

Geopolitical and Strategic Causes and Implications of the Syrian Civil War and the Refugee Crisis

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Abstract

This article analyzes the war in Syria in geopolitical terms and as a humanitarian catastrophe. Its significance goes beyond merely its regional dimension. There are many different causes of the Syrian conflict, including its colonial past, the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the sectarian polarisation and radicalization of Syria and Iraq and the West's lukewarm response to the "Arab Spring". Finding a solution to the conflict in Syria is not an easy task, due to the involvement of various global and regional powers in a proxy war, such as the United States, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Turkey, and due to the extraordinary brutality of the Syrian regime. The Syrian war has triggered the worst humanitarian disaster since the Second World War. The refugee crisis leads to the destabilization of the Middle East and affects Europe as the desired destination.

Resumo

Causas Geopolíticas e Estratégicas e Implicações da Guerra Civil na Síria e a Crise dos Refugiados

Este artigo analisa a guerra na Síria em termos geopolíticos e como catástrofe humanitária. O seu significado transcende a mera dimensão regional. Existem várias causas distintas para o conflito sírio, incluindo o seu passado colonial, a rivalidade entre os Estados Unidos da América e a União Soviética durante a Guerra Fria, a invasão americana ao Iraque em 2003, o sectarismo e a radicalização da Síria e do Iraque e a resposta "frouxa" do Ocidente à "Primavera Árabe". Encontrar uma solução para o conflito na Síria não é uma tarefa fácil devido ao envolvimento de vários poderes globais e regionais numa guerra por procuração, tais como os Estados Unidos, a Rússia, o Irão, a Arábia Saudita ou a Turquia, e devido à extrema brutalidade do regime sírio. A guerra síria despoletou o maior desastre humanitário desde a Segunda Guerra Mundial. A crise dos refugiados conduziu à destabilização do Médio Oriente e afeta a Europa como destino de eleição.

Introduction

The conflict in Syria is one of the most serious problems of the modern world from the geopolitical and humanitarian points of view. Its significance goes beyond merely its regional dimension, since its consequences are felt not only in the Middle East, but especially in Europe, which is affected by an unprecedented wave of refugees. The issue of the attitude towards refugees significantly differentiates the position of European countries and leads to one of the most serious crises of the European Union. Given past and present internal crises, especially the Eurozone crisis and “Brexit”, it may result in significantly weakening the European Union both in terms of internal coherence and effectiveness in international relations. The crisis in Syria also has a broader geopolitical dimension. Due to the involvement of global and regional powers, such as the United States, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Turkey, the conflict in Syria has quite quickly turned into a proxy war not only in an attempt to reshape the Middle East but also wider global relations. First and foremost, Russia treats it as an opportunity to return to the global stage by re-establishing itself as a key player in the Middle East. The involvement of external powers with contradictory interests in the Syrian war complicates the possibility to resolve the conflict. The emergence of many local parties involved in the conflict, including the Islamic State regarded as a terrorist group aiming at the establishment of a worldwide caliphate, is not an encouraging phenomenon.

As is frequently stressed, the Syrian conflict began in 2011 and has led to the biggest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. 250,000 people have been killed, 4.5 million Syrians have escaped to neighbouring countries and Europe, 6.6 million are internally displaced. Due to the continuation of the war, the opportunity to resolve the humanitarian problem seems to be largely impossible. A tragic example is the air raid carried out on September 19, 2016 not far from Aleppo on the UN humanitarian convoy, which killed about 20 people and destroyed a large part of the cargo. This event and barbaric raids on civilians in Aleppo are testament to the tragic dimension of the situation in Syria, which for a long period of time will be difficult to solve.

Despite serious domestic causes of instability in Syria and devastating droughts prior to 2011, the Syrian refugee crisis has a significant international dimension. Therefore, the main aim of the article is to analyze the geopolitical and strategic causes and implications of the present Syrian refugee crisis. The role of main powers and the European Union in dealing with the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis will also be taken into account. Efforts to solve the Syrian conflict are treated as a key issue in finding a solution to the refugee crisis.

There are a number of direct and indirect international causes of the Syrian war. The present situation in Syria and the Middle East is connected with the colonial past and especially with the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 which has been

resented by the Arabs for a century. The superpowers' rivalry during the Cold War was also a very important factor complicating the situation in the Middle East where proxy wars were fought between the United States and the Soviet Union. Of great importance was the failure of the American strategy of democracy promotion in Iraq. After the 2003 invasion and removing Saddam Hussein from power, the United States did not provide any concrete plan to create a strong democratic state. It led to the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS), which played a vital role in the Syrian crisis. The failed response of the European Union and the United States towards the "Arab Spring" in emphasizing democratization over stabilization did not produce any concrete results in terms of the next wave of democratization. Contrary to expectations, internal conflicts developed and chaos erupted in several countries in North Africa or the Middle East, including Libya, Egypt and Syria.

