



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The Syrian Dilemma: Assad and his Allies' Response to the US–Led Intervention

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Sep 2014

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## Introduction

The US has officially started its military campaign against Islamist militant groups in Syria. Air strikes have been carried out by the US-led coalition, targeting the headquarters of the Islamic State (IS) and the Nusra Front in Syria. Bashar al-Assad has welcomed America's intervention, allying himself alongside all "international efforts to combat terrorism", despite him having previously denounced any military operation without the regime's consent as an assault on Syrian sovereignty. Syria's Foreign Ministry stated that the US Secretary of State John Kerry had informed his Syrian counterpart about the attacks via the Iraqi foreign minister. The US state department was quick to deny any military coordination with the regime, but confirmed that its ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, gave her Syrian counterpart advance notice of a military campaign so as to avert any attacks by the regime on American aircrafts.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, in a recent televised speech, avoided taking a clear position on the American attacks in Syria, and focused instead on his party's staunch rejection of Lebanon taking part in the US-led coalition. "Lebanon is able to defend itself", vowed Nasrallah, "and does not need the alliance".<sup>1</sup> On the Iranian side, President Hassan Rouhani called the American attacks illegitimate since they came without the agreement of the Syrian government or a Security Council resolution<sup>2</sup>. This would suggest that had Obama accepted the Iranian and Syrian regimes' offers of coordination with the US-led coalition, the intervention would have been deemed legitimate. It also suggests that Bashar al-Assad has supported US-led attacks in Syria despite there being no coordination or consultation, and without the United States even requesting it from him. No doubt al-Assad has long experience in deflecting American anger and attempting to win American approval, one does wonder however, what is the true position of the Syrian regime and its allies?

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<sup>1</sup> "Nasrallah: We are able on our own to defeat terrorism," *Al-Akhbar* (Lebanon), September 24, 2014, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/216282>.

<sup>2</sup> "Iranian President: The coalition raids on Syria are illegitimate," Iranian Alalam TV, September 23, 2014, <http://www.alalam.ir/news/1634968>.

## The Syrian Regime

Mosul's fall constituted a major blow to the US trained and US equipped Iraqi army, forcing the US to consider renewed embroilment in the region. The turn of events also saw the Syrian regime pushing to ally with the coalition's war against the Islamic State, despite it having refrained from targeting IS headquarters in Raqqa and Aleppo throughout 2013. In fact, not only did the regime wash its hands of the rapid advancement of the Islamic State in its own backyard, but went as far as intervening on its side against the armed Syrian opposition in numerous battles, including those for al-Bab, Manbij, and Raqqa at the beginning of 2014.

As Washington drew nearer to establishing an international alliance against the Islamic State, Assad's forces started to target IS headquarters in Raqqa and Deir al-Zor on a near daily basis, a move that did little to persuade the US to consider the regime a partner in the alliance against terrorism. For the Obama administration, taking on the Islamic State forms part of long-term strategy that would eventually lead – as put by President Obama himself – to the grievances of Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis being addressed, and to their incorporation within a consensual political process. The US administration aspires to create an international coalition whose pillars would be Sunni Arab states, ensuring that Washington, in its confrontation with a group that presents itself as a defender of Sunnis, does not appear to be in alliance with Shiite political forces in the region.

As it stands, the Syrian regime has much to fear. The American Congress has recently agreed to the Obama administration's request for 500 million dollars to arm the "moderate Syrian opposition" and train them in Saudi Arabia. Assad must also realize that Washington's involvement in military action against IS on Syrian territory means that the US is no longer hesitant to embark on military action in Syria, which in itself opens the door for a potential assault on the regime and its forces.

The US-led intervention in Syria might indeed strike a blow at the regime's two strongest opponents among the armed opposition, namely the Islamic State and the Nusra Front, but it also constitutes a threat to the regime. Were Assad's forces to even attempt defy American aircrafts, America would not think twice to strike. There is also the possibility of Washington targeting the regime if Assad's forces are seen to take advantage of the weakening of IS and the Nusra Front, and exert control over the

territory they have seized, or if they were to attempt to strike against the Syrian armed opposition that Washington classifies as moderate.

