

Argument - Anchored in History

# The Liquid Imperialism That Engulfed Syria

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## **How regional and global powers, internal colonialism and Salafi-jihadist subterfuge converged to short-circuit the Syrian struggle against despotism**

Syria is a country of only 71,498 square miles in area, with a population of less than 24 million, and yet two global superpowers (the United States and the Russian Federation) and three of the largest regional powers (Iran, Turkey and Israel) are present on its territory. Israel has occupied the Syrian Golan Heights since 1967, and carries out almost nonstop incursions into Syrian air space today. In centuries past, prior to the heyday of European and Russian imperialism, Iran and Turkey were empires. While it is debatable whether they still qualify as imperial powers, they have never let go of their regional imperial ambitions. One way to understand them, regionally, is as “subimperial”: expansionist and interventionist, including militarily, in neighboring countries.

The U.S. and Russia have well-known histories of expansion and domination of peoples and territories. Imperialism was key to the very formation of both nations. But while Russia’s “manifest destiny” had been, for centuries, to expand into neighboring areas in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, it was in Syria that Moscow established its first overseas outpost. I will return to this crucial fact later.

In Syria, multiple imperial and subimperial powers have poured into one small country — some of them to protect a murderous regime, all of them annihilating any independent political aspirations among its people, dividing up sectors of Syrian society among themselves and their satellites, and denying Syrians the promise of a different future.

This unique situation was made possible by a combination of internal as well as international structures and dynamics involving five key powers — the U.S., Russia, Iran, Turkey and Israel.

The key internal factors are the colonial nature of the Assad family’s rule and what I have called the “conquered imperialists” (the title of my 2019 book published in Arabic) — that is, the Salafi-jihadist Islamists who played a central role in the Syrian tragedy and who bear an immense share of the responsibility for derailing the popular struggle and directing it away from its early, emancipatory aspirations.

Taken together, the unprecedented and peculiar convergence of international and regional imperial powers in one country, enhanced by the colonial nature of the Assad family’s rule over the course of more than half a century, as well as the “conquered imperialism” of the Islamists, amount to what I call (in a nod to the late Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman) “liquid imperialism.”

In a series of influential studies, including the landmark “Liquid Modernity” (1999), Bauman theorized the modern condition as highly volatile, “unable to keep any shape or any course for long,” with “no ‘final state’ in sight.” “The status of all norms ... has, under the aegis of ‘liquid’ modernity ... been severely shaken and become fragile,” he wrote. Lest his metaphor imply smoothness, he

stressed that “liquid is anything but soft. Think of a deluge, flood or broken dam.”

Syria has been deluged, flooded and broken by imperial and subimperial states. The array of global and regional powers that came pouring into Syria after 2011 effectively turned the country into a container for liquid imperialism, transforming and disfiguring the place in profound and far-reaching ways, with no final state in sight.

**The Islamic Republic of Iran** sided with the Assad regime from the outset of the 2011 uprising, which was, of course, inspired by other Arab revolts in what came to be known as the Arab Spring. Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic has shown expansionist tendencies, first in the form of “exporting the revolution” before rebranding as the vanguard of a so-called “axis of resistance” — an ideological smokescreen that deploys anti-imperialist rhetoric to justify brutal dictatorships and their authoritarian agendas.

After 1982, and the debacle of Israel’s occupation of Lebanon and the expulsion of Palestinian fighters from the country, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) built what would become Hezbollah, an armed sectarian force in a country Iran does not border. Iran also became, de facto, the dominant power in Iraq after America’s criminal invasion in 2003, and a long corridor was opened from Tehran to Beirut, passing through Baghdad and Damascus. In his paper “The Other Regional Counter-Revolution: Iran’s Role in the Shifting Political Landscape of the Middle East,” *New Lines’* Politics Editor Danny Postel has detailed the Islamic Republic’s reactionary response to popular uprisings in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq — a reality that flies directly in the face of the all-too-prevalent narrative that posits Iran as a “revolutionary” state in the vanguard of a regional “axis of resistance.” Iranian officials boast of controlling “four Arab capitals” (Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus and Sanaa). In all four cases, Iran has been a sectarianizing influence, funding and arming Shiite groups and investing in the Shia-fication of other communities. This is especially marked in Syria, where Shiites had always been a small minority (some 0.5% of the population). This sectarianizing policy, the means by which the Iranian regime has sought to consolidate its regional power, has predictably led to bloodshed and atrocities in the four Arab dominions, each of which is now a failing state.

