

A GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ACTIVATION OF THE SHIITE GEOPOLITICAL FACTOR WITHIN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT GEO- SYSTEM¹.

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Abstract

This paper presents a systemic analysis of the Iran-Syria-Lebanon geopolitical sub-system within the frame of the Wider Middle East geo-complex and in light of the geopolitical factor of the Shiite Islamist movement. We consider that the Shiite Islamist movement, which is represented by Hezbollah in Lebanon and by proxy Shiite organizations in Iraq (Kataeb Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al Haq), has been transformed, under Tehran's management and direction, into an important power redistribution factor in the region. Turkey's foreign policy is evaluated as unsuccessful and dangerous for the security of the state of Israel and the stability of the Middle Eastern geopolitical system, particularly in relation to Ankara's support of radical Islamist groups operating inside Syria. Ankara's policy is also considered as a trigger mechanism for the acceleration of secessionist and state-formation ambitions, such as in the case of the gradual autonomy of an ethnically Kurdish zone in the northeastern Syrian territory. In addition, the US - Russian initiative for the destruction of the chemical arsenal of the Assad regime is evaluated as beneficial for the regional stability. Equally, we evaluate the US - Iranian negotiation process as a strategically agile diplomatic maneuver from Washington's part.

Keywords: *Systems, Sub-systems, Super-system, Shiite Islamist movement, Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, Israel, Syrian Kurds, Turkey, Saudi Arabia*

JEL-Classification: F50,F51,F52

Iran's and Hezbollah's strategy in Syria: a deepening regional crisis

A. The Geopolitical Factor

The *geopolitical factor* of the present analysis is the Shiite Islamist movement, which functions as a power redistribution factor within the examined geo-complex (that is analyzed in the Systems described below). The redistribution of power under consideration is examined within the Geographical Complex/System of the Wider Middle East.

B. Determination of the Systemic Grades

I. The System: Wider Middle East.

II. The Sub-systems: Iran/Syria/Lebanon, Turkey-Syria/Iran/Lebanon

1) The first sub-system: Iran/Syria/Lebanon, as the operator of the geopolitical factor of the Shiite Islamist movement.

2) The second sub-system: Turkey-Syria/Iran/Lebanon, as the typical conflictual sub-system.

III. The Acting Super-system:

The US, the UK, France, Russia and China. The EU, as a whole, is clearly influenced by the London - Washington 'special relationship', which appears as particularly fragile in the case of the Syrian crisis². The UN, as a super-systemic factor, is functionally neutralized in the short-term.

C. From a Syrian crisis to a regional crisis

The system of the wider Middle East has, once again, entered a period of extreme violence and high volatility. Ten years after the Second War in Iraq (2003), it is now Syria that has become the focal point which is sending geopolitical vibrations throughout the region.

Since March 2011, when the first protests against the Assad regime started in southern Syria together with the almost immediate violent crackdown by the regime's forces, the Syrian crisis has been gradually acquiring additional dimensions. From one more string in the chain of the so called 'Arab Spring' revolts (Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen)³, the Syrian crisis was initially transformed into an armed conflict between the regime forces and the insurgents. More specifically, it mutated into an escalating conflict with highly sectarian characteristics (the Sunni majority versus the ruling Alawite minority), while radical Islamist groups (Syrian and non-Syrian that were "imported" into Syria via Turkey) began to exert increased military and ideological influence among the anti-Assad fragmented camp.

By 2012, the escalating Syrian crisis had acquired a deepening regional dimension. Syria was becoming ever more –as Lebanon had in the 1970s and 1980s- the combat zone for the entire Middle East. Throughout the duration of the year 2012, the regional dimension of the Syrian crisis was growing very rapidly. With Syria as a focal point, two competing regional blocs had crystallized: The pro-Assad bloc, consisting of Iran, the Lebanese party *Hezbollah* and Iraq and the anti-Assad bloc, consisting of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates⁴.

Meanwhile, by the middle of 2012 the international dimension of the crisis had also become intensely active: the US, Britain and France supported the opposition forces, while Russia and China backed the Assad regime. These regional and international actors started to provide arms, training and resources to their respective allies within Syria.

By the middle of 2013, the conflict's regional dimension had reached new heights. A US official made the following very accurate note in a recent *International Crisis Group* report: "...the Syrian crisis had evolved and from a Syrian war with regional consequences is becoming a regional war with a Syrian focus"⁵.

D. The activation of the Shiite geopolitical factor: the opposition's military advances trigger the Iranian counterattack

The period from the second half of 2012 up to the first half of 2013 has been, until presently, the most critical period of the Syrian conflict. This is mainly due to two reasons: firstly, because it was during this period of approximately 8 to 10 months, that the Syrian war went through its highest point of combat volatility, when strategically vital territory was initially lost and then retaken by the Assad regime. Secondly, because this volatility and the threat that it posed to the survival of the Assad regime triggered the reaction of the Iranian regime and led to the escalation of the military involvement of Iran and *Hezbollah* (Shiite geopolitical factor) inside Syria.

In particular, in November 2012, the Sunni opposition forces opened new fronts in the north, centre and south of the country⁶. At the end of November, a series of events heightened the sense of the increasing fragility of the Assad regime:

1) A twin car bomb in a Damascus district (the mainly Christian and Druze populated Jaramana) and an attack against the Damascus International Airport⁷.

2) In the middle of December, the opposition forces captured the military academy in al-Muslimiyah outside Aleppo⁸ and engaged with regime forces in the suburb of Daraya, just outside Damascus⁹.

3) In January 2013, the opposition forces were continuing to make serious military gains, both in the Syrian countryside and in various urban centres, such as in the northern city of Aleppo and in the suburbs around the capital Damascus.

4) By the middle of February, opposition forces were engaging with regime troops in various suburbs of Damascus, closing in on the Syrian capital.

5) On 13 February a Reuters journalist reported the following from Damascus: *“The war has not yet reached the heart of the capital, but it is shredding the suburbs. In the past week, government troops backed by air power unleashed fierce barrages on the east of the city in an attempt to flush out rebel groups. Most of central Damascus is controlled by Assad's forces, who have erected checkpoints to stop bomb attacks. The insurgents have so far failed to take territory in the center”*¹⁰.

6) Three weeks later, on 4 March, the Assad regime lost the city of Raqqa, the sixth most populated urban centre in Syria and the first provincial capital to fall under opposition control¹¹.

7) In the middle of March, the opposition forces escalated their offensive against Damascus.

8) On 21 March, a car bomb exploded outside the Al-Iman Mosque in central Mazraa district, killing 42 people, among which the prominent Sunni cleric sheikh Mohamed Al Buti, a staunch supporter of the Assad regime¹².

9) Four days later, anti-regime units launched an extended mortar attack against central Damascus, hitting targets close to the central Baath offices and the TV centre in Umayyad Square¹³.

Therefore, by the end of March 2013, the Assad regime appeared to be under extreme pressure from the opposition. It had lost critical territory around the northern city of Aleppo, the first provincial capital had been lost (Raqqa), as well as part of the strategic town of Qusair in the west close to the Lebanese border, and Damascus was under siege by opposition forces that were able to strike close to the capital centre, at the heart of the regime. (*see Maps 1 & 2*)

A.1. The sub-systemic level: the Iran-Syria dipole and the activation of the sub-systemic Shiite “axis of resistance”

The abovementioned military gains and territorial advances that the Syrian opposition had achieved from November 2012 to March 2013 alarmed Iran (the leading Shiite geopolitical factor). The increasing fragility of the Assad regime, which could lead to its possible collapse, was perceived by Iran as a critical threat for its foreign policy in the wider Middle East. Syria

constitutes a vital part of the 30 year old sub-systemic Iran – Syria - *Hezbollah* geostrategic alliance. A triple alliance to which Tehran, Damascus and southern Beirut (where *Hezbollah*'s HQs are) have given the name “axis of resistance” against US, Israeli and the Gulf states’ geostrategic interests in the Levant.

