

**THE SYRIAN AND SPANISH CIVIL WARS— BOTH PRELUDES TO
WIDER CONFLICTS?
isranet-publications
Blog, February 11, 2016
<https://www.isranet.org/blog/syrian-and-spanish-civil-wars-both-preludes-wider-conflicts-0/>**

To the already-crowded military field in Syria, with its various Sunni Muslim and Alawite-Shiite militias, Iranian, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Russian actors, as well as the U.S., British, and French-led allied air coalition, we now learn that both Saudi Arabia and Turkey may also soon be directly involved. This fraught and unstable internationalized battleground should recall Spain from 1936-39, which was in important respects the antechamber of World War II.

In 1936 Spanish pro-fascist monarchist forces under General Francisco Franco attacked the legitimate government of the Spanish Republic, setting off a civil war. This war was soon internationalized, with fascist Italy and Nazi Germany supporting Franco's nationalist forces, and Leon Blum's "Popular Front" France initially providing some military aid (Britain remained "neutral") to the Republic. Soviet Russia, pushing "Popular Front" politics, also /countered Nazi-fascist support for Franco with military equipment and advisers. As well, thousands of largely socialist and communist volunteers, organized into International Brigades, came to the aid of the Republic.

The viciously partisan war, pitting Catholics against leftists, fascists and monarchists against liberal, socialist, and anarchist republicans, ended with the defeat of the Republican forces in March, 1939, as the Western democracies provided little help and Stalin's Soviet Union, after failing to dominate the anarchist (POUM)-led Republic, withdrew its initial support. The long war entailed massive urban and rural destruction, with an estimated half-million deaths, and over 400,000 Republican refugees, military and civilian.

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The Spanish Civil War should, *mutatis mutandis*, in some ways remind us of the increasingly complex and even more destructive and dangerous civil war in Syria, now almost five years old, with eight million internal and over four million external refugees and a death toll approaching 300,000. In Syria, of course, the government was, and is, not a legitimate representative Republic, but a one-man, one-party dictatorship, while the initial Syrian rebels were not proto-fascist monarchists but relatively moderate Muslims, demanding, in one of the last gasps of the failed regional Arab Spring, a truly representative government.

While the Assad-family dictatorship had traditionally been supported by the Soviet Union, a policy continued by its Russian successor, the direct intervention of Moscow would come only later. Initially, the West supported the rebels indirectly, with the American President, Obama, calling for Assad's removal but providing no aid to his opponents. As Assad moved militarily against his largely civilian opponents, new factors entered the equation: Shiite Iran and its Lebanese Hezbollah clients ramped up support for the Alawite Syrian ruler, while the anti-Assad Sunni Saudi Arabia and Gulf Arabs (and to some extent the Turks) supported the largely Sunni rebels.

Soon, however, as the conflict deepened, a new element entered the increasingly volatile mix. An extreme Islamist force, IS, or Islamic State (or ISIL [Arabic "Daesh"]), breaking away from Al Qaeda, established itself, proclaiming a *sharia*-based Caliphate in both Iraq and Syria. Bloodily repressive, beheading and burning captives and raping and enslaving subordinate Yazidi and other women, IS quickly conquered part of northern Syria, around Raqqa, and a swath of Iraq around Ramadi, first threatening and then taking Iraqi-Kurdish Mosul, and threatening Baghdad.

As in the Spanish Civil War, an initially internal conflict was soon internationalized. In Spain, the conflict was deepened and broadened by Italian-German military support for the monarchist-conservative-Catholic Franco's Falange movements, and indirect Western, and then direct Soviet Russian, support for the secular liberal-socialist-anarchist Republican forces. In Syria, the initial moderate Muslim

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rebels were soon overshadowed by more radical anti-Assad Islamist forces, financed and supported by Sunni Saudi Arabia, while Bashar Assad received Iranian funding and arms, troops from Iran's Lebanese client Hezbollah, and increasing Russian support. And the pro-Republican International Brigades in Spain were inversely mirrored in Syria by thousands of young pro-IS Islamist volunteers from around the world.

In Spain France gave only minor, indirect support to the Republic (the International Brigades, however heroically motivated, were of relatively modest military weight), and the Soviets, while providing arms and some military cadres, never went "all in". Similarly, in Syria, where Obama kept the US (and NATO) out of direct involvement, moderates received Western moral, but little direct military, aid, and their weakness created a pro-Sunni, anti-Assad power vacuum soon filled by IS.

