Syria: From Non-Religious and Democratic Revolution to ISIS

By Fabrice Balanche[1]

In 2011, there was general agreement that Bashar al-Assad would fall like a ripe fruit after a few months of fighting and that the Syrian revolution was peaceable, non-religious, and democratic. There was no risk of radicalization, for Syrian civil society would supposedly oppose any moves in such a direction. In July 2012, Bassma Kodmani, a member of the Syrian National Coalition, confirmed that her organization had a plan to prevent any drift toward communitarianism in Syria. Certainly, she conceded, there was a risk of this happening, but the Syrian National Coalition should be trusted to prevent it. [2] France 24, The debate: "Guerre en Syrie: un mini-État..."[2] Attacks against minorities and booby-trapped cars in the barracks of the intelligence services were nothing but machinations on the part of the Assad regime. [3] Wladimir Glasman (alias Ignace Leverrier), "Un œil..."[3] This interpretation of events in Syria still persists, with some believing that the suicide bombing that killed forty-one people in an elementary school in the Alawite quarter of Akrama in Homs, in October 2014, was also the work of Bashar al-Assad—supposedly a way of harming his own community to force it to support him. [4] Wladimir Glasman (alias Ignace Leverrier), "Un œil..."[4] Although such ideas may have been conceivable in 2011 or 2012, when there was still confusion about the presence or otherwise of jihadi groups in Syria, it is now rather more difficult to maintain them.

The communitarianism that structures Syrian society was completely ignored, as was the Salafist re-Islamization of Syrian society that began in the 1990s. All of this seems to have escaped the researchers and diplomats who have been stationed in Damascus in recent decades.

It is difficult to be completely objective when analyzing the Syrian crisis, but I will nevertheless try to avoid the same failings that led many intellectuals to have a certain complacency in regard to the USSR.

The same phenomenon is emerging within the humanities and social sciences with respect to the "Arab spring," and particularly in regard to Syria. Many researchers are

caught up in condemnation of Bashar al-Assad's regime in the name of human rights and/or their empathy toward Islamist movements considered as expressions of the people and thus in line with the direction of history (Burgat and Caillet 2012). Such blinders interfere with any rational analysis of the interplay between actors, and prevent an understanding of what is really happening in Syria.

Reading the works of Christian Chesnot, Georges Malbrunot, and Alain Chouet provides an edifying insight into the state of French diplomacy in the Middle East (Chesnot and Malbrunot 2014; Chouet 2013). A comparable study of the state of research in the humanities and social sciences is without doubt required. The freedom of speech granted to researchers, in comparison to the diplomatic duty of confidentiality, has at least enabled some dissenting voices to express their opinion on the subject. Reservations about the quick and painless victory of the "Syrian revolution" initially arose in the field of geopolitics, and particularly from Yves Lacoste, who provided a dispassionate analysis of the power relationships between actors at a local and international level (Lacoste 2014). From 2011, it was clear that Bashar al-Assad would benefit from the unfailing support of Russia (Berthelot 2013) and Iran (Masri 2013), enabling him to resist an insurrection that was quickly supported by the enemies of Iran (Pichon 2014). The internal dimensions of the conflict, however, and in particular the prevailing communitarianism, escaped many analysts due to a lack of true insight into Syria. The links between internal and external power relationships were often missing from their analyses (Balanche 2013).

The Syrian Crisis: A Turning Point in International Relations

The Syrian crisis marks a turning point in international relations: the end of twenty years of Western hegemony since the fall of the USSR. Western intervention in Libya, endorsed by UN resolution 1973, seems likely to be the final operation of its kind for several decades, since the Western powers simply took advantage of Russia and China by claiming that they only wanted to defend the civilian population of Benghazi, while they actually wanted to topple Muammar Gaddafi. For Vladimir Putin, this tactic was unacceptable, and this explains why he responded with exceptional force when it came to Syria: not because Russia had economic and strategic interests of the highest importance in Syria, but simply because his power politics had been called into question. It is true that since September 2015, Russia has moved from high-level

support to direct intervention, but this appears to be led more by events on the ground than by a policy that has been carefully developed over several years.

On three occasions, the Russians and their Chinese allies have vetoed UN Security Council binding resolutions that could lead to Western military intervention in Syria. It is difficult to know what really happened between Russia and the United States in August–September 2013, when the Western powers were planning to bombard Syria as a result of the chemical attacks in the Damascus suburbs. Barack Obama's backtracking was not only due to a lack of enthusiasm in Congress, but the result of serious threats of military escalation from Putin, for Russia does indeed possess military technology capable of impeding the kind of airborne operations that were carried out against Serbia in March 1999. **[5] Interview with an officer from the Ministry of Defense,...**[5] In 2011–12, French diplomats aimed to "nudge Russia" in regard to Syria. **[6] Interview with a French diplomat, March 2012.**[6] Then, disappointed by the Russian reaction, they decided to disregard Moscow's opinion, **[7] Amaury Brelet, "Syrie: la Russie sous pression de l'ONU,"...**[7] particularly as they believed that the Assad regime would collapse like a house of cards within a few months, as Alain Juppé claimed in the European Parliament on February 15, 2012: "Bashar al-Assad will fall." **[8] "Alain Juppé: 'Bachar el-Assad tombera'," lefigaro.fr,...**[8]

