Syria? It's complicated...
How many times have we heard that comment? In an effort to clarify our understanding of this conflict, the NGO Franco-Syrian Democrats has elaborated some explanations which aim to untangle our perception of the many dimensions of this war which has ravaged the country for four years now and has become complex.

As democrats, our position is clearly one which defends the human rights of the Syrian people. Nonetheless, our approach is as objective as possible and we have tried to deal with prejudices on all sides. We are certainly not irreproachable, but we wish to be both honest and rigorous.

This text is published on the site of the non governmental organization Souria Houria. We try to update it as often as necessary.

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Introduction: "Syria? It's complicated!"

After hearing this observation so many times, we decided to work on the present explanation. Confronted by a conflict which has expanded and intensified unceasingly for four years now, it is normal that the outsider has become disoriented. The evolution and reversals of this multidimensional crisis, accompanied by an escalation of horror and violence, are indeed tragic and discouraging.

"Give up trying to understand..." This statement, also frequently heard, is comprehensible for someone who has no ties or interest in the region or the country. But is this attitude still possible today when the consequences of the Syrian crisis are felt everywhere in the world? Hoards of refugees fleeing the country, many perishing in the Mediterranean, terrorist threats and the phenomenon of jihadism are directly affecting societies everywhere.

"Take a moment to learn" is what we propose here. By reviewing those questions frequently asked (FAQ) on the causes, the nature, the actors, the stakes and the possible outcomes, we try to offer some answers, as simplified as possible. We have grouped the questions by themes in order to facilitate the account of the events and their clarification.

"Recall, explain, and decipher" the facts, the dimensions and the stakes involved in the events which have occurred over the past four years in and around Syria is the object of our initiative. To
do so we have referred to dates, figures and information which have been verified and compared with many of the most reliable sources.

**Who are we?** Syrian, French and Franco-Syrian journalists and university scholars who have closely followed the events in Syria and the region for many years. Without pretending to be neutral, we privilege an objective approach to the realities of the situation and we assume with lucidity our support of democracy for all Syrians.

**Reminder: How did it all start? How did this come to happen?**

**Syria before 2011**
The country today has a population of 23 million and a surface of 185 000 square kilometres. The current borders were fixed after World War I, when the French and the British obtained the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire by the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916). A French mandate until 1946, independant Syria then alternated short periods of democracy with military coups d'état. That of the Baath party in 1963 founded the current regime. In 1970 Hafez Al-Assad, Bachar's father, seized power by a putsch and established a repressive dictatorship. As in North Korea, upon his death in 2000, he was succeeded by his son. After a short period of détente, mostly economic, Assad tightened up the regime, recreating an authoritarian system around a clan of family and military, corrupt and profiteering.

**How did it all start? How did this come to happen?**
The contagious protest fomented by the revolutions of the "Arab Spring" in the beginning of 2011 attained Syria in March, following Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrein and Yemen. The Syrians acclaimed the overthrow of Ben Ali and Moubarak. Like other Arab peoples, they also wanted to express their aspiration for change, to reclaim "liberty, justice and dignity" - the first watchwords of the Syrian revolution.

**Why did the Syrian people protest?**
The Syrians had many legitimate reasons to revolt against the tyrannical and corrupt government which had been imposed on them for over 40 years. There comes a time when the exasperation of a people surpasses their fear. In 2011, that exasperation was at it's apogy. Only the bourgeoisie of those cities close to the regime had profited from the economic advancement it so bragged about - and so greatly exaggerated. The lavish lifestyle of the clan in power was scandalously exhibited. Corruption was widespread. A large part of the population was in great difficulty. In the 80's, government regulation had diminished, but private economic activity and employment had not been privileged. The number of those unemployed and disadvantaged grew. In the countryside, the population was also smitten by drought. Many young people, even those highly qualified, felt they had no future. The stifling and oppressive regime deprived individuals of their rights and prevented any kind of initiative. All the conditions for an explosion were reunited. Only the spark was missing.

**What put the spark to the powder?**
In March 2011, some young students, adolescents at the age of transgression, wrote on the walls of the city of Derea in the South of the country the slogan which they heard people shouting in all Arab streets: "The people want the fall of the regime". The youngsters were arrested by security forces and tortured. After this barbaric act, demonstrations spread across the country. Hundreds of thousands of peaceful demonstrators reclaimed democracy and the end of corruption. The forces of the regime responded systematically by firing on the crowds, killing and wounding. At the same
time, certain young activists and other civilians were imprisoned. The repression was more violent each day, provoking new demonstrations. The cycle protest/repression continued for months. At the end of 2011, the UN had already announced 5000 victims.

**The protestors took up arms. Wasn't that a crazy decision?**

"Militarizing" the revolution was a very controversial turning point, even among members of the Syrian opposition. In the beginning, certain soldiers simply refused to fire on their fellow citizens. Some were executed by their superiors while others had no choice but to desert. On the 31st of July 2011, a group of officers who had deserted and fled to Turkey announced the creation of the Free Syrian Army and called other soldiers to join them. They had light weapons that they had brought with them and no other intentions but to defend the protestors. At the same time, civilians began to take up arms to protect their districts and villages against the acts of the army and the security forces. Then the Syrian army replaced guns by canons.

