of lives (approximately several tens of thousands, not included in the preceding figures).

According to international estimations, In addition to these figures, 13 million persons are in need of humanitarian relief.

lexpress.fr – Syrie : une ONG dénonce les “insupportables” bombardements des hôpitaux
A diminishing population, displaced persons

The Syrian population has decreased 23% due to the number of victims, but also because of the decrease in the number of births: 50% less than in 2011.

More than 5 million Syrians have left the country to take refuge in neighboring countries, in Europe and less frequently in the Gulf countries or in the US.

Refugees: 5,030,391

Turkey: 2,973,980
Lebanon: 1,011,366
Jordan: 658,015
Iraq: 236,772
Egypt: 120,154
North Africa: 29,275

Population in refugee camps: 10%
Requests for political asylum by Syrians in Europe between April 2011 and May 2016:
1,066,844.

In France, the number of requests for political asylum (many more than those actually granted the status) between April 2011 and May 2016:
12,142 (in comparison: Germany 354,038 Serbia 313,656 Sweden 110,579 Hungary 72,505 Netherlands 32,070).

There are also between 7 and 8 million Syrians displaced inside their country.

If we total the number of Syrians displaced inside and outside the country, one out of two Syrians no longer lives in his home!

The displacement of populations provokes changes in demography (see this study addressing these issues). A first observation reveals that the demographic majority, the Arab Sunnite population, is the main group leaving the country. This phenomenon creates a slightly better balance of other minority groups. Certain reports (example here) develop the
hypothesis that the regime deliberately destroys certain zones in order to reconstruct them with the installation of foreign Shiite populations. These theories must be considered with caution. Nevertheless, some evidence, such as presidential decrees preventing the return of displaced populations in the district of Mezze, could be a sign of a desire to create a zone of Iranian influence, in the same way that the Hezbollah established itself in the southern suburbs of Beirut in Lebanon.

A lost generation?

The extent of the consequences of the Syrian tragedy for future generations and the regime’s deliberate strategy of targeting youth can be summarised in a few figures:

- 1 child out of 3 has known only wartime
- More than a third of the children massacred were killed while at school or while coming or going to school
- Since 2011, there have been more than 4,000 attacks against schools. Today, only one school out of four in Syria is open
- More than 2 million children are out of school and an additional 1.35 million could soon abandon school

Syrian children also suffer from psychological traumas. A report from the international NGO Save the Children intitled “Invisible Wounds” shows the impact of six years of war on the mental health of these children: more than 70% of them suffer from “toxic stress”. See this report here.

The cost of destruction

The destruction first hit Syria’s national heritage. UNESCO has repeatedly deplored the “immense destruction” of archeological and cultural treasures. The tragic list is enumerated here.

It is estimated that 2.1 million habitations and more than 7,000 schools have been destroyed. Their cost is estimated at 270 billion dollars.

If the reconstruction were to be undertaken today, when the war is not yet over, it would cost 300 billion dollars, or ten times more than the
Americans invested in the reconstruction of Iraq.

The problem of reconstruction remains to be confronted: with whom, when, by which channel? It is obvious that the reconstruction must be linked to political transition, so as not to reproduce the pattern of the Israelo-Palestinian conflict, where Europe sends funds in vain, fails to obtain any political influence and remains powerless to prevent new destruction. After Aleppo, it is tempting to think that funds for reconstruction should be sent to Damascus. In reality, this position englobes several risks:

1) The misappropriation of the funds, as occurred with those given by the UN for humanitarian aid which ended up being used by the regime for its own financing (see this explanation);

2) The utilisation of the funds only in zones favorable to the regime, ignoring those of the opposition, accentuating the fractures and humanitarian distress in the country and thus the conflict.

A devastated economy

Economic production, evaluated with regard to the GDP in constant prices, is half of what is was at the beginning of the crisis.

The production of electricity, which was deficient before the crisis, has been reduced by 70%.

Agricultural production has been reduced by more than 40%.

The unemployment rate is 50%.