Firstly, Syria’s strategic importance within this “axis of resistance” is absolutely central for Iran. Syria is the sole state that is a close ally of Iran in the region, a strategic partnership that started in 1979 and one which is based not on religious or ideological foundations¹⁴, but purely on geopolitical data and geostrategic interests. The Assad regime provides Iran with vital strategic depth, which gives Tehran crucial access to the geopolitical system of the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

This access offers multiple advantages to Iran. Firstly, it allows Tehran to transfer weapons and other logistical support to its close non-state ally, the Lebanese party of *Hezbollah*, which has a very powerful paramilitary force. Through *Hezbollah* in southern Lebanon Tehran has the capacity to exert pressure on Israel, thus extracting military and diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis Tel Aviv.

Secondly, Syria’s geographical position in relation to Iraq (a 600km-long common border across western Iraq) provided Iran - during Saddam Hussein’s Baathist rule in Iraq - with a critical pressure line against what at



Map 1. Damascus, the Syrian capital. During the first months of 2013, the opposition forces made military gains in several suburbs of the capital. (Source: BBC)

the time was Tehran’s fiercest geopolitical competitor and enemy. Consequently, after the US intervention in 2003 and the disintegration of the Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein, Syria and Iran encircled the new Iraq and were able to check the US military operations in post-Saddam

Iraq and eventually to maintain a fragile Baghdad government under the de facto control of Tehran.

Finally, this relatively recent control that Tehran exerts on post-Saddam Iraq, has given Iran the unique opportunity to create its own geostrategic power nexus, a horizontal alignment from central Asia to the Mediterranean coast. This is a continuous and enhanced strategic alignment that has its starting point in Iran, crosses through Iraq and Syria and ends in southern Beirut and Lebanon.



Map 2. The northern city of Aleppo is the biggest urban centre in Syria with an official population of 2.1 million people. Aleppo has been fiercely contested between the regime forces and the opposition. In March 2013, 110 bodies were found on the banks of the Aleppo river. (Source: The Guardian)

Syria, with its unique geopolitical centrality within the Middle Eastern geo-systemic power nexus, is the connecting space of this Iranian-inspired horizontal geostrategic alignment. The Assad regime, at the geographic centre of this alignment, provides a double strategic depth, east to the Iraqi Shiite element (*Kazali Network* or *Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq* and *Kataeb Hezbollah*¹⁵), west to the Lebanese Shiite element (*Hezbollah*).

The heightened threat, in March 2013, by the opposition forces against the viability of the Assad regime threatened simultaneously the above mentioned strategic regional architecture of the Iranian regime. The collapse of the Assad regime would automatically break the horizontal geostrategic power nexus that Tehran had gradually created, it would elevate Turkey's regional role in the north, and it would allow the Sunni Gulf states to use the Syrian territory in order to perform a double geopolitical pivot and project their power in both Lebanon and Iraq, enforcing the local Sunni elements against the Shiite ones. Therefore, Tehran decided that, in April 2013, it had to act rapidly and to intervene in Syria in a more drastic manner than it had up to that point.

A.1.1. The Shiite geopolitical factor's activation frame: Iran's counterattacking strategy in Syria

Due to Syria's important place within the abovementioned Iranian geostrategic power nexus, Tehran had supported, almost from the beginning of the insurgency, the Assad regime. It had sent to Damascus military advisors from its elite *Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps* (IRGC) and it had provided the Syrian regime with new weapon systems, cheap oil and credit¹⁶. Furthermore, Iran's close ally in Lebanon, *Hezbollah*, conducted military operations along the porous Lebanon-Syria border east of the Bekaa Valley in order to prevent the transfer of fighters and weapons destined for the Syrian opposition from inside Lebanon.

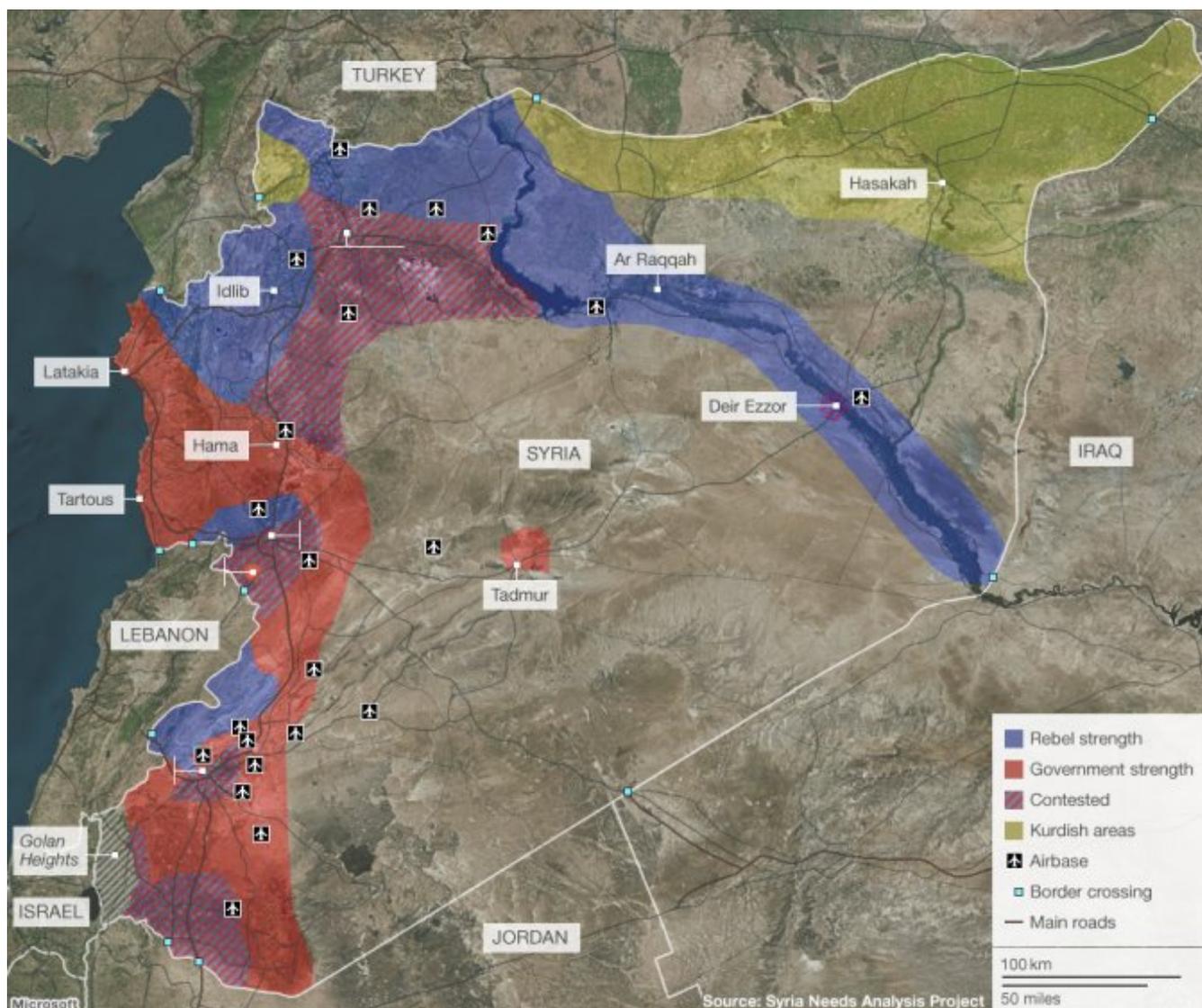
In April 2013 Tehran took the decision to intensify its direct involvement in the Syrian conflict in order to safeguard the continuity of the Assad regime and of course its geostrategic nexus. This elevated and more direct intervention was to be coordinated by the special unit of the *IRGS*, the *Al Quds force*, and spearheaded by the paramilitary forces of Lebanese *Hezbollah*.