On July 18, 2012, an attack in Damascus killed senior Syrian officers, including the defense minister, Daoud Rajiha, and Assef Chawkat, the president's brother-in-law. The rebels were at the gates of Damascus, had taken the Western part of Aleppo, and the Syrian army was retreating on all fronts. In the French Foreign Ministry, the end of the Assad regime was believed to be nigh: it would take only a few days, or a few weeks at most. The Western media were in almost total agreement on this subject.

Why Bashar al-Assad Did Not Fall from Power Like Mubarak, Ben Ali, and Saleh

Unlike the Egyptian, Tunisian, and Yemeni presidents, Bashar al-Assad was supported neither by the West nor by the Gulf countries. Had he had such support, he would have been abandoned by his allies when the demonstrations first began. The case of Yemen is more complicated: Ali Abdullah Saleh resisted for a year before the Saudis finally convinced him to give up power in exchange for an amnesty and protection for the interests of his supporters. This latter promise was not kept in the end by President

Hadi, hence why the Saleh clan has rallied to the Houthis in the current crisis. As for Iran, how could it dream of abandoning such a strategic ally? It patiently built an axis from Tehran to Beirut and opened up a path to the Mediterranean, enabling it to break free of the constraints it had suffered since the Islamic Revolution, since the United States had had the excellent idea of getting rid of its worst enemy: Saddam Hussein. Geopolitics is not simply a game of chess in which the pieces are pushed around: the chessboard also has its own dynamic. In the case of Syria, the Assad regime's survival does not depend only on Iranian and Russian support, but has a real foundation in part of the population and in the armed forces.

The Alawite Community: The Backbone of the Syrian Army

Unlike the Egyptian army, which is highly reliant on the United States, Syrian army officers were not trained in the West, but at first in the USSR, and for the last thirty years in Iran. This important difference explains why the Egyptian army did not support Hosni Mubarak while the Syrian army has remained loyal to Bashar al-Assad. However, it cannot explain everything, for Gaddafi's army, like the Syrian army, was rapidly split into two, and numerous pilots defected with their planes rather than gun down demonstrations or bombard rebel towns. This is not the case with the Syrian air forces, which have seen only one defection since 2011. It is primarily conscripts who have deserted, and more through fear for their lives than refusal to endorse the regime. The media were happy to highlight the hundred or so Syrian generals who had defected, but omitted to mention that the Syrian army includes around 1,200 brigadier generals (*amid*), and that there had been no desertions from the army's hundred major generals (*liwa*) who form the backbone of the system. Defections primarily took place among officers who were on the verge of retirement, yielding to petrodollars, and had been relegated to management or technical posts, such as Salim Idris, the former chief of staff (December 2012–February 2014) of the Free Syrian Army (FSL), and a civil engineer by training. I should further specify that they were all Sunnis. The structure of the Syrian army has never been under threat, as it is dominated by people who are loyal to the Assad regime because they belong to the Alawite community, and more specifically to a small group of initiates. [9] The Alawite religion is initiatory. The religion's...[9] Bashar al-Assad, like his father, personally supervises the promotion and transfer of officers from the level of lieutenant and above. This involves favoring the Alawites, especially members of the Kalbiyya tribe to which he belongs, and preventing the

concentration of Sunni officers in one brigade or one region, in order to prevent any attempts at revolution or a military coup. Such personal involvement in control of the army clearly paid off, since it did not collapse during the uprising. The sole instance of rebellion was that of Lieutenant Tlass and the other Sunni officers from Rastan, the stronghold of Mustafa Tlass, defense minister under Hafez al-Assad, who promoted many people from his tribe within the Syrian army, and ended up turning on the system. This partly explains the disgrace of the Tlass family, which was unable to hold its own stronghold despite having benefited from the generosity of the Assad regime for forty years. The fact that Manaf Tlass was approached by the Western powers to replace Bashar al-Assad also incurred the regime's displeasure toward the family of one of Hafez al-Assad's longest-standing servants.

