

**THE SYRIAN AND SPANISH CIVIL WARS— BOTH PRELUDES TO
WIDER CONFLICTS?
isranet-publications
Blog, December 4, 2015
<https://www.isranet.org/blog/syrian-and-spanish-civil-wars-both-preludes-wider-conflicts/>**

In 1936 Spanish pro-fascist monarchist forces under General Francisco Franco attacked the legitimate government of the Spanish Republic, setting off a vicious and soon internationalized civil war. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany directly supported Franco's nationalist forces, with air support, military equipment, advisers, and materiel; France provided some aid to the Republic while Britain maintained neutrality. Soviet Russia countered Fascist-Nazi support to Franco with military equipment and advisers, while thousands of largely socialist and communist foreign volunteers, organized into International Brigades, also came to the aid of the Republic.

The viciously partisan war, pitting Catholics against secular Republicans, 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 real help, and the Soviets, fearing the Spanish anarchist-republicans (POUM), withdrew their support. The war, entailing large-scale urban and rural destruction and dislocation (Guernica), produced the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, and over 400,000 Republican refugees.

The Spanish Civil War should in some ways, *mutatis mutandis*, remind us of the increasingly complex and even more destructive, dangerous and internationalized civil war in Syria. Now almost five years old, with eight million internal and four million external refugees and a death toll approaching 300,000, the Syrian civil war shows no signs of soon ending. 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

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regional Arab Spring, a truly representative government.

While the Assad dictatorship had traditionally been supported by the Soviet Union, a policy continued by its Russian successor, Moscow's direct intervention has come only recently. 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 ramped up its support for the Alawite Syrian ruler, while the anti-Assad Sunni Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arabs (and to some extent the Turks) supported the largely Sunni rebels.

Soon, however, the conflict deepened, with a new element entering the increasingly volatile mix. An extremist Sunni Islamist force, IS, or Islamic State (or ISIL [Arabic "Daesh"]), breaking away from Al Qaeda, established itself and proclaimed a strict *sharia*-based Caliphate in both Iraq and Syria. A fundamentalist movement, bloodily repressive, beheading and burning captives and raping and enslaving subordinate Yazidi and other women, IS quickly conquered part of northern Syria, around Raqqa, which it proclaimed its capital, and a swath of north-eastern Iraq around Ramadi, threatening both Iraqi-Turkish Mosul and Baghdad.

As in the Spanish Civil War, an initially internal conflict was soon internationalized. In Spain, the conflict was deepened and broadened by direct Italian-German military support for monarchist-conservative Franco, and indirect and ineffective Western, and then direct Soviet Russian, support for the Republican forces. In Syria, the initial moderate Muslim rebels were soon overshadowed by more radical Islamist forces, financed and supported by Sunni Arab states (Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States), and dedicated to removing Assad, while Assad received Iranian funding and arms, troops from Iran's Lebanese client Hezbollah, and increasing Russian support.

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In Spain France and Britain gave only minor, indirect support to the Republic (the International Brigades, however heroically motivated, being militarily of relatively modest weight), while the Soviets, providing arms and some military cadres, but always with an eye on the larger international scene, never went “all in”. Similarly, in Syria, where Obama, while proclaiming that Assad had to go, kept the US (and NATO) out of direct involvement. The moderates received moral support, but little direct military aid, with their weakness creating a kind of pro-Sunni 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 reneged on a pledged “red line” after Assad’s use of chemical weapons was discovered. Lack of American resolve and leadership created the political vacuum into which IS expanded.)

As the crisis deepened, IS expanded and Assad’s area of control steadily shrank. The foreign interventions were now radicalized: the U.S. in 2014, after a series of IS massacres and the beheading of American captives, championed a rather desultory Western-Sunni Arab air campaign against IS (but still no “boots on the ground”, save latterly for the use of Kurdish forces in the north-east). Iran’s support for Assad (before, through and after its nuclear deal with Obama) ramped up, Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops intervened directly, and, finally, as Assad’s regime seemed to totter, Russia intervened directly. (Putin mounted his own air campaign from his Syrian airbase near Latakia against the “terrorists” [supposedly including IS, but actually directed against the coalition of moderate anti-Assad Sunni forces].)

Now, in November, 2015, as Russia’s involvement deepens and the American-led air campaign still shows little sign of markedly impeding IS, the US, in an Obamian about-face, has announced the placing of an initially small contingent of American troops on the ground and a ramping up of the aerial sorties. So suddenly the two leading world-powers are directly facing off against one another in the downwardly-spiralling Syrian civil war where, despite hurried “deconfliction” talks to avoid accidental confrontations, incidents sparking a deeper crisis—like the

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recent Turkish shooting down of a Russian bomber-remain quite possible.

