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The New Logic of the Syrian Conflict And its Meaning for NATO

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As the Syrian crisis persists despite the prevailing conviction in the Western media that Bashar Al Assad's regime is doomed, its escalation to the whole of the Middle East is an increasingly distinct prospect. Turkey's recent call for the deployment of NATO Patriot missiles to protect its borders highlights that the Alliance is now forced to discuss the issue internally as well as with its partners in the region. From the outset, a variety of diplomatic and military considerations have meant that it is not feasible to envisage a NATO intervention in Syria along the lines of Operation Unified Protector in Libya. Because the UN Security Council is unlikely to reach consensus on the matter, launching a NATO-led operation would only worsen the existing tensions with Russia and China. In addition, the Syrian regime's military capabilities, particularly in terms of air defence, are a significant deterrent against military engagement like Libya.

Despite genuine hesitation about intervening in Syria, concern about preserving security in the direct vicinity of the country is growing in earnest. Since the summer of 2012, the Syrian conflict has been escalating to a regional level that is already challenging the security of one of NATO's members – Turkey – and is putting the balance of power in the Middle East to the test: the crisis is becoming more and more the regional centre of

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gravity, with the stability of most neighbouring countries depending on the fate of the regime in Damascus. This is exactly what Bashar al Assad envisages as his strategic objective: to make himself irreplaceable, both domestically and regionally.

Given NATO's interests in the region, there is thus an urgent need for the Alliance to move from a passive to a proactive approach, reassessing the logic of the conflict and defining a policy to contain spillover from it.

1. The dual escalation logic of the Syrian conflict

Following the spectacular bomb attack in Damascus on 18 July 2012, which killed several key officials of the Syrian security apparatus[2], the conflict has evolved into a new form of all-out war for regime survival. This has led to further escalation, both vertically and horizontally.

The vertical escalation can be seen in three ways. First, the conflict within Syria has intensified as the regime increasingly resorts to its entire array of military assets. This means extensive and increasingly indiscriminate use of airpower (fighter aircraft and helicopters) over the major disputed urban centres like Aleppo and Homs. Such strikes aim at terrorizing and coercing opposition groups, as well as any locals who might be tempted to join them. In logistic terms, the strikes allow the regime to assert its military power despite the shortage of manpower with which it is faced as a result of increasing defections and desertions.

The regime's need to address its shortage of human resources is part of the rationale for the second feature of the current escalation: the greater involvement of Syria's allies, Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, on the battlefield. During the first year of the conflict, Iran and Hezbollah both maintained a schizophrenic posture: on the one hand, they lent political - and occasionally military - support to their historical ally in Damascus; on the other hand, they publicly expressed their understanding of protesters' demands for political reforms. However, as the conflict escalates, both are finding it extremely difficult to maintain this balancing act and tend to be increasingly drawn into Assad's frenzied escalation strategy.

The swing towards civil war in Syria has jostled the political strategy of Iran and Hezbollah, and has left them facing a crucial dilemma. The longer Assad's war lasts, the more the Syrian regime needs its allies to support it. As they can no longer hedge their bets between Assad and his opponents, both Iran and Hezbollah have lost any credence they had regarding potential mediation. The presence of Iranian Pasdaran in Syria to help crack down on the rebellion has been much more visible in past few weeks, and of-

[2] Among those killed in the attack were: Syrian Defence Minister General Dawoud Rajiha; Deputy Defence Minister Assef Shawkat (who was President Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law); Assistant Vice President General Hasan Turkmani; and the head of investigations at the Syrian Intelligence Agency, Hafez Makhlouf.

ficials in Tehran are issuing no denials. Likewise, some Hezbollah fighters are reported to have been killed on the Syrian battleground. Far from refuting these allegations, immediately after the 18 July attack in Damascus Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah emphasized his movement's support for the Syrian regime, and in particular the status of the "martyr Assef Shawkat", in the battle against Israel. The increased support from Iran and Hezbollah is a clear indication that Assad's allies will do whatever it takes to maintain the regime. At the same time, this puts them at odds with prospects for a post-Assad Syria, as is well understood off the record by supporters of the alliance with Assad.

