Q&A: Recent Developments in Syria

Many questions, queries and clarifications have been sent Khilafah.com, regarding a number of recent developments in Syria. Many questions overlapped with each other. These were categorized into 16 questions and put forward for our political analyst Adnan Khan to answer.

1. Where does the uprising currently stand in the country?

The uprising in Syria will reach three years in March 2014. Within this period the landscape of Syria has been discernibly altered. Aside from some pockets, the North of the country from Maysof to Deir ez Zour has been lost by the regime and is in the hands of the rebel forces. The centre of the country and the nation's heartland – the corridor from the coast of Latakia to Damascus remains within the grip of the regime. The South of the country from Damascus to the Southern town of Deraa remains contested. The rebel groups today control more territory than al-Assad, however critical territory still remain in regime hands.

The regime has effectively given up reclaiming most of the north of the country and has focused on cutting rebel supply lines between Damascus and Latakia. 2013 saw the rebel groups launch a concerted attempt on the seat of the regime in Damascus and the regime in desperation launched a Chemical attack on the Eastern suburb of Damascus – Gouta. The regime perceived an existential threat to Damascus throughout 2013 and as a result launched an unprecedented chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of its own capital and followed this up with a large, multi-faceted siege.

Defected official Brigadier General Zaher al-Saket confirmed the al-Assad regime was on the verge of collapse, this is what led to the intervention of Iran and thousands of fighters from Hizbullah. Because of this Bashar al-Assad achieved one of his most important military victories by forcing the withdrawal of opposition forces from the town of al-Qusayr. The fall of al-Qusayr effectively altered the balance of power on the ground and served as a critical turning point in the war. This is because it is a critical junction that's links Damascus to Latakia and the Mediterranean coast.
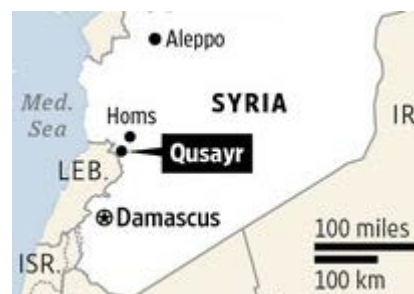
Rebel forces have continued to reorganize in late 2013 and early 2014 and the newest wave of rebel coalitions have thus far proved more successful than previous formations. Rebel groups have also dabbled in governance with mixed results, leading to the first signs of rebel discord. As matters stand as we approach the third anniversary of the Syrian uprising the regime is just about maintaining a grip on an ever shrinking strip of land between Damascus and Latakia.

2. What is the current balance of power in the country?

The rebel groups today control more territory than al-Assad, however critical territory still remain in regime hands. By the end of 2013 the al-Assad regime was maintaining and conducting successful operations simultaneously in Aleppo and Damascus, which from the surface would seem to be an indicator of the strength of the regime. However this has only been possible due to the

regime's overwhelming reliance on foreign and irregular forces and illustrates the reality of the weakness of the Syrian military.

Damascus is the Syrian regime's center of gravity: the loss of the city would be the end of the regime. As the threat of Western intervention subsided, the regime gained renewed confidence and continued with offensive military actions and crippling neighborhood sieges. However the regime is running out of options and capability, despite support from Iran, Russia and Hizbullah to reverse rebel gains.

The rebel groups lack the numbers and heavy weapons necessary to lead a sustained siege of Damascus and on regime positions. The equipment provided from external sources for the moment will not change the balance of power on the ground.

The battle between the Muslim of Syria organized into rebel groups on the one side and the regime and Alawis on the other side remains at a stalemate.

3. Who are the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), what are their aims and capabilities?

The ISIS originated as an insurgent group during the US invasion of Iraq, and for the past decade it has been Iraq's pre-eminent group. During that time it has operated under various names, including al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq. When the Syrian uprising started, those fighting in Iraq were sent to take part in the uprising in Syria and stand-off against the regime. Supported by ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, Abu Muhammad al-Joulani formed Jabhat al-Nusra (Nusra Front) in January 2012.