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, something similar in relation to the Assad regime is occurring: Russian-Iranian support for Assad (the equivalent of German-Italian aid to Franco) seems about to trump the moderate rebels who (like the Spanish Republicans), weakly backed by the US (equivalent to the weak British-French in Spain) are losing.

Here IS, as a kind of relatively independent third party to the conflict, breaks the structural parallelisms. Playing off the Alawites and the moderate Sunnis against one another, and oddly (or not so oddly) not the direct target of the Russians, the Turks, who have been opposed to Assad from the beginning, or of Assad —IS is holding its own, or better.

(Indeed, some 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. It is also pointed out that the mass emigration of millions of Sunni Syrians to Lebanese, Jordanian and Turkish refugee camps, and thence to Germany and Sweden through southern Europe, is a kind of ethnic cleansing strengthening Assad's Alawite constituency. And the Turks have proved more concerned with its traditional Kurdish enemies on the Syrian-Turkish border than with IS or Assad.)

The Spanish Civil War was a prelude to World War II, strengthening and encouraging the fascist-Nazi forces and, not least, demonstrating the irrelevance of the League of Nations as well as the appeasement of France and Great Britain. Even before the War ended in 1939, Hitler had already affected the *Anschluss* with Austria, at Munich Czechoslovakia had been abandoned; and by 1939 the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact aligned the Bolsheviks and Nazis, and led to the invasion of Poland and the beginning of WWII. Could the Syrian Civil War, similarly, be the

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antechamber of a wider regional conflict, one which —remember Putin in Crimea and Ukraine—could mutate into a major European war?

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. Aside from accidental confrontations—Russian and American aircraft encountering one another, a Russian-American naval crisis in the Mediterranean, recently-emplaced advanced Russian guided-missile batteries (inserted after the Turks shot down the Russian jet) shooting down a coalition (or Turkish, or Israeli) aircraft, and so on—more “structural” elements, radicalized by the ongoing conflict, may well come into play.

Syria today is 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. America, still isolated by appeasement in 1936, has once again withdrawn from world engagement under Obama. But as the Russians respond by stepping up their own involvement, and IS threatens to expand into a world-wide terrorist threat, the US has now begun to be sucked back, however unwillingly and despite the evident distaste of its President, into the vortex.

The Saudis and Gulf Arabs, fearful of Iran and already bogged down by the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen, are also deeply involved, supporting both elements of the moderate Sunni opposition and IS, while IS remains an expansionist factor with recent gains both in Syria and Iraq, and now in Libya and Afghanistan (as well as killing over 200 Russians by evidently bringing down a jetliner on its way to Moscow from Sharm El-Sheikh over the Sinai, and 130 Frenchmen by its terrorist attack in Paris).

Iran is doubling down by sending in thousands of its own Iranian Revolutionary Guard units, under IRG generals (several recently killed in combat) to support

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Assad. Turkey, where conservative Sunni Islamist Erdogan, initially against Assad, has been handed a reinforced nationalist majority in the recent election and is moving against the Kurds, inside and outside the Syria-Turkey border And the Kurds, in turn, are the U.S.'s only effective “boots on the ground” in Syria.

Hence the prospect in Syria is one of increasing, unstable, and internationalized combat, which could at points easily escalate into a wider war. And nothing to this point has been said of Egypt, formerly leader of the Sunni Muslims, opposing IS in the Sinai, which also has a stake in the Syrian outcome.

Nor has mention yet been made of Israel, which to this point has studiously avoided getting involved, save to prevent transshipment of advanced war materiel from Iran through Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Yet Iranian-led troops are on the Golan Heights border, and Hezbollah and some 60,000 rockets are on the southern Lebanon border. Fire between Israel and Iranian-backed troops on the Golan has been exchanged, and incidents there and in south Lebanon could easily escalate, and much the same can be said of the Iran-backed elements in Gaza (Hamas).

Given the rising stakes of the game, the American abdication of regional leadership, heightened Russian military involvement, the rising strength of Islamist IS, and many other unstable variables, would seem to indicate that the Syrian Civil War, like Spain's, could, sooner or later, burst out of its domestic container and spark, if not World War III, then certainly a severe and extremely dangerous regional Middle East conflagration.

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