**Wasn't the opposition being manipulated?**

That was the theory of the regime, who from the beginning denounced a conspiracy to provoke unrest on the part of "extremist terrorists agitating on behalf of foreign powers". But the claim that the countries of the Gulf and the Occident were behind the uprising was unfounded. The internal reasons for the explosion were sufficiently ample - there was no need for foreign intervention. Only the intensification of the violent repression provoked the military escalation, which began in a timid manner at the end of 2011 with the first acts of resistance acknowledged by the Free Syrian Army. Later arms began to arrive from outside, first by way of the Lebanese border and then from Turkey. This military support of the insurgents began to grow starting in 2012, principally by means of private Syrian or Arab funds. This financing increased as armed confrontations multiplied, and came increasingly from fundamentalist groups in the Gulf countries. In order to continue their armed struggle and to keep receiving aid from these sponsors, the Syrian insurgents began to adopt the attitudes and to use the vocabulary of the fundamentalists, even those who were not convinced.

**Then it was more of a civil war than a revolution?**

This is a controversial question. It all depends on the definitions used. If we cannot refer to a popular uprising seeking to put an end to a dictatorship by overthrowing a dynasty in power for over 40 years as a "revolution", then the word has no sense. Some say that the revolution evolved into an "armed insurrection". Others consider that when there is an armed confrontation between forces of the same country on the same territory, one should speak of "civil war". Battles between Syrians multiply as the number of deserters and armed civilians increase. These are of course unsymmetrical combats between the Syrian army with its tanks, its canons and its aviation and rebels armed with machine guns and occasionally rocket launchers.

**How did the government lose control of part of the territory?**

As the revolt spread across the entire country and soldiers continued to desert, the regime no longer had sufficient forces to maintain its power everywhere. Its priority was to put down the demonstrations and to prevent insurrection in the large cities. It is mainly in rural and semi-rural zones where groups of armed rebels formed locally escape its control. A turning point occurred in 2012 when the brigades of the Free Syrian Army took over most of the working class districts of Aleppo, the second largest city and economic capital of the country. The regular army surrendered under the pressure of the rebel offensive, and also withdrew from large regions in the Northwest, around Aleppo and Idleb. The taking by the Free Syrian Army of several posts on the Turkish border changed the situation by facilitating access for the rebels to men and to arms and also the
arrival of the first foreign soldiers. The zones "liberated" from the control of the regime were administered by the local population who created "Civil councils" to manage daily affairs. These zones were bombed daily by army aviation, provoking large destruction, but above all the departure of tens of thousands of refugees.

**Now there's total chaos?**
We have this impression because since 2013 several internal conflicts are taking place simultaneously and, in addition, other regional power groups are combatting each other on Syrian territory by means of proxy forces.

1. The confrontation between the forces of Bachar Al-Assad and Syrians opposed to the dictatorship continues.
2. Part of the conflict has taken on a sectarian aspect with confrontations between Sunni muslims (the majority of the population) and Alawites (a dissident branch of Shiism, a minority of the population), the sect to which the Al-Assad clan belongs.
3. The confrontation between outside powers who support one or the other of the two principal opponents: the Shiites of Iran and Iraq and the Lebanese Hezbollah support the Assad regime by direct participation in ground combats while Turkey and the Gulf countries aid and arm the insurgents, mainly the fundamentalists.
4. There is also an international dimension implicating Russia, who supports the Assad regime, and the Occidental countries, who denounce the dictatorship (see details below).
5. An international war against terrorism involving both the local Syrian forces and the intervention of an international coalition led by the United States, following the development of Daech (the Arab acronym of the Islamic State), who proclaimed in 2014 a Califate straddling the border of Syria and Iraq.

**We're a long way from the movement of 2011!**
Yes and no. Yes, because on the ground, the Free Syrian Army, which best represented the rebellion, has lost a great deal of territory and the other rebel movements have little or no democratic vocabulary. No, because the ideals of 2011 and part of those who shared them are still present. The insurgents who wish only to overthrow the dictatorship and allow the Syrian people to choose the government they want for their country are numerous. The civilian population remains active through diverse projects of organisation and resistance in the zones held by rebels. The young and less young who participated in the protest of 2011 are involved in these projects, or in any case those who are still there, because many have left the country because of the violence of which they were the target. Many others have been arrested, imprisoned, tortured or executed.

**It's too complex, it's very hard to understand!**
That's for certain. Chaos is often the inevitable result of a war which drags on with no political perspective in view. Foreign intervention, diverse opposing forces, diverse fronts superimposed: the situation is so complex that sometimes it becomes illegible even for those involved. International reticence has encouraged this development: the feeling of abandonment of many insurgents facing the barbary and the repression of the Syrian regime made them turn towards radical extremists. With so little means, soldiers join the fundamentalist brigades who can arm them and give them a minimum allowance to help them and their families to survive. The Free Syrian Army waited in vain for aid from the Occident which would have prevented the radicalisation of these soldiers. Daech thrives on chaos. This movement has also attracted hundreds of disenfranchised young people from around the world to Syria to join their troops.
Syria: the story of the conflict

On the ground: Who's fighting who? Who controls what?
A dynamic and uncertain struggle for position

The front lines between the different zones evolve with each combat, offensive and conquest by one or another of the forces present. They depend mostly on outside support and aid for men and arms. As a result, since the beginning of the conflict, we have witnessed an unending wavering as the groups successively strengthen or weaken, without forasmuch ever giving any one group a decisive military advantage on the ground. Since April 2015, a large offensive led by a group which united different rebel formations has inflicted some important defeats on the forces of the regime, who have lost the control of some cities and certain strategic positions mainly in the North, but also in the South. Their decline is also flagrant in their confrontations with the forces of Daech, who took over a large portion of territory in eastern Syria last May, including the historical city of Palmyra.

