

Syria, from Dictatorship to New Caliphate

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Abstract

The outbreak of the Arab revolts¹ of 2010 – 2011, in MENA², led to an unprecedented protest movement on March 15, 2011, in Syria. While in other countries the Arab Spring meant the beginning of the democratization process, Syria has been caught in a bloody civil war, with unexpected effects even for the international policy analysts. President Bashar Al-Assad manages to control a part of the country, while the rest of it is „split” between „rebel forces”. The Arab Spring meant also an Islamic Awakening, including the proclamation of the Caliphate, on the current territory of Syria and Iraq. In this context, Europe has to face new security challenges.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Civil War, Islamic Awakening, Terror, Dictatorship.

1. Arab Spring - General Causes and Context of the Outbreak of Revolutions

After 2010, most MENA countries have started a process of political, social and economic transformation which determined Europe as

¹ Researchers have not reached a consensus: the Arab Spring events are defined as popular uprisings and sometimes as revolutions. The distinction is important when we talk about the structure of Muslim society.

² MENA is the term for the Middle East and North Africa (see World Bank definition at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/overview#1>), an acronym used in academia, military planning, economic literature. The countries included in MENA are, in alphabetical order: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, UAE, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen.

well as other international political actors to formulate more or less appropriate geopolitical replies. MENA was engulfed in a wave of uprisings, generically called by Western media and academia the Arab Spring. Four authoritarian regimes have fallen with the revolutionary wave: Ben Ali's in Tunisia (17 December 2010), of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt (11 February 2011), Gaddafi, Libya (August 23, 2011) and Saleh, Yemen (23 November 2011). Arab Spring reached other countries: Morocco, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon and Oman. In some of these, the leaders have adopted urgent reforms demanded by citizens (Morocco, Jordan), and thus protests have stopped, in others the uprisings were violently suppressed (Bahrain).

Syria, however, is a special case: The Arab Spring has been violently repressed and turned into civil war, the population is caught between a dictatorial regime and the threat of terrorist rather than political opposition groups. Finally, the great international political actors do not have any solution to stabilize or normalize the situation very soon. Syria has seen a territorial division within the borders, more or less acknowledged by the authorities. The situation was further complicated in the summer of 2014, when the extremist group IS- Islamic State, also known as ISIL - Islamic State in Iraq and Levant or ISIS - Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Syria appears in the title as al-Sham, old name of a Syrian province) conquered large parts of the territories of the two countries, now being in control of some important resources and recently declared the restoration of the Caliphate.

Although it is considered that there were general causes, shared in the Arab revolutions, such as youth unemployment, violation of fundamental rights, corruption, etc., Andrea Margelletti³ has shown that in each country the Arab Spring has a central element: in Tunisia the social character created by economic crisis was highlighted; in Egypt the riots had a political character and were targeted against Mubarak regime; in Libya it was a tribal, separatist revolt against Gaddafi regime. Also, in an article wrote in June 2011, just a few months after the outbreak of the Arab

³ Andrea Margeletti, „Introdizione” at *Atlante Geopolitico del Mediterraneo 2013*, Francesco Anghelone, Andrea Ungari (coord.), Istituto di Studi Politici S. Pio V, Rome, 2012, pp. 8-9.

revolutions, Giordano Altarozzi said that „*despite the obvious impact on the evolution of the international system, the causes of the new revolutionary process, that includes these regions, are predominantly internal*”⁴. The Arab Spring, however, coalesced all forces toward a single goal: to end the dictatorships, without necessarily stating a desire for democracy.

Regarding the international community's response to the crisis created by the Arab Spring, it varies from one country to another, even within the European Union, according to the interests of each country. For example, Sarkozy's France and Berlusconi's Italy, had special relationships with Gaddafi. There was even a separate vision of the Mediterranean countries, other than EU vision on the MENA issue: France proposed since 2007 a Union for the Mediterranean, „*a form of institutionalized and structured cooperation*”⁵, an economic cultural, social, health, etc. development program, and solidarity in case of natural disasters. „*In fact, France, Italy, Spain and UK are part of a group of EU countries most involved in the development of the Arab Spring. These four countries supporting the interests of the United States and its policy regarding the Arab Spring, but their national interests in the Mediterranean, as well as their capabilities, were and are very different*”⁶.