The role of the *Al Quds force* in the Iranian intervention in Syria is fundamental. The *Al Quds force* is an elite, covert military unit which operates in the wider Middle East with the mission of promoting the geostrategic aims of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It has been characterized as the Iranian equivalent of a combined Special Forces and the CIA. General Qassem Suleimani is the commander of the *Al Quds force*. A veteran of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Suleimani is one of the most powerful men in Iran. As leader of the *Al Quds force* he is in charge of Iranian policy in Iraq and Syria, while according to a number of sources he is answerable only to the Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei¹⁷.

After March 2013 and the military setbacks of the Assad regime, General Suleimani began coordinating the counterattack of the Syrian regime. He went to Damascus and set up a command centre in the Syrian capital. US journalist Dexter Filkins reported recently that, "*In Damascus he is said to work out of a heavily fortified command post in a nondescript building, where he has installed a multinational array of officers: the heads of the Syrian military, a Hezbollah commander and a coordinator of Iraqi Shiite militias, which Suleimani mobilized and brought to the fight*"¹⁸.

The nature of Suleimani's strategy was both defensive and offensive at the same time. Its main objective was the retaining of the vital territory of central Syria, a large part of land that extends from the eastern Syria-Iraq border through Damascus to the east of the Lebanon-Syria border and then slightly north to the Syrian Mediterranean coast. This stretch of territory constitutes the heartland of Syria and it is where the vast majority of the Alawites (the sect that the Assad family belongs to), the Christians and the Druze live, that is the minorities that support the Assad regime against the Sunni opposition¹⁹.

Furthermore, the retaining of this territory enables the defence of the capital Damascus, which is the heart and base of the regime, while it connects Damascus with the vital and predominantly Alawite coastal towns of Latakia and Tartous (where Russia, a strong supporter of the Assad regime, retains its only naval base in the Eastern Mediterranean). In other words, Suleimani's plan was to reinforce the periphery of Damascus, to cut-off Lebanon and Iraq for the Sunni opposition, but to keep them open for the Shiite paramilitary forces and the Syrian Alawite regime units. (*See Map 3*)



Map 3. Contested areas of the Syrian conflict during the first months of 2013. (Source: Syria Needs Analysis Project)

A.1.2. The nucleus of the activation of the Shiite geopolitical factor: Hezbollah's central role in Iran's strategy

Suleimani's counterattacking strategy was based primarily on the upgrading of *Hezbollah's* military operations inside Syria and secondary on the mobilization of the Iraqi Shiite paramilitary groups *Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq* and *Kataeb Hezbollah*. Both of these Shiite Iraqi groups were very active in numerous attacks against US and British forces in Iraq from 2004 onwards. Its fighters are trained in a number of locations in Iran and Lebanon by experienced *Al Quds* force and Lebanese *Hezbollah* commanders and then take part in military operations inside Syria, particularly in areas around Damascus²⁰.

But undoubtedly, it was the Lebanese *Hezbollah's* decisive involvement that was to spearhead Iran's counterattack in Syria. According to a *Reuters* report, the leader of *Hezbollah*, Hassan Nasrallah, travelled covertly to Tehran in April 2013, where he met with the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, and the commander of the *Al Quds* force, General Qassem Suleimani²¹. According to reports, it was at this meeting that it was agreed that *Hezbollah* was going to assume a much more direct and aggressive role in the Syrian crisis. Its primary – but not singular - aim was to counterattack and defend the eastern flank of the Syrian territory, which was considered vital for the defence and survival of the Assad regime. This eastern flank is composed of the Syrian-Lebanese borders, the territory east of the capital

Damascus and the Homs province which lies on the route of the supply line towards the Syrian Mediterranean coast.

In a televised speech, on 29 April 2013, given by Nasrallah in *Hezbollah's* TV station *Al-Manar*, the leader of the Shiite party announced publicly that *Hezbollah* "could become more deeply involved in the Syrian crisis" and that "Syria had real friends who would not allow it to fall into the hands of America, Israel and Islamic extremists"²². It was an acknowledgment that *Hezbollah* was already operating in Lebanon, but also a threat that, if needed, the Shiite geostrategic axis, *Hezbollah* and Iran, were ready to defend the survival of the Syrian regime more actively. Then, in early May 2013 came a new speech by Nasrallah, this time an official confirmation of *Hezbollah's* active and extensive military involvement in Syria, and at the same time a statement of intent and a clear message towards the powers that are opposing the Assad regime, naming in particular the US, Israel and the Sunni Islamists. During the same period, an unconfirmed number of *Hezbollah's* elite fighters were taking part in military operations near and around the strategically located town of Qusair in Homs province, in coordination with units of the Syrian army.

But prior to the active military involvement of *Hezbollah* in the strategically vital battle of Qusair, its fighters were also involved in the organization of the defense of the Sayyida Zeynab shrine in southern Damascus. It is considered one of the most sacred sites for Shiite Muslims and it is named after Zeynab, the daughter of Imam Ali (and founding father of Shiite Islam), who is buried within the gold-domed shrine in the southern suburbs of Damascus. According to many sources, a few months ago, after two failed attempts by Sunni jihadists to destroy the shrine, *Hezbollah* sent a small detachment in order to protect the shrine, along with other Shiites from Iraq and Syria itself. The defense unit that now protects the Sayyida Zeynab shrine has been named *Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas* brigade, or *Kataeb al-Abbas*²³ after the son of Imam Ali and brother of Zeynab²⁴.

Beyond the religious significance of the protection of the Sayyida Zeynab shrine in Damascus, there is another, practical one. The call for its protection by the leadership of the *Al Quds* force and the leadership of *Hezbollah* has also been utilized as a mobilization call for all Shiites across the Middle East and has been providing ideological legitimacy to the military involvement of Lebanese, Iraqi and Iranian Shiite fighters inside Syrian territory. In any event, Iran and *Hezbollah*, have used the sectarian card in their rhetoric in order to facilitate the mobilization of the Shiite public opinion with regards to their intervention in Syria.