A territory whose map resembles a leopard skin

The division of the territory between the four principal forces on the ground is far from being uniform. The zones controlled by one or another are not homogeneous. In zones held by the opposition, one finds loyalist enclaves, notably around Aleppo, and others controlled by Daech, as in the center of Deir Ezzor. On the other hand, the forces of the opposition control localities and pieces of territory around cities held by the regime and often encircled by governmental forces, particularly on the outskirts of Damascus.

Who's fighting who in Syria?

Who's fighting who? : 4 principal forces on the ground

1. Governmental forces, loyal to the regime, today include militia and other informal groups in addition to the regular army. They control a little less than a third of Syrian territory, essentially in the western part of the country, from Damascus, the capital, to Latakia, including the coastal zone and the major cities of Homs, Hama and half of Aleppo. This zone is the greater part of what some refer to as "Useful Syria". State agencies continue to fonction almost normally here where the population is spared from bombings, because the opposition forces have neither the will nor the means to attack. The pro-regime troops combat the different rebel forces on the ground, but mostly in the air, where they are clearly unchallenged. Their helicopters drop barrels of explosives daily on rebel controlled zones, causing many civilian casualties. The army of the regime also claims to combat Daech, but in reality these attacks are much less frequent, and they are conducted with much less determination and efficacy.

2. The army of the Syrian opposition, first called the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and also called the "rebellen" or the "insurgents", never succeeded in constituting a centralized and coordinated force. Today it is composed of different groups and local brigades, dominated by fundamentalists, more or less radical, including the Al-Nosra Front, affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Together they control a large part of the northern part of the country, along the Turkish border, as well as the larger half of Aleppo, the economic capital, and also some rural zones around the principal cities: the outskirts of Damascus, Hama, Latakia et Deraa in the South. These zones are bombed regularly by the aviation and the artillery of the loyalist army and a large part of their population has fled towards the interior or left the country. The different formations combat both the forces of the regime and those of Daech
3. **Daech or the Islamic State** Present from the Spring of 2013, the objectives of the formidable jihadist formation Daech or the Islamic State, whose members are 80% non-syrian, are completely different from those of Syrian insurgents opposed to the regime of Bachar Al-Assad. Daech proclaimed a "Califate" covering a large part of Syrian and Iraqi territory. The Islamic State controls almost half of eastern Syria near the Iraqi border, which is the cradle and the headquarters of the movement. It has established itself by force and terror, pushing out the Syrian opposition forces, and subjecting the local population to its rules by committing atrocities. Last May, it took the city of Palmyra from the forces of the regime in a violent offensif and also won the city of Ramadi in Iraq.

4. **Kurdish Syrian Forces** control the zone in the Northwest at the Turkish border, occupied mainly by Syrian Kurds. Their military forces are composed of local combatants, members of the PYD (Democratic Union Party), the Syrian branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), the Turkish Kurdish party of Communist origin. The Kurds adopted a more or less neutral position in the conflict between the opposition and the regime until 2012 when, under attack from the Islamic State, they began a long and fierce struggle to defend and reconquer the city of Kobanî with the help of air attacks perpetrated by the international coalition. In June 2015, the Kurdis forces and the brigades of the Free Syrian Army succeeded in ousting the Islamic State from the city and the region of Tall Abyad near the Turkish border.

**So there are only fundamentalists fighting against the regime?**
Starting in 2012, diverse armed groups brandishing a religious banner emerged. Financed by the Gulf countries, these brigades loudly reclaim their Islamic affiliation in order to have access to this manna. But the insurgents often pass from one brigade to another depending on power relationships and the arrival of funds. Young rebels who have belonged to a dozen different brigades in four years of warfare are not rare. This shows the extremely uncertain nature of the rebellion. The Free Syrian Army would regain its force if it was doted with sufficient means.

**And where do the jihadists stand?**
The jihadist group Al-Nosra Front was created In February 2012. It declared its allegiance to the Syrian revolution and its intention to fight alongside the rebel brigades. Later, it declared allegiance to Al-Qaeda.

In May 2013, Daech (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) appeared. The roots of this jihadist organization (a dissident of Al-Nosra) are in Iraq, but the Syrian crisis impulsed the growth of the group. Daech combats mainly the Syrian rebels and rarely the forces of the Assad regime, who continually bombard the zones controlled by the rebels, but spare Daech, in an ambiguous game of exchanges.

Daech adopted the name of Islamic State after the announcement of the creation of a Califate straddling the border of Syria and Iraq in the summer of 2014. After the intervention of the international coalition against this terrorist organization in August, Assad's army, most probably in an effort to gain respect for the regime, proceeded to bomb a few zones held by the jihadists. But its principal targets remain the rebel zones which it bombs constantly with barrels of explosives, causing many civilian victims.

> The weakening of all the protagonists of the Syrian conflict
On the chessboard: where is the regime of Bachar Al-Assad placed? The Syrian opposition? Daech (Islamic State)?

1. The regime of Bachar Al-Assad

Why do we say Syrian "regime" and not Syrian "government"?
Because there is not a constitutionnel government but a dictatorship, established by a military putsch, with all the characteristics of totalitarianism. The regime relies on different security agencies and organizations which serve the clan in power, who has completely locked the country up for 40 years, plunging it into institutional inertia and seizing all aspects of power and notably the economy. Only a revolutionary process could overturn such a system. This explains why the opposition had no other choice than to resort to an armed struggle, since the regime refused every demand for reform.