The third feature of the escalation in Syria is that Assad's all-out strategy is bringing in its wake a radicalization of armed opposition. What started a year and a half ago as peaceful and non-sectarian demonstrations is inexorably becoming an insurrection (see image 1), sadly driven by a sectarian narrative ("the Sunni majority against the Alawis"). As a consequence, the international image of the rebellion has been tarnished by repeated cases of massacres.

There is indeed a stark contrast by comparison with the siege of Homs in the spring of 2012, which marked the high point of the international community's concern for the condition of the Syrian population: the "mother-battle" (*Oum-Maaraka*) of Aleppo last September intensified the conflict, but at the risk of forfeiting further support from the population. Videos of rebels cold-bloodedly executing rich Sunni Aleppans who backed the regime for economic reasons have spread across the country and have alienated many supporters.

Image 1. Anti-regime forces write on the first photograph, "This is how we started and you did not understand"; on the second photograph, "Here is what we became, from now on you will understand".

Exhausted by a protracted war, some of the people in the big cities who initially supported peaceful revolution are becoming embittered: they cannot identify with the current escalation, and feel that they have been turned into pawns on a regional chessboard pitting Assad against his enemies (namely the West and the Gulf Cooperation Council monarchies). Faced with food and energy shortages, continuing unemployment and no short-term prospects of improved living conditions, the Syrians are increasingly coming to demand nothing more than their safety – with or without Assad.

The radicalization of the opposition should by no means give credit to Assad's narrative

of "Syria under the attack of terrorists sponsored by foreign powers". As both sides reached breaking point and Assad made it clear that the end-state would be either him or chaos (see image 2), the opposition had no real choice but to accept this winner-takes-all logic that means its own radicalization. It has thus been trapped in a spiral of escalation that may jeopardize its popular appeal. Overall, though, the fact remains that neither the regime nor the rebels seem able to achieve victory and hold the territory. Under these circumstances, the vertical escalation is likely to worsen during the weeks ahead.

Image 2. Assad supporters write on a wall in Damascus, "Assad or we burn the country".

The horizontal escalation is illustrated by the regional effects of the war, particularly in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel. For the last two years, decision-makers within NATO countries have hoped, if not that the Syrian crisis would be solved, at least that it would remain within the country's borders. This hope is steadily eroding as the crisis spreads across the region. The harsh reality is that the regional effects of the Syrian conflict may well surpass those of the Iraqi civil war of 2006-2007, which for many in the West remains the darkest period in the recent history of the Middle East.

The closest challenge for NATO regarding the regionalization of the conflict is the rapidly worsening situation in northern Syria, which is fuelling Turkey's security concerns. Repeated cross-border violence from Syrian forces targeting rebel positions in Turkey has engendered anger in Ankara. The Turkish government's recent request to NATO for the deployment of Patriot missiles operated by member countries (the US, Germany and the Netherlands) along its borders with Syria testifies to the gravity of the situation. In addition, Assad seems to be deliberately playing the Kurdish card against Ankara, withdrawing his forces from areas now controlled by Syria's Democratic Union Party (DUP) – a Kurdish separatist organization. Relations between the DUP and Assad's regime are difficult to assess, but there have been reports of inter-Kurdish clashes between those who benefit from the withdrawal of Assad's troops in the north, namely the DUP, and those who have joined the armed opposition. This "micro-civil war" among Kurds is an additional complicating factor for Turkey.

After Turkey, the country which most obviously stands to suffer from the protracted war in Syria is Lebanon. In spite of the government's attempt to maintain a policy of "dissociation", the country has not managed to remain uninvolved: the long-standing rift in Lebanese politics between pro-Syrian and anti-Syrian camps has been exacerbated. Northern Lebanon (above all the city

of Tripoli), the eastern region of the Bekaa valley and southern Lebanon have since the spring of 2012 been the theatres of repeated clashes between the two camps, and the Lebanese Army has been unable to restore order. In mid-August 2012, former Minister of Information Michel Samaha was arrested on charges of plotting a terrorist attack in northern Lebanon and allegedly taking direct orders from Damascus: this was a reminder to the Lebanese of Syria's long-standing interference in their internal affairs. It was followed in October by a spectacular terrorist attack in the middle of Beirut, killing Wissam al-Hassan. As head of the Lebanese security forces' Information Branch, al-Hassan had been closely involved in the prosecution of Syrian security adviser Michel Samaha for terror plots. In retrospect, the Samaha affair may have been the turning point in terms of Lebanon's becoming dragged into the Syrian crisis (see image 3).