US foreign policy analysts for the Middle East show the double American discourse: on the one hand, human rights, and democracy are invoked, on the other hand the actions of governments against their own people are tolerated. The United States have supported the „trends of democratization” of Egypt and Libya, yet they have „closed eyes” when Bahrain's Pearl Revolution was violently repressed. Bahrain is „*the most glaring exception of a generally benevolent attitude of Obama, regarding*

⁴ Giordano Altarozzi, „Analisi di due processi rivoluzionari: dalle rivoluzioni del 1989 alla Rivoluzione dei Gelsomini”, *Focus- Rivista di Studi Politici*, S. Pio V. (N. 2/2011 - Anno XXIII - April / June, Roma, p. 9.

⁵ According to Alessandra Mignolli, Daniela Vitiello, „L'Unione Europea, il sistema Schengen e le migrazioni via mare. Considerazioni in merito al recente „Caso Lampedusa” in *Atlante (...)2013 cit.* p. 43.

⁶ Roberto Aliboni, „A Transatlantic Perspective on the European Union and the United States in North Africa Strategic Transitions, Perceptions, and Policy Responses”, in *Mediterranean Paper Series 2012*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, IAI - Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, 2012, p. 9.

the protesters”⁷. Kenneth Roth considers that the United States government values the relationship with Saudi Arabia and the maintaining of the American naval base for the Fifth Fleet, in Bahrain, rather than the rights of citizens of Bahrain.

Since 2012 there have been signs of „*the inability or refusal of major powers to take new risks to help manage hot spots*” that „*will lead to strong disorders in the Middle East (...) After the Arab Spring, the United States are confronted with an unprecedented lack of influence in the Middle East*”⁸. In close relationship with the United States, two other important political actors have played a role in the events preceding and subsequent to Arab Spring: Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Although the two monarchs do not support democratic movements „at home”, they were actively involved in the countries comprised of the Revolutions in 2011. Apart from investments made by Qatar into countries covered by the Revolution, the powerful TV station Al Jazeera is considered „*a major weapon in Qatar's foreign policy*”⁹. The reporters of this television are those who have transmitted the images of revolutions and the calls to protest. Through its editorial policy, Al Jazeera supports the Islamist political groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

2. Syria, Country Profile. Short History.

Syrian Arab Republic is a semi-presidential republic. Bashar Al-Assad is the President of the Republic since 2000. He was running for presidency again in the summer of 2014, in an electoral process catalogued by his main opponents, and also by Western media, as a „caricature”. Its 21 million inhabitants are ethnically diverse (Arabs- 82%, Kurds - 7.3%,

⁷ Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, „Renunțați la acești opt aliați indezirabili!”, *Foreign Policy România*, January-February, 2013, p. 16.

⁸ ***, „Cele mai mari 10 RISCURI care amenință lumea în 2012”, Institutul Pentru Cercetări Politice, available at: <http://www.icp.org.ro/stiri/cele-mai-mari-10-riscuri-care-ameninta-lumea-2012.htm>, accessed on September 15, 2014.

⁹ Patrick Schulze-Heil, „Qatar: An economic and religious offensive”, *Monde Arabe*, June 28, 2012, available at: <http://monde-arabe.arte.tv/en/qatar-an-economic-and-religious-offensive/>, accessed on October 1, 2014.

Armenians - 2.7%, others - 3.8%), different denominations (Sunni Muslim - 74%, Shia Muslims¹⁰ - 12%, Christian - 5.5%, Druze¹¹ 3%, as other religions - 5.5%) and speak a multitude of languages and dialects (Arabic - official language, Aramaic, Armenian, Circassian and Kurdish)¹². This mosaic of ethnicities and religions play an important role in the developments in Syria, as we shall see. Also, way that current events have unfolded has its roots in history. European powers, on the one hand, and the powers in the region, on the other hand, claim important roles in the political, economic, social and cultural life of Syria.