These regional policies are an extension of the Islamic Republic’s methods within Iran itself. Exploitation of divisions along ethnic and religious lines is part of the regime’s modus operandi, and it brutalizes those who resist. This repressive logic has been on full display for the world to see since the “[Woman, Life, Liberty](#)” uprising that began in the fall of 2022. Iran’s imperialist and counterrevolutionary role in the region is an extension of its war at home against the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people.

In Syria, the Iranian regime has been the principal sponsor and patron of Shiite militias raised from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to oppose the Syrian uprising. On the international level, the legitimizing ideology behind Iran’s expansionist-sectarianization complex has been resistance to Israel and the U.S. But the Islamic Republic’s destructive role in Syria and elsewhere far outweighs this alleged resistance.

**Since October 2011**, Russia has wielded its veto power in the U.N. Security Council as a weapon to protect the Assad regime. In March 2012, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared that Russia would not allow “Sunni rule” in Syria. (Sunnis comprised some 70% of the population before the start of the uprising in March 2011.) This was an extremely thuggish, imperialist, racist and Islamophobic statement, but Lavrov could expect that it would not be condemned by Western powers, the U.N. or the Western left, because this sort of thinking had been implicit in the essentialist logic of the “war on (Islamic) terror” since the 1990s. Lavrov’s was an unusually blunt expression of that logic, pronounced on an international stage.

Russia launched a direct military intervention in Syria in September 2015 at the behest of Qassim Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, the IRGC's foreign operations arm. Russia operates the Hmeimim military air base in western Syria and, in 2019, leased a naval facility in Syria's Tartus seaport for 49 years. As a Russian outpost, Syria does not lie within the geographic ambit of direct Russian imperial expansion. Syria is Russia's first overseas satellite.

According to Airwars, which investigates civilian harm in conflicts around the world, Russia killed close to 24,000 Syrian civilians in the first six years of its intervention. In September 2022, the Syrian Network for Human Rights estimated that Russia committed more than 360 massacres in the country using illegal phosphorus and cluster munitions. Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu bragged of testing "all of Russia's latest weapons" in Syria. President Vladimir Putin himself claimed that "over 85% of Russian Army commanders gained combat experience in Syria." Sergey Chemezov, CEO of the Russian arms giant Rostec, has claimed that, in 2018 and 2019, Russia received weapons orders from Middle Eastern countries worth over \$100 billion.

Having exerted its veto power 18 times to shield the Assad regime from international censure, Russia's relationship with Syria can be seen as parallel to that of the U.S. with Israel. We can therefore speak of the "Palestinization" of the Syrian people through massacres, dispossession and ethnic cleansing.

**Structurally speaking**, and despite its geographical distance, the U.S. has been a Middle Eastern power since the end of World War II. Every decade since, the region has been rattled by a major war with either the U.S. or Israel as a protagonist. Consider the wars of 1956 (Suez), 1967 (the Six-Day War), 1973 (the October War), 1982 (Israel's invasion of Lebanon), 1991 (the Gulf War), 2003 (the American invasion of Iraq), 2006 (Israel-Hezbollah war) and Israel's periodic "mowing the grass" operations in Gaza, Jenin and elsewhere. All of these conflicts were given geopolitical cover by successive U.S. administrations. In a joint venture of American-Israeli exceptionalism, the two countries have flouted international law and made themselves outliers in the international community on this issue of Palestine.

From early 2013, Washington saw the Syrian struggle through the lens of a "war on terror." Essentialist claims that reduce the conflict to an expression of timeless, transhistorical forces or "ancient sectarian hatreds" have provided a convenient shortcut for Western policymakers and pundits from across the ideological spectrum. We are presented with only one option: war, waged by those who enjoy decisive military superiority.