The average inflation rate over the four year period was 50%, with peaks at 120% in 2013.

The official exchange rate in May 2015 was 220 Syrian pounds to the dollar, and 300 on the black market.

If the economy has not completely collapsed, it is largely due to aid from Iran (provisioning of petrol and renewal of credit lines).
A ransacked cultural heritage

Due to the combats (in Aleppo, for example), voluntary destruction by Daech (the temples of Bel and Baal-Shamin in Palmyra, among others), and the systematic pillaging committed by both Daech and the regime in order to finance their actions, many vestiges of the cultural heritage of humanity present in Syria have been damaged and many others are in danger of destruction.

The civilian population: How do the Syrian people carry on during the crisis?

Wherever they are and whatever their community, political orientation or socio-economic situation, all Syrians have had their lives shattered by the conflict.

Obviously, in areas controlled by the regime, the inhabitants are safest because they are not bombarded. They still enjoy most public services: administration, education, health, etc. However, under pressure and close surveillance by security forces and the militia, they continue to live in fear. The economic difficulties of everyday life (see above) are their main concern, due to power and water cuts and especially the lack of fuel for heating and transportation and the soaring prices of all basic necessities.

In areas controlled by the Syrian opposition, the populations are the most hard hit by war and violence. Certain regions are entirely besieged by the army and have no access to the most basic products. Others are regularly bombed by aviation of the regime or the Russians. Towns and villages are devastated. Syrians who remain in these areas are mainly those who do not have the possibility to go elsewhere and some who refuse to leave their homes and their environment. Everyday life is organized locally by civilian councils in coordination with the combatants who control each zone. Services for health, education, justice etc. … are guaranteed more or less correctly depending on the locality. The poorest residents receive humanitarian aid for food, while others live from some commercial activities, services or black economy.
In areas controlled by the Islamic State, Daech subjugates the inhabitants to its rigorous order, which controls all aspects of daily life by means of ruthless terror. All activity and all commerce must stop during prayer time. Women cannot go out in the street without the black niqab that covers them from head to toe. Anyone who transgresses this totalitarian governance is subjected to extreme persecution, including summary executions and torture. Schools, hospitals and courts are established and managed by the services and the police of Daech, which are mainly composed of foreign jihadis.

In the refugee camps of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and inside the Syrian borders, families usually live in tents and occasionally in trailers or prefabricated structures. They are supported by international and local humanitarian organizations that distribute food, linen and blankets and provide medical care. Children account for the majority of the population of these camps. Some schools have been created where informal education is provided by volunteers. Some camps have become veritable towns or slums, such as Zaatari in North of Jordan, which has about 150,000 inhabitants now. Some commercial activities and workshops for women have been developed by refugees. However, with terribly degraded living conditions, some camps have become lawless no-man’s lands, where the residents suffer the presence of mafias, prostitution, and trafficking of all kinds.

There are millions of Syrian expatriates and refugees around the world, belonging to many different communities and social categories. Most left the country individually, to escape the fighting and repression, or because they had lost their homes or in an attempt to find security for their families. They are concentrated in neighboring countries (1 out of 4 residents in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee), but notably since 2015, and at incredible risks, they increasingly seek asylum in Europe, mainly in Germany or in Sweden, despite the fact that these countries are gradually closing their borders. Surveys show that the overwhelming majority of these refugees do not wish to remain in Europe but hope to return to their country as soon as possible, and most of them only when Syria will be free of Assad. The refugee crisis will only find its solution in the resolution of the Syrian conflict.
The Syrian conflict for dummies — IV. What has become of Syria and the Syrian people?


adoptrevolution.org – Majority of Syrian refugees in Europe are running from the Assad regime, not Isis, says survey
lexpress.fr – Syrie: les derniers survivants d’Alep
V. The Future
What are the possible outcomes?  
Should the war against Daech be the priority? Is the regime of Assad a lesser evil?