Instability in the Middle East in a Historical Perspective: the Colonial Past and the Cold War

Many different factors influence the current complicated situation in the Middle East, including its colonial past. In particular, the Sykes-Picot agreement is still regarded by the Arabs as a sign of the imperial and military dominance of the West and the source of all misery for the past 100 years. Thus, as reported by the British newspaper *The Guardian*, when in 2014 "Islamic State fighters broke through the desert border between Iraq and Syria – flying black flags on their captured US-made Humvees – and announced the creation of a transnational caliphate, they triumphantly pronounced the death of Sykes-Picot" (Black, 2015). Concluded on May 16, 1916 by Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot, the secret agreement of the governments of Britain and France, with the assent of Tsarist Russia, partitioned the Middle East into spheres of influence after World War I. Soon, Italian territorial ambitions in the Middle East were also accommodated. But after the revolution in Russia, the text of the agreement was exposed to the public in November 1917 in the Russian and British press. Although arbitrarily determined boundaries changed later, the Sykes-Picot agreement was regarded as an instrument of European imperialism, which did not take into account deep sectarian, communal or religious divisions shaped over the centuries while creating new nation-states (Wright and McManus, 1992, p. 51). First of all, it did not consider the Sunni-Shia divide inside Islam to be important, as Western powers wanted to create secular states. The process of leaving the heritage of imperial arrangements is now associated with the disappearance of strong nation states which prevailed in the Middle East in the immediate post-colonial period (The Rt Hon Lord Williams of Baglan, 2014). Moreover, at present, a challenge to an idea of statehood is not only a result of the "Arab Spring" and a desire to become democratic (Gaub and Pawlak, 2013, p. 2). It was the inability of the state to provide for people's physical and social security

which could be blamed for an eruption of the civil war in Syria. Regardless of which explanation is true, a possible dissolution of Iraq and Syria is a serious security threat with regional and transregional consequences. The increased influx of refugees to Europe is one of them.

With regard to the Middle East, the Cold War period was associated with the process of decolonization and an attempt to offer specific political and economic solutions in the post-colonial period by the two rival global camps. It is widely believed that the Cold War was introduced to the Middle East by the Suez Crisis of 1956. Great Britain and France, former imperial powers losing most of their influence in the Middle East, were soon replaced by the United States and the Soviet Union, who were competing for hegemony in the region. Both superpowers were convinced that a victory in the "Third World" was vital for the future vitality of their systems (LeFeber, 1985, pp. 171-172).

Already in the late 1950s there was a division in the Middle East between the conservative, pro-Western monarchies and states and radical or socialist states supported by the Soviet Union (Trentin and Gerlini, 2012, p. 2). The Arab Cold War, proxy conflicts and power struggle in the Middle East were not a simple reflection of the global competition due to the greater margin of discretion of individual countries towards the United States and the Soviet Union as compared to Europe. Although the Middle East was of great importance from the point of view of Cold War strategies of both superpowers, the countries in the region were not only pawns in global politics. Another example can be fundamentalism growing since the 1970s, which was not supported by any superpower, as it posed a challenge for both the East and the West (Halliday, 2005, p. 129). This fundamentalism in various forms, including terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, is one of the most severe problems in the Middle East today. Moreover, not all countries in the region were controlled by the superpowers. This particularly applies to Iran, which emerged as an independent entity and the first Islamic State as a result of the revolution in 1979. At that time, this meant not only the loss of a very important ally in the Middle East for the United States, but also a strategic strengthening of the Soviet Union and its global advantage. Hence, the revolution in Iran was treated as an important Cold War crisis (Emery, 2013, p. 46). Despite a certain independence of the local actors, the Cold War was a period of conducting proxy wars in the Middle East. In particular, the Arab-Israeli conflict can be interpreted in such a way, which negatively affected its solution.

An analysis of the Middle East during the Cold War poses a very significant problem in determining the causes of conflicts in the region. This question is extremely important for clarifying the nature of relations in the Middle East today, including identifying the causes of the war in Syria. Generally, there are two opposing perspectives of Middle Eastern wars during the Cold War period (Tibi, 1998, pp. 22-42).