In the eyes of U.S. policymakers, "terrorism" eclipsed wars of aggression, brutal repression by tyrannical regimes and even genocide — "the crime of all crimes," in the words of the Polish-Jewish jurist Raphael Lemkin (who coined the term during World War II) and the paramount evil in the world. Thus, in 2015, the U.S. established a program to arm and train Syrian rebels — with the crucial condition that they only fight the Islamic State group, not the Assad regime (the rebels were against both and had already been fighting the Islamic State). The results of this "train and equip" program were discomfiting. Only 65 men accepted its conditions and they were captured by jihadists before firing a single bullet.

The Ghouta [chemical massacre](#) of August 2013 crossed U.S. President Barack Obama's (in)famous "red line." Yet less than three weeks later, the U.S. and Russia cut a deal to dismantle the Assad regime's chemical arsenal and exempt it from punishment under international law. The deal gave Assad carte blanche to continue his murderous rampages with other weapons — and, in practice, also with the same chemical weapons that were supposedly being decommissioned. (The overwhelming majority of chemical attacks in Syria — 311 out of a total of 349, according to the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute — occurred after the deal was struck.) Justice and truth

were sacrificed along with the massacre's 1,466 victims. The massacre and what followed were also gifts to the nihilistic Islamist forces, who capitalized on such injustices (and the impunity with which they were meted out) in their narratives.

In 2014, the U.S. intervened against the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (later rebranded as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham). Previously, in Afghanistan and Iraq, Washington had nurtured the imperialist and nihilist methods of such militant Islamist groups. America also controls a large swath of eastern and northeastern Syria through its Kurdish allies, who chose not to fight the Assad regime because their essential enemy is in Turkey.

According to a report by Amnesty International in April 2019, more than 1,600 civilians were killed in [my native city](#), Raqqa, by coalition forces, led by the Americans in the course of their "war on terror."

**In 2016**, like the other four powers, Turkey intervened in Syria in the name of "fighting terror." But the "terrorists" in its crosshairs were the Syrian Kurds affiliated with the PKK, the Kurdish nationalist party that has been locked in armed struggle with Ankara since the 1980s. The Syrian branch of the party (the PYD) was instrumental in the U.S. intervention against ISIS. This geopolitical fact has caused considerable friction between Washington and Ankara. But the Donald Trump administration betrayed the Kurds in 2018, when it accepted Turkey's expansion into PYD-controlled areas and the occupation of Afrin, and then again in 2019 when the Turkish military occupied Ras al-Ain. Afrin and Ras al-Ain are two Syrian towns with Kurdish majorities in the northwestern and northeastern parts of the country, respectively. Turkey and the PKK exported their civil war to Syria, which had, and still has, a civil war of its own.

It became common for people to say — whether in exasperation or out of laziness — that the Syrian conflict is "complicated." It is complicated. How could it be otherwise, with all these states and substate actors involved?

Turkey has been hosting some 3.7 million Syrian refugees, slightly more than half the entire number (which is close to 7 million). But since 2016, Syrians' mobility within Turkey has been severely curtailed: Refugees need special permission to travel from the community where they registered to other places. This measure was introduced after a Turkish-EU deal, inked in February 2016, that was designed to prevent Syrian (and non-Syrian) refugees from arriving to Europe.

The scapegoating of Syrian refugees has been growing in Turkey, recently reaching hysterical levels with calls for forced repatriations. Refugees are blamed for Turkey's economic problems: They have been racialized and demonized by populists and demagogues like Umit Ozdag, leader of Turkey's far-right, ultranationalist Victory Party. For electoral reasons, the Turkish government announced a program of consensual return of refugees to Syria, and President Erdogan declared that 526,000 refugees had returned by early October 2022. Recently, he said that 1 million have returned to Syria of their own volition. It is impossible to verify this number from independent sources. However, the Turkish government might well be using this program as a pretext to populate certain Kurdish-majority areas with non-Kurdish Syrians in order to solve its own "problem" (by causing big problems for Syria in the future). But then, demographic engineering has always been among the tools of imperialism.