Remember that the Baath Party has been in power in Syria for 52 years, that the Assad family has ruled Syria for 45 years and that Bachar Al-Assad, heir to his father as leader of the country, has been the sole decision maker for the last 15 years.

But what if he decided to make reforms?
The population asked for reforms at the beginning of the revolution in 2011, but the regime refused categorically, responding with a ferocious and systematic repression. This reaction was logical, because the only valid change possible was the organisation of free elections and the establishment of a democracy, which would inevitably result in the end of the dictatorship and the ousting of the Assad clan.

When Bachar Al-Assad came to power in 2000, nothing prevented him from initiating significant changes, other than the certitude that the least breach in the system would lead to his downfall. He therefore never made other than superficial political reforms. To give the impression that he was loosening up the restrictive system his father had elaborated, Assad declared that he was in favor of opening the economy and of modern technologies (parabolic antennas, cell phones, Internet...). The Syrians rapidly understood the manoeuver shortly after he came to power. The declarations of glasnost lasted one year...Then the regime quickly closed in on a situation that risked compromising its absolute control: discussion groups were forbidden, opponents were arrested, the Lebanese file was confiscated. But a part of the population and foreign governments believed (and continue to believe) in the illusion that Assad was a reformer who rejected the old guard...
At the present time, that image is even less credible. In recent interviews, Bachar Al-Assad clearly shows he is incapable of being a source of proposal.

Is Bachar Al-Assad a modern leader?
A medical doctor, Assad has no beard, speaks English, resembles us. In reality, he has only the attributes of modernity. He has adopted the language of modernity and says everything that the Occident wishes to hear. It is easy to don such a mask.
Since he came to power, Bachar Al-Assad and his wife present an image calculated to seduce the Occident: that of a modern, civilized and occidentalized couple (they met in London where he studied ophthalmology for two years)! This image is a radical departure from that of traditional Arab rulers but is familiar in modern societies. Bachar Al-Assad used each appearance in the press as
an advertising campaign. He seemed to represent a new generation of Syrians, more open-minded. This operation was successful for a long time with leaders and public opinion in the Occident.

**Is it a secular regime?**
That would imply that democracy is not a prerequisite to secularism. The so-called secularism of the regime is an argument put forth for decades. Like his father before him, Bachar Al-Assad understood how he could benefit from the rise of fundamentalism by appearing as a rampart against it. In reality, the Syrian regime functions on a clanic and confessional basis. Power is detained by the Alawite minority, and with the Syrian revolution, this segregation was accentuated. At the same time, under Bachar Al-Assad, Syrian society became little by little more Islamized.

Under his rule, the number of Christians diminished and the number of women wearing the veil progressed!

**Isn't he the protector of minority groups in the Orient?**
Here again, the image is as appealing as it is false. In fact, he doesn't protect minorities but manipulates them to protect himself. He uses them, declaring that though there may be a lack of political pluralism, there is tolerance of religious and ethnic diversity.

By instrumentalizing the different communities, he bonds them to his own destiny. He infantilizes the Christians by making them believe he is responsible for their salvation. This works because the Christians well remember the fate of the Iraqi Christians after 2003, when many were forced to flee their country and take refuge in Syria. But the different communities in Syria lived together long before Assad. On the contrary, the regime jeopardized a secular tradition of coexistence between the different groups. It constantly accentuated confessional divisions. By incessantly repeating to the Christians (5% of the population today) that he protected them, he designated the Muslims as their possible aggressors and provoked their suspicion of their neighbors. The regime created religious hierarchies, subjugating the different confessional groups: the Christian hierarchy openly supported the regime. If the regime really protected them, the emigration of Christians from Syria that began in the 19th century should have diminished under Assad, but this was not so.

Those Christians who demanded more liberties were arrested and tortured, like all other dissident Syrians. Even for the Alawite minority, this supposed protection was a trap - as their sons left home to combat and die to defend the regime, they progressively dissociated themselves from it.

(Cf article by Salam Kawakibi in La Croix, April 5th 2015, "Does the regime of Bachar Al-Assad really protect Christians?"

**He is one of the last defenders of the Palestinian and Arab cause**
This is one of the great fabrications promulgated by the Syrian regime, which has never supported the Palestinians or attacked Israel other than verbally. A little history permits us to understand the situation. Since the war of 1973, the border between Syria and Israel has been calm. Netanyahu's silence at the outbreak of the revolution revealed the Israelis' fear of the fall of the regime. In 1976 and then in 1982, Hafez Al-Assad had sent the Syrian army to Lebanon to combat those he called "palestino-progressives". The army besieged and attacked the camps of Yassar Arafat and his partisans. The leadership of Arafat prevented Hafez Al-Assad from instrumentalizing the Palestinians and subordinating their cause to his own interests. Since 2011, the conflict reveals even more clearly the contradictions of the Syrian regime. Since 2013, Yarmouk, a Palestinian camp on the outskirts of Damascus (as well as other zones of the country in favor of the
opposition), is encircled by the forces of the regime who hope to force the rebels to negotiate on their terms by starving them.