There is no doubt that Assad's regime takes the statements of US Secretary of State John Kerry seriously, especially in view of his recent threat to make the regime pay the price for its use of chlorine gas against regions controlled by the opposition. The same goes for the statements made by Obama on September 15, in which he threatened to destroy Syrian air defenses if al-Assad "dared" to challenge American aircrafts.<sup>3</sup>

Syria cannot avert the attacks, and neither can it play the card of the right to retaliation, as it usually does after every Israeli attack against Syria. The threat is clear: the regime might itself become a target. Assad has momentarily found a way out, by welcoming the attacks, which are described as targeting terrorism and its instruments. He has however unilaterally decided to join the American coalition although his presence is clearly not welcome. Al- Assad has imposed himself – in the words of Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad – as a "natural ally" of America and of the Gulf states in fighting the Islamic State, a group he had previously claimed was an American and Gulf creation.

## Iran

The Islamic State's control over large swathes of Iraq has dealt a blow to Iranian ambitions throughout the region. The advancement of the Islamic State has led to the fall of the Nouri al-Maliki government, inflicting a terrible defeat on the sectarian-based Iraqi army, and exposing the failure and weakness of the Iranian-affiliated security forces and sectarian militias. The Islamic State has also thwarted Iranian ambitions to create a crescent of influence extending from Tehran to Beirut via Baghdad and Damascus. It is thus only natural that Iran should appear cooperative with Washington's war against IS. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has repeated this sentiment on more than one occasion, most recently at the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, earlier this month, when he stressed that IS could not be defeated by air strikes, but required regional and international coordination and cooperation.

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<sup>3</sup> "Obama threatens to oust Assad if US planes downed in Syrian airspace". Press TV, September 15, 2014,

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2014/09/15/378792/us-to-assad-down-planes-youll-be-out/>.

America's handling of the Iranian offer, however, as with the Syrian regime, suggests that Iran is part of the problem, and that its sectarian policies and those of its allies in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, have contributed to the rise of IS and other radical groups. From America's point of view, it is not possible to combat IS using a visible alliance with Iran, because that would turn the United States into a party in the sectarian war between Muslims. Washington, under pressure from its Arab allies, has thus decided to ignore the Iranian offer of support and refuse Tehran as part of the international coalition, giving rise to Iranian fears of potential new political arrangements – be it in Syria or Iraq – that threaten its interests in the respective countries. American intervention constitutes a double edged sword for Iran and its ally in Damascus, for this intervention turns the conflict into one essentially against terrorism and not against tyranny, but also one that risks putting forward political solutions that challenge Iranian hegemony.

## Hezbollah

Hezbollah's position on the air strikes against Syria, and the creation of an international coalition, is marked by the same contradiction paralyzing its allies. Hezbollah, however, stands to be the main beneficiary of America's latest military campaign. The air strikes are targeting jihadist groups that resemble it in terms of organizational structure and combat style, but oppose it in terms of position, sect, and aims. Hezbollah's daily battles and clashes with the Islamic State have also taken their toll in recent months, becoming a significant burden, be it in the Syrian towns of Qalamon or in Lebanese Aarsal. In this respect, it could be said that Hezbollah finds itself in the same trench as the international coalition in that they share the same goals. However, because of its political rhetoric, its slogan of "resistance and rejection," and hostility towards America, it simply cannot take a stance welcoming the American bombing, as its Syrian ally did. For this reason, Hezbollah's reluctance to take a stance on the attacks on Syria does not come as a surprise, since the air strikes serve it, even if they raise fears similar to those of the Syrian regime.

## Missing from the Picture

The bottom line is that there is a coalition of the willing, and another of those who stand to benefit but who remain anxious about the repercussions entailed. Hence the contradiction between words and deeds that serves to create an impression of chaos. What is missing, however, is the organized political and military representation of the



victims, mainly, the Syrian people, the prime victims of terrorism and tyranny, and the Iraqi people, who have been relentlessly subjected to sectarian exclusion, Iranian hegemony, and terrorism. When America overthrew Saddam Hussein, Iran verbally opposed the war, but did not need to do any more than that, for America had in fact gone to war for Iran. That could happen again, if nobody is there to fill the vacuum. The difference is that there is greater awareness of that fact, and the consequences of what happened in Iraq are still fresh in people's minds. Awareness, however, might not be enough.