**The state of Israel** was founded on ethnic cleansing, dispossession and expansion. The Ashkenazi leaders of the Yishuv (the Jewish population living in Palestine before 1948), who had developed cordial ties with colonial elites in the main Western powers, embarked on a project of dispossession and displacement of the Palestinian people in what they call "the War of Independence." It is undeniable that Israel is a colonial, even settler-colonial state. The 1917 "Balfour Declaration,"

which announced British support for the construction “in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people,” was included in the British colonial mandate over Palestine established in 1922.

In 1956, Israel briefly occupied the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula, in collaboration with the British and French invaders, following President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal Company. The three colonial powers had to withdraw after heavy pressure from the then-ascendant global imperial centers: the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In 1967, Israel — this time fully supported by the U.S. — occupied Sinai again, as well as what remained of Palestine (the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip) and the Syrian Golan Heights.

Israel would subsequently engage in multiple wars in Lebanon against the Palestine Liberation Organization and then Hezbollah. Numerous Israeli military campaigns have targeted the Gaza Strip and refugee camps in the West Bank. All have been justified as “fighting terror” (i.e., any Palestinian resistance) and fulfilling Israel’s seemingly insatiable security needs. Stripping the Palestinian people of their right to self-determination, Israel also refuses to acknowledge the Palestinian people as equal citizens in one state. This ongoing situation has been a persistent source of violence in Palestine and instability in the region.

Beginning in 2013, in response to Iran’s intervention in support of the Assad regime following the Syrian uprising, Israel has periodically sent its planes on bombing runs inside Syria, mostly against Iranian military facilities. Underlying the insouciance of these raids is a logic of impunity and internationally normalized Israeli exceptionalism.

The Israeli state and society have been drifting steadily rightward since the 1970s, following a trajectory inscribed in the very logic of colonialism, apartheid and exceptionalism that goes back to the state’s formation.

**The dynastic family dictatorship** that has ruled Syria for 53 years has reduced the country to an Iranian-Russian protectorate in order to maintain itself in power “forever,” to quote a pro-regime slogan. To achieve this eternal rule, it relies on sectarianized security agencies and equally sectarianized military formations with security functions.

Since the 1970s, what we call “sectarianism” in Syria (and the Middle East more broadly) no longer refers merely to an irrational force in the political and social spheres, nor to the colonial “divide and rule” strategy that was later adopted by the “national” elites who replaced the European colonizers. It refers ever more dangerously to a growing potential for civil war and genocide as well. The convergence of the Assad family’s decades of rule in Syria with the colonial paradigm is seen not only in its own “divide and rule” strategies but in its use of a permanent state of emergency. This state of emergency has been in effect since March 1963, when military officers seized power in the name of the Baath Party, but its justification has shifted since 2011 from war with the colonial Israeli enemy to the war on terror. For 60 years now, the country has been marked by suspension of law and a civil war that has fluctuated between cold and red-hot.

Under this dynastic rule, Syria is an inside-out state that, internally, deals with society according to a unitary logic of sovereignty in which Syria must be one, undivided, everywhere, in which no diversity of views or desires is possible. This inside-out state treats the population as if it were a disciplined and obedient army, devoid of plurality and spontaneity — all the while working externally with powerful states in the region and around the world according to a pluralistic logic, in which problems always have political solutions. The only treaties the regime has respected are those with influential powers, Israel included: The Golan Heights have been perfectly calm since the 1974 cease-fire agreement that followed the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973.

What we have had in Syria since the 1970s has been a continuation of colonial rule by other means. The French Empire brutally occupied Syria between the end of World War I and the end of World War II. But French colonial rule was much less violent than the Assad regime, under which Syria has experienced two civil wars with genocidal dimensions: 1979-1982, with tens of thousands of victims, and 2011 to the present, with hundreds of thousands of victims and some 7 million refugees in 127 countries (close to 30% of the entire population, according to a 2022 Human Rights Watch report).