Image 3. A Beirut protester after the killing of Wissam al-Hassan, with the message: "This is what Bashar wants".

With regard to Jordan, the kingdom has been brought under severe pressure by a massive flow of Syrian refugees into the country in recent months. Although Jordan's King Abdallah II has been much more explicit than the Lebanese authorities in his condemnation of Assad's actions (and was the first Arab leader to call on Assad to step down), the Syrian crisis exacerbates the country's own domestic challenges. If there is not yet a substantial threat to its political system, there have been growing demonstrations in Amman against political inertia, massive corruption and negative economic prospects. The King remains a popular symbol, but people in the streets of Amman are increasingly questioning his concrete ability to deliver. Against this background, in the case of Jordan the Syrian crisis acts as an instability multiplier.

Finally, in Israel the government was until late October extremely cautious vis-à-vis Syria, the Netanyahu government being well aware that any Israeli measure would only fuel Assad's narrative of an international conspiracy against him. However, clashes have now grown in earnest on the Golan Heights, the Syrian territory occupied by Israel since 1967. In early November, Syrian tanks entered the demilitarized zone to bomb rebel positions. Benny Gantz, Israel's Chief of Defense, put Israeli forces on high alert and, a few days later, they shelled Syria for the first time since 1973.

An additional source of concern is the war in the Gaza Strip, which broke out in November 2012 between Hamas and the Israeli defence forces. Some observers in Brussels fear a link

with the Syrian question, raising the possibility that Israel's problems on both fronts are attributable to the same source. However, Hamas distanced itself from Assad and shuttered its office in Damascus while at the same time conducting a rapprochement with the Emirate of Qatar – now arguably one of the fiercest enemies of the Syrian regime. This means that any likelihood of Syrian-Hamas coordination to launch a new Israel-Arab war on two fronts is very low, and should remain so in the coming months.

2. Consequences for the Atlantic Alliance

In reality, NATO has been in a state of denial if it thought that the conflict would eventually be contained and that its security interests would not be threatened. The dual escalation process is likely to continue and to grow. This slow but steady spillover of the Syrian crisis in the region has three critical consequences for NATO.

First, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the crisis is becoming more and more the regional centre of gravity, with the stability of most Syria's neighbours depending on the fate of the regime in Damascus. This is an understandable calculus from Bashar al Assad at this stage: to make himself irreplaceable, both domestically and regionally. For this purpose, his forces have been playing a high-aggression strategy, compounding sectarian tensions by exploiting minority fears of the Sunni majority to divide the country and thus projecting clashes to the country's borders with its regional neighbours.

In the meantime, however, Assad's gamble also changes the way the international community and the Atlantic Alliance might address the issue. This is the second consequence: the narrative of the conflict is changing. The debate no longer centres on the legitimacy of a humanitarian intervention together with the pros and cons of the "Responsibility to Protect", a dilemma that has dominated the discussions of Syria in Western circles until today. Nor is it only a question of whether or not to arm the rebellion inside Syria. As events there pose more and more of a threat to the security of its neighbours, the whole of the diplomatic game alters accordingly. In the case of Turkey, the threat is becoming – and, to a certain extent, is already – one that requires defence of a NATO ally. In the case of Jordan, or Israel, regional balance is at stake.

