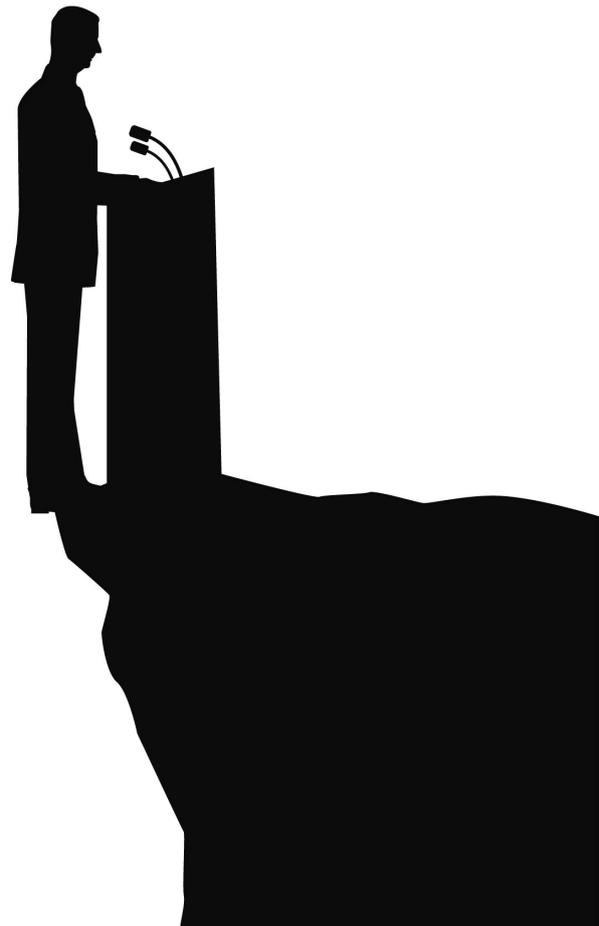


# II. From civil war to regional confrontation



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 country. 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 guarantees.

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.