2.1. Syria, an Old Dispute between European Powers

Since 1516 Syria has been ruled by the Ottoman Empire, but direct contact with the central authorities was limited. European powers such as France and Russia have called in the 16th and 18th centuries for the right to protect Catholics or Orthodox in this area. The creation of Lebanon in 1861 is thus related to the intervention of European powers, which demanded to the Ottoman Empire the separation from Syria, following the repression of Maronites' riots. In these circumstances, France gradually took over Lebanon's government. World War I made Syria, again, the theater of confrontation of European powers. Great Britain claimed the Arab nationalist movement in order to weaken the power of the Ottoman Empire. Hussein, „*Sharif of Mecca (...) defender of Holy Places and descendant of*

¹⁰ Shi'ism has existed since the beginning of Islam and refers to partisans (Shia) of the Prophet son-in-law, Ali. Unlike Sunni, there is a clergy responsible for the interpretation of doctrine, according to Francois Massoulie, *Conflictele din Orientul Mijlociu*, Publishing House BIC ALL, Bucharest, 2003, p. 41.

¹¹ Druze are relatively a small Middle Eastern religious sect characterized by an eclectic system of doctrines and by a cohesion and loyalty among its members that have enabled them to maintain for centuries of turbulent history their close-knit identity and distinctive faith, according to Enciclopedia Britannica, available at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/172195/Druze>, accessed on September 10, 2014. They enjoyed the protection of Assad regime, according to Gianmarco Volpe, „La Siria oggi”, in *Atlante Geopolitico del Mediterraneo 2014*, Francesco Anghelone, Andrea Ungari (coord.), Istituto di Studi Politici S. Pio V, DataneWS Editrice, Rome, 2014, p. 306.

¹² According to *Atlante (...)2014 cit.*, p. 286.

the Prophet"¹³, the head of the Hashemite family, supported by the British, triggered anti-Ottoman revolt in 1916. His son, Faysal entered triumphantly into Damascus in October 1918, as military government, and assumed the leadership of Syria, except for French-controlled areas. In July 1919, the General Syrian Congress declared a free and sovereign Syria, and in 1920 Faysal became King. The European powers, namely France and the UK, and the Jews in Palestine did not want an independent Syria. Under these conditions, the two allied powers signed the famous Sykes-Picot secret agreement: France controlled Syria and Lebanon, and Great Britain, Transjordan and Iraq, although the British promised to create an Arab kingdom. The two powers dealt in this Agreement also the Palestine issue. Neither under French mandate Syria did not enjoyed stability: in an attempt to weaken Arab nationalism, France had a number of initiatives for ethnic and territorial divisions. Syrian nationalists' riots and French riposte have continued until the eve of the Second World War. Charles de Gaulle's France allowed in 1943 the election of a Syrian Parliament, and in 1944 the Soviet Union recognized the sovereignty of Syria, followed by the United States and Britain. Syria became a founding member of the United Nations and the Arab League in 1945. After a year France has abandoned any claim on Syria, which became independent on April 17, 1946. Conflicts with the newly formed State of Israel (1948) and successive coups made, in the '50s and '60s, Syria an unstable country. Also it became close to Soviet ideology and the pan-Arab Ba'ath Party claimed the internal political scene. In this context, the military Hafez Al-Assad, a moderate Ba'athist member, came to power following a coup and ruled Syria since the '70s and until 2000.

After the seizure of power, Hafez Al-Assad has realized that a mix of religions and ethnicities requires the maintenance of a balance that enables it to govern Syria. Under the Constitution of 1973, Islam was not mentioned as the state religion, despite the fact that there is a Sunni majority. „*Ba'ath Party's founders, one Sunni Muslim and one Greek Orthodox Christian (...) considered Islam more of a cultural commonality than an all-guidang force (...) and Syria would be 'a planned socialist, economy*"¹⁴.

¹³ According to Francois Massoulie, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Lin Nouheihed, Alex Warren, *The Battle for Arab Spring- Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, update edition, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2013, p. 216.