According to the globalist school, “Third World” wars were closely related to superpower competition. The Arab-Israeli War in 1973 may be the best, but not the only example, when Israel was attacked by Egypt and Syria in order to recapture their territory lost in 1967. It was a classic proxy war as Israel was supported by the United States and Egypt and Syria by the Soviet advisers and a big supply of ammunition. According to the opposite regionalist school, conflicts in the Middle East had their own dynamic and mostly unequivocally endogenous causes despite the Cold War rivalry. In this perspective, the local powers were not fully controlled by the United States and the Soviet Union, even if the two superpowers penetrated the Middle East. Internal and regional factors were more important in shaping foreign policy than global influences. An example would be Egypt, which in the early 1970s gradually changed the vector of its foreign policy from the Soviet Union to the West and the United States. Already in 1972, the new Egyptian president Anwar Sadat expelled the Soviet military advisors. Following the war of 1973, he acknowledged that only the United States could give the Egyptians a fair solution concerning the restoration of Sinai, the territory occupied by Israel, as the Soviets could only deliver the arms (Shama, 2014, p. 154). Some other factors played a role in the change of Egyptian foreign policy as a personal mistrust of the Soviets by Sadat. Generally, internal factors not related with global competition influenced Egypt’s activities.

Both of these explanations can be applied to the present day situation, including the war in Syria. During the Cold War, developments in the Middle East were influenced by the rivalry between the superpowers, which often fought proxy wars in the region. But at the same time, some other considerations were equally important, like internal and regional factors as well as a self-definition of national interests by countries of the region. Globalist and regionalist schools were interrelated, just as it is today. The present Syrian war began in March 2011, when a pro-democracy and anti-authoritarian uprising soon transformed into an armed conflict and a brutal proxy war with the active involvement of neighbouring and European countries, the United States and Russia. Initially, the local and internal crisis soon changed through the involvement of outside powers into an armed conflict with serious regional and global implications.

The Middle East in the Post-Cold War International (dis)Order

The end of the Cold War strengthened the process of autonomization of the Middle East from global policy due to the disappearance of strategic rivalry between the two superpowers. Analyzing the trend of resistance of the Middle East’s policy towards global cycles, Fred Halliday concludes that the Middle East Cold War finished not at the end of the 1980s, but to a large extent 10 years earlier, when there was a revolution in Iran (1979) and the outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq in

the 1980s (Halliday, 2005, p. 133). Therefore, as acknowledged by Richard Saull (2006, pp. 71-77), the challenge for the new post-Cold War international order was not the Soviet Union and states being in its sphere of influence, but the new social and political forces that do not fall within the conflict between communism and capitalism. New divisions, whose source can be traced back as early as in the 1970s, run between the pro-Western authoritarian states and reactionary Islam aiming to get rid of Western influence. Paradoxically, the United States is the main target of radical Islamic terrorist groups and at the same time is largely responsible for their appearance, by supporting them during the Cold War, when Islamic fundamentalism was treated as a bulwark against communism (Dreyfuss, 2005). Many factors contribute to the current conflict in Syria, but Islamic fundamentalism is of paramount importance due to the activities of the Islamic State.

The disappearance of East-West rivalry after the end of the Cold War was also evident in the Middle East. After the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, the United States managed to secure various resolutions by the UN Security Council with the consent of the Soviet Union which developed friendly relations with Iraq during the Cold War (Nonneman, 2011, pp. 203-210). It was a sign of unity between two superpowers, and allowed for the creation of a coalition led by the United States with the participation of 34 countries and the removal of Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. Even the contribution of European states to the Gulf War was modest, since Operation Desert Storm was an expression of the development of transatlantic relations. This atmosphere of mutual understanding and trust between Russia and European powers quickly changed when, in 1993, the United States adopted the 'dual containment' policy directed towards both Iraq and Iran, a country which in fact supported the coalition against Iraq. This meant a return to the perception of the Middle East in terms of geostrategic interests and rivalry.

The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 constituted a very important turning point in the development of post-Cold War global politics and the situation in the Middle East. Since then, terrorism has been identified as a major threat to international security and the fight against Islamic fundamentalism, as the source of further terrorist attacks in Europe and various parts of the world, has become a necessity. As a response to the 9/11 events, the United States declared the war on terror and invaded Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), countries blamed for creating rampant terrorism. In particular, the intervention in Iraq led to significant divisions within the Western world and complicated transatlantic relations.

