

# Things fall apart; Syria cannot hold

BY PIALUISA BIANCO

The country once known as Syria is falling apart. The state that won its independence after World War II could very well disappear. This ancient territory, surrounded by Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Iraq – three years ago an untroubled asylum where Christians, Muslims and other sects lived side by side – has become a dark place fueling the Middle East's violent rivalries. A shattered Syria would also feed worldwide jihad, becoming not just a fathomless tragedy but also a regional threat and a global hazard. The international community's fears that the conflict could spill over the border and affect neighboring states, thereby creating a regional disaster, have come to pass. The country's future should not become a rerun of Lebanon's past. If that happens, millions of lives will be ruined. Almost all the West's hopes for the Middle East will become harder to achieve: containing terrorism, facilitating democracy in the region, ensuring the supply of energy and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Moreover, such a catastrophe would make itself felt across the world.

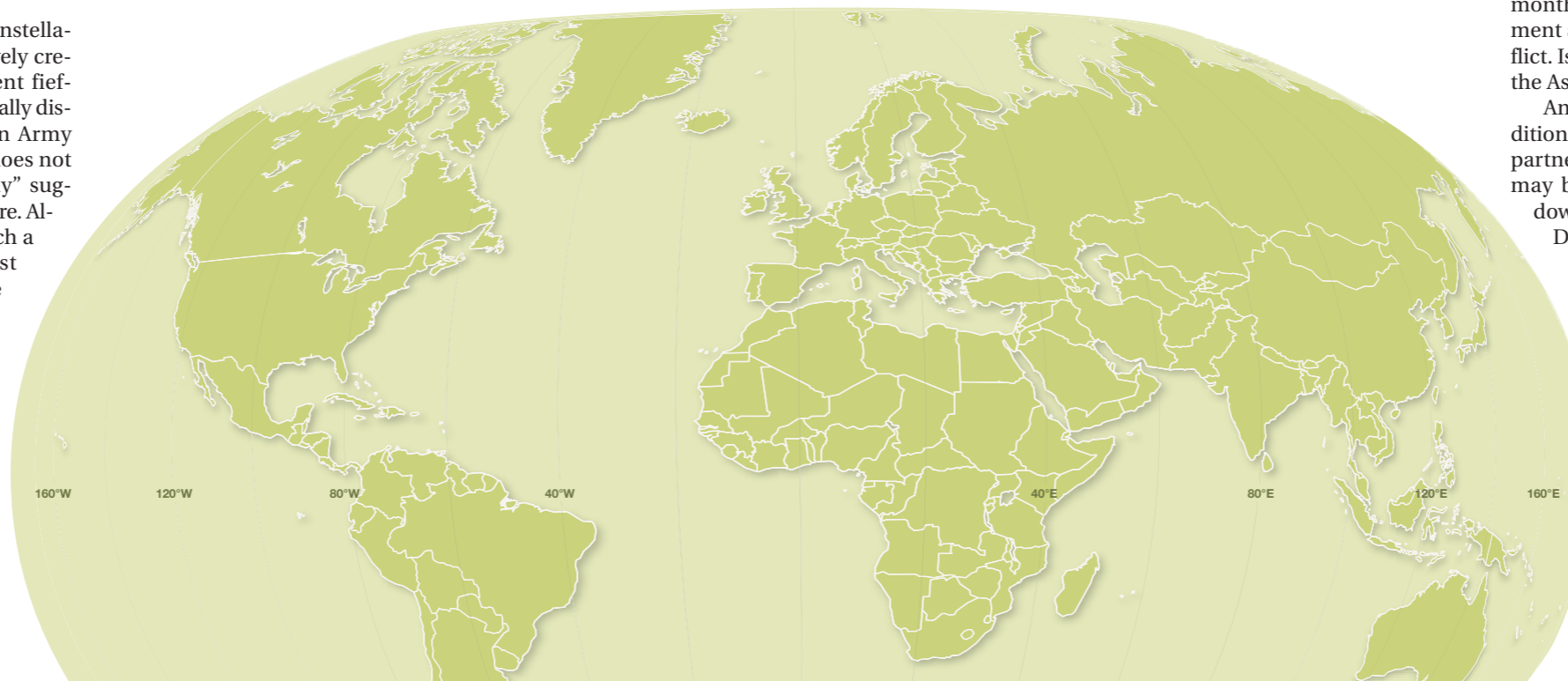


lose; whereas for a regular army, unless it is clearly winning, it is losing. The Syrian crisis has, for the time being, stood that maxim on its head.