After the death of Hafez, the position was taken over by his son, Bashar Al-Assad. It's important the Assad family's affiliation to an Alawite¹⁵ branch and the presence of an axis Damascus - Lebanese Hezbollah - Shia Iran, which made Syria „an extremist country” in the eyes of the West and made George W. Bush's administration to declare Syria as part of „axis of evil”¹⁶. Hafez Al-Assad used three items to keep himself in power, elements „inherited” by Bashar: „a military security complex, Ba'athist party apparatus and a new Alawite elite”¹⁷. Bashar took over from his father an authoritarian state, with a stagnant economy, a persistent corruption and political oppression - a *mukhabarat*¹⁸ state, ie dominated by security and military apparatus. Assad's offer was „more stability to the price of less freedom”, especially since there were always wars at the borders.

Bashar inherited from his father - is what we call, as in North Korea and most likely was planned to happen in Egypt and Libya, „a dynastic presidency”, a way to prepare the dictators' sons to take power, through apparent legal methods – a foreign policy that enables him to maintain power. Researchers say that is a „crossroads”¹⁹ of foreign policy: Syria was close to Iran, while never turning its back on Europe; stored hopes of peace without a treaty with Israel, but encouraged the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah and certain Palestinian factions; Syria shared intelligence on Islamic militants with Washington, but also facilitated the insurgency in post-Saddam in Iraq. Maybe this is why the great powers did not know which card to play once of the Syrian Spring began.

Because I said that history has always played an important role in the shaping of this area, it is time to remember that Syria now has no peace treaty with Israel, although the two states have signed a ceasefire after the war for the heights Golan in 1973. Also, Syria has always considered

¹⁵ Alawites is a Shia community, widespread in Syria and Lebanon. They are seen as schismatics. According to Dumitru Chican, *Mic lexicon al Orientului Mijlociu –Istorie, conflicte, politică, religii, valori și concepte*, Publishing House Proema, Baia-Mare, 2011, p. 19.

¹⁶ According to Francesco Anghelone, „Siria-La Storia”, in *Atlante(...)2014 cit.*, p.296.

¹⁷ Lin Nouheihed, Alex Warren, *op.cit.*, p. 215.

¹⁸ According to David W. Lesch, *Syria -The fall of the House of Assad*, New Update Edition, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012/2013, p. 5.

¹⁹ Lin Nouheihed, Alex Warren, *op.cit.*, p. 223.

Lebanon „its province”²⁰, has deployed troops in 1976 during the civil war in Lebanon, where they remained for nearly three decades. Meanwhile the Syrian regime has cultivated Shiite Hezbollah to fight Israel, and to prevent the creation of an Islamic (Sunni) Lebanese State.

After taking power, Bashar Al-Assad has brought economic cultural and social openness in order to permit greater political and media freedom and the cancellation of emergency state, instituted since 1963. In 2000 he allowed Internet access. But even with these measures, freedom of expression was almost nonexistent: „Syria was ranked a miserable 173 out of 178 countries in 2010 Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders”²¹. It is said that during the regime of Hafez Al-Assad was not even an ATM in Syria, but Bashar opened banks, tourism has flourished - 8,5 million foreigners visited Syria in 2010²². Despite the reforms, his regime remains one of the most authoritarian dictatorships in the Middle East.

3. The Syrian Spring

An unprecedented protest movement began on 15 March 2011 in Syria, followed by an appeal on a Facebook page, „Syrian Revolution against Bashar Al-Assad 2011”²³, that encouraged to uprising for „a Syria without tyranny, without emergency law and without exceptional tribunals”²⁴. Daraa, a city near the border with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan started the revolution. Protests in the streets were extended and included the whole country, but were violently suppressed by the authorities. Even if those who wrote the first anti-Assad messages on school's walls were children, Syrian security had no moderation to arrest and torture them. In late March 2011, revolution swept Damascus, and until the end of the same year several Syrian cities were in full revolt.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 217.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 219.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 220.

²³ <https://ar-ar.facebook.com/Syrian.Revolution>

²⁴ Rodica Binder, „Siria în stare de asediu”, *Deutsche Welle*, 25.04.2011, available at: <http://www.dw.de/siria-%C3%AEen-stare-de-asediu/a-15028273>, accessed on September 10, 2014.