Resentment Towards the Alawites

The Alawite community forms the backbone of the Syrian regime. Following his accession to power, Hafez al-Assad systematically placed members of his community in all key posts, doubling Sunni ministers and generals with an Alawite deputy who held the real power (Seurat 2012). Over 90 percent of Alawites work for the state, whether in the army, intelligence services, public industries, or the broader civil services. In exchange for their loyalty, the Assad regime bestows subsidies and posts upon Alawites in a classic clientelism exchange. In the 1970–80s, a time of triumphant Baathism and an overdeveloped public sector, most communities found work from the state. But when the country began to liberalize economically, first hesitantly in the 1990s, then without restraint in the 2000s, the state made cuts, and civil service posts were increasingly reserved for Alawites: not through explicit instruction from the Syrian president, but because the civil service had become the preserve of the Alawite community, which preferentially recruited its members at all levels of the system. In mixed areas of Alawites and Sunnis, there was a stark difference in the 2000s between Alawite villages, peopled with peasant-civil servants, and the Sunni villages. In mixed cities such as Baniyas, in the early days of the revolution Sunni demonstrations notably demanded the creation of two thousand jobs for their community in the city's public industries (refinery and thermal power plants), accusing the Alawites (accurately) of monopolizing jobs. The demonstrators in Baniyas also called for an end to co-education in public schools, and respect for the city's Islamic identity. In the area around Baniyas, tensions were particularly fraught between

Alawites and Sunnis, leading to violent clashes such as those in Deraa in March 2011, and massacres, that could be considered ethnic cleansing, in May 2013.

It is not therefore possible to understand how Syrian society works without taking into account the communitarian factor and the Alawites' fear of Sunni reprisals if they lose power. This reflects centuries of persecution and, more recently, the 1980 Aleppo massacre of a group of Alawite cadets, who were carefully separated from their Sunni counterparts by the Muslim Brotherhood who had infiltrated the city's military academy. This event is foremost in all Alawite minds, and since 2011 similar events have occurred, most symbolically the execution of twenty-five Alawite soldiers by ISIS in the amphitheater of Palmyra on May 25, 2015.

The Communitarian Factor Underestimated by Researchers

The slogan chanted during demonstrations in Homs—"The Alawites in the grave and the Christians in Beirut"—during the Arab spring was interpreted by the media as a provocation to the Syrian regime, which they believed was aiming to create tension between communities, scare minorities into supporting it, and destroy the image of the "non-religious and democratic revolution" (Balanche 2015). Even now, despite the evidence of the communitarian civil war and the Islamic nature of the rebellion, many Syrian opponents continue to deny the reality of the situation. Communitarianism is difficult to accept for Arab intellectuals who, like Edward Said, simply accuse the West of having created communitarianism in order to divide the Arabs. This denial of reality can be explained in some utopian minds by a wish to move on from communitarianism, and in others, who are more aware of the importance and longevity of the phenomenon, by bad faith, if not intellectual dishonesty, as they use the idea abundantly for their own benefit even while denying it. In these circumstances it is difficult for a Western researcher to treat communitarianism as an organizing societal factor without being seen as an orientalist, in the pejorative sense of the term, and an accomplice of Americano-Zionist imperialism. However, it is without doubt through communitarian networks in the broadest sense (ethnicity, religion, and tribe) that individuals find work, subsidies, and protection within predatory dictatorships or a religion-based semi-democracy such as Lebanon.

In Syria, communitarianism is the buried aspect of social relations, the main circulatory channel for resources and access to political power. It has been this way for many years, but in 2011 it was thrust into the spotlight with the shrinking and

suppression of the state. Baathism did not succeed in eradicating it. But did it really aim to do so? Baathism was an ideology created by minorities to protect them from the Sunni majority, a universalist ideology that would serve as a firewall against political Sunnism as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood. In Syria it was the Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Ismailis who embraced Baathism en masse, while in Iraq it was the Sunnis who did so to protect themselves from the Shiite majority. The two branches of Baathism were unable to unite, not because of ideological differences, but simply because they had different communitarian interests (Chabry and Chabry 1984).

Understanding Communitarianism through Territory

In reaching these conclusions, the territorial approach developed by geographers has been a way to transcend the quasi-permanent contradiction between discourse and reality. During my first years of research in Syria, at the beginning of the 1990s, I studied the process of administrative division following the Baath accession to power in 1963. The regime defined itself as non-religious, wishing to create a Syrian Arab citizenship and destroy communitarian solidarities, whether these were ethnic, tribal, or religious. One of its methods consisted of breaking the territorial hold of communities through administrative division. And yet entirely the opposite of this took place, since the new administrative entities, in particular the small links in the chain (cantons and districts), corresponded to communitarian bodies. The choice of provincial capitals was a direct result of the communitarian clientelism instituted by the Alawite leaders, primarily Hafez al-Assad. He succeeded in retaining power, unlike his predecessors, precisely because his realism urged him to lean on communitarian structures, putting individuals from his tribe in key posts. This son of the mountains, who had doubtless never read Durkheim, believed that concrete solidarities were more reliable in Syria than organic solidarities, given the country's state of development. This meant that he would find more loyalty in communitarian links than in political solidarities, which create much weaker links unless they also have a communitarian foundation. The Assad system thus maintained communitarianism while dividing the majority Sunni community and preventing the creation of new forms of solidarity. Hafez al-Assad's methods were no different from those used in the rest of the Middle East. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein relied on his Sunni clan from Tikrit, while in Jordan, the Hashemite monarchy recruits its personal guard from the Circassian minority and the rest of the armed forces from native Jordanians

rather than the population of Palestinian origin, who form a majority in the kingdom. The Gulf monarchies are supported by tribalism, which forms the basis for the division of petrol income and social elevation.