However tensions erupted in April 2013 when al-Baghdadi released an audio message in which he announced his organization had subsumed Jabhat al-Nusra. Al-Baghdadi named the new, expanded organization the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and reportedly moved to Syria's Aleppo governorate to take charge. The announcement sent shockwaves across Syria and the region, but more so, amongst the leadership and rank-and-file within Jabhat al-Nusra. Within days, Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, the head of Jabhat al-Nusra rejected the proposal and 'reaffirmed' his allegiance to Ayman Al-Zawahiri, who for Joulani, represented the global Jihad, whereas Baghdadi represented the cause in Iraq. As a result fighters from Iraq moved into the Syrian theatre and began taking over territory Jabhat al-Nusra controlled and was governing. Matters reached boiling point in early January 2014 when Jabhat al-Nusra took over an ISIS position in Atmeh in northern Syria in conjunction with Ahrar al-Sham. Today the ISIS control four border towns - Atmeh, al-Bab, Azaz, and Jarablus, allowing it to control the entrances and exits from Syria into Turkey.

The ISIS is composed of numerous battle hardened fighters who fought US forces in Iraq. For many years they held US forces to a stalemate through an insurgency. This is why it was not surprising that Jabhat al-Nusra achieved many victories against the Syrian armed forces and militia. Even before the ISIS takeover, Jabhat al-Nusra in coordination with many other rebel groups conducted many daring attacks on regime supply lines and air bases.

The aims of the ISIS and what remains of Jabhat al-Nusra differ in terms of priority; but both have the re-establishment of the Khilafah as their end objective. Implementing Islam in the territories under their control has been the priority of ISIS, whilst Jabhat al-Nusra has focussed on fighting the regime rather than governance.

4. Is ISIS infiltrated?

Jihadi groups across the world need training and the environment conducive to facilitate guerilla warfare, arms and bomb-making. Iran's creation of Hizbullah and Pakistan's grooming of the Taliban and many other Jihadi groups against the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan are publically known examples. All militant groups of whatever persuasion have had government support, funding and arms at some point. Some may have turned against their masters, but this all points to the fact that governments have links to militant groups, although their influence over these groups may fluctuate.

The Syrian government's history of sponsoring Jihadist movements over the last three decades contributed to the Jihadist foothold in the country. The Syrian intelligence apparatus long cultivated ties with these groups; moreover, it has solidified robust logistics networks that facilitate Jihadist activity. As Syrian intelligence services became preoccupied with the uprising in 2011, some of these Jihadist elements turned against their former regime allies and are now cooperating with local Jihadists. The origin of many rebel groups is linked with the Syrian government's sponsorship of groups fighting Western coalition troops during the Iraq War.

Syria played an active role in infiltrating the Sunni resistance against the US in Iraq and passed on valuable intelligence to the US-led coalition. Syria's influence over the Sunni resistance fighters that operated in Iraq was emphasised by the Baker-Hamilton report. In May 2006, the Department of Defence quarterly report titled "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq", Syria's influence was outlined: *".... Syria continues to provide safe haven, border transit, and limited logistical support to some Iraqi insurgents, especially former Saddam-era Iraqi Baath Party elements.*
Syria also permits former regime elements to engage in organizational activities, such that Syria has emerged as an important organizational and coordination hub for elements of the former Iraqi regime. Although Syrian security and intelligence services continue to detain and deport Iraq-bound fighters, Syria remains the primary foreign fighter gateway into Iraq..."

Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) which was drowning the US in a quagmire, in the middle of the insurgency turned to targeting civilians. It turned against the Shi'a as well as conducting suicide bombings in public places, massacres and executions. Very quickly the insurgency against the US weakened as the various groups began fighting al-Qaeda rather than US troops. Many consider the insurgency to have been infiltrated by Jordanian, Syrian and US intelligence assets at the time.

The defecting diplomat Nawaf al-Fares stated in an interview with the Daily Telegraph that Jihadi's were used by the Syrian government in attacks against civilians so that the government could blame the deaths on Syrian rebels. Mr Fares' most damaging allegation was that the Syrian government itself has a hand in the nationwide wave of suicide bombings on government buildings, which have killed hundreds of people and maimed thousands more. He said: *"all these major explosions have been perpetrated by al-Qaeda through cooperation with the security forces."*

Whilst there is no doubt there are many sincere individuals who have taken up arms against the regime to bring real change to the country, it cannot be ruled out that such groups are infiltrated.