In the middle of May 2013, an elite *Hezbollah* unit along with Syrian army units, launched a counterattack in order to retake Qusair from the Syrian opposition forces. The town of Qusair, with a population of around 50.000 people, is located 35 kilometers southwest of Homs, thus linking the strategically important route from Damascus to the Syrian coast and Lebanon²⁵. The Assad regime needs to control this route, which connects its base in Damascus with the predominantly Alawite Syrian coast and the Lebanese Shiite border towns and villages. On the other hand, the Syrian opposition has been trying for many months to cut this route and isolate Damascus from the Syrian coast and northeastern Lebanon. (*See Map 4*)



Map 4. Qusair (indicated above in red) is a strategically located town that connects the capital Damascus with Latakia, the Alawite Syrian coast, as well as northern Lebanon. (Source: The Guardian)

According to Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “it was *Hezbollah* that was leading the battle in *Al-Qusair*, with its elite forces”²⁶. Furthermore, this battle brought Shiite *Hezbollah* in a direct confrontation with the Sunni extremist organization *Jabhat al-Nusra*²⁷. This organization is the most powerful Islamist group among the Syrian opposition and has recently declared itself affiliated and linked with *Al Qaeda*²⁸.

On 5 June, after two weeks of intense urban warfare, Qusair fell under the control of *Hezbollah* and the Syrian army units. *Hezbollah* had made use of its experience in asymmetric warfare tactics and its urban warfare training and it had shifted the balance of this crucial battle in favor of the Syrian regime. According to reports, *Hezbollah* had used around 2.000 of its elite fighters in the battle of Qusair and had suffered between 150-200 casualties. In the aftermath of the battle, Iran released an official statement, with which it congratulated “the Syrian people for their victory”²⁹.

B.1. The systemic level: *Hezbollah*'s systemic aspirations in Syria

In the case of *Hezbollah*, its strength relies not only with the advanced arsenal that it has managed to acquire through Iran and Syria, but also with its geographical position vis-à-vis Israel and in relation to the Tehran-Damascus geostrategic dipole. Therefore, the event of a regime change in Damascus would present *Hezbollah* with an almost existential challenge. The primary objective for *Hezbollah* is to sustain its asymmetric warfare capabilities against Israel. Within the frame of the Middle East geo-system, *Hezbollah*'s primal systemic objective is to ensure for itself three fundamental geostrategic necessities:

a. *The preservation of the strategic depth that is provided to Hezbollah by the Assad regime, particularly in relation to the party's ongoing confrontation with Israel.* The survival of the Assad regime is absolutely vital for the continuation of the Tehran-Damascus-south Lebanon “resistance axis”. The Syrian territory, east and north-east of the strategically important Bekaa Valley (the birthplace and first HQ of *Hezbollah* in 1982), allows the Shiite organization vital ‘breathing space’. A regime change in Damascus would confine *Hezbollah* in a very tight territory, isolated between the Mediterranean Sea in the west (which is closely patrolled by the Israeli Navy and Air Force), the Israeli borders in the south, the Sunni Lebanese territory in the north and the new, presumably hostile, Syrian regime in the east and northeast. In such an event, *Hezbollah* could find itself geographically, but more importantly, geopolitically isolated.

b. *The maintenance of the weapons route, from Iran and Syria.* *Hezbollah* bases its attacking capability on the advanced weapon systems that it receives from primarily Iran, but

also Syria. This route is usually by air, from Tehran to Damascus airport and then on land, through the Syrian territory and into the Bekaa valley. The May 2013 Israeli surgical strikes within Syria were aiming to avert the acquisition of the Iranian produced Fateh-110 missiles by *Hezbollah*. These missiles have a range of 300 km, and Israel declared, after the airstrikes (on 3 and 5 May 2013) that it will not “*allow game-changing weapons falling into the hands of Hezbollah*”. The first air strike, on 3 May, hit a target in Damascus airport, while the second and biggest one, hit targets close to the city of Damascus, in particular bases of the elite *Republican Guard* and a military research centre. In comments made by Israeli government officials, the Israeli side denied any direct involvement in the Syrian crisis, but made clear that it would act again in order to prevent the strengthening of *Hezbollah*. “*Israel*”, said the official, “*will continue its policy of interdicting attempts to strengthen Hezbollah, but will not intercede in the Syrian civil war as long as Assad desists from direct or indirect attacks against Israel*”³⁰.

A few months earlier, in January 2013, Israel had also struck a convoy that was heading to Lebanon, close to the Bekaa valley. It was later confirmed that the convoy of trucks was carrying SA-17 anti-aircraft systems destined for *Hezbollah*³¹. These missiles are Russian-made and were transported recently by Moscow to the Assad regime³². A former Mossad operations officer commented recently that “*the absolute top priority of the Israeli government – and by extension the intelligence community and the military – is the prevention of a first strike weapons capability that threatens Israel’s population centers from reaching the hands of Hezbollah*”³³.

Indeed, after the eruption of the Syrian crisis, Israel has drafted a Syria strategy that focuses mainly on the prevention of the strengthening of *Hezbollah’s* arsenal. A strategy that consists of a combination of advanced intelligence via satellite and drone technology and surgical airstrikes. On the other side, *Hezbollah* has attempted to utilize its clandestine operations inside Syria in order to acquire more powerful missiles in its arsenal. In order to do so, the Shiite organization has had to evade the Israeli aerial control. According to Israeli sources, *Hezbollah* has managed to acquire at least 8 Scud-D missiles (which have a range of 300 km, but are less accurate than the Fateh-110 missiles) from Syria³⁴.

c. The continuation of Hezbollah’s military superiority inside Lebanon. In light of the higher sectarian tensions that the Syrian crisis has spread across the Levant (Syria, Lebanon and Iraq), it is imperative for the Shiite *Hezbollah* to maintain its military superiority against its Sunni adversaries within Lebanon. Since the start of the Syrian crisis, the north and north-east parts of Lebanon have become transit points for logistical support for the Syrian Sunni opposition. But it is the ever rising Sunni Islamist *Jabhat al-Nusra*, an extremist organization connected with *Al-Qaeda*, that poses a new challenge for *Hezbollah* in Lebanon. *Jabhat al-Nusra*³⁵ was formed in Syria in January 2012 and it is a direct product of the ferocity of the Syrian conflict. Since then, it has grown speedily, drawing fighters from the wider Middle East. The formation and growth of *Jabhat al-Nusra* is directly connected to *Lebanon*, since many Lebanese Sunnis joined its ranks after the eruption of the Syrian conflict. These originate particularly from the Palestinian refugee camps, as well as the northern city of Tripoli, historically as well as recently, an important urban centre for Sunni Islamist groups³⁶.