The Counterinsurgency

The tools of the humanities and social sciences enable us to understand the causes of the Syrian crisis, whether they are political problems, regional geopolitical conflicts, or socioeconomic issues that were too often ignored during the outbreak of revolution in Syria. Syrian demographic growth had become unsustainable for the resources of the country, which in the economic context was unable to reabsorb endemic unemployment (Balanche 2011a). The exceptional economic growth that Syria experienced in 2005 was merely illusory, as it benefited only a minority of the population: development was limited, and this accentuated frustrations even more. Few economists, however, commented on the roots of the crisis (Aïta 2013), leaving the area to political scientists. This led to the first distortion in our conception of the nature of the rebellion, since the economic motivations of actors were completely absent. But what was lacking in our understanding of the reasons for the insurgency, and above all the counterinsurgency, were the tools of the military.

The Inexorable Advance of the Syrian Rebels

In fall 2012, it was commonly believed that the Syrian regime would collapse before the end of the year. The Syrian army was retreating on all fronts, abandoning the countryside and small towns and withdrawing into the cities, and there were increasing defections throughout 2012. This was in fact, however, a strategic response as part of the counterinsurgency: concentrating troops in the cities, under the control of officers, and dispersing untrustworthy elements among the soldiers. By remaining in the regular army such individuals became informants for the rebels and might then betray military operations, but the regime did not want them to join the insurrection. The ideal way to purge the army of its opponents was to lay traps for them, making them believe they could easily desert and then eliminating them discreetly. Among the officers, it was necessary to promote a new generation of senior soldiers and wait for the rebels to attack their positions.

Initially, it is useless to try and secure territory if the population is hostile and you are uncertain of your army. Small groups of soldiers isolated in villages risk desertion or massacre by groups of insurgents. It is therefore preferable to concentrate troops in cities where, under the supervision of their officers, soldiers are less inclined to desert. As for those who want to join the rebellion, they cannot remain, because in the regular army they become informants for the rebellion and may then betray military operations. It is necessary to eliminate all untrustworthy individuals, above all among the senior soldiers, and ensure the promotion of a new generation of officers. Once the situation becomes clear, it is sufficient to wait for the rebels to attack your positions, as to do so they are obliged to assemble, and leave behind the protection of the civilian population. It is at this moment that the army can eliminate them, since rebel groups can rarely defeat a disciplined and well-equipped regular army (Gallula 2006).

Assad On a Winning Streak Until Winter 2014–15

In May 2013, when the Syrian army and Hezbollah retook the city of al-Qusayr, south-east of Homs, there was amazement in the ranks of the opposition and among those who had predicted the fall of the regime in Christmas 2012. How could they have regained the upper hand? The media erupted, and there were even claims that the Syrian army would retake Aleppo in a matter of weeks. [10] **Morris Loveday, "In Syria, Hezbollah forces appear...**[10] This demonstrated their desperate lack of tools for understanding the military situation. The counterinsurgency was a long-term endeavor that required patience on the part of the government. Its other principle consisted of not reoccupying a territory until the population, fatigued by the chaos of combat, sought security.

It is these two elements that Bashar al-Assad's regime relied upon in bombing infrastructure in the rebel-held zones, so that normal life there became impossible. The civilian population took refuge abroad or in the government-held zone where security reigned. In 2015, of the eight million people internally displaced in Syria, the vast majority were in the government-held area, while the territories held by the rebels had lost three-quarters of their population. [11] **Aron Lund, "The political geography of Syria's war:...**[11] Aleppo is the most characteristic example of this strategy. From January 2014, the Syrian army systematically bombed the rebel areas to the east of the city, and in six months the population had dropped from over a million to less than two hundred thousand people, while now only a few dozen thousand live among the ruins, primarily

fighters and their families. The Syrian army's objective was to surround the rebel-held areas, then once the civilians had left, to reduce the rebels through complete siege warfare, as was the case in Homs. This objective was not achieved because of their failed attempt to completely surround the western part of Aleppo in February 2015. Situated in countryside hostile to the regime and too close to Turkey, which was providing significant support to the rebels, the situation in Aleppo was therefore much less favorable to the Syrian army. In Homs, the rebels stopped receiving aid from Lebanon in spring 2013, when Hezbollah and the Syrian army succeeded in completely closing the Lebanese-Syrian border. Syria's second city thus risked falling into the hands of the rebels, but Russian intervention and reinforcement by dozens of thousands of Shiite fighters from Iraq (and most likely Iran) completely changed the balance of power. The Syrian army and its allies gradually surrounded the rebel-held areas, and cut off routes toward Turkey from where the majority of logistical aid was being sent (Balanche 2016).