Perhaps the regime will collapse into chaos. It could fight on for some time from a fortified enclave, as more a militia than a state, “the biggest militia in a land of militias,” as some have described it. Whether or not the Assad regime falls, there will still be civil war in Syria. It's not just Assad's future that is at stake. The entire Alawite population, of which he is a part, is at risk. Don't expect the Alawites to give up. (See the cover story.)

The growing brutality of fighters on all sides and the increasingly sectarian nature of the violence are feeding the country's breakup. The escalation of cruelty and the multiplication of armed factions will have a greater effect on the country's future than territorial gains on either side. The pulverization has been further complicated by the entry into the arena of al-Qaeda-linked jihadists and armed criminal gangs. So much has changed between the different parties, that, like Humpty Dumpty, piecing the country back together again is unimaginable. This fragmentation is also the reason for an incohesive and in-

After more than two years of conflict, a constellation of groups armed to the teeth are effectively creating the outlines of scattered and belligerent fiefdoms. This is less a classic civil war than a brutally disjointed, mutinous uprising. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) we have been hearing so much about does not exist as an organized entity. The word “army” suggests a cohesive force with a command structure. Almost two years after the FSA was created, such a structure remains elusive. They are still just many groups of fighters. The most capable have come from abroad or represent an extremist minority. The BBC's Middle East correspondent Paul Danahar called them “men with guns,” because having guns and firing in the same direction is the only thing that unites them. The regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is battered, discredited and unacceptable, but unlikely to be dislodged by force any time soon. Henry Kissinger once said that in a guerrilla war the rebels, in order to win, only had to not



effectual leadership in Syrian political opposition. As a result, there is no clear successor to Assad in sight. From the current standpoint, a post-Assad Syria looks like a vacuum – or worse.

Even in Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia and Libya, where the vacuum was at least filled through semi-responsible attempts to create governments, the chances of disorder remain very high. And Syria cannot even remotely hope for progress without strong and coordinated outside assistance. Any political solution needs to craft a framework for coexistence inside Syria, even if the conflicting factions ignore it for a while. But nobody seems to know how to prevent Syria from melting down before our eyes.

Nothing illustrates the limits of Western power more than the controversy over what the United States and the European Union should have done about the Syrian Civil War. Western governments have struggled to keep up with events inside the country. Fearing another Middle East adventure in the wake of Iraq, they have been reluctant to do anything beyond calling for Assad to go. Western intervention could make things much worse, and the entire Middle East could find itself in an uncontrollable and protracted

war. However, many of the terrible consequences of a Western intervention are already happening in Syria even without it. Syria is more dangerous and out of control today than it was some months ago. The West's wait-and-watch policy has actually pushed some more moderate elements of the opposition into the ranks of the extremists. With both non-Syrian Salafis and Iranian-backed militias now fighting, Syria has become the frontline of the Sunni-Shia conflict reignited by Iraq with à la carte incursions by local power Israel. Yet while Assad's mega-militia and the black-bannered brigades of the Sunni jihadis are well provisioned, mainstream rebels favored by a nervous West are not. Should the West have armed the opposition from the outset? Would that have contained the jihadists? Perhaps not. It seems more like a “damned if you do and damned if you don't” situation.

The region is on treacherous ground and it is far from clear that there is a calibrated way to keep the fire from spreading. And diplomacy alone, unfortunately, will make little impression on the Assads.

So what *can* diplomacy do? Russia and the US – after a three-hour meeting between Secretary of State John Kerry and President Vladimir Putin – are planning to convene an international conference this month (including representatives of Assad's government and the Syrian opposition) on ending the conflict. Is this the same old tentative wish list, relying on the Assads to volunteer for early retirement?

Any chance of success requires several basic conditions. First of all, Russia must be recognized as a full partner. As a stakeholder with much to lose, Moscow may be the key to pressuring the Assads to stand down, securing their WMD, and influencing Iran.

Distrust, however, is one of the main obstacles: right after the talks, Putin shipped advanced missiles to Syria – in case anybody was toying with the idea of either a no-fly zone or a naval blockade. Secondly, a psychological offensive is needed to convince the wavering Assad loyalists to desert him, similar to the effort that had successfully hollowed out support for Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia. Thirdly, the US and Russia must be able to at least effect a ceasefire, which might require all sides supplying weapons to hold back. If these conditions do not exist, then diplomacy may be futile.