Again, we go back to history and ethnic mosaic: Kurds in Syria have been marginalized by Assad dictatorships, many Kurdish refugees from Turkey having no Syrian nationality and being practically „stateless”²⁵. Kurds in Syria were not cultural or linguistic rights and the Syrian authorities have handed the Turks many important leaders of the PKK. So, in 2012, the Kurds have chosen to rebel against the Assad regime. Also Sunni Islamists saw in Arab Spring the ideal moment to assert themselves. Christians lived in harmony with other faiths, with relative protection of the government, so they were not very determined, initially, to join the protests.

In 2012 Bashar Al-Assad began a campaign of „punishment” by aerial bombing aimed at the population. In 2013 ballistic missiles were used to attack residential districts in Aleppo, and the international community classified the attacks as war crimes. *„These conclusions were reached by foreign chanceries after the use of chemical weapons, in August, 2013, in Damascus”*²⁶.

The real number of dead is not known, but in 2014 it is estimated at over 150,000 and 9 million Syrian are refugees (3,000,000 in other countries) or displaced to other parts of Syria, according to the UN Refugee Agency - UNHCR²⁷. UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, has called the situation in Syria *„the most critical humanitarian emergency of our era”*²⁸.

The main causes of the outbreak of revolution in Syria were a combination of factors: youth unemployment, economic crisis, precarious political balance, military Alawi „dictatorship”, the political and economic control of Syrian resources. *„Theoretically, Syria is a parliamentary Republic that recognizes the principle of separation of powers. Executive power is exercised by the President of the Republic, which can initiate legislative proposals, gives decrees may amend the Constitution, decide the*

²⁵ Lin Nouheihed, Alex Warren, *op.cit.*, p. 232.

²⁶ Georg Meyr, *Siria, un inverno arabo*, Panozzi Editore, Rimini, 2013, p. 33.

²⁷ ***, „Syria Regional Refugee Response”, *UNHCR Report*, available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, accessed on October 2, 2014.

²⁸ Quoted in „Siria : allarme dell’ONU, “oltre tre milioni di rifugiati”, *MediArabe.info*, August 29, 2014, available at: <http://www.mediarabe.info/spip.php?breve25230>, accessed on October 1, 2014. („Syria: UN warning, “more than three million refugees”)

Cabinet and military officials, but the army may declare „state of emergency” and suspend all constitutional guarantees and rights”²⁹.

Syrian dictatorial regime does not recognize multipartism or free electoral competition. „Under the Constitution, the only party allowed is the Ba'ath Party”³⁰. In this way the Assad family has direct access or right to operate, in the party-state apparatus.

3.1. A New Cold War? International Political Actors' Position

Syria became immediately after the suppression of the first Arab Spring protests, the theater of a civil war between different religious forces, firstly. Alawite Minority supported by Iran and Hezbollah faces a Sunni majority. Tehran sees Syria as a vital ally to maintain influence in the Middle East, in mediating communication with Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are supporting the Sunni „rebel forces” without supporting their ideas of democracy, which could bring problems „at home”. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are exactly the counterpart to the influence of Tehran. In Doha (Qatar) was formed in November 2012 the National Syrian Coalition of the opposition and revolutionary forces. The coalition is recognized by many European and MENA countries as „the legitimate representative of the Syrian people”. However, the coalition is challenged because of its inefficiency, even inside the Syrian rebel forces. Since 2011 Qatar withdrew its embassy in Damascus, followed by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait so „several Gulf states became increasingly vocal in calling for outside intervention in Syria”³¹. Syrian rebel forces, so often quoted by the media, but rarely identified, are brought together under the Free Syrian Army and they recruit fighters from Arab-Muslim countries, and also from Western Europe and America. It is the army of the Coalition. Since the beginning of the Syrian Spring extremist forces like Al-Nusra Front emerged, considered part of the Iraqi branch of Al Qaeda. „The rebels” managed in 2013 to take control of Aleppo, „the economic heart of the country”³².

²⁹ According to Gianmarco Volpe, *op.cit.*, p.297.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p.298.

³¹ Lin Nouheihed, Alex Warren, *op.cit.*, p. 236.

³² According to Gianmarco Volpe, *op.cit.*, p. 300.