From retaking al-Qusayr in spring 2013, to winter 2014–15, the Syrian army gradually took back territorial control. The Damascus–Homs route was freed from the threat of insurrection. The western areas of Aleppo, loyal to the government, were reconnected to Homs by a new route across the steppe. The rebels around Damascus were gradually surrounded in western Ghouta and any serious threat against the capital was eliminated. Bashar al-Assad did of course receive valuable assistance from Hezbollah and the Iraqi Shia militias who had come to reinforce an army weakened by loss and defection. But the regime was also able to mobilize new forces by creating the National Defense Forces (*Difaa Al Watani – Quwāt ad-Difāʿ al-Watanī*). These are district and village militias formed of civilians fighting to protect their lands, who free up the Syrian army from security tasks and allow it to mobilize for new offensives. The combined actions of the Syrian army, the National Defense Forces and the Shia militias were facilitated by division among the rebels. In December 2013, the BBC estimated that the Syrian rebellion included one hundred thousand fighters divided into a thousand groups. [12] **BBC, "Guide to Syrian Rebels," http://www.bbc.com/...**[12] The larger organizations that emerged, ISIS and Al-Nusra, entered into a fratricidal conflict during winter 2013–14, which was further to the benefit of the Syrian army. The political opposition overseas, the Syrian National Coalition, was unable to form a political alternative, and the "moderate" rebels of the Free Syrian Army were eliminated by fundamentalist groups, depriving the West of military representatives on

the ground. The counterinsurgency was thus headed in the right direction. Only one major obstacle remained: the determination of foreign sponsors of the rebellion—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—to topple Bashar al-Assad.

The Unification of the Rebellion Behind the Al-Nusra Front Reverses the Dynamic in Early 2015

Despite the influx of refugees into Turkey and the risks of destabilization linked to the presence of ISIS and the involvement of the PKK in Syria, President Erdogan maintained his anti-Assad policy. Although he now refused to officially support the international coalition against ISIS, he maintained his principle objective: to prevent the reinforcement of the strategic position of the Syrian Kurds, which would risk reinforcing that of the Kurds in Turkey. The king of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, now deceased, maintained his own policy in regard to Syria, and even reconciled with Qatar for the occasion. In summer 2014, these three countries decided to reunite the rebel groups to launch a new offensive against the regime. [13] **Aron Lund, "The Revolutionary Command Council: rebel...**[13] During fall 2014, the various rebel groups in the north-west and south of Syria were invited, by choice or force, to unite around the Al-Nusra Front. The Levant Front (*Jabhat al-Shamiyah*), financed by Qatar, was therefore dissolved in April 2015, and its members rejoined the new coalition, called "The Army of Conquest" (*Jaish al-Fatah*). [14] **Aron Lund, "The end of the Levant front," April 21,...**[14] Between February and April 2015, the new coalition led by the Al-Nusra Front seized several cities in the north-west—Idlib, Jisr ash-Shugur, and Ariha—as well as Bosra in the south. It threatened Aleppo and Daraa, cities which saw intense fighting between the Syrian army and the insurgents.

The rebellion seemed to have succeeded (provisionally?) in forming an armed force capable of competing with the Syrian army. Their recent victories had broken the myth of the army's inexorable advance and were a morale boost for the troops and the population that supported the regime. The counterinsurgency was above all a psychological war with the prime objective of bringing the civilian population back into its camp by all means necessary. Repression was one of the factors in this strategy, but this alone was not enough. It was necessary to convince the population of the regime's ability to restore security as quickly as possible. In spring–summer 2015, the morale of the Assad camp was at its lowest. During a trip to Syria in June 2015, I observed that the Bashar al-Assad regime was struggling to mobilize new recruits to

replace its losses, even from the Alawite population, its most loyal supporters. Young people were hiding to avoid going into the army, with the complicity of villagers who agreed to protect them instead of pushing them to enlist, as they had before. The martyrs' walls that sprang up across the Alawite mountains demonstrated the sacrifice of the community, which felt it had paid a heavy toll for the defense of the regime and the dream of a united Syria. The fall of Jisr ash-Shugur, in April 2015, directly threatened the Alawite region with a rebel attack, and with no active forces to defend them, the Alawites were afraid of being massacred in their stronghold. A revolt by Alawite officers in Damascus in April 2015 forced Bashar al-Assad to send elite units to Latakia, depleting the defenses of Damascus, because some officers were threatening to go to Latakia with their regiments in order to protect their villages. Once again, the situation was completely reversed. The rebels were wiped out from the north-west mountains of Latakia, which they had held since spring 2012. This rebel stronghold represented a direct threat to the Russian airbase at Latakia, as anti-aircraft missiles could have destroyed Russian planes as they took off. Until then, Saudi Arabia had refrained from distributing MANPADS to the rebels, but given this reversal of fortunes, they bypassed the American veto. Russia then heavily bombarded the region, even sending special forces to assist the Syrian army.