This leads to the third critical consequence that derives from the ongoing civil war in Syria: the growing risk of miscalculation. The regionalization of the conflict now involves a greater number of actors and thus makes it increasingly complicated to predict the possible scale of further escalation. We tend to believe that, all actors being rational, Israel would not mistakenly start a war with Syria, the Lebanese authorities would do everything possible to avoid slipping into a new civil war, and Turkey would not allow itself to be sucked into the Syrian quagmire. In reality, all these assumptions depend on the calculus of each player and their capacity to convey their own resolve to the other parties concerned in order to avoid war. The more the Syrian crisis extends to the Middle East, the more this bal-

ance becomes precarious, and the greater the likelihood of misperceptions leading to ill-advised, potentially disastrous decisions. In other words, the risk of inadvertent escalation dragging NATO into the conflict is now becoming distinctly high.[3]

3. A NATO policy to counter Assad's spillover strategy

If direct military intervention remains out of the question, this does not mean that NATO should continue not to be involved. Having no military role does not mean lacking a diplomatic position. NATO should start to implement a strategy combining a proper declaratory policy and diplomatic engagement with its partners.

By declaratory policy, we refer here to the all too often neglected value of NATO public statements. As of today, NATO's views on the Syrian crisis are barely understood by, or even known to, the regional actors. On the one hand, partners are puzzled by NATO's inertia and its seemingly wait-and-see position; on the other hand, Syria and its allies are convinced that the Alliance is only waiting for the perfect opportunity to jump into the conflict so as to change the Assad regime[4]. Both misperceptions make it urgent to design a communication strategy.
The first priority of this declaratory policy should be to reaffirm the Alliance's resolve to ensure the safety and stability of the NATO member which is immediately involved – Turkey. The second priority should be the securing of NATO's interests in the region (e.g., energy security, countering proliferation of weapons of mass destruction). Needless to say, the transfer of Syrian chemical weapons to a third actor in the region would affect the Alliance.

On the subject of diplomatic engagement, NATO as a whole has to reinforce its exchanges with Mediterranean Dialogue partners like Israel and Jordan which are concerned with fallout from the Syrian crisis. As in previous crises in the Middle East, the Alliance's regional partnerships (both the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative) are under-exploited. Within this diplomatic framework, the Alliance should discuss with its partners their contingency planning and strategies vis-à-vis Assad. The likely arrangement would be bilateral talks (NATO + MD partner), which could take the form of a strategic dialogue or a visit by a NATO delegation, involving civilian and military planners from both sides. Engagement of this sort might help mitigate the risk of miscalculation.

Overall, this means that NATO policy toward Syria should not aim at prioritizing a humanitarian purpose – which remains the concern of the UN, not NATO – or regime change: the focus should be support for regional stability. In that perspective, one very concrete development

[3] In that sense, deploying Patriot missiles to Turkey is one mean of de-escalation by politically reassuring a NATO member.
[4] See, for instance, "NATO preparing the ground for intervention in Syria", *Tehran Times*, 6 October 2012.

that NATO should declared as unacceptable is the transfer of Syrian chemical and biological weapons as well as its ballistic arsenal to a third party like Hezbollah. This horizontal escalation should be pointed out as the ultimate red line for NATO. It means that, if the regime's all-out strategy were to continue, it would be addressed appropriately by the Alliance. This selective, and limited, engagement should be made clear: even though some NATO countries have called on Assad to step down, the Alliance itself will not intervene in Syria to change the regime. But it will show unambiguous determination to honour its commitment to the security of its members, as well as to prevent regional spillover.

Measures like the deployment of missile defense systems in Turkey, engagement with MD partners, and a solid declaratory policy offer the framework for a sound coercive diplomacy – based on a carefully calibrated show of force and the reassurance of NATO's interests in the region – by which NATO can counter Assad's agonistic strategy. The balanced approach which the situation requires will surely be delicate to implement. It will in all likelihood be distorted and used by the Syrian regime to support its narrative of an international conspiracy targeting the country.[5] Additionally, the risk of NATO becoming bogged down in the conflict will remain substantial. However, the Atlantic Alliance can no longer afford to avoid discussing the issue.

[5] Among the many conspiratorial narratives, see the frequent comparison between Assad and Gamal Ab-el Nasser, for instance in Ghalib Kandil (an intellectual close to the Syrian Baath Party), "Al Assad fi 2012 wa Nasser fi 56", http://neworientnews.com/news/fullnews.php?news_id=68044.