The Syrian conflict has already draw two „blocs” of the political actors: Arab monarchies, allies of the United States, while Putin's Russia has made clear its support for the regime of Bashar Al-Assad and Iran. It's probably a new Cold War, in view of the crisis in Ukraine which has polarized Europe, on the one hand, and MENA countries, on the other. In terms of an internal Cold War in the Arab-Muslim countries (this is because Iran is not an Arab country, but it is a Muslim one) Saudi Arabia-Iran relationship occurs. *„As Washington and Moscow in the days of the Cold War, Iran and Saudi Arabia have not been directly confronted. But, as the ideological confrontation between the USA and USSR took place, religious conflict between Shiites and Sunnis, who are in charge of the two countries, led to bloody clashes elsewhere: Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain”*³³.

Regarding the US's attitude towards the crisis in Syria, David Rothkopf³⁴ argues that the Obama administration had, despite a tough speech, delayed reactions. These can be explained because the US did not want to repeat the Bush's administration mistakes in Iraq. According to the American researcher, the US administration showed indecision, plus „diplomatic mistakes” such as spying on European allies (Germany), who have now become more reluctant to USA. Now the United States faces a major shortcoming: *„The United States has any power in large quantities, except one: legitimacy (...) that allows setting the agenda”*³⁵. Humanitarian aid to civilians in Syria, supporting the opposition against Assad regime, the demands to Syria to give up its chemical arsenal or the air raids against ISIS are not enough. Hesitations are explainable: more support to opponents of Assad could mean encouraging the jihadi movements.

³³ Ugo Tramballi, „Le periferie della grande guerra contro il califfato”, *Affari Internazionali - Rivista online di politica, strategia ed economia*, October 7, 2014, available at: <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=2827>, accessed on October 10, 2014.

³⁴ David Rothkopf is CEO and editor for Foreign Policy Group. The Article „Încă sunteți o superputere”, published by Foreign Policy Romania, October/November 2014, pp. 60-65, is a prologue of his book *National Insecurity: American Leadersip in an age of Fear*, volume to appear this year.

³⁵ Fareed Zakaria, *Lumea Postamericană*, Publishing House Polirom, Iasi, Bucharest, 2009, p. 215.

The Syrian Spring, now transformed in the war between the Assad regime and the „rebels”, and in addition a conflict „Iraq plus Syria” against ISIS, also affects other countries, „*brinkmanship: Turkey, Iran and Israel*”.³⁶

Turkey is a NATO member, but seems a long way from becoming an EU member, has nearly 900 km of common border with Syria and faces new vulnerabilities that threaten its security: the creation of a Kurdish state, encouraged by the policy of arming the Kurds by European powers (Germany)³⁷ in order to confront ISIS. In addition, in Turkey there are over 1 million Syrian refugees, according to UNHCR³⁸, in September 2014. Turkey has turned, over the three years since the outbreak of the Syrian Spring, from an ally, to an enemy of Syria.

Francois Massoulie argues that „*the existence of Israel in the heart of the Middle East polarizes most of the conflicts in the region*”³⁹. Regarding the Syrian Spring, Israel's position is rather complicated and concerns the security issues: diplomatic interventions are marginal, but since 2013 the Israeli armed forces carried out three air raids in Syria which have targeted „*a military research center in Damascus where suspected that are produced and stored chemical weapons; a convoy carrying SA-17 air defense missiles for Hezbollah Lebanese most likely; an armory inside the airport in Damascus where it was believed to have been deposited Fateh-110 missile, that arrived from Iran and destined for Lebanon's „Party of God*”⁴⁰. However, Israel is trying to remain outside the conflict: „*Only the failure of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue could push Israel directly into the battlefield*”⁴¹.

Currently, international political analysts do not see a practical and immediate solution to the Syrian crisis. There have been political and

³⁶ Ugo Tramballi, *cit.*

³⁷ „Council of Ministers headed by Angela Merkel decided to deliver weapons Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq. They will receive 16,000 automatic weapons G3 and G36, 8,000 guns, 10,000 hand grenades, 240 portable anti-tank weapons, 30 anti-tank weapons Milan type, 500 missiles and vehicles”, according to: „Arme germane pentru kurzii irakieni”, *Deutsche Welle*, September 1, 2014, available at: <http://www.dw.de/arme-germane-pentru-kurzii-irakieni/a-17893258>, accessed on October 1, 2014.