Until the attacks in Paris in 2015, François Hollande seemed to maintain the principle «Neither Assad nor Daech”, but following these tragedies he seemed to give priority to the eradication of Daech. The French continue to debate over this question of priority. But is it really possible to separate the two objectives? In fact, it is not, and for three reasons:

1. From the beginning, Daech and Assad have had an objective complicity. Not only because the imprisoned jihadists liberated by Assad in May 2011 sooner or later joined the ranks of Daech, but also because the regime always preferred bombing the rebel groups and the civilian population rather than Daech, and apart from a few exceptions, such as the taking of their base at Tabqa, Daech likewise preferred attacking opposing rebel groups than the Syrian regular army.

2. The continuation of the bombing of civilians by the regime, now seconded by the Russians, has encouraged candidates for the jihad who now mainly join Daech. The departure of Assad and the end of the killing of civilians would be the most effective way to limit their attraction for Daech.

3. It is only in establishing a veritable political transition in Damascus without Assad that it would be possible, under certain conditions, for the opposition army to join forces with the regular army in order to constitute a ground force capable of eradicating Daech.

diary.thesyriacampaign.org – 5 reasons we can’t beat Isis while Assad is in power

liberation.fr – Bachar al-Assad moindre mal contre Daech : chiche !

After Aleppo
Today the martyrizing of unarmed populations in Syria is symbolized by the tragedy of the city of Aleppo.

Do not forget that Aleppo was liberated from the IS by revolutionary forces in January 2014! But under the pretext of the “battle against terrorism”, Aleppo was besieged starting in July 2016, with intensive bombing by the Russians and the regime, despite the fact that at the same time pro-Assad Iraqi et Afghani militia and Iranian “Guardians of the Revolution” were combatting on the ground. East Aleppo fell in December 2016.

There are no longer any hospitals functioning, as they have all been destroyed and the “White Helmets” (civilian rescue squads) have also been bombed. The number of civilian victims, including many children, increases each day. It is also to be feared that the takeover of the districts of East-Aleppo will be accompanied by many arrests and unfortunately, many “disappearances”, as the regime and its allies are driven by revenge against those who resisted them for so long.

Bassem Khalifé, a resident of the district of Bustan Al-Qasr in East Aleppo, declared, “Each time we go out, we say farewell to our families”.

The fall of Aleppo and the indifference of the international community made this battle a turning point. Firstly, in addition to the loss of lives and territory, the new balance of power is very unfavourable to the opposition. Revolutionary dynamics are re-configurated in very difficult conditions. Secondly, it is a military victory for Al-Assad and his allies. But above all, it is the confirmation that since the battle of Homs two years earlier, the Syrian regime is only capable of taking back territories emptied of their populations.

In the end, Daech is also a victor. On November 21, 2016, Stephen O’Brien, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations for Humanitarian Affairs declared before the UN Security Council : “Month after month I have reported to this Council that the level of depravity inflicted upon the Syrian people cannot sink lower, only to return the following month with hideous and, with shocking disbelief, new reports of ever-worsening human suffering… Humanitarian conditions in eastern Aleppo have gone from terrible to terrifying and now barely survivable by human beings.”

Beyond the humanitarian crisis, the question arises of the impotence of the UN and its incapacity to impose peace and security. Limited to denouncing war crimes, the UN has not taken any action to end the massacre. Faced with the death of a quarter of a million people, this position, which could be considered to be a form of passive complicity with the aggressors, risks, in addition, to encourage terrorism, as Daech has already pointed to this position in its discourse on “injustice”.

Although all efforts were concentrated on the bombing of a city where it wasn’t present, the organization symbolically took up the initiative at Palmyra.
VI. Conclusion
Considering all that has been described here, it is difficult to imagine a solution in the near future. Proposals do exist however: they depend on the courage and the will of the protagonists to adopt them. A review of the latest diplomatic initiatives show progress, but also the long road ahead.

The conflict has been raging for over five years now. A just solution with a diplomatic scenario stipulating the end of combat and a political solution to the conflict seems increasingly remote.