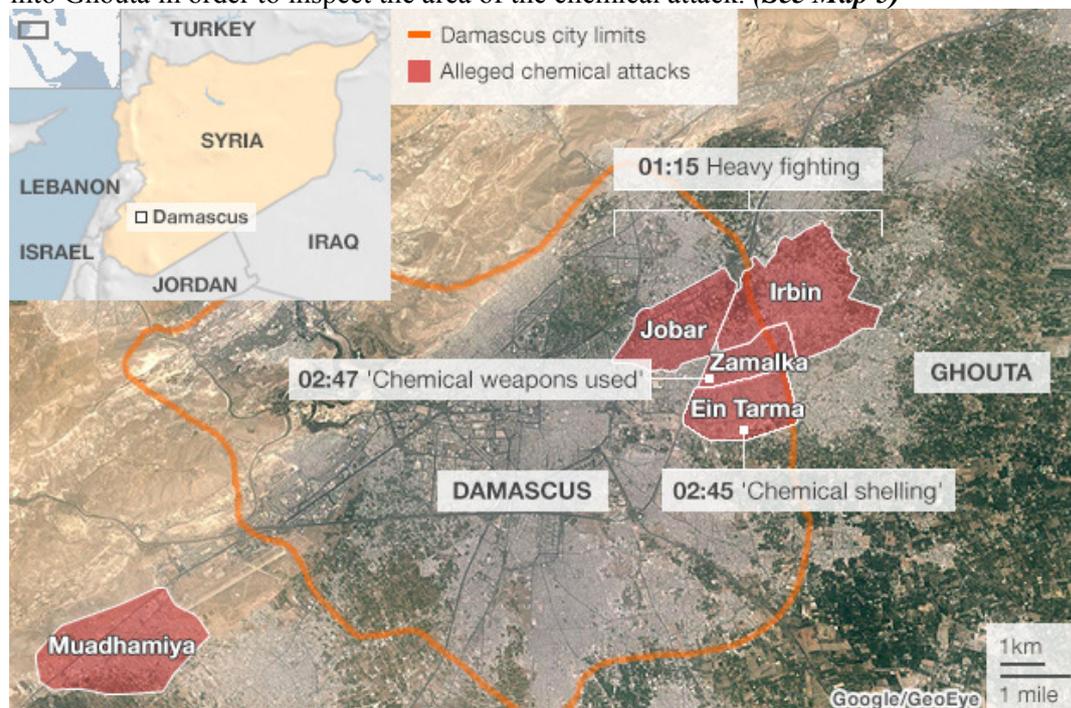
The Palestinian refugee camp of *Ain al-Hilweh* in Sidon, in south Lebanon, is also a base of a number of Sunni Islamist groups (such as the *Abdullah Azzam Brigades*, the *Osbat al-Ansar* and the *Jund al-Sham*), which are believed to have close ties with *Al Qaeda* in general and *Jabhat al-Nusra* in Syria³⁷. According to the Lebanese daily newspaper *Al-Akhbar*: “*Jabhat al-Nusra has been attempting to establish a base in the Ain al-Hilweh camp*”³⁸, while in Tripoli, in the north of Lebanon, which is already dominated by Salafi groups, *Jabhat al-Nusra* has a strong presence³⁹.

The military operations of *Hezbollah* inside Syria, and particularly in the battle for Al-Qusair, lead to the direct confrontation between the Sunni fighters of *Jabhat al-Nusra* and the Shiite fighters of *Hezbollah*. After these developments, *Jabhat al-Nusra* threatened to attack *Hezbollah* in its base, in Dahiye, in the southern suburbs of Beirut⁴⁰. A possible regime change in Syria, which would include a Sunni Islamist element, would constitute an imminent danger for the current power balance within Lebanon. In other words, a new Sunni Syrian regime would most probably attempt to reshape the internal balance of power in Lebanon

against *Hezbollah*, through the advancement of the military ascending of Sunni Islamist groups such as *Jabhat al-Nusra*.

C.1. The super-systemic level: repercussions of a pivotal event in Syria

On 21 August 2013 took place one of the most critical and pivotal events of the Syrian civil war: a chemical attack in the eastern Damascus suburb of Ghouta, an area that had been contested by opposition forces. The attack was launched with surface to surface missiles and the nerve agent that was utilized was sarin gas⁴¹. On 26 August, UN inspectors were allowed into Ghouta in order to inspect the area of the chemical attack. (See Map 5)



Map 5. Locations of the chemical attacks of the 21st of August 2013. (Source: BBC).

Meanwhile, a complex diplomatic procedure was taking place, since according to US President Obama's 'red line statement', the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime was subject to a military response by the US and its allies. Turkey, France and the Gulf States pressed hard on the US in order to intervene militarily against Damascus, while the British Parliament rejected David Cameron's call for an airstrike.

This particular event, the rejection of Cameron's call for an airstrike by the British Parliament, is diplomatically very important, since it constitutes an unexpected breach on the geostrategic dipole of Washington and London on a critical issue which is related to their projection of power in the Middle East. Furthermore, it is an event that dealt a vital blow to Washington's determination to proceed to the enforcement of the measures that President Obama had announced in the event of Damascus crossing the 'red line' (namely the use of chemical weapons).

For a number of days, during the beginning of September, all indications were leading to an imminent airstrike by the US against the Assad regime, which, depending on its time and target extent, could even lead to the collapse of the Assad regime. On the other hand, Russia vehemently opposed the use of force against Damascus, claiming also that the chemical attack was carried out by opposition forces, with the aim of forcing the US to strike Damascus. At the same time, Iranian military sources were threatening the US with serious consequences in the event of an US strike inside Syria. During those September days, the wider Middle East was on the verge of a serious military escalation, which would, without doubt, entail critical repercussions for the whole region.

After the Obama and Putin meeting in Saint Petersburg during the G-20 summit (6 September 2013)⁴² and after John Kerry's "gaffe" during a press conference (9 September 2013)⁴³ regarding the possibility of a political solution in case the Assad regime surrendered all its chemical arsenal, the international community witnessed an impressive switch of the

rigid US stance regarding a military intervention in Syria. Certainly, the rejection of the British parliament of British PM David Cameron's proposal for military action against Syria (29 August 2013), as well as the US current financial fragility and the absence of a legalizing support by the UN Security Council, did play an important role in this abrupt change of the US stance.

Therefore, suddenly and only a few days later and with what at the time seemed an unexpected U-turn, the US and Russia reached, on 14 September, an agreement for the UN to destroy Assad's chemical arsenal⁴⁴. It was, primarily, the result of a very important intervention of the Russian factor on the super-systemic level, which totally reversed the climate of an impending escalation of the crisis in the Middle East. An escalated crisis that would not be confined within Syria, but it would also involve the system of the wider Middle East, as well as super-systemic factors such as Russia and China⁴⁵. The US-Russian agreement was materialized on 26 September, under a UN Security Council Resolution and the beginning of the UN mission inside Syria at the beginning of October⁴⁶.

Conclusions

General implications of the US-Russia agreement

i) Increase of the viability and legitimacy of the Assad regime

The US-Russian agreement averted an imminent US airstrike and set in motion the destruction of the Syrian chemical stockpile, but it also reframed the regional geopolitical competition which is taking place and it has Syria as its focal point. The implications of the agreement were primarily evident inside Syria. The Assad regime had avoided the impact that a US airstrike –whether smaller or larger in scope- would have on its military and organizational capabilities and that could, eventually, threaten its viability. Furthermore, the almost immediate agreement by the Assad regime to comply with the UN resolution and with the destruction of its chemical weapons arsenal provided Damascus with a form of legitimacy vis-à-vis the western powers.

ii) Widening of the rift between Syrian moderates and Islamists

On the other hand, the US-Russia agreement dealt a heavy blow to the Syrian opposition, and particularly to the *Syrian National Coalition* and the *Free Syrian Army*, which had invested its efforts on a US military strike against the Assad regime. This led to further fragmentation of the anti-Assad forces and widened the rift between the Syrian moderate opposition forces and the Islamist opposition forces. This was a rapid process and an almost direct repercussion of the aversion of the US airstrikes: the crystallization of Assad's survival in Damascus shifted the immediate strategic targets of the Islamist groups (the *Jabhat al Nusra*, the *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS* among others) that operate inside Syria, which opted now not for the militarily unrealistic removal of the Assad regime, but for their consolidation in Syrian territory that the Assad forces have already been pushed back from. This has often led the Islamist groups in direct confrontation with units of the *Free Syrian Army*⁴⁷.