³⁸ Available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>, accessed on October 10, 2014.

³⁹ Francois Massoulie, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

⁴⁰ According to Gianmarco Volpe, *op.cit.*, p.302.

⁴¹ Ugo Tramballi, *cit.*

economic sanctions against the Assad regime, adopted by EU and USA. The EU has tried to intervene with financial resources to address the humanitarian crisis in Syria and in January 2013 the European Commission has said it will support Syria with over 265 million euros plus contributions from states, reaching 453 million. A partial „derogation” to the economic embargo, for the supply of weapons for Syrian National Coalition has also been introduced by the European Council⁴². In June 2013, Egypt announced the cessation of diplomatic relations with Syria⁴³. A diplomatic solution was attempted: Geneva 1 and Geneva 2 in January and February (2014), where the Syrian opposition forces and the Assad regime would have to negotiate reforms and the end to the civil war under UN auspices. To date (October 2014) an agreement has not been reached and the UN has established a new appointment.

Russia, however, opposes any Western intervention in Syria, including in the UN Security Council, although it is facing also the terrorism on Islamic foundations. There are strategic interests, Italian political analysts said: „Moscow's strategic interests in the region (...) are related to the unique Russian naval base in the Mediterranean, at Tartus”⁴⁴. Moreover, Syria had since the early 50's special relations with Russia. At that time, the United States feared communist expansion in the Middle East, but Nasser's Egypt was favorable to USSR (remember that Egypt and Syria formed the United Arab Republic for 3 years). In addition, the Ba'ath Party came to power in Syria in 1963, which prompted the USSR to intervene in the Middle East. The Syria-Russia Alliance was strengthened even after the coming to power of Hafez Al-Assad, especially when the Arab-Israeli conflict became virulent. The USSR supported Damascus in the 1973 in Yom Kippur War, at military and diplomatic level, to achieve a ceasefire under UN. In 80s, the USSR - Syria partnership was reinforced by a friendship and cooperation treaty, including providing weapons to Syria. Today, a pipeline makes even strongly the Russian-Syrian relations. „In fact, Russia wants the West to recognize its role in the Middle East. The

⁴² Georg Meyr, *op.cit.*, pp. 43-44.

⁴³ ***, „Egypt Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Syria”, 15.06.2013, *Al-Jazeera*, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/06/201361519182028756.html>, accessed on September 8, 2014.

⁴⁴ Gianmarco Volpe, *op.cit.*, p.300.

difference between the Arab Spring in Syria and other countries is Russian intervention”⁴⁵.

3.2. „The Syrian Solution”

While some scholars, such as David W. Lesch, consider it is only a matter of time until the fall of „the House of Assad”⁴⁶, other researchers argue that *„the path towards it has already been longer, bloodier and fraught with more danger for Syria and all its neighbours”*⁴⁷. There are scenarios that, in the absence of international solutions, the Assad regime could reform itself. This would mean however that Syria and the Assad regime will never be as before the outbreak of the Arab Spring⁴⁸.

4. ISIS and the Proclamation of the Caliphate

4.1. „The Islamic Awakening”, Islamism and Jihadism.

The Arab Spring has meant an „Islamic awakening”. In all countries where dictators feared of opposition forces with Islamic bases, these parties were banned before the revolutions in 2010-2011. As the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) came to power after the Arab Spring. But after the overthrow of MB leader, Mohammad Morsi, and the installation of Sisi's regime (considered by some countries such as Turkey, a coup) MB and Freedom and Justice Party, were declared again illegal and more, the Brotherhood is now considered a terrorist group⁴⁹.

Without many explanations of the term Islamism, we consider it as „religion translated into policy”. *„Allah is our goal, the Prophet is our model; Our constitution and our law is the Quran, the holy war is the path*

⁴⁵ Georg Meyr, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

⁴⁶ David W. Lesch, *op