5. **What is the reality of the ISIS declaration of an Islamic State in some parts of Syria and Iraq?**

Throughout the war against the US in Iraq and as the uprising in Syria evolved, various reports have emerged of the re-establishment of the Khilafah. Some groups who engaged in Jihad, upon securing some areas, began distributing food and energy and settling disputes amongst people. On a number of occasions the world's media reported such situations as the establishment of the Khilafah or an Islamic state, since the end aim of the Jihadi groups is indeed the Khilafah.

The ISIS has been accused on a number of occasions of declaring the establishment of the Khilafah in the territories it had under its authority. Such statements however never come from the ISIS themselves, in fact ISIS officials have made clear their intention to establish an Emirate system rather than Khilafah. Abu 'Abd Allah Anis, explicitly called for founding an "Islamic emirate" in Syria in the Jihadi magazine Majallat al-Balagh, he said: *"We hope to witness [in Syria] in the near future an alliance of jihad powers and their establishment of a broad shura council leading to the announcement of an Islamic emirate."*

Islam has very specific evidences for what constitutes the Khilafah, the Emirate system which has no foreign policy is counter to this.

6. **Are the recent tensions in Iraq linked to Syria?**

The fall of Fallujah was widely reported by the global media in early 2014. Jabhat Al-Nusra were originally members of the Jihad in Iraq, who moved to Syria to fight the al-Assad regime; this is the only link between what is taking place Iraq and Syria. What is taking place in Iraq is the result of the US invasion and the Iraqi people turning against the corrupt Maliki government.

Fallujah and the Anbar province were both the heart of the insurgency against the US. The US was able to co-opt the Shi'a factions in South Iraq, but failed to achieve this in central Iraq which is dominated by Sunnis. It took a brutal siege in 2004 to put down the insurgency, with reports continuing to emerge of the use of chemical weapons by US forces.

Successive Iraqi governments have done little to fix this reality or the poverty in Fallujah.
In fact the city has been marginalized because of its history as a center of resistance. These feelings have only exacerbated over the past year with protests and government repression. Violence began in early 2014 when Iraqi security forces disbursed a protest camp in Fallujah and arrested a politician who had been friendly to the protestors' goals. This camp was part of a non-violent protest movement – however Iraqi security forces attacked protestors in Fallujah.

Jihadi groups joined the local tribes in facing off against the Maliki government. In this context, calls of the establishment of the Khilafah have been greatly exaggerated, including by the Maliki government to justify military strikes. Feurat Alani, a French-Iraqi journalist with family ties in Fallujah, reported that: *"ISIS is not playing a significant role in the fighting in Fallujah. Much has been said and written about ISIS raising their flag over a building in Fallujah. This has been taken to be a sign of their power in the city. But they took the flag down five minutes later when ordered to by tribal leaders. This shows that the tribes control Fallujah."*

7. **What is the reality of rebel infighting?**

The rebel discord has fundamentally been due to the actions of the ISIS. Their actions have led some rebel groups to turn against them. At the heart of the discord are priorities; many rebel groups insist ISIS fighters integrate into Syria's other groups and fight to bring down the regime and then

establish Islam. The ISIS has been taking over areas including those under the control of other rebel groups and then governing them.

Tensions began when the ISIS entered Atareb looking to arrest an individual. The people of the town refused and insisted in setting up a Shari'ah court to settle the dispute. ISIS eventually kidnapped the individual concerned and his mutilated body was found dumped on the side of the road. This resulted in the people of the town turning against the ISIS. ISIS reinforcements were denied entry at the town's checkpoint in order to stop any further fitnah. This trail of events eventually led to fighting breaking out between ISIS and the brigade in charge of the checkpoint.

Throughout the summer of 2013, ISIS established areas of control in key terrains in northern and eastern Syria along the Turkish border, with a significant presence in towns such as Atmeh, al-Bab, Azaz, Manbij, and Jarablus. ISIS used such key terrain to control who and what can move in and out of Syria. At first, these clashes were scattered occurrences, but by October, Baghdadi's fighters had overreached by seizing the border town of Azaz and picking fights with fellow rebels all across northern Syria. At this point, many of the Islamic groups began to show their frustration and issued public rebukes to the group.