Within this context, on 25 September 2013, most of the Islamist groups fighting against the Assad regime inside Syria announced their cooperation under the title *Islamic Alliance* and stated their separation from the *Syrian National Coalition* (based in Istanbul), as they aimed to achieve increased military effectiveness on the battleground⁴⁸. This development resulted not only in further armed confrontation between units of the *Free Syrian Army* and the Islamists, but it has also profited further the Assad regime, which sees its enemies fragmented and weakened. At the same time, the formation of the *Islamic Alliance* strengthens President Assad's rhetoric, which presents the Syrian war as a battle between the regime and Islamic terrorism⁴⁹. Furthermore, these developments have led to high numbers of fighters of the *FSA* joining Islamist groups, which are more effective, more organized and have better funding⁵⁰.

At this point it is important to make two observations: Firstly, that this form of fighter movement (from secular to Islamist groups) indicates towards two directions: that the number of the Islamist members within the secular opposition groups were higher than previously

calculated and that the military effectiveness of the Islamist groups (as opposed to that of the secular groups) proves to be an important incentive for the growth of the man-power of the radical Islamist groups.

Secondly, that the Islamist government of Turkey has facilitated, through its political help and resources, this growth of the Islamist groups against the secular ones⁵¹. Turkey's backing of Islamist groups in Syria has alienated some of its traditional allies (such as the US) and has heightened the international pressure towards Erdogan's government. Furthermore, this perilous strategy of facilitating the transport of fighters that are –ideologically or militarily - related to *Al Qaeda*, ultimately run counter to what Ankara aimed for. It has added legitimacy to Assad's claims that his regime is defending Syria against Islamic terrorism and has shifted the international agenda from Assad's violent reaction to the growth of *Al Qaeda*'s influence in Syria⁵².

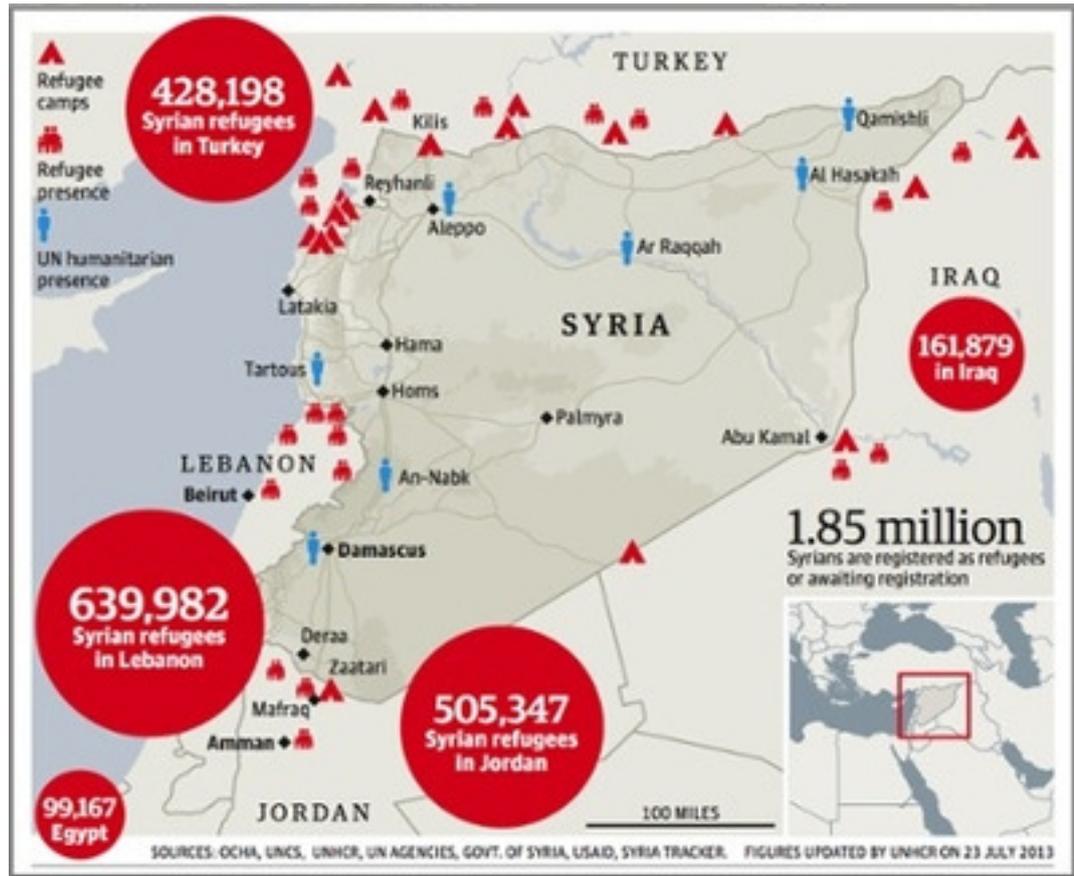
Recently (11 October 2013), the US-based Human Rights Watch organization published an extensive report on human rights violations that Islamist fighters had committed in the region of Latakia during August 2013. In the report, the organization is expressing fierce criticism for Turkey's role regarding the presence of foreign fighters in northwestern Syria: "*According to Syrian security officials, media reports, western diplomats, and direct observations by journalists and humanitarian workers who visited the area in the past, many foreign fighters operating in northern Syria gain access to Syria via Turkey, from which they also smuggle their weapons, obtain money and other supplies, and sometimes retreat to for medical treatment (...) A western diplomat told Human Rights Watch that diplomats from several EU member state missions in Ankara are very concerned about the transiting of nationals from European and other countries through Turkey to Syria*"⁵³.

iii) Turkey and Saudi Arabia sidelined

The regional implications of the US-Russia agreement are even more significant. The regional actors that were pressing the US towards the direction of a military strike were sidelined, primarily Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Both Ankara and Riyadh had been strong advocates for a wider military airstrike against Damascus and the removal of the Assad regime.

With regards to Turkey, the US-Russia agreement was the second biggest geopolitical setback after the removal of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi earlier in the summer of 2013. In both cases Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had invested major diplomatic and geopolitical capital. Erdogan has supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, Egypt and Syria. So Ankara has pursued a Sunni and Muslim Brotherhood-orientated foreign policy in the Wider Middle East, which has, nevertheless, backfired heavily and more spectacularly in Egypt and Syria. Many Turkish political analysts have characterized Erdogan's wider Brotherhood backing as failed risk, not only for Turkey but for the entire Eastern Mediterranean.⁵⁴

Political analyst Daniel Pipes observed recently the following with regards to the Turkish foreign policy and the eastern Mediterranean security system: "*Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu have pursued an ambitious foreign policy of "zero problems with neighbors" which, ironically, has led instead to zero friends. Strained relations with Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Serbia, raise the prospect of Ankara reverting to an older Turkish pattern and lashing out at Cyprus and Greece. In both cases, for instance, it could encourage disruptive refugee flows. This is where the brutal civil war underway in Syria, just 70 miles (110 km) away, enters the equation. So far, that conflict has not had a major impact on Cyprus, but the island's proximity, its minimal defense capabilities, and its membership in the European Union (meaning, an illegal immigrant setting foot on Cyprus is close to reaching Germany or France) make it exceedingly vulnerable. The 2.2 million refugees from Syria since 2011 (See Map 6) have so far bypassed in favor of (in descending order) Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, and Iraq, but that could quickly change if the Alawites living closest to Cyprus take to the sea in sizeable numbers. Or if Ankara encourages Syrians to emigrate to northern Cyprus and then to sneak across the border into the republic*"⁵⁵.



Map 6. July 2013 estimates of Syrian refugees show that Cyprus has so far escaped the influx.