The opposition of Germany and France to the Iraq war contrasted with the participation of many European countries in the US coalition, *e.g.* the United Kingdom, Italy or Poland. Differences resulted from divergent perspectives on the ways to solve these international problems. While the Americans were convinced they should undertake unilateral actions, creating, if possible, a coalition of the willing,

Europeans were committed to the concept of multilateralism. The different approaches and transatlantic tensions were not the only reasons that further complicated the situation in the Middle East through the growth of radical and anti-Western sentiments.

One of the fundamental mistakes was an immediate dissolution of the Iraqi army what led to the rise of the ISIS, once a branch of the Al Qaeda, which began its operations as an Iraqi organization. As estimated by some experts (Thompson, 2015), around 25 of the ISIS's top 40 leaders once served in the Iraqi military. The dissolution of the Iraqi army and no clear American postwar planning led to sectarian violence between the Sunnis who dominated the regime of Saddam Hussein and the new Shia-led government sponsored by the United States. The outbreak of the conflict in Iraq was therefore the result of a failed idea of promoting democracy in a country that was not prepared for it. Contrary to the declared goals of the intervention in Iraq, the United States could not therefore ensure security in the Middle East by exporting democratic values (Podraza, 2015, pp. 81-82). Quite the contrary, "this project of ushering a democratic revolution in the heart of the Middle East has been met with a growing anti-American insurgency, Sunni/Shia sectarianism or civil war, and widespread anger throughout the region towards American intentions" (Barder, 2009, p. 55). The situation deteriorated when President Barack Obama withdrew American soldiers from Iraq at the end of 2011. Three years later, when Islamic State fighters swept into Iraq from Syria and made territorial gains, Obama decided to deploy American forces in Iraq once again (Schmidt and Landler, 2016). Errors made by the United States in Iraq and the lack of proper Western response to the events of the "Arab Spring" in Syria led to the strengthening of the threat from the Islamic State exploiting chaos and divisions within both Syria and Iraq.

The "Arab Spring" and the West's Response

Despite initial hopes concerning the events of the "Arab Spring" in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, it quickly became apparent that the effect of the changes will not be democratization as expected, but the destabilization of individual countries and the region. The "Arab Spring" showed the limited abilities of the United States and European countries to influence the Middle East region, which was the result of both the lack of a clear strategy and the desire to avoid entanglement in another armed conflict. This was particularly evident in the case of the United States, which always played an important role in the Middle East. However, the experience resulting from many years of war in Iraq led President Obama to repeatedly stress the impossibility of sending ground troops to solve the Syrian crisis. As he acknowledged in 2013, his intention was to shift the United States away from "a perpetual wartime footing" (Delman, 2016). Military options

of the United States have since been limited to attempting to rely more on diplomacy than military measures.

The “Arab Spring” began in Tunisia in December 2010 as a protest inspired by the dissatisfaction with the social and economic conditions and the authoritarian rule. It quickly spilled over to other countries of North Africa and the Middle East, showing the frustration and determination of the protesters, largely young people, who due to the high level of unemployment, low income and widespread corruption felt a lack of prospects and development opportunities. Social media played a large role in the mobilization of protesters by activating the younger generation. The causes of the “Arab Spring” were primarily internal and were associated with an outdated model of management of the economy and the state. But from the perspective of 2018, its overall outcome is far from optimistic. As acknowledged by Daniel Byman (2011), one year after the beginning of the protests in Tunisia, the hope of the “Arab Spring” turned into the chill of an “Arab Winter”, as “the peaceful demonstrations in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen that were supposed to bring democracy have instead given way to bloodshed and chaos, with the forces of tyranny trying to turn back the clock”. With the exception of Tunisia, which can be regarded as a success story, other countries, including Syria, Libya and Yemen became mired in civil wars or like Egypt started a counter-revolution. The basic problem, which appeared after the “Arab Spring”, was the issue of how the pursuit of democratization would not undermine the stability of individual countries and the entire region of the Middle East and North Africa. It quickly became clear that the direct effects of the “Arab Spring” are chaos, a civil war, but also the rise to power of Islamic organizations in democratic elections, as in the case of Egypt. It could have negative consequences not only for the countries of the region, but also in the wider transnational dimension through the influx of refugees into Europe.