Then in December 2013 fighting erupted in several areas as activists across Syria demonstrated against the murder of Abu Rayyan, a commander from Ahrar al-Sham who had been tortured, mutilated and killed by the ISIS. The ISIS made limited attempts to explain its position and instead simply kept pushing other rebels on the ground and refused almost every proposal for arbitration and compromise.

As can be interpreted from the group's name, be it the 'Islamic State of Iraq' or the 'Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (Levant)', this group views itself as a political entity who is ruling over its territories. For ISIS, implementing Islam includes their understanding of the creed and as a result many have been accused of apostasy for taking different positions to them. Based on this, courts have been set up and any opposition to ISIS rule or verdicts has been viewed as rebellion and has seen individuals and groups punished with execution. With ISIS controlling a number of checkpoints leading into Turkey, many residents have complained of paying multiple tariffs to just shop for basic staple foods. ISIS is composed of fighters, who should be on the front lines facing-off against the regime, but many remain in rebel held territory running checkpoints, acting as judges and distributing resources. Rather than elect people from amongst the indigenous population, those best experienced in fighting are governing over people, and as a result maintaining cohesion has been through the gun.

Significant resources were dedicated against the ISIS at the expense of the al-Assad regime.

8. What is the reality of the rebel alliances under the banner of Islam?

Two major alliances have been announced since the uprising began in Syria. The 'Islamic Alliance' was formed from eleven Syrian rebel organizations, according to a statement that Liwa al-Tawhid released in late September 2013. The new Islamic Alliance, included some of the most powerful factions from the FSA, the Syrian Islamic Front, and also Jabhat al-Nusra. Its aims were very clear - to fight to establish an Islamic State with the Shari'ah as the source of governance in Syria.

A few days later an even more grandiose declaration emerged when at least 50 groups operating mainly around Damascus merged to form Jaish al-Islam; undermining the FSA's dominance in a section of the country where it had long been considered the strongest rebel force. They signed a joint statement announcing that they did not recognize its National Coalition and affirmed Islam as the sole source of legislation.

Around 38-40 of the brigades or battalions mentioned in Jaysh al-Islam's statement were in fact already under the umbrella of Liwa al-Islam prior to the announcement. A number of major Islamic factions were however not included in the umbrella. Ahrar ash-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusrah, Suqur ash-Sham and the ISIS were not part of the move – more so – Ahrar ash-Sham and two other strong Islamic factions withdrew from Jaysh al-Islam's logistical-operations room, citing that certain factions had a hegemony in decision making and thus played an arbitrary role. Saudi Arabia was central to the merger, and Liwa al-Islam chief Zahran Alloush has a long and chequered history with Riyadh. This alliance was mainly one of sharing logistical supply lines rather than multiple groups becoming one unit.

9. Why has the regime failed to defeat the rebels?

The strength of Bashar al-Assad's regime has really been a mirage; it was able to maintain its hegemony over the decades due to the fear it instilled in the people through its notorious secret services. Once this factor changed and the Ummah of Syria took up arms against the regime, Al-Assad's forces have struggled to defeat the uprising.

Most of the Syrian military infantry is composed of Sunni soldiers, who al-Assad does not trust and was thus unable to use them in the war. As a result al-Assad has relied primarily upon his elite units. What really crippled the regime was its attempts to conduct simultaneous operations on multiple fronts against rebel groups, which led to the army sustaining more losses than it could replenish. It relied on air assets to resupply besieged troops in Aleppo and Idlib because it lacked overland logistical lines connecting these outposts. As a result the regime gave up regaining most of the North of the country and just focused on Damascus and Homs in order to secure its supply lines.

The regime still has units fighting in Aleppo; it however lacks any capacity to launch a decisive operation to clear the city or destroy rebel forces. The amount of combat power the regime requires to secure and retain territory in the north is so high that it is not able to do so quickly and efficiently, and retaining terrain is now its main focus and challenge. One of its key strategies as a result has been carrying out mass atrocities, inflicting heavy casualties on civilians in order to relieve pressure and gain ground.