At the moment, Turkey stands sidelined and its foreign policy in the Middle East seems to be in a kind of uneasy limbo. Ankara's geopolitical orientation is out of focus and Turkey remains at odds with all the major regional actors: with Iran (over Syria), with Israel (over Gaza Strip) and with Saudi Arabia (over Egypt, as Turkey supports the Egyptian Brotherhood that is an ideological and historic enemy of Riyadh).

Furthermore, the military growth of the radical Sunni Islamist groups - which also directed their attacks against the Syrian Kurdish territory on the north and northeast of Syria⁵⁶ - led to Assad's decision to utilize the Kurdish military reaction against the Islamist opposition groups and to cede the northern territory that is Kurdish-populated to the leadership of the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the party that is related to the PKK in Turkey. This move has led to the re-rising of future secessionist tensions in the Kurdish-populated southeastern Turkey. Additionally, this de facto alliance between the Syrian regime and the Kurdish PYD has offered Assad a double advantage: it has created a zone that disrupts the flowing of foreign Islamist fighters entering Syria territory from Turkey, as well as an important military diversion vis-à-vis Ankara's Syrian strategy.

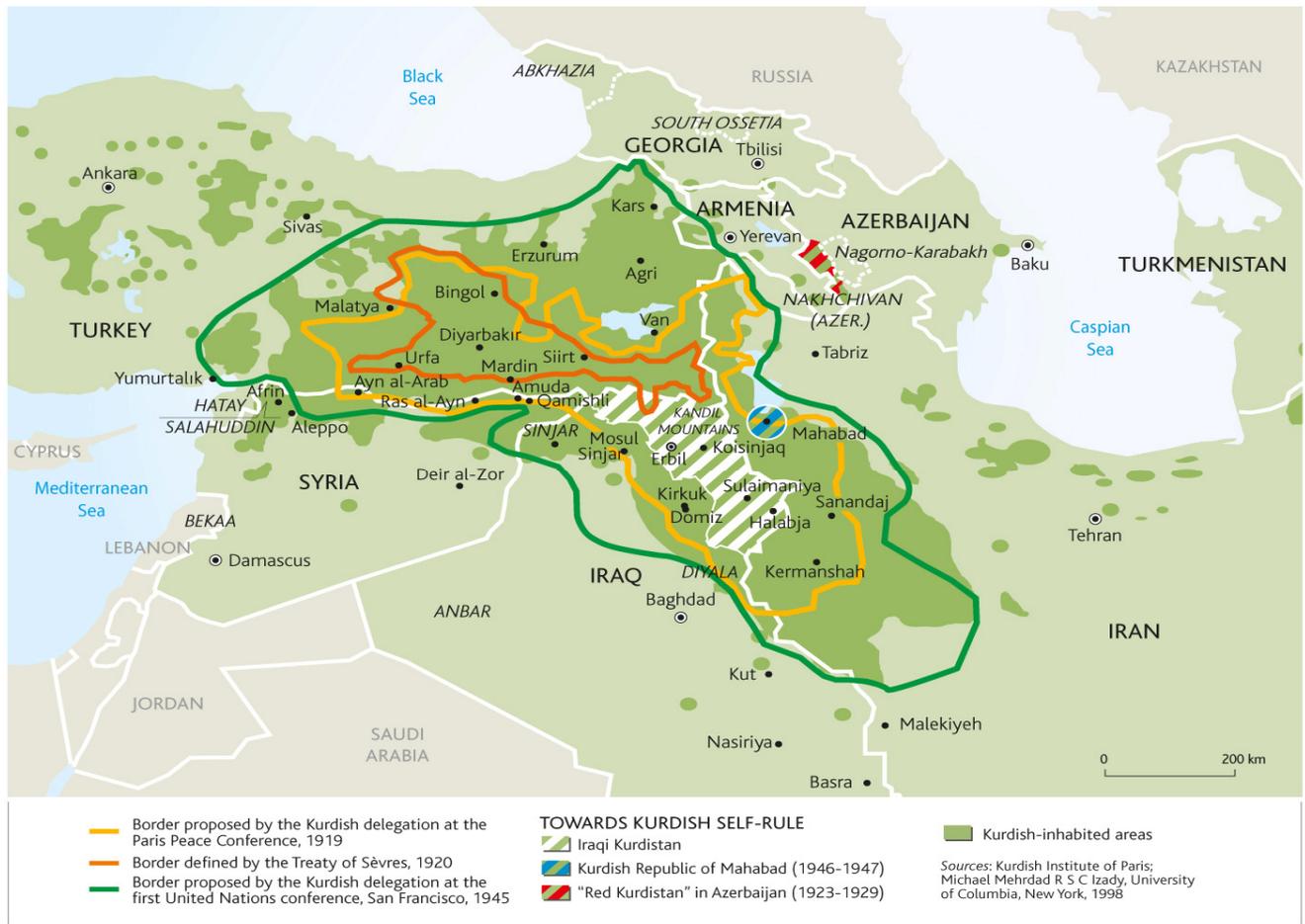
During the months of October and November 2013, the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) defeated the Islamist groups in a series of clashes in northeast Syria and managed to secure a large part of the Kurdish-populated northeast Hasakah province of Syria⁵⁷. This increased military and subsequently political autonomy of the Syrian-Kurdish territory in the northeast, which is a direct result of the Syrian conflict, has also wider regional repercussions. Firstly and in the short-term, for the first time it creates a continuous, if only informal, territorial space, connecting the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq with the 'autonomous' Syrian-Kurdish territory. Secondly, this de facto autonomy of the Kurdish-populated territory and the growing synergy of the DYP with the PKK could lead to a chain-reaction process, re-charge the separatist tendencies of the PKK militants in Turkey, a development which could lead to a new phase of conflict and instability in the adjoining Kurdish-populated territory of southeastern Turkey. (See Map 7)

Ankara, on the other side and in order to monitor such future tendencies, has been fostering its economic and energy relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Masoud Barzani in Iraq. Only recently, the KRG agreed with the Erdogan government to the construction of a second pipeline that will transfer the northern Iraqi oil through Turkey⁵⁸. From the KRG's perspective, the energy route to Turkey is absolutely vital as it provides it with the opportunity to pursue an independent energy policy from the central and Shiite dominated government of Baghdad. In that way, KRG President Barzani aims to enhance its own political and economic position in Erbil vis-à-vis the Maliki government in Baghdad⁵⁹.

Additionally, Turkey has recently begun to construct a wall in its southeastern borders, with the aim of separating the Kurdish-populated areas of Turkey from the Syrian ones. The construction of the specific wall sparked clashes between the Turkish police and Kurdish protesting against the project⁶⁰.

However, on 12 November, after the abovementioned military gains against the Islamist groups in the northeastern Syria, the PYD announced the formation of a transitional government in Qamishli, Syria. That was a major development and a clear move towards an announcement of the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state in northeast Syria⁶¹. In light of this development, the close relations between PKK and DYP raise the possibilities that in the future the PYD could opt to follow a confrontational stance against Ankara, instead of the energy cooperation mode that the KRG has followed, and to pursue by military means a greater Kurdistan that would contain parts of southeastern Turkey. In any event, the formation of a Syrian Kurdistan would have a different effect on some of the major powers of the region: Turkey would consider it as a serious threat. Israel, that has traditionally good relations with the Kurds, would view it as a new leverage point against Assad's or even post-Assad Syria and a strategically friendly territory vis-à-vis Iran.