The reasons for the failure of the “Arab Spring” are diverse. They are both internal and result from the action of external actors. The myth of the democratization of Arab countries very optimistically referred to the experience of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Such analysis did not take into account the specifics of the tradition of the Middle East and the different nature of the events of the late 1980s and of the beginning of the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe. The difficulties in introducing democracy in the countries of the Middle East in comparison to Central and East European countries resulted from a powerful tradition of authoritarianism based on the long history of dynastic rule and the lack of a democratic tradition (Ahrari, 1996, p. 98). The concept of a nation-state exported by the colonial powers has never fully been accepted in the Middle East since religious and tribal identities in many countries are more important than national allegiances (Kupchan, 2012). In addition, no one was really aware of the possibility of eventually creating an Islamist political system as a result of the democratization process,

which, paradoxically, could undermine the possibilities for democratization in the Middle East. This problem is closely related to two things underestimated by both Western countries and demonstrators themselves (The Economist, 2016). The institutional fragility of many Arab states in coping with changes was not really taken into account. The second problem was the vicious determination of the regimes to retain or recapture control, leading to bloody civil wars like in Syria.

The West, meaning European countries and the United States, committed a number of significant errors in response to the “Arab Spring” that resulted from the absence of a clear strategy of how to react to events in the countries of the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. The reaction of the European Union, including its Member States, was an illustration of a number of problems of the EU as an unfinished international actor. The indecisive and relatively weak reaction of the European Union towards the “Arab Spring” and the Syrian crisis stemmed from the lack of clarity in defining desired objectives, the weakness of instruments and an inability to cope with the sudden and unexpected deterioration of the situation. To some extent, the Union made the same mistakes as when it reacted to the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Both in the face of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the growing radicalization in the Arab countries, Europeans wrongly concluded that political conditionality would be sufficient to achieve the desired change and stability of individual countries and the region in a situation of intensifying conflicts. The main problem for the EU strategy towards MENA countries prior to and after the “Arab Spring” was seeking a solution to the “stability *vs* democracy” dilemma (Mühlberger and Müller, 2016, pp. 54-59). Despite the rhetoric of promoting democratic values and taking into account the authoritarian nature of the Arab states, the EU to a greater extent developed a “stability partnership” with ruling elites up until the “Arab Spring”. Development of political dialogue and trade relations were the only tools used vis-à-vis the Arab states. The EU’s policy was therefore quite conservative in nature, in which stabilization prevailed over possible democratization. The consequence of the “Arab Spring” was a change of priorities by the European Union through greater emphasis on democratization and strengthening civil society. When in 2011 the European Union revised its European Neighborhood Policy, the concept of a “deep democracy” complemented the concept of “deep free trade,” however, it lacked concrete elements (Casier, 2012, pp. 104-106).

The Syrian War and the Role of External Powers

The European Union did not have a clear and well-thought out strategy towards the conflict in Syria, which quickly turned into the biggest security threat towards Europe, both in terms of the influx of refugees and the terrorist attacks in European countries carried out by the Islamic State. The impact of the European Union and

individual Member States on developments in Syria was from the beginning very limited.

Launched in the Summer of 2011, diplomatic attempts to influence the Syrian regime through the freezing of cooperation, diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions did not produce the desired results (Asseburg, 2013, pp. 17-18). Being a member of the Friends of Syria group established in February 2012, the European Union gave diplomatic, technical and financial support to the Syrian opposition. But the Union's policy has been incoherent since then. Initially, there was a considerable difference of opinion on a number of issues, like arming the rebels or military intervention. As concluded by Muriel Asseburg (2013, p. 18):

"In addition, European policies – as those of other third parties – have been inconsistent in that there has been a contradiction between a norm-based rhetoric encouraging the Syrian opposition in its ever more militant approach on the one hand (by stating that Assad had to go and by insinuating the establishment of buffer/protection/no-fly zones and the delivery of arms to the rebels, assuming the opposition organized itself according to the West's vision), and the lack of concrete and effective European support for achieving that objective (against the backdrop of concerns over a regional conflagration and the spectre of a Jihadi safe haven emanating in Syria) on the other".

Although it is hard to believe that the European Union will solve the Syrian conflict alone, the apparent lack of action or sending conflicting signals lead to increased activities of other players in the region, especially Russia. The cautious and indecisive attitude of the United States as the sole superpower in the post-Cold War period contributed to the difficulty in resolving the conflict.

The position of Barack Obama towards the escalation of the conflict in Syria, which is both a civil and a proxy war, was initially the result of criticism of the involvement of former President George W. Bush in the war in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq. Barack Obama's rise to power in 2009 was, to a certain extent, the result of challenging Bush's democracy promotion agenda in the Middle East by military means, which resulted in the intervention in Iraq. Moreover, Obama's initial Middle East strategy was based on the conviction that the United States should reduce its massive military and political presence in the Middle East at a time of economic crisis as it was a vital national security interest to reduce the United States' overextension (Lynch, 2015). As argued by Christopher Phillips (2016, pp. 1-9), the vacuum created by a perceived decline of the USA's power in the Middle East led to a violent competition between the United States and other powers like Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar in Syria regarded as a key battleground. The initial reaction of the United States towards the events of the "Arab Spring" was marked by ambiguity. There was a considerable gap between rhetoric and actions characterizing the USA's policy: "While the American rhetorical