The Assad regime has also replenished its combat power by bringing Hizbullah into the war. It formed a National Defense Force comprised of local volunteers. Iran also provided full support to the regime, including senior advisors from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Iraqi Shi'a militias as well are fighting offensive operations away from the Sayyida Zeinab shrine to which they had been initially deployed in 2012.

The decentralized nature of the rebel groups forced the regime to fight simultaneously across different fronts and this has been the main reason why after nearly three years, the regime has failed to defeat the rebels, despite conducting repeated massacres and using chemical weapons.

10. Why have the rebels failed to overthrew the regime?

Many rebel groups are small and do not deploy away from their home provinces. Throughout 2013, the exceptions were groups in large rebel coalitions, such as Suqur al-Sham and the Tawhid Brigades part of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF) and Ahrar al-Sham and the Al-Haqq brigade in the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF). These coalitions have since disbanded, but the groups continue to organize and lead attacks involving multiple rebel groups under the banner of the Islamic Front.

The rebel groups also lack a national-level command and control system and has relied on a decentralized system which created multiple centers of gravity for the opposition, thus diversifying the risk of systemic collapse faced by rebel groups when the regime attacks on any given front. Rebel infighting, which escalated in January 2014, diminished the advantages gained from this dispersion.

The ISIS has focused its effort on carving out territory for itself in northeastern Syria, which is not aligned with the opposition's goal to defeat Assad's military. These distinct opposition campaigns are now much more prominent and have impacted attempts at leading a coordinated assault on Damascus, the seat of the regime.

11. What are the prospects of the re-emergence of the Khilafah?

Syria's foreign minister, Walid Al-Moallem in a press conference in June 2013 confirmed what was at stake in the country and the region, he said: *"We know that those who plan evil for Syria and those who demand the establishment of the Islamic Khilafah state will not stop at the borders of Syria. So what we are currently doing is even defending Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey."*

There are two aspects to establishing Khilafah in Syria. One is the public opinion and second is the nation's capabilities. The rebel groups and the people of Syria have overwhelmingly made clear they want to replace the al-Assad regime with one based on Islam. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov after the Geneva 2 Conference in an interview confirmed this to Vesti 24: *"there are conditions when all the Syrian patriots must understand what is more important: to fight on the side of those who want Syria to become the Khilafah or to unite and return their homeland the image that it was famous for centuries - namely, a multi-confessional, multi-ethnic, secular state in which all the people live comfortably. This issue will definitely be one of the principal at the Geneva Conference."*

The second aspect presents serious challenges in terms of the nation's capabilities. The nations in the Middle East were created to ensure they remain weak and under subjugation. It should be remembered throughout history, Syria's borders were much larger than they are today; Al-Sham consisted of Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and parts of South Turkey.

Syria produces relatively modest quantities of oil and gas but the country's location is strategic in terms of energy transit. After oil processing the Syrian economy is dominated by agriculture. Northern Syria watered by the Euphrates has for most of Syria's recent history made it self-sufficient in agriculture. The bulk of the country's exports are agricultural based, the bulk of manufacturing is based on agro processing, a large share of trade and commerce is based on agriculture, and many services are also linked to agricultural production. Syria has very little indigenous defence industry to speak of, thus leaving the country reliant on foreign procurement of military weapons and systems. Considering all these factors, it would be quite challenging for Syria to survive as the Khilafah on its own. However in partnership or through integration with the surrounding nation, Syria can be a viable base for the promised return of the Khilafah, *inshaa Allah*. It should be kept in mind, when the Decree of Allah comes, all material obstacles can be overcome. Historically the most profound example was that of the first Islamic State established by Rasulullah (saw), in the isolated meagre deserts of Arabia, surrounded by the mighty Roman & Persian Empires. Yet the Khilafah within a short span of time was able to overcome these two empires and expanded across multiple continents. Hence, outward material considerations should not always be taken as a defining form of evaluation.

12. Can the sectarian problem ever be resolved?

The current architecture in the Muslim world was designed by the departing colonialists and in designing the region every care was taken to ensure that it remained reliant and subservient to foreign powers. One strategy employed by both Britain and France was to bring minorities to power, who would always rely on external help to remain in power.