The late Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power," highlighting the lasting effects of colonial domination on the exercise of power in modern societies, is not merely an analytic category. Inviting Iran and Russia in to protect the regime is the realization of the Assad regime's fundamentally colonial logic. The imperialist war on terror has only consolidated the regime's coloniality and murderousness.

One slogan of the recent protests that erupted in the southern city of Sweida on Aug. 20, 2023, speaks directly to the imperial-colonial complex that controls Syria:

*We want the seaport, we want the land (the oil, in another formula) and we want the airport returned to us!*

The seaport is Tartus, which, as mentioned, has been leased to Russia. The land is divided by the five occupying powers. And Damascus International Airport has, for several years now, been widely perceived to be under de facto Iranian control. The protestors in Sweida are thus drawing a connection between their economic hardships and the colonial relations between the regime and its Russian and Iranian protectors. In the version of the slogan that refers to oil, the implication is that it has been usurped by another imperial power: the U.S.

The protests in Sweida have reactivated the slogans of the 2011 revolution, including one of its defining rallying cries, "The people want to bring down the regime." The Assad regime, which has long claimed (exactly as the French colonizers did in Syria) to be a protector of the country's minority communities against the Sunni majority, has thus far not cracked down on the protests (Sweida is a largely Druze area). But no one should expect that this uprising will be tolerated for long. The regime's response is unlikely to take the form of chemical massacres or barrel bombs; instead, it will likely aim to decapitate the movement by assassinating or disappearing its leaders and others active in it.

**No discussion of the liquid imperialism** that has befallen Syria can neglect those "conquered imperialists," the champions of Salafi-jihadist Islamism, which has become a global phenomenon since its emergence in Afghanistan in the early 1980s. The political imaginary of Salafi-jihadist Islamists is about conquest, expansion, empire and control. Their worldview emanates from Islam, a monotheistic religion with a solidly universal vision, but they relate themselves to one Islamic tradition only, that of conquest, power and strict observance of Islamic jurisprudence. They never connect themselves to other traditions — rational, spiritual, Sufi or popular. Their violent disciplining of bodies, especially those of women, has an unmistakably fascist quality. They are highly elitist when it comes to ordinary life in the present world, and extremely nihilist when it comes to the mundane customs, laws and institutions of that world.

**Characterizing them** as elitist might seem counterintuitive. Let me explain. They believe only a very few people are true believers and on the right path, and that power should be in the hands of one man, surrounded by a small group of influential men. The amoral nature of great power politics, with its disregard for international law and discrimination against Muslims, is actually good news for the jihadists, because these things justify their negation of the world as corrupt, unjust and essentially anti-Islamic. Theirs is a self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating nihilism.

This militant Islamism has been at war against Western imperialism and, to a certain extent, against Russian imperialism as well. But its own imperialist logic, as well as the extraordinary narcissism of its foot soldiers, eliminates any possible emancipatory elements in their fight. Their elitist terrorist methods have always weakened the ordinary Muslims under their rule. Under their control, my hometown of Raqqa was divided into a ruling elite of mostly non-Syrian muhajireen (immigrants); exploited and brutalized Syrian Muslim commoners; and a very small minority of non-Muslims, namely Christians, who were second-class subjects. Women were not allowed out of their homes unless they were dressed fully in black.

**Lenin's argument** that imperialism represents "the highest stage of capitalism" has led many to think of imperialism as embodied in a very few capitalist powers. By this logic, there has been only one imperialism since World War II: Western imperialism, with the U.S. as its center and NATO as its military arm. The Soviet Union was not generally seen by those on the left as imperialist: not following World War II, nor after it invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, nor even after it invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Similarly, Putin's Russia has not generally been understood as imperialist, even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the intervention in Syria in 2015. For much of the so-called anti-imperialist left, not even the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was enough.

This conception of imperialism must be challenged. The case of Syria requires a paradigm shift in the understanding of imperialism and the theorizing of new practices and phenomena pertaining to it.