Nevertheless, it is not certain that the Syrian army, even with the support of the powerful Russian air force, can retake the whole country. Territorial gains remain limited (800 km^2 since September 2015) and have focused on securing strategic objectives. Bashar al-Assad remains the head of state, but his sovereignty is limited since the country has essentially been partitioned into four main zones, ruled by the Bashar al-Assad regime (from Latakia to Suwayda), ISIS (the Euphrates valley and the steppe as far as Palmyra), the Al-Nusra Front (the north-west and the Hauran), and the PYD (the Kurdish cantons of Afrin, Ayn al-Arab, and Qamishli). The Syrian government therefore seems content to hold the "Syrian core." Its 2016 objective appears to be securing the west of the country by taking back control of the Turkish and Jordanian borders, while eliminating any rebel pockets on the way—western Ghouta, Al-Zabadani, and Al-Rastan—which will also produce symbolic victories designed to improve the morale of the troops. It will not be abandoned by its allies, Russia and Iran. Russia is now deeply involved in Syria, and Iran is reinforcing its presence in the region thanks to the dividends of the nuclear agreement. In addition, Bashar al-Assad's opponents are likely to weaken. Saudi Arabia is trapped by Yemen,

and its elites are divided by the latent coup d'état of the young Mohammad bin Salman, who wants to accelerate the succession to his own benefit. As for Erdogan's Turkey, it must face the resumption of civil war in Kurdistan. Internally, the coalition formed around the Al-Nusra Front is increasingly divided. Ahrar al-Sham and Al-Nusra, the two Salafist pillars of the coalition, regularly clash over control of the "liberated" territory, as was the case with previous coalitions. In these circumstances, the Syrian rebellion's regional sponsors may be tempted to support ISIS, which has shown itself to be strongly effective against the Syrian army. Their wish to topple Assad is far greater than their loyalty to the anti-ISIS international coalition.

ISIS: A Pure Product of the New Middle East

ISIS, also known as Daesh, an acronym for *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī ʿl-ʿIrāq wa-sh-Shām* (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), originated from a split within the Al-Nusra Front in spring 2013. Al-Nusra is the official branch of Al-Qaida in Syria, and ISIS broke with Al-Qaida because it disagreed with Ayman al-Zawahiri's leadership and strategy. The debate is an old one: Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, the founder of Al-Qaida in Mesopotamia, wanted to make Al-Qaida into a mass organization by supporting the fight of Sunni Arabs marginalized by the new Iraqi power dominated by the Shiites, and threatened in the north of the country by the creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Ayman al-Zawahiri, on the other hand, felt that this strategy would reopen discord (*fitna*) between Muslims and distract the organization from its true objective: the fight against the West and the destruction of Israel. Al-Zarqawi had his own ideologist, Abu Musab al-Suri, a Syrian from Aleppo. From 1976 to 1983 he belonged to the paramilitary wing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, before fleeing to Europe and then Afghanistan. He is believed to be behind the bombings in Madrid and London, and the creator of autonomous terrorist cells with the ability to attack the West (Kepel 2008). Al-Zarqawi's death in 2006, and the success of the American counterinsurgency, left the organization dormant until the war in Syria gave it the opportunity to re-emerge from the shadows.

The first fighters from the Al-Nusra Front were clearly identified on the Turkish-Syrian border in spring 2012. They spread across north-east Syria and were involved in the fighting in Aleppo in July 2012. Their major success was the March 2013 capture of Raqqa, the first city in the province to fall entirely into the hands of the rebels. But tension mounted between al-Jolani, the Syrian leader of Al-Nusra, and al-

Baghdadi, his Iraqi second-in-command, who used the organization's foreign fighters to take power and eliminate al-Jolani, but did not succeed in killing him. Al-Nusra and ISIS became two enemy brothers and clashed violently during the winter of 2013–14. ISIS was chased out of the north-west, but took complete control over the Euphrates valley, and in June 2014, it unleashed a lightning offensive in the north of Iraq, taking key Sunni Arab cities including Mosul. Since then, ISIS has controlled a territory of 300,000 km^2, peopled with around ten million inhabitants and rich in hydrocarbons. This territory provides it with its own resources and thus greater autonomy than the other jihadi groups, but this has not prevented it from continuing to receive external financing, notably from the rich inhabitants of the Gulf, both Qatari and Saudi. ISIS has implemented Islamic courts and imposed strict sharia law in the territory under its control. Christians, reduced to the status of "protected persons" (*dhimmi*), and Shiites, threatened with death, have fled the area as well as all those who, regardless of their religion, did not want to live under sharia rule. This is particularly the case for lawyers and judges from the "former regime," who are targeted by ISIS for having administered justice in the name of the state rather than of God. But for the majority of the population ISIS has brought no changes to their daily lives, because they were already living under sharia law. The Euphrates valley is the most underdeveloped region of Syria, with an illiteracy rate above 30 percent (compared to 10 percent nationally) and the highest birth rate in Syria (eight children per woman) due to most women marrying very early (Balanche 2011b). It was not therefore very difficult for ISIS to enforce its rule over this still very traditional society, where the countryside is bound by tribal structures. Indeed, it is through such structures that ISIS imposes its control on the population: they need only include the sons of tribal chiefs in the military apparatus and marry their daughters to local emirs in order to secure lasting alliances. Any tribes that hold out, such as the Al-Shaitat tribe near Deir ez-Zor, are ruthlessly massacred. These tribal alliances are also designed to avert a new counterinsurgency strategy comparable to that in 2006–08 in Iraq, when General Petraeus was able to wipe out Al-Qaida from Mesopotamia with the support of the tribes.