> Assad and Daech united against the Palestinians of Damascus

**Assad may be disreputable, but with the menace of Daech, wouldn't it be wiser that he stay in power?**

Assad or Daech? This type of question has been evoked repeatedly from the beginning: "Assad or the Muslim Brotherhood?" or "Assad or the terrorists?". The partisans of Assad repeatedly impose this simplistic question, implying that the only answer possible is "Assad". In affirming that the protestors are all either fundamentalists or terrorists, the Syrian regime conveniently proposes itself as a foil and an alternative. In order to ram the idea home, Assad voluntarily left Daech prosper, inspiring growing fear among the population. In June 2011, Assad liberated the jihadists from the prison of Sednaya. He spared the city of Raqqa from bombings, even though the état-major of the jihadists there was an easy target. By repeating incessantly that the only choice is reduced to "Assad or Daech?" the regime has forced public opinion across the world to choose "Assad" and thus transformed the fundamentalists into a sort of perverted ally of the regime.

Beyond this ambiguous game is the question of the real capacity of the Syrian regime to combat Daech. The regular army has been incapable of taking back the territory won by the fundamentalists. In the rare battles where they confronted each other, near Raqqa in 2014, or in the region of Palmyra in May 2015, the regime suffered defeat. In Palmyra, the Syrian army withdrew without ever really waging battle, leaving the way open for the troops of Daech.

2. The opposition

**It seems as if no alternative force is clearly identifiable**

The fact that the Syrian opposition is not clearly identifiable is an essential problem which has prolonged the conflict. Even though they constitute a majority of the population and of those who have left the country, Syrians who demand the fall of the Assad's regime have yet failed to form a representative political front, coherent and united, with a clear and realistic strategy. This weakness is primarily the result of over 40 years of dictatorship under which freedom of expression and all political activity was forbidden. The fact that the members of all the factions of the Syrian opposition lack experience and knowledge of politics has proven to be a very serious handicap, considering that the complexity of the crisis requires exceptional political, diplomatic and strategic skills.

**The opposition is divided**

This argument is often brandished by Assad's regime, his allies and supporters to minimize or discredit the opposition. The opposition is indeed composed of a wide range of trends and political movements, from the young protesters present at the first hours of the revolution to expatriate politicians and political groups. The geographical dispersion and especially the stakes involved explain the divisions and differences of approach. It should not be forgotten that many opponents inside the country have been imprisoned, tortured or killed.

**The opposition is under foreign influence**
The Syrian opposition is often accused of having links, or of being manipulated by Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, etc ... because the majority of political and financial support of the opposition comes from these countries. The opposition found itself increasingly dependent on these countries because the rest of the world had abandoned it. The group "Friends of the Syrian People", which counts more than one hundred Arab, Western and other countries has continuously failed to meet its obligations. Promises of political, military and even humanitarian support have seldom been kept. The greatest mistake of the Syrian opponents has probably been their naivety. The opposition long believed in the sincerity of multiple promises of support before it finally came to realize the extent to which the world had little interest in the Syrian conflict or the Syrian people.

The main constituents of the opposition:

An official group : The National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, created in November 2012, reunites most opposition movements and personalities, including secular and religious groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Its objective is the overthrow of the Assad regime and the establishment of a secular democracy. It is recognized as the main representative and interlocutor of the Syrian opposition by several Arab and Western countries and the UN. Its president is Khaled Khoja.

The provisional government, created up by the Coalition in 2014, manages the affairs of Syrians in exile or living in territories no longer controlled by the regime, notably concerning matters of health and education. Its agencies and services are based in Turkey.

Other small protest groups which are part of neither the old nor the new Coalition represent various trends. The most important among them is the National Coordination Committee which reunites intellectuals inside and outside Syria. Some of its members have been arrested. Other intellectuals and influential personalities have also created different minority parties or movements of opposition.

> Guide to the Syrian opposition

A people in resistance

The overwhelming majority of those Syrians mobilized to replace the dictatorship of Bashar Al-Assad by a democratic system are not part of any of the political structures of the opposition. Some are passive but others are actively engaged on the ground, working with the civilian population in a variety of ways to try to bring about the advent of a new Syria.

Civilian associations : thousands of such organizations exist inside and outside the country. They have different sizes, objectives and fields of competence. Medical organizations set up by expatriate and resident Syrian doctors do a tremendous job in often dramatic conditions, treating the wounded and setting up public health services in areas outside government control. Many groups founded by women and young people intervene through humanitarian and educational programs and increasingly by the creation of projects of micro-economy destined to help families to survive. All these informal initiatives testify to the vitality of Syrian civil society.

Local councils: In most districts and villages situated in territories controlled by the opposition, residents have set up civilian councils to manage everyday life : municipal services, justice, health,
distribution of aid. Some have inaugurated democratic practices previously unknown in Syria, organizing elections and collegial systems of decision making.

**Intellectuals:** it is important to emphasize that the majority of the dynamic forces of the country - young people, intellectuals, writers, artists, musicians, filmmakers, etc., those who contribute to the creativity of a nation and its hopes for the future - have supported the contestation. They chose to freely express their creativity and their opinions through their literary or artistic works, which is why there has been a tremendous development of artistic creation of all kinds since the beginning of the revolution. Many of these intellectuals have since had to leave the country because of fierce repression. France has welcomed a number of them.

### 3. Daech or the Islamic State

As we have said, this terrorist organization has very different political objectives than those of the opposition, which combats Daech militarily on the ground regularly. Its goal is the establishment of what it calls a "Caliphate", straddling Iraq and Syria, ignoring the borders drawn by the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916. Daech will not agree to any arrangement with the opposition and would most probably confront a new opposition government in Syria after the departure of Bashar Al Assad.

**Geopolitics: who supports who?**

Analyses of the Syrian conflict often take into account only its regional and international aspects, ignoring those realities which concern specifically Syria. What are the reasons behind this perception? Why are countries like Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia so active in the conflict? Let's try to see these points more clearly.