Ultrationalism, expansion, dismissal of international law, exceptionalism, imperial imaginaries — these are characteristics of many powers in the age of the war on terror. With "terror" identified as the principal political evil globally, any state that joins in this alleged war can gain international legitimacy — even those engaged in war crimes and murder on an industrial scale. This has dealt massive blows to the rule of law both locally and internationally. It has contributed to a securitized politics, it has promoted thuggery among political elites and has weakened democracy and popular movements everywhere. Imperialism has permeated the practices of power in many countries, among which Syria is arguably the most unfortunate, with no fewer than five expansionist powers on its territory.

The concept of liquid imperialism is an attempt to capture the fact that five different powers have penetrated one small country. But it also speaks to the lack of solidity or coherence in these powers' strategies, practices, visions and commitments. Unlike the imperial projects of the past, in Syria there is no "civilizing mission." Natural resources are not a primary motive (though the intervening states have seized whatever they can get their hands on, from oil and phosphates to seaports and airports, to water and real estate). Rather, this is a scramble to control the future of the country.

There is also a liquid aspect in the relations among the five colonial powers. In Syria, we have two Russias — one of them is called the U.S. On a rhetorical level (especially at the beginning of the uprising), Moscow and Washington seemed to be on opposite sides: The Kremlin stood by Assad and the White House denounced him. Yet operationally, Russia and the U.S. were effectively on the same side — especially after the Islamic State came into the picture and became the central focus of U.S. strategy in Syria. From that point forward, Moscow and Washington were on the same page: The two powers closely coordinated "deconfliction" and their military personnel were on the phone to each other on a daily basis to avoid planes flying in the same location at the same altitude and to ensure airstrikes didn't hit one another's "friendlies." For all the bluster about Washington wanting "regime change" in Syria, the exact opposite was the case. The researcher Michael Karadjis has demonstrated that U.S. policy in Syria was decidedly one of "regime preservation."



In another rhetorical smokescreen, Iran claims an ideology of “resistance” but, in Syria, it intervened to crush resistance and save a dictatorship.

The situation is also liquid in the sense that we lack the tools to adequately conceptualize it. Syria is a unique case of misunderstanding and disbelief. As several observers have pointed out, Syria might be the most documented war in history, with millions of images, videos and social media posts chronicling every aspect of the conflict — yet this abundance of documentation coexists with a war of narratives about what the documents mean. Every truth claim has a corresponding counterclaim; every assertion is met with a denial, and conspiracy theories abound. Not only has vast documentary evidence failed to create a consensus about the war but, as the political scientist Lisa Wedeen argues in her 2019 book *“Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria,”* the overwhelming volume of material has instead led to an “atmosphere of doubt,” generating widespread confusion and bewilderment. Paradoxically, Wedeen shows, “too much information may generate the very uncertainty that circulating it is intended to allay.”

Socialism in one (big) country — the Soviet Union — was turned into a source of legitimation for absolute power that betrayed the socialist ideal and led to repression and mass murder. Imperialism in one small country is quite a novel condition, when one considers that, historically, imperialism was characterized by one or a very few imperialist centers expanding by force over vast areas and continents, whereas what we have here is many imperialist and subimperialist powers converging on a single country. It is like several thugs abusing a child — there’s only a very slim chance the child will survive. It is an unforgivable crime that should haunt the world.

For the political theorist Hannah Arendt, “worldlessness” is a condition in which we no longer share common institutions or systems of meaning with others. It is “like a desert that dries up the space between people,” in the words of the philosopher Siobhan Kattago. Syria’s worldlessness — its separation from the world’s shared institutions, while at the same time much of the world is in Syria and much of Syria is thrown everywhere in the world — is also an ominous portent of an increasingly Syrianized world, in which the tragedy that has engulfed and destroyed Syria is not contained, but is rather becoming a cataclysm without borders.

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**P.S.**

- New Lines Magazine. September 7, 2023:

- <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/the-liquid-imperialism-that-engulfed-syria/>

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