response to all these crises followed a similar pattern, actions, even in similar circumstances, varied considerably” (Gilboa, 2013, p. 52). A change of the American position occurred in 2014, when President Obama realized that rising extremism had to be responded. But the reaction of Obama was still not without ambiguity (Testimony of Tamara Cofman Wittes, 2015). It is doubtful whether the commitment of the military coalition is sufficient to destroy ISIS and whether after a military campaign stability can be attained in Iraq and Syria.

Even before 2014 the conflict in Syria entered a very dangerous phase through the involvement of a number of regional players and, above all, Russia. Iran and Russia traditionally support Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Iran is doing this mainly for religious reasons and for retaining strong presence in Syria and Lebanon, countries having borders with Israel. Russia’s support has many causes. The first and foremost goal of President Putin in the long term is to restore Russia as a global power. It is to be achieved, among other things, by limiting the influence of the United States and other European powers in the Middle East. As in the case of Ukraine, Russia with suspicion assesses intentions of the Western countries, because it believes that their humanitarian or normative goals are designed to realize their own political and economic interests and to further marginalize Russia in the international arena. A naval presence in the Mediterranean is also an important factor since the only Russian base in the Mediterranean is located in a Syrian city Tartus. What’s more, one of the objectives of Putin’s policy, what motivates Russia’s activities not only in Syria but also in Ukraine, is to prevent a success of any revolution aiming at overthrowing undemocratic regimes. Their success could in fact lead to a further reduction of Russian influence in international relations, which was launched at the start of the process of transition of Central and East European countries at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. It could also serve as an example for Russian society to carry out a change of power in Russia by removing Putin. Russian support for the Syrian regime is thus determined by the interplay of geopolitical and internal factors particularly important in shaping Russian foreign policy. Russia’s military action in Syria began in September 2015 and is the largest foreign operation after the end of the Cold War. Russia seeks to eliminate moderate opposition groups and strives for the survival of President Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Russia’s brutal bombing of Aleppo in September and October 2016 significantly contributed to deepening the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. These attacks could even amount to crimes against humanity as suggested by Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (Al-Khalidi and Brunnstrom, 2016). They do not allow the international society to find a political solution to the conflict in Syria. A number of other powers, with diverse interests and supporting the different parties in the conflict, are involved in the war in Syria. Sunni Saudi Arabia supports a number of rebel groups by providing military and financial assistance. Saudi

Arabia is seeking to remove Bashar al-Assad from power. Its competition in Syria with Iran, a traditional rival since 1979, has been even described as a “cold war” (Kinninmont, 2014, p. 49). Saudi Arabia has been critical of the US policy in Syria because of the lack of military intervention, stressing that the world had betrayed the Syrian opposition (Thompson, 2016, p. 64). Turkey is also a major player in the Syrian war. Its activities with regard to Syria stem from the recognition that the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS are the main security threats (Thompson, 2016, pp. 58-63). Moreover, due to a renewed neo-Ottoman identity, Turkey wants to establish itself as a leader in the Middle East. Turkey’s attitude towards the conflict in Syria is not entirely clear, and this has led to the deterioration of relations with Russia and Iran, but also with its Western allies (Altunışık, 2016, p. 39). Differences with Russia and Iran result from actions by Turkey directed against President Assad. Despite periods of close cooperation with other NATO Member States, Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian conflict gave rise to a number of doubts.

In contrast to the United States, the position of Turkey in the fight against the Islamic State is not clear. Turkey officially entered the war against ISIS in July 2015, but it was rather a war against the Kurds and not the Islamic State, as mainly Kurdish targets were hit by the Turkish jets (Thompson, 2016, pp. 60-61). In this respect, Turkey adopts a different strategy than the US, since the Americans provide weapons to the Iraqi Kurds, while Turkey supports anti-Assad radical Islamic groups. An option under consideration by the Obama Administration was a plan to directly arm Syrian Kurdish fighters combating the Islamic State, a move which could lead to a deterioration of relations with Turkey (Schmitt, 2016). But Obama left this issue to President Donald Trump who finally took a decision in May 2017 to provide weapons to Syrian Kurds to retake the city of Raqqa from the Islamic State (Gordon and Schmitt, 2017). Differences in the approach of Turkey and the United States make it difficult to find a solution to end the conflict in Syria. Therefore, it is not possible to end the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria and the refugee crisis, which are the direct results of the escalating conflict.