(The rise of IS can, in fact, in large part be laid at Obama's feet. Allergic to providing "boots on the ground", Obama—who had already fostered IS's rise by prematurely withdrawing American forces from Iraq—reneged on a pledged "red line" after Assad's use of chemical weapons was discovered. Lack of American resolve and leadership created the Syrian political vacuum into which IS expanded.)

As the crisis deepened, and IS expanded while Assad's area of control steadily shrank, the interventions were radicalized. The U.S. in 2014, after the public outcry over IS's savaging of the Yazidis in Iraq, championed a Western-Sunni Arab (Jordan) "Allied" air campaign against IS (but still no "boots on the ground", save for the use of Kurdish forces in the north-east). Now Iranian support for Assad (before, during, and after its nuclear deal with Obama) was ramped up, and then Russia—with naval and air bases in north-west Syria—intervened directly by bringing ground-attack aircraft into play. (Putin's air campaign, from his Syrian base near Latakia, while supposedly directed against the IS, in fact has concentrated largely on what Putin called "terrorists", that is, the relatively moderate—and supposedly US-backed-Sunni anti-Assad coalition.)

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Now, in February, 2015, Russia's involvement has deepened (advanced S-400 missile anti-aircraft batteries are in place, heavy bombers from Russia are being used, and there is evidence of augmented Russian ground forces). Meanwhile the American-led air campaign still shows little sign of markedly impeding IS (and Canada under its new Prime Minister is withdrawing its six F-18 fighters). In a partial Obamian about-face, the U.S. Administration—under increasing domestic pressure, as the Presidential election campaign heats up—has announced the placing of an initially small (50!) contingent of American special forces troops on the ground and a ramping up of the aerial sorties.

As the Saudis and Turks reportedly contemplate direct intervention, the two leading world-powers and their proxies are now directly facing off against one another in the downwardly-spiralling Syrian civil war. Despite hurried “deconfliction” talks to avoid accidental confrontations, incidents like Turkey's recent downing of a Russian Su-24 fighter-bomber, and continued claimed border incursions by Russian aircraft, could easily spark a deeper crisis.

In Spain, Nazi-fascist support trumped ineffectual Western, and manipulative Soviet, aid (see George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, on the Soviets' duplicity), resulting in a Francoist victory and the destruction of the Republic. In Syria at this point, Russian-Iranian support for Assad (the equivalent of German-Italian aid to Franco) seems about to trump the moderate rebels who, weakly backed by the U.S. (like the Spanish Republicans by France), are losing.

Here IS, as a kind of relatively independent third party to the conflict, breaks the structural parallelisms. IS—playing off the Alawites and the moderate Sunnis against one another, and oddly (or not so oddly) *not* constituting the direct target of either the Russians or the Turks, or for that matter of Assad—is, despite some recent allied air force-backed Sunni and Kurdish advances, holding its own, or better (see its recent expansion into Libya and Afghanistan).

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(Indeed, some analysts argue that Assad has in fact used IS against the moderate rebels, and is willing, at least in the short-to-medium run, to divide Syria with them to do so. It is also pointed out that Turkey's Erdogan, focused on fighting the Kurds, not IS, has maintained porous Turkish-Syrian borders, allowing IS reinforcement and supply. And, further, that the mass emigration of millions of Sunni Syrians to Lebanese, Jordanian and Turkish refugee camps, and on to Germany and Sweden through southern Europe- worsened recently by continuing Russian-supported bombings of civilians-is in fact a kind of ethnic cleansing strengthening Assad's minority Alawite constituency.)

If the Spanish Civil War was a prelude to World War II, strengthening and encouraging the fascist-Nazi forces, demonstrating the weakness and appeasement of the democracies (and of Stalin) and, not least, demonstrating the irrelevance of the League of Nations, is the Syrian Civil War (also demonstrating the weakness of the West, and the impotence of the UN) the antechamber of a wider and deeper conflict?

The book of the future is the hardest of tomes to read, but the obviously deeply unstable Syrian situation indeed has within itself elements of a wider conflict. Accidental confrontations—Russian and American aircraft encountering one another, a Russian-American naval crisis in the Mediterranean, an incident issuing from recently-emplaced Russian guided-missile batteries (which “cover” Israel as well as Syria and the Turkish border), the possible shooting down of an allied coalition (or as happened recently, a Russian) aircraft, a Russian cruise missile going astray, and so on- could lead to serious consequences.