David Fromkin, Professor and expert on Economic History at the University of Chicago, in his book: "A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East", encapsulated the strategy: *"Massive amounts of the wealth of the old Ottoman Empire were now claimed by the victors. But one must remember that the Islamic empire had tried for centuries to conquer Christian Europe and the power brokers deciding the fate of those defeated people were naturally determined that these countries should never be able to organize and threaten Western interests again. With centuries of mercantilist experience, Britain and France created small, unstable states whose rulers needed their support to stay in power. The development and trade of these states were controlled and they were meant never again to be a threat to the West. These external powers then made contracts with their puppets to buy Arab resources cheaply, making the feudal elite enormously wealthy while leaving most citizens in poverty."*

In Syria specifically the French looking to maintain its influence brought the Nusayris (Alawis) to power, who formed little more than 10% of the nation's population. With a minority ruling over the majority and after centuries of being marginalised, the Alawi leadership dominated by the al-Assad family ruled with brutal force oppressing the Muslim majority. This type of rule typically institutionalizes differences and views other sects as inferior.

Resolving this scenario requires first and foremost the removal of the regime that maintains such a system and its replacement with an alternative system, which from a ruling perspective views all its inhabitants as citizens rather than Sunni, Shi'a etc. Most differences amongst the Ummah are not necessarily political but legislative, for which Islam provides a detailed framework. This framework is what led to the development of Fiqh and Usool throughout history. It is when such legal issues turn to political differences and then with no practical way to resolve them that sectarianism raises its ugly head.

13. What is the West's strategy in the country?

Former US ambassador to Syria Ryan Crocker outlined the West's strategy: *"We need to come to terms with a future that includes Assad - and consider that as bad as he is, there is something worse."* Gathering the different factions in Switzerland in the Geneva 2 conference in late January 2014 was with this mentality in mind. However the West has struggled in cultivating an opposition that has influence on the ground in Syria who will then negotiate with the al-Assad regime in a transitional government, and ultimately share power with him and his cronies.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) has been completely out-classed and out-gunned by various Islamic alliances, and the National Coalition (NC) spends more time in Washington, London and Paris then it does in Syria. Its armed wing, the Supreme Military Council (SMC) was humiliated in December 2013 after receiving months of training, diplomatic support and aid from the West; the Free Syrian Army's command lost control of its headquarters and supply depots in northern Syria to the Islamic Front.

The West's strategy in cooperation with the countries in the region is to weaken who they view as radical factions, who have been extremely successful by diverting their attention against the regime through rebel infighting.

As many of the rebel groups individually are very small; the West through Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Jordan are looking to weaken the Islamic groups through absorbing them into larger alliances which weakens their capabilities.

With the other groups a strategy of infiltration appears to be the tactic in order to weaken them. This was a similar strategy to what was pursued in Iraq.

The Geneva conferences also aim to exploit the gaps in infighting between rebel groups through demarcating between the rebel groups both politically and militarily and through assigning them labels of "moderate" and "radical" to further widen the divisions. In this way the West can absorb and utilize the moderates in its roadmap and isolate and exclude the radicals.

14. What is the role of the surrounding Muslim Nations?

Whether it is Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan or Qatar, all these Muslim nations are mere pieces on a chessboard, owned and managed by the US. Despite numerous meetings, conferences and summits the Muslim countries are not presenting any solutions other than executing those developed in London, Paris and Washington.

Saudi Arabia's role has been to provide arms to the rebels in order to create a relationship of dependency. Saudi Arabia is now the main country financing and arming the rebels. Saudi Arabia does have its own aim to counter Iran's influence in Syria, and as a result financed the large purchase of infantry weapons, such as Yugoslav-made recoilless guns and the M79 Osa, an anti-tank weapon, from Croatia via shipments shuttled through Jordan.

Turkey has played a central role in housing and building America's strategy of bringing loyal new faces to negotiate with the regime. Turkey trained defectors of the Syrian Army in its territory, and in July 2011 a group of them announced the birth of the Free Syrian Army under the supervision of Turkish military intelligence. Turkey has housed the leadership of the FSA, and South Turkey has been used to smuggle weapons into Syria.