From the very beginning the conflict in Syria has escalated into a war, which involved several regional and global powers representing divergent interests. Therefore, the conflict in Syria is not a civil but a proxy war. The possibilities for its solution are therefore limited. Various factors have an impact on this situation, as divisions within the opposition groups, the activities of the radical Islamic State in Syria, but also terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States, and the extraordinary brutality of the Syrian regime. The lack of a single strategy of external powers concerning the causes of and possible solutions of the Syrian crisis deepens the sectarian polarisation and radicalisation, which further complicates the situation inside Syria and does not allow for ending the conflict through diplomatic talks. From the perspective of the first half of 2017, it can be assumed that the most

likely scenario is a further escalation of the fighting in Syria. The risk of a “Lebanisation” of Syria should therefore be taken into account, but the effects of this development will be extremely negative in both the regional and global dimensions. Even by accident a proxy war may change into a direct clash between external powers. Without taking explicit action by the international community, the continuation of the conflict and the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the coming years are very likely. Already at this point it is believed that the Syrian war has triggered the worst humanitarian disaster since the Second World War.

The Refugee Crisis

The immediate result of the Syrian conflict is the refugee crisis. Its short and long-term humanitarian, political and economic effects are and will be enormous for Syria, the Middle East, Europe and other parts of the world. As estimated in September 2016, 13.5 million people in Syria were in need of humanitarian assistance and 6.6 million were internally displaced (European Commission, 2016, p. 1). The Syrian refugee crisis began in April 2011 when 5000 refugees fled to Lebanon. Now there are over 4.8 million refugees in neighbouring countries and the wider region. Turkey and Lebanon are the most affected countries. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2016), there are over 3 million people in Turkey and more than 1 million in Lebanon. In Europe between April 2011 and August 2016 there were 1,151,865 Syrian asylum applications (UNHCR, 2016). Compared to Syria’s neighbouring countries, this amount is relatively low as it represents slightly more than 10% of Syrians fleeing the country. The population of Syria has also decreased as a result of war. As estimated by the United Nations, the death toll has exceeded 250,000 people, but according to the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), it reaches the level of 470,000 with 1.2 million injured people (The World Bank, 2016).

Without ending the conflict in Syria, it is impossible to resolve the refugee crisis. In the regional dimension, it leads to the destabilization of the Middle East, because the Syrians are first of all fleeing to neighbouring countries, especially to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. These countries are deeply affected socially and economically by the growing influx of refugees. This significantly deepens the internal problems of the host countries. At the beginning of 2014, 927,638 Syrian refugees were registered in Lebanon, representing around 21% of the total population in the country what implied a significant social and economic impact on Lebanon, including the labour market (International Labour Organization, 2014). The World Bank estimated in 2014 that there would be an increase in the labour supply in Lebanon by 30-50% (Tan, 2015, p. 309). Taking into account other negative manifestations of the presence of refugees in Lebanon, such as a price increase of essential goods and services, this leads to a considerable fall of public sympathy towards refugees. It is

reported that over 90% of Lebanese nationals “perceived refugees as threats to their economic livelihood and value system, and over two-thirds perceived them as existential threats” (Tan, 2015, p. 308).

Despite some differences between the host countries, similar problems to those in Lebanon appear in other countries. Therefore, neighbouring countries seek to limit the influx of refugees by strengthening the borders, stopping the refugees at the border, introducing visas and a range of other activities. Such actions aggravate the situation of refugees, who are often trapped in *no-man’s land*. Jordan was the first country to shut its border to refugees in mid-2014 and since then, 75,000 Syrians have been stranded in dire conditions on the Jordanian border (Kingsley, 2016). Syria’s neighbours largely undertake measures due to the lack of adequate support from the international community. This problem is particularly evident in regard to Turkey. “Turkish reception policies at the outset predicated on the assumption that the conflict would come to a swift conclusion” (İçduygu, p. 1). Yet, as the situation in Syria has deteriorated, the Turkish state is not able to provide adequate assistance to all in need. As estimated in July 2016, there were over 3.1 million Syrians in Turkey, which became the host country with the largest refugee population in the world (European Commission, 2016, p. 1). Poor living conditions mostly outside special camps forced Syrians to illegally migrate to Europe. As reported by Frontex – the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (2016a), in 2015, some 885,000 migrants arrived in the European Union from Turkey via the Eastern Mediterranean route (through the Greek islands, especially Lesbos) – 17 times the number in 2014. These migrants tried to reach Western Europe, especially Germany, and they used the Western Balkan route going through the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and Croatia. In 2015, there were 764,000 detections of illegal border crossings by migrants, a 16-fold rise from 2014 (Frontex, 2016b). Most of them were Syrians, but also Iraqis, Afghans and other nationalities. According to Eurostat (2016), in 2015, 1.2 million (1,255,600) first-time asylum seekers were registered in the European Union. It was double the number from the previous year. Almost 1 out of 3 asylum seekers originated from Syria (362,800 – 29%) followed by Afghans (178,200 – 14%) and Iraqis (121,500 – 10%). The countries most affected by the influx of refugees were Germany (441,800 applicants – 35%), followed by Hungary (174,400 – 14%) and Sweden (156,100 – 12%). Compared with the population of each Member State, Hungary was at the top of the list.