At the same time, more “structural” elements, radicalized by the ongoing conflict, may well come into play (Turkey, after all, which may soon enter the fray, is, like the U.S., the French, and the British [whose Parliament recently voted to join the bombing campaign in Syria], a NATO member).

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Syria today has become what Hobbes, reflecting on an earlier civil war, termed a *bellum omnium contra omnes*, a “war of all against all”. The UN, despite the periodic protestations of Ban Ki Moon, is—like the League of Nations in 1936—irrelevant, and recent attempts to convoke an effective peace conference leading to a general truce and a political solution have again foundered (on sustained Russian bombing and “moderate” Muslim forces’ opposition to Russian demands that Assad stay in place in any ensuing “caretaker” regime).

Syria,, where the civil war is entering its sixth year, is the scene of increasing internationalized combat and socio-economic disintegration, reinforcing already massive population flows. America (still isolated by isolationism in 1936, and having once again largely withdrawn from the world under Obama) has, as IS continues to spread and the Russians and the Iranians step up their own involvement, been partially sucked back into the vortex despite the evident distaste of its President.

The Saudis and Gulf Arabs (already bogged down in Yemen by opposing the Iranian-backed Houthi revolt there) are nevertheless also deeply involved in Syria, supporting both elements of the moderate Sunni opposition and IS. IS itself remains a destabilizing expansionist factor, with footholds in Libya and Afghanistan, connections to Boko Haram in Nigeria, terrorist killings of over 200 Russians in the Sharm El-Sheikh airplane bombing over the Sinai and 130 Frenchmen through multiple terrorist attacks in Paris, and scores of other dead in Beirut and in San Bernardino, Ca., where one of the Muslim killers of fourteen innocents had pledged her allegiance to IS by cellphone.

Russia-backed Iran, doubling down in Syria, is sending thousands of its own Iranian Revolutionary Guard units under IRG officers (over 400 killed in combat), to support Assad. Turkey, where conservative Sunni Islamist Erdogan was handed a reinforced nationalist majority in recent elections, is moving against the Kurds, inside and outside the Syria-Turkey border, despite the fact that they are the

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U.S.'s only effective “boots on the ground” ally in Syria.

Note that nothing to this point has been said of Jordan, or Egypt. King Abdullah, who has absorbed hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, is under both IS and Moslem Brotherhood domestic pressure. And Egypt's Gen. el-Sissi, in a domestically precarious position facing IS terrorism in the Sinai and continuing Moslem Brotherhood radical opposition domestically, also has a direct stake in the Syrian outcome.

Israel, too, which has studiously avoided getting directly involved to this point, save to prevent transshipment of advanced war materiel from Iran through Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon, remains a potentially (major) wild card. With IS forces in the Egyptian Sinai, Iranian-led troops near the Golan Heights, Russian planes over the borders, Iran-backed Hamas terrorists in Gaza and Hezbollah Shiite fighters (with 100,000 rockets) on the southern Lebanon border, dangerous incidents are possible, and could easily escalate.

The American abdication of regional leadership, despite the rising stakes of the Middle East game, has emboldened the deepening Russian and Iranian intervention; indeed, whether Obama is in fact collaborating *de facto* with Russia (and Iran) in Syria remains moot. This would seem to indicate that the Syrian Civil War, like Spain's, could, sooner or later, burst out of its domestic container. By 1939, Hitler, emboldened by Franco's victory in Spain and Western weakness and appeasement at Munich, had forced the *Anschluss* with Austria, and then signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with his erstwhile Bolshevik enemy. The Nazi invasion of Poland, and the beginning of World War II, were only months away.

Could accidental confrontation, hubris-driven aggression, or a successful “victory” in Syria (*e.g.*, a Western diplomatic “peace settlement” betraying the moderate Opposition, with Russia maintaining Assad in power and further emboldening the Iranian Mullahs and Putin-remember Crimea, and eastern Ukraine) spark a region-

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wide Middle East conflagration? Such an eventuality surely cannot be discounted. And could this, given the regional rivalries and NATO connections, spark a wider European war? Given the current downward spiral, we could find out the answer, one way or another, in the not-so-distant future.

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