The negotiations engaged in Geneva by UN mediator Steffan de Mistura have not permitted any advancements. The last round in April 2016 was cut short as the opposition, represented by the High Negotiation Committee, found it impossible to remain at the table while the regime of Al-Assad continued to bomb civilians when a cessation of hostilities had been decided in order to give a chance to the negotiation process. Both Moscow and Washington had seemed favourable to such a process in response to the growing force of Daech, but nothing came out of this.

What hypotheses?

- The creation of protected zones in the North and the South of the country, covered by Western and Turkish aviation, in order to protect the population from attacks by the regime, is no longer on the agenda, despite the fact that this option would be a means for the opposition to enlarge its capacity for action and bring humanitarian aid to populations living in dramatic conditions.
- The obtention of a cease fire allowing the end of combat: all the attempts to this day have failed and this option would necessitate the presence of strongly committed regional and international sponsors who could force respect by the different groups and the government of Al-Assad.
- The resumption of negotiations: the conditions for this are not reunited today even if the pattern is known and rests on parameters defined by the communiqué delivered in Geneva in June 2012: a transition government in charge of the enforcement
of the cease fire and the implementation of new institutions, taking into account the realities of the field.

- These different hypotheses imply that the battle against Daech be reinforced in order to succeed in eliminating this force, after which the question will be who will control the territory.
- Lastly, what will become of Bachar Al-Assad? It is evident that he will not have a place in post-conflict Syria, even if his departure is no longer imposed as a condition for future negotiations.

**Only a just solution can prevail**

The challenges obstructing the road to peace in Syria remain considerable and their outcomes uncertain. As for every negotiated decision, compromises must be found between the Syrians and their respective foreign allies. Each will be obliged to make concessions. And after a war of such violence generating so much suffering, the Syrian people must find not only peace, but liberty, dignity and justice: ideals which were at the origin of the revolution.

**What can we do?**

We must talk about the situation in Syria, inform each other of the objectives and the expectations of the Syrian revolution. They are the echo of French history, of the French revolution and the French Resistance. Such is the sense of the Syrian uprising.

*Souria Houria – Comment porter encore le message de la révolution syrienne ?*
The Authors

Isabelle Hausser

Writer and translator, she has also held judicial and diplomatic positions. In her last two books, *Petit Seigneur* and especially in *Les Couleurs du Sultan*, she reveals the reality behind the myths about the Assad regime and the complexity of Syrian society.

Hala Kodmani

A freelance journalist specialized in the Arab world since 2009, since 2011 she has covered the conflict in Syria, her homeland, notably for “Libération” and “L’Express”. She also trains young Arabic speaking Syrian, Palestinian and Algerian journalists.

For two years during the creation of the French television channel and Website “France 24”, she worked as editor in chief at the Arab desk.

Previously, for over twenty years, she worked in communication and information for several regional and international organizations (Arab League, Francophonie, UNESCO …) notably as editor of publications, newsletters and websites.

In October 2014, she made a 26 minute TV reportage on the Islamic state intitled “Du chaos au Califat ” (“From chaos to the caliphate”) for ArteTV.

In March 2014, she published *La Syrie promise* (Editons Sindbad) and has also translated into French *Du despotism* ( Actes Sud, 2016) by Abdel Rahman Kawakibi.

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Reporter for the French television channel TF1 until January 2013, she was formerly their correspondant in Jerusalem and in Moscow.

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Partners

CCFD-Terre Solidaire

“Le Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement -Terre Solidaire” is the partner of all those who fight against poverty and injustice.

Souria Houria (Syrie Liberté)

Our civil society association, founded in May 2011, regroups members of diverse political, professional and social affiliations. We are committed to supporting the Syrian people in their struggle and their legitimate demands for freedom, democracy and dignity.

Fares Cachoux

The Syrian born graphic designer Fares Cachoux came back to Syria because of the war. He now devotes his graphic talents to the revolution, illustrating the harsh realities of his country in an original visual style.
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