**Which countries support the regime of Bashar al-Assad?**

Since the beginning of the revolution, Iran has given unfailing political, financial, diplomatic and military support to the regime because Tehran wants to avoid at all costs the establishment in Damascus of a Sunni government or any other force backed by the Gulf oil-monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia.

The Lebanese Hezbollah supported by Teheran is also involved in the conflict alongside Assad's forces. For Iran it is important to have this strategic continuity between Tehran / Baghdad / Damascus and the Hezbollah. That is why we speak of the Shiite axis versus the Sunni axis formed by Riyadh, Cairo and Ankara with the oil-monarchies of the Gulf.

> **The Shiite jihadists, the other threat to the future of Syria and the Syrians (3/3)**

**Are neighboring countries destabilized by the Syrian situation?**

Yes of course, notably because of the number of Syrian refugees present today in Turkey (1.7 million), in Lebanon (1.2 million), in Jordan (650 000), in Iraq (245 000) and in Egypt (137 000).

The situation with regard to refugees differs from one country to another. Turkey and Jordan have organized the reception or refugees at the Syrian border. In Lebanon, however, since citizens of both countries had the right to cross the border freely, no official survey was realized. Recently, because of the growing number of Syrian migrants, Lebanese authorities have taken measures making it very difficult for Syrians to enter the country.
When the demonstrations against Assad began in 2011, Turkey, who had excellent relations with the regime, tried to mediate with Bachar Al-Assad and to convince him to make the political reforms demanded by the demonstrators. When he flatly refused, Turkey brought support to the opposition and accepted hundreds of thousands of refugees on their territory. Ankara is very concerned about the situation because of its difficulty in controlling its long border with Syria and because of the Kurdish problem. Turkey does not want the Kurds to take advantage of the Syrian crisis to create a new state on their border. The Turkish government is also often criticized for being indulgent with the jihadists, letting troops and weapons enter Syria.

**Whose side is Russia on?**
Russia has been an ally of Syria since the 1950s. An arms deal was first signed between the two countries in 1956 and a strong cooperation has been established economically and politically. After the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, Russian support to Syria declined but when Putin came to power, the relationship regained impetus because the Russian leader sought to assert his country’s presence in the Middle East. Moscow has supported Assad since the outbreak of the revolution, as Syria is its last ally and main client in the region. As a member of the Security Council of the UN, the Russians vetoed any punitive action against the Assad regime, paralyzing all international initiative to resolve the crisis. Moscow has organized meetings with some "Damascus-approved opponents", in order to try to find a political solution, but they have never given any results because the members of these delegations are not representative of the opposition and lack legitimacy.

The emergence of radical groups and of the Islamic State has reinforced Russian support to the Syrian regime, because Russia has long waged a merciless struggle against radical Islam, fearing it will attain the Central Asian republics : the memory of Chechnya is still fresh. Yet, since recent meetings in Moscow between representatives of the Syrian regime and the so called “inside opposition”, Russia seems to show signs of weariness and impatience towards Bashar Al Assad.

**The red line and the United States**
The United States and the European countries quickly deducted that considering his intransigence to reform, the raging violence could only be stopped by Assad’s departure. In 2012, Washington and some other capitals projected bringing support to the rebellion, but the project never materialized. It was then that certain groups on the ground turned towards those willing to arm and sustain them.

The inconsistency of the US position was confirmed after the use of chemical weapons by the forces of Assad near Damascus in August 2013, killing almost 1700 civilians and marking a turning point in the conflict. Barack Obama had said that the use of chemical weapons by the regime would be considered the red line, and that as soon as there was evidence of chemical warfare, strikes would be launched against specific targets. But as the world awaited these strikes against Assad in September 2013, the US President reversed his decision, thus conferring Assad with the "right to kill". Late in 2014, Obama admitted publicly "The United States has no strategy for Syria".
Since the agreement to destroy chemical weapons, and in spite of UN denunciation of these crimes, Assad’s Army has continued to bomb localities with explosives containing chlorine.

**And Europe? What is the position of France?**
Europe is divided concerning the position to take towards Syria. Paris has clearly expressed political support of the Syrian people but doesn’t have the means to act alone. When the US renounced its decision to launch strikes in September 2013, France was obliged to do likewise.

**Why have different international mediations failed? Kofi Annan, Brahimi and Mitsura**

The radical position of the regime currently prevents the culmination of any mediation. The first plan proposed by the Arab League in November 2011 asked the regime to begin serious discussions with representatives of the opposition. In February 2012, Turkey recommended an international initiative *supporting the people and not the Syrian regime by proposing a political transition*. In June 2012, the member states of the Action Group on Syria (China, USA, France, Great Britain and Russia) as well as Turkey, Kuwait and Qatar agreed on the bases for a political transition *led by the Syrians*: the formation of a government of national unity, the implementation of constitutional reforms and the organization of free and fair elections. This communiqué was signed at the first international conference on Syria, referred to as "Geneva I".

A second meeting was held in Geneva in February 2014. The two Syrian delegations had agreed to use the Geneva I document as the basis for the talks, but the delegation of the opposition wished to commence the negotiations by the question of the creation of the transitional government while the representatives of the regime insisted on beginning by a discussion on terrorism, thus undermining the negotiations.