Qatar had funded the Syrian rebellion with as much as $3 billion as the uprising has evolved. Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar has danced to the tunes of the West in cobbling together a loyal opposition. Qatar has not proposed any new solutions to the regions problems but taken part in implementing, hosting, organizing and bringing the various parties in the conflict together. All the groups and factions Qatar supports and provides sanctuary to are hostile to the US. Qatar was in fact at the forefront in all the strategies by the EU for Syria.

Jordan has not deviated from its historical role of supporting Western aims in the region. After a joint military exercise in June 2013, the US left troops, F-16 fighters and Patriot missile batteries deployed in the country. However Jordan's main role has been to house the CIA and US Special Forces who have been training Syrian rebels fighting in the south of the country. Jordan has also been one of the main routes through which weapons into Syria travel. Like Qatar, Jordan is central to managing the flow of arms to the right western friendly moderate rebel groups.

Iran has played a direct role in arming, funding and propping up the al-Assad regime.
The Iranian regime maintains close ties with the Syrian leadership in order to act as a bloc in the region; these ties included military, economic and political ties. Iran has transferred significant weaponry to prop up the al-Assad regime and provided oil and gas at reduced prices due to the lack of energy reserves in Syria. When the al-Assad regime was on the verge of collapse, Iran intervened and came to the rescue through deploying its Revolutionary Guards (IRGC).

15. Can the surrounding nations not end the crisis?

Turkey and Egypt have more than enough military capability to remove the al-Assad regime. However, they have remained mere spectators, refusing to utilize their armies for the noble endeavor.
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Bashar al-Assad has resorted to using the Republican Guard and the 4th Armoured Division, as the rest of the army is largely Sunni and cannot be trusted. Any Egyptian or Turkish intervention would be facing anything between 20,000 – 80,000 personnel. As Turkey shares a border with Syria it would not have long supply lines and could quickly resupply troops whenever needed.
The sheer size of Turkish armed forces would most likely quickly overwhelm Assad's defenses. Turkey makes its own Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC) and tanks, whilst Syria has no indigenous defence industry to speak of. Whilst Syria would suffer from huge resupply efforts as it is reliant on foreign supplies to replace destroyed equipment, Turkey's production facilities can continue to roll out APCs and tanks if required.

A ground assault combined with an air assault would disable Syria's SAM batteries – which are surface to air missiles. Turkey has indigenously developed its own unmanned aerial vehicles, which could take out and overwhelm Syria's missile defence system. Alongside this, Turkey has 800 combat aircraft of which 350 are F15 Falcon fighting jets capable of 9g maneuvers and speeds in excess of Mach 2, which could easily overcome Assad's Soviet era MiGs made in the 1960s.
A crucial difference between the air combat capability of Syria and Turkey is that Turkey has modern support systems in place for the planes it flies, with the result that a high proportion of aircraft are available for operations at any given time.

All this shows that the military capability exists to end the crisis; the political will however, is absent.

16. What are the likely trends for 2014?

There should be no doubt that the US strategy of maintaining the status quo is the fundamental challenge standing in the way of the people of Syria bringing real change to the country. The US has however failed in cultivating an alternative and as a result America will continue looking in the opposite direction as the regime massacres whole neighborhoods. The aim with this is to force the rebel groups into a negotiated settlement with the regime and thus undermining all attempts to being real change.

Friction amongst the rebel groups will continue as the ISIL has been denounced by almost all rebel groups. Jabhut al-Nusra took this a step further by killing one of the leaders of ISIL in Deir al-Zour on 8 February 2014. This trend has serious implications as ISIL have rejected almost all talks and more and more rebel resources will need to be dedicated to them at the expense of the regime.

The United Nations estimates over 250,000 people are trapped in besieged areas of Syria. The al-Assad regimes strategy will continue throughout 2014, which is besieging towns in the 'Starvation Until Submission Campaign.' Currently, the most critical areas where civilians are at greatest risk of starvation are in and around Homs and Damascus. The al-Assad regime is trying to enact similar sieges in Aleppo as it uses barrel bombs to cut opposition supply routes. These sieges are going to play an increasingly important role in the regime's war strategy.

For further reading see Khilafah.com Special Report - The End Game in Syria