In Syria, the United States must now rely on the Kurds of the PYD to fight against ISIS, which reinforces ISIS's hold over the Arab peoples who fear the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state in the north of the country. During the various assaults on Kurdish areas ISIS has relied on the support of local Arab tribes, motivated by

conquest and the defense of their lands against the Kurds. After their victory in Kobanî, the Kurds took Tell Abyad, an Arab city, securing the link to the Kurdish canton of Qamishli. The capture of Ayn Issa (June 2015) was more difficult because it was situated at the limits of Kurdish territory, and the further the Kurds went south, the more hostility they experienced from the population. Other forces will therefore be required to take back Raqqa from ISIS. The PYD's current objective is rather to connect Kobanî to the canton of Afrin, and to take complete control of Hasakah, where the Syrian army is losing ground to ISIS. The progression of the PYD militia toward Afrin is more difficult than toward the east because between Jarabulus and Azaz the countryside is densely populated with Arabs and Turkmens who are united against the Kurds. Erdogan's Turkey, sickened by the Kurdish advances, will do anything to prevent the creation of a Syrian Kurdistan between Afrin and Iraq, even if it means supporting ISIS, as it did during the attack on Kobanî in June 2015: a first warning for the PYD. **[15]** **All the Western powers knew that the jihadis had entered...**[15]

ISIS is therefore solidly entrenched in the east of Syria and the west of Iraq. It has the support of the Arab Sunni populations who have been marginalized by the Syrian and Iraqi regimes, and feel threatened by the Kurdish and Shiite advances. International coalition air strikes will not succeed in eradicating ISIS, because there are insufficient troops on the ground to retake its positions as they are lost. In Iraq, the Iraqi Army has failed in its offensive and the United States has had to let the Shiite militias take over. Such a remedy may turn out to be even worse, as it is precisely anti-Shiism that motivates support for ISIS. In Syria, the United States is unable to recruit "moderate" fighters for the struggle against ISIS, and they will not work with the Syrian army as long as Bashar al-Assad is in power. Will it decide to accept the good offices of Ahrar al-Sham, a Salafist group allied to the Al-Nusra Front? **[16]** **Washington Post, July 10, 2015, "The deadly consequences...**[16] This group claims to be the only one capable of effectively fighting against ISIS, because they have a mobilizing Islamic ideology to oppose it. They believe that the United States has no legitimacy to define who is or who is not a moderate rebel.

In order to defeat ISIS, our regional allies must actively participate in the war. But for Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, the main target is Bashar al-Assad. Initially Turkey even refused to allow the coalition to use the NATO bases on its soil to bombard ISIS, and it considers ISIS to be a strategic ally against the Kurds. The Arab countries contribute only symbolic assistance, with 95 percent of the air strikes led in fact by the

United States. The petromonarchies of the Gulf allow ISIS to grow, because it has succeeded in breaking the continuity of the pro-Iranian axis, the famous Shiite crescent described by the King of Jordan in 2006. In Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government, led by Masoud Barzani, and the former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, have also played with fire by allowing ISIS to develop. The Kurds saw a Sunni rebellion as an excellent opportunity to seize disputed territories, in particular Kirkuk, and the threat of ISIS enabled al-Maliki to unite the Shiite camp and obtain support from the United States and Iran for his re-election. But Barzani and Maliki both underestimated the strength of ISIS: without intervention from the PKK and Iran, Erbil would have been taken by ISIS in June 2014, and Maliki ended up losing power despite his success in the 2014 legislative elections. Bashar al-Assad himself must take some responsibility for the development of ISIS: the emergence of this new fundamentalist player fed his counterinsurgency ideology and contributed to the flight of frightened populations toward his regime. The fratricidal war between ISIS and Al-Nusra clearly served his interests, which is why the Syrian air forces barely bombarded Raqqa and ISIS's other strongholds until the end of 2014. However, the loss of military bases around Raqqa in fall 2014 and Palmyra in April 2015 changed the game, and since then, the Syrian air force has attacked ISIS as much as the other groups. In fall 2015, the Syrian air force led by Colonel al-Namer (the Tiger) retook the Kuweires military airbase that had been surrounded by ISIS since 2013. They sought at all costs to prevent the garrison from falling and resulting in a massacre like that in Tabqa in November 2013. Following the earlier disaster Bashar al-Assad had promised that no other Syrian soldier would meet such a fate, and this was an absolute condition for the troops to keep faith in their commander. The liberation of Kuweires made it possible to protect eastern Aleppo, and threatened ISIS with encirclement, with the Kurds close to Manbij, in the western part of Aleppo province (Balanche 2016a).