Finally, in October 2014, Staffan de Mistura, who had been named UN special envoy for Syria in July, suggested the creation of "battle-freeze" zones in Aleppo, the implementation of the resolutions of the UN Security Council and the deployment of international efforts against terrorism in Syria and the region. He announced the organization of new separate consultations, starting in early May, with representatives of the regime, the opposition and civil society as well as regional stakeholders. Iran, who had been excluded from the two previous two international conferences in Geneva, would be invited.

Staffan de Mistura was the third UN envoy to Syria, succeeding Lakhdar Brahimi and Kofi Annan. The latter resigned five months after his nomination after proposing a six-point plan providing for a ceasefire and a political transition. But in the absence of international support - Russia and China used their vetoes - the former Secretary General of the UN preferred to withdraw.

As for Lakhdar Brahimi, UN and Arab League envoy responsible for the file from August 2012 until May 2014, he finally renounced his mission because he felt that "the principal protagonists inside Syria - but also outside Syria - would accept no objective other than total victory" [1]. The regime spoke only of conspiracy from the outside. The opposition had first fixed the departure of Bashar al-Assad as conditional to any discussion, but later abandoned this exigency.

[1] Orient XXI, *interview with Lakhdar Brahimi*, March 18, 2015,

**The civilian population: How do the Syrian people carry on during the crisis?**

Wherever they are and whatever their community, political orientation or socio-economic situation, all Syrians have had their lives shattered by the conflict. In this tragic situation, there are degrees and a hierarchy of misfortune.
Half of the Syrian people have been forced to leave their homes. Four million out of 23 million Syrians have become refugees in neighboring countries or abroad, and some 7 million others have been displaced within the country. The other half of the inhabitants have remained in their homes. The quality of their daily life differs depending on who controls the territory where they live: the regime, the opposition, the Islamic State, etc.

In areas controlled by the regime, the inhabitants are safest because they are not bombarded. They still enjoy most public services: administration, education, health, etc. However, under pressure and close surveillance by security forces and the militia, they continue to live in fear. The economic difficulties of everyday life are their main concern due to power and water cuts and especially the lack of fuel for heating and transportation. In addition to the slowing down of economic activity and growing unemployment, they are victims of an explosion of the prices of all necessary commodities, accelerated since early 2015 by the fall of the exchange rate between the Syrian pound and the dollar.

In areas controlled by the Syrian opposition, the populations are the most hard hit by war and violence. These zones are regularly bombed by the regime's aviation. Towns and villages are devastated. Syrians who remain in these areas are mainly those who do not have the possibility to go elsewhere and some who refuse to leave their homes and their environment. Everyday life is organized locally by civilian councils in coordination with the combatants who control each zone. Services for health, education, justice etc ... are guaranteed more or less correctly depending on the locality. The poorest residents receive humanitarian aid for food, while others live from some commercial activities, services or black economy.

In areas controlled by the Islamic State, Daech subjugates the inhabitants to its rigorous order, which controls all aspects of daily life by means of ruthless terror. All activity and all commerce must stop during prayer time. Women cannot go out in the street without the black niqab that covers them from head to toe. Anyone who transgresses this totalitarian governance is subjected to extreme persecution, including summary executions and torture. Schools, hospitals and courts are established and managed by the services and the police of Daech, which are mainly composed of foreign jihadists.

In the refugee camps of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and inside the Syrian borders, families usually live in tents and occasionally in trailers or prefabricated structures. They are supported by international and local humanitarian organizations that distribute food, linen and blankets and provide medical care. Children account for the majority of the population of these camps. Schools are sometimes created where informal education is provided by volunteers. Some camps have become veritable towns or slums, such as Zaatari in north of Jordan, which has about 150,000 inhabitants now. Some commercial activities and workshops for women have been developed by the refugees.

There are millions of Syrian expatriates and refugees around the world, belonging to many different communities and social categories. Most left the country individually, to escape the fighting and repression, or because they had lost of their homes or in an attempt to find security for their families. They are concentrated in neighboring countries, but they increasingly seek asylum in Europe, America and Australia. Depending on their resources, their training or their family ties, they live and work in these countries in an exile which stretches on in time.
The future: What are the possible outcomes?

Why not talk with Assad? After all, we should communicate with our enemies

Indeed, resolving a conflict usually implies discussion between the antagonists. Such discussions are more or less successful.

The Syrian regime uses negotiations for specific purposes. Firstly, to gain time and attenuate pressures. We saw this after the chemical attack in the suburbs of Damascus in August 2013: Assad agreed to cooperate immediately, thus avoiding military reprisals.

By pretending to agree to enter into negotiations, the regime shifts political pressure onto its adversary and stirs up internal tensions. We witnessed this at the Geneva II conference in January 2014 with the Syrian opposition.

Finally, by means of these pseudo-negotiations, the regime eludes the real problems, diverts attention and takes advantage of the international exposure to promulgate propaganda. By introducing the subject of terrorism at the Geneva II talks, the regime succeeded in bypassing the very object of the meeting: to find a solution to the Syrian conflict. The delegation at Geneva II thus completely undermined the negotiations, calling its adversaries "insects" and "terrorists" guilty of "contaminating" a country which now needed to be "cleansed". A vocabulary which recalls the darkest hours of European history, and certainly kills all possible initiatives to reach an agreement.

But has anyone ever really tried to talk seriously with the regime?