Such a large influx of refugees into EU countries in 2015 was a result of many factors, among others, of the Turkish policy to put pressure on European states (the EU-Turkey migrant agreement was concluded in March 2016) and Germany’s welcoming policy. Angela Merkel, Germany’s chancellor, at the end of August 2015 declared that “we can do it” and this was a reaction to the tragic fate of some refugees dying in the Mediterranean and a result of the normative character of German

and European policy. In the opinion of critics, the effects of Merkel's unilateral declaration were negative for Europe. Opinion polls, already published in October 2015, pointed to the critical attitude of most Germans towards Angela Merkel's decision (Paterson, 2015). 49% of respondents negatively assessed Merkel's policy in this area and only 39% approved of it. Also, various EU Member States responded critically towards the unilaterally declared open-door policy (Heisbourg, 2015-2016, pp. 12-13). The criticism mainly related to the lack of appropriate consultation and coordination. It was also thought that Germany, breaching the Dublin Regulation, believed that a rules-based European order should be respected by others and not by Berlin. Germany's attitude contributed to deep divisions between the EU Member States and to a certain degree to the decision of the British to leave the European Union. Moreover, an almost uncontrolled influx of refugees into Europe allowed terrorists from the Islamic State to create new modes of entry or re-entry into the European Union (they are citizens of the EU Member States fighting in Syria). Although only a small minority of refugees are in fact terrorists, attacks in Paris, Brussels and Nice in 2015 and 2016 had a negative impact on public sentiment towards refugees and reinforced isolationist or even xenophobic attitudes in various countries.

The divisions in the European Union, that have been caused by the refugee crisis, leads to increasing difficulties as regards an adoption of a coherent policy towards external problems. Despite a lot of efforts, the European Union cannot become an effective geopolitical player as it lacks a clear strategy to address the problems of its neighborhood despite the direct security consequences of the Syrian conflict for the Member States. So far the Union proves that it does not have a genuine Common Foreign and Security Policy and its normative influence has its obvious limits. This is not only a problem of the external influence of the European Union, which also in the past was not an effective actor in the situation of bloody conflicts, as in the case of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. The problem also applies to crisis management in the EU itself, which could not and cannot solve the problem of its borders control and the distribution of refugees among the Member States. The first issue results from the lack of effectiveness, while the second is connected with a difficulty of achieving a common position in the face of differences between the Member States. Therefore, different groups of countries within the European Union, whose interests are clearly differentiated, can be distinguished. Countries most affected by the influx of refugees, as for example Germany, Sweden, Greece or Italy, are interested in the establishment of refugee burden-sharing mechanisms. Other countries, like the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, are reluctant to accept such a scheme and are in favour of a national control of immigration policies. The Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis reveal limitations of the European Union in playing an important geopolitical role. What's more, they

can lead to a political earthquake in some Member States, which will not only reshape Europe's politics, but also significantly weaken the EU's international position. Renationalisation may in fact lead to disintegration or at least to a change of the model of unification towards a more intergovernmental paradigm. There is no doubt that Russia would be the geopolitical winner of an eventual decline of the European Union.

Conclusions

The geopolitical and strategic implications of the refugee crisis are especially important as the impact of the Syrian conflict goes beyond a pure regional dimension and might drastically deteriorate international relations. Rising instability in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea basin may lead to possible future conflicts. Moreover, an increasing penetration of Syria by various powers, like the United States, Russia, Turkey, France, the United Kingdom, Iran etc., could lead to their rivalry as the outbreak of a proxy war is now a fact. The destabilization of the European Union is also possible due to a rise of anti-immigrant sentiments and differences between the Member States. It could also lead to a possible change in the model of European integration in terms of developing a more intergovernmental mechanism or adopting the idea of a two-speed Europe.

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