The Syrian army's restraint in regard to ISIS has fed the propaganda of the Syrian opposition, which claims that ISIS was quite simply created by the Syrian intelligence services. They allege that in 2011, Bashar al-Assad, aiming to discredit the "Syrian revolution" and divide its forces, freed a group of Islamist militants from prison, who went on to create ISIS. This argument was taken up in France by various academics and journalists, willfully confounding actor strategy with conspiracy theory. One of the aims of the counterinsurgency is to divide its adversaries and harm in particular its most moderate opponents, as it is they who could represent a credible alternative

political force. Bashar al-Assad did not create ISIS, he simply used it to put the West in a no-win "me or chaos" situation. One which has been highly effective, given that since fall 2013 the United States has abandoned the pursuit of power through force in order to avoid the collapse of Syrian institutions and the arrival of Islamists in Damascus. In Washington, realpolitik quickly reasserted itself in the handling of the Syrian crisis. In Paris it has rather been a matter of "riyal-politics" for the insiders, and "human rights-ism" for the non-believers.

 "From a non-religious and democratic revolution to ISIS": the title may seem daring to some, and a reductive shortcut to others. I chose it to be deliberately provocative, for my goal is to question our view of the Syrian crisis. Certainly, it is not necessarily the same people who demonstrated in spring 2011 in the streets of Damascus who are now butchering hostages. But the fact remains that the "moderates," those who truly supported a non-religious and democratic revolution in Syria, are no longer actors in the rebellion. It is important to link secularism and democracy, for this cannot necessarily be taken for granted with a Syrian opposition that believes Sunni Islam should be the state religion in the name of democracy, since Sunnis form a majority in the country. In February 2012, a new Constitution was promulgated in Syria. The article stipulating that the Baath party must lead the country was removed, in response to a demand from the Syrian opposition, represented at the time by the Syrian National Council. But this same "moderate" opposition provided no criticism of the renewal of the article stipulating that the president of the Republic must be a Muslim. The "moderates" who created the "Local Coordination Committees of Syria" have long-since fled abroad, or have been jailed or radicalized. From the very beginning, it was clear that they were not representative of Syrian society and that they would be quickly outflanked by the fundamentalists. The active players in the rebellion come from the countryside or from informal suburban settlements. They are unknown in the west, because they are from the working classes and only speak Arabic. The civil war has given them the opportunity for lightning-quick social elevation, and they do not intend to lay down their arms if a peace agreement is signed in Geneva between the Syrian government and a Syrian National Coalition with no representation on the ground. The radicalization of the opposition may have its origins in repression. This is the main argument used by the Syrian opposition in exile to explain its failure. But given the weakness of the democrats, the current state of the Syrian crisis seemed inevitable.

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Notes

[1] Lecturer at Université Lyon-II and Visiting Fellow from 2015–16 at the Washington Institute.

[2] France 24, The debate: "Guerre en Syrie: un mini-État alaouite serait-il viable?" (Part 2), 25 July 2014.

[3] Wladimir Glasman (alias Ignace Leverrier), "Un œil sur la Syrie," *Le Monde*, August 21, 2012.

[4] Wladimir Glasman (alias Ignace Leverrier), "Un œil sur la Syrie," *Le Monde*, October 6, 2014.

[5] Interview with an officer from the Ministry of Defense, Paris, December 2013.

[6] Interview with a French diplomat, March 2012.

[7] Amaury Brelet, "Syrie: la Russie sous pression de l'ONU," *JDD*, January 31, 2012.

[8] "Alain Juppé: 'Bachar el-Assad tombera'," *lefigaro.fr*, February 15, 2012.

[9] The Alawite religion is initiatory. The religion's secrets are revealed to adolescent males who wish to deepen their understanding if the sheikh deems them worthy of receiving these secrets. The initiation lasts three years and the initiate must swear on pain of death to never reveal the secrets that have been confided to him. The sheikh then becomes his spiritual father.

[10] Morris Loveday, "In Syria, Hezbollah forces appear ready to attack rebels in city of Aleppo," *The Washington Post*, June 2, 2013.

[11] Aron Lund, "The political geography of Syria's war: an interview with Fabrice Balanche," *Syria in Crisis*, January 30, 2015, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=58875.

[12] BBC, "Guide to Syrian Rebels," http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003.

[13] Aron Lund, "The Revolutionary Command Council: rebel unity in Syria?," December 1, 2014, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

[14] Aron Lund, "The end of the Levant front," April 21, 2015, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

[15] All the Western powers knew that the jihadis had entered Kobanî through Turkish territory, with the complicity of the Turkish authorities. However, no-one officially

recognized that a NATO member was supporting ISIS. Turkey also threatened Europe with breaking off all security cooperation and enabling the departure of Syrian refugees toward Europe if it were criticized. (Interview with a French diplomat, Paris, June 2015).

[16] *Washington Post*, July 10, 2015, "The deadly consequences of mislabeling Syria's revolutionaries."