For Saudi Arabia also, the US-Russia agreement on the Syrian chemical arsenal was equally a major setback. Saudi Arabia had invested heavily, both in resources and in diplomatic capital, in the removal of the Assad regime in Syria, a development which would weaken Saudi Arabia's major regional competitor, Iran. Instead, the deal agreed between Washington and Moscow not only left Riyadh isolated, but it also had a direct impact at the core of the Saudi regional strategy. Riyadh's dissatisfaction with the US-Russia agreement became most evident on 18th October 2013, when it declined its election as a member on the UN's Security Council⁶².



Map 7. The eruption of the Syrian conflict has brought again the Kurdish issue on the forefront of the regional developments. (Source: Kurdish Institute of Paris; Michael Mehrdad RSC Izady, University of Columbia, New York, 1998)

Both Turkey (which from its part had been negotiating the purchase of advanced Chinese missiles, an unprecedented move from a NATO member) and Saudi Arabia (its decline of the Security Council seat is equally unprecedented) have been experiencing a rift with the US over the Syrian conflict, but also –and this counts mostly for Saudi Arabia- over Washington’s recent negotiations with regards to Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

That is because the most important implication of the US-Russia agreement was that it lead to the first direct contact between a US President and his Iranian counterpart since 1979 and to direct talks and negotiations over a set of issues and particularly the Iranian nuclear issue. This was a major development, an agile diplomatic maneuver from Washington and potentially a game-changing one, which could transform or even shift power relations that have been established since 1979.

iv) A Shiite sub-system and the new regional role of Hezbollah

Iran’s regional influence has been enhanced during the last decade or so. The regional developments of the last decade have gradually given Tehran a serious geopolitical advantage over its regional competitors, particularly Saudi Arabia and Turkey:

1. - One critical development was the Iraq War in 2003, where the US intervention removed the Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein. Gradually, Tehran grew its influence within Iraq, which is now governed by an Iranian-orientated government under Shiite PM Nouri al Maliki⁶³.
2. - The second development was the Lebanon War in 2006, where *Hezbollah* managed to resist for 33 days a direct attack of the Israeli Defense Forces. This war - despite the fact that Israel enhanced its stance diplomatically by the involvement of Europe in south Lebanon through the presence of UNIFIL II - led to the upgrading of *Hezbollah’s* profile in the region and its consequent military and political supremacy

inside Lebanon.

3. - The third development was the Syrian crisis. In the beginning the Syrian crisis threatened the viability of the Assad regime, a strategic ally of the Iranian regime. Nevertheless, as the Syrian conflict raged on, Syria's battleground provided Iran with the opportunity to exercise its geopolitical advantages and to further enhance its regional influence.
4. - Finally, if Tehran utilizes its geopolitical gains wisely, it could proceed into an agreement with Washington by making a number of concessions, especially with regards to its nuclear program. This could lead to a much needed stabilization in the wider region and it could ease Iran's severe economic embargo imposed by the West.

The period analyzed in the previous pages, from April 2013 to October 2013, affirmed the gradual formation, within the last ten years, of a sub-system that is defined by the ascendance of Iranian influence and the geopolitical advantage of the Shiite or Shiite-related element in each of the states that constitute this sub-system, namely Iran itself, Iraq, central and southern Syria and most of Lebanon. It is a sub-system that cuts through the centre of the system of the wider Middle East and it is adjoined to most geopolitically unstable regional conflictual sub-systems: the Syria/Lebanon-Israel sub-system and the Syria-Turkey conflictual sub-system.

In the case of *Hezbollah*, the Syrian crisis has highlighted the evolution of the organization from a proxy actor in Lebanon to a vital partner of the Assad regime and Tehran in the Levant and the spearhead of the Iranian foreign policy in the wider Middle East. Even though the relation between Shiite Islamist *Hezbollah* and the Alawite but secular Assad regime was always defined by common geopolitical objectives and interests (while on the contrary, with the third part of the alliance, Iran, *Hezbollah* has always maintained, in addition to organizational, political and military ties, deep ideological and spiritual connections), Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current Syrian President, had always kept *Hezbollah* and its leadership at a distance. Hafez al-Assad considered *Hezbollah* a vital yet a merely proxy force in the Lebanese arena, often very helpful as a pressure leverage against the Israelis, particularly with regards to the Golan Heights.

On the other hand, when Bashar al-Assad took over power after his father's death, in June 2000, he chose to ascend *Hezbollah's* status within this power relationship. This was done mostly because the new and inexperienced President needed to strengthen his leadership and legitimization against both a series of regional challenges (such as the Iraq war in 2003) and his domestic opponents. Already since 2006 (after the Second Lebanon War) analysts were commenting that *Hezbollah's* status had been elevated from a mere proxy to "a partner with considerable clout and autonomy"⁶⁴. Now, seven years later, *Hezbollah*, in close coordination with Iran, has been called to assist to the survival of Bashar al-Assad, therefore completing its role as strategic partner to the Baathist regime of Damascus. An assistance that is not based on a mutual religious or ideological agenda, but instead on a fundamental geostrategic aim that is common for *Hezbollah*, Damascus and Tehran: the 'axis of resistance' directed against Israel.

Furthermore, *Hezbollah's* position in Iran's strategy within the Shiite sub-system that was described above is absolutely central:

i) Firstly, because the effectiveness of *Hezbollah's* asymmetric warfare, whether against the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) or against the Sunni opposition (both in Syria but also Lebanon, let us not forget the West Beirut clashes in 2008), establish the Lebanese party and organization as a very powerful ally in the western flank of the abovementioned Shiite sub-system (namely in Lebanon and central and southern Syria).

ii) Secondly, because *Hezbollah* is, historically, the most successful export of the Iranian revolution, it also currently operates as a mould, a formula, upon which Tehran establishes its proxy militia forces within the frame of the central part of its Shiite sub-system (in Iraq), but also parts of eastern and central Syria. Such as the paramilitary Shiite Iraqi groups of *Kataeb Hezbollah* (or *Hezbollah Brigades*) and the *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (League of the Righteous, also known as the *Khazali Network*).

From its part, *Hezbollah* appears to have underestimated the importance of the super-systemic interventions by Moscow and Beijing that have resulted in a favorable outcome for the Iran-Syria axis (especially with regards to the cancellation of the US airstrikes against the

Assad regime). *Hezbollah* considers that it has been upgraded from a Lebanese paramilitary force into a regional player. On 22nd September, in a televised speech he gave in Beirut, the leader of *Hezbollah* Hassan Nasrallah shifted his rhetoric away from its “traditional enemy”, the state of Israel, towards Turkey and Saudi Arabia: he mentioned that Turkey and Saudi Arabia have failed in Syria and called them to revise their stance⁶⁵. Additionally, in an article published in pro-*Hezbollah* Lebanese newspaper *Al Akhbar*, its editor-in-chief wrote the following in an article under the title «*Hezbollah and the new Levant*»: “*When Hezbollah decided, openly and blatantly, to penetrate the heart of the battle against the armed groups in Syria, it did so with awareness of its new role*”⁶⁶. Nevertheless, at this point it would be in the benefit of the wider region and Iran itself if Tehran moved to restrain an overconfident *Hezbollah*. In that way, Iran would maximize its chances of achieving many of its geopolitical objectives - via the diplomatic negotiations with Washington and Tel Aviv’s allowance - particularly with regards to its balance of power with Saudi Arabia and Qatar. If it doesn’t do so, then it is possible that the chance for a wider regional peace settlement will be lost once again.

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