Attempts to bring Assad to the negotiating table were many and came from different horizons. In October 2011, the Arab League called for reforms and a dialogue between the regime and the opposition. The regime had then reproached the delegation just for having met representatives of the opposition... The following year, Kofi Annan, envoy of both the UN and the Arab League, proposed a peace plan that did not include the departure of Bashar Al-Assad, but simply humanitarian aid, the cessation of violence, political dialogue, the end of arbitrary detention and freedom for journalists. He resigned six months later. His successor Lakhdar Brahimi did likewise in May 2014. Meanwhile, the international conference referred to as "Geneva II" was organized in vain. More recently, a similar initiative in Moscow was also fruitless.

If Bashar Al Assad steps down, what will happen?

One thing is sure: in order to maintain absolute control, the current dictatorship will block any evolution of the society and condemn it to divisions of all kinds, not to speak of terror and violence. There can be no real progress until the departure of not only Bashar Al Assad, but his entire clan (the extended family and close collaborators).

This can only be achieved through negotiations implicating regional and international forces, and pressure from the principal allies of the regime, notably Iran and Russia. A transitional constitutional body should be set up including members of the former regime, members of the opposition and independents. Then the task will be to dismantle the aggregate of institutions and services that served to strangle Syrian society since 1970. Once the system is unlocked, the Syrian people will finally have the opportunity to develop their own political experience. There is no doubt that the road will be long and chaotic before they can fully assume the responsibility for their destiny.
**Could the chaos go on for years?**
The perspective of Syria repeating the scenario of Somalia and more recently Libya is often evoked. With armed factions engaged in several different conflicts being fought out simultaneously on the ground, it is true that the situation is chaotic. The major part of the country is no longer controlled by the regime of Assad. Confrontations occur everywhere between different groups and armed forces, including terrorists. The possibility of this situation continuing or even worsening is not to be excluded, especially if international inaction persists.

However, the geographic and strategic position of Syria in the heart of the Middle East, the impact of the conflict on neighboring countries, the number of victims and the extent of material damage for all parties involved could accelerate finding a solution.

**... Or a civil war like in Lebanon?**
If the regime remains in power for several years to come, Syria could find itself in a scenario resembling that of Lebanon, which suffered fifteen years of civil war, from 1975 to 1990. The regime brandishes the possibility of this outcome since 2011, hoping that this dismal prospect will turn around the protestors. But Syrian society has continued to refuse to accept this scheme as a possible outcome. If ever it should come to pass, the resulting chaos would be detrimental to all actors in the conflict.

According to this scenario, the ruling clan would become accustomed to the crisis and would adopt a new way of functioning (it has in fact already started to do so), which would allow the regime to manage problems on a short term basis without ever resolving them, offering no perspective or proposals. Its own cohesion would continue to be fragile. Today, the regime has already been fragmented into a multitude of militias which it controls only partially. We could no longer even refer to a "State", as its authority would be perpetually challenged. The national army would be hijacked and infiltrated by one faction only, unable to represent the whole of society.

The other groups would follow the same path: militarization on a sectarian basis, a multitude of brigades with changing alliances, no fixed line of demarcation between fronts, latent violence, localized conflicts and the impossibility for any group to prevail.

This would imply the multiplication of forms of violence: the pursuit of combats, terrorist attacks and political assassinations and the proliferation and banalizing of criminality in general.

Finally, each armed group would be supported by foreign "sponsors", according to their own interests. As in Lebanon, these interventions would nourish the crisis and make its solution even more complex. The great difficulty Lebanon experienced to get out of this trap, even after the Ta'éf Agreement of 1989, shows the dimensions of the obstacles that this scenario would engender.

**Could the division of the country be a solution?**
Evoked since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the idea of a division on a sectarian or ethnic basis, implies the creation of an Alawite state along the Syrian coast, possibly a Druze state in the southern mountains, and a predominantly Sunni state on the rest of the territory. We must add the Kurdish entity which already has de facto autonomy on the ground, although few Kurdish political forces have demanded an independent state.
All Syrian parties officially reject this proposition, even if the regime and the opposition have accused each other of backing it. It is above all difficult to implement such a solution since the populations of the different regions concerned are not homogeneous, and are not composed of only one confession or ethnic group. The economic non-viability of the future states is the essential argument against such a division.

Other scenarios of de facto division on the basis of Iranian / Shiite influence in the south and Turkish / Sunni influence in north have also been proposed. Although it a already a reality on the ground today it's difficult to imagine a durable solution in these terms.

Is there a solution or is the crisis insoluble?
Only a true commitment on the part of the international community can help in resolving the conflict and this implies a dialogue with Iran and Russia, the two sponsors of the Syrian regime.

Conclusion: a just solution

The Diplomatic Scenario

The conflict is now entering its fifth year. Why not imagine that the diplomatic scenario will prevail? The regime is losing ground every day and the various opposition forces are too dispersed to share a common strategy and reverse the balance of power significantly.
Can the new negotiations which began in Geneva under the direction of UN envoy, Staffan de Mistura, help to expedite the peace process?

These consultations have involved 40 Syrian groups and 20 regional and international actors so we can suppose that all parties concerned are represented. The participation of Iran is important because of its support of the Assad regime.

A first step could be the establishment of protected areas in the North and South of the country - with air cover provided by the West and Turkey, for example - in order to protect the population from attacks by the forces of the regime and of Daech and to provide them with humanitarian assistance. Once these zones are fixed, the opposition will have a greater capacity for action.

If this option were chosen, it would be conceivable that Assad would be forced to accept a political solution because his chances of winning on the ground, which are already very poor, would be further diminished. It would then be possible to apply the conditions defined by the communiqué of Geneva I and Geneva II. But this would only be possible in the framework of an agreement implicating the UN Security Council and therefore a consensus between Washington and Moscow.