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
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.

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
rebels.

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...
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...
The Syrian conflict for dummies — I. From revolution to civil war

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.

– Caesar Report :
diplomatie.gouv.fr – La torture dans les centres de détention du régime syrien

– Human Rights Watch and Amnesty Reports:
hrw.org – Rapport mondial 2015 : Syrie
amnesty.org – Syrie | Amnesty International

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.

*bbc.com – Guide to the Syrian opposition*

**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 Idleb, 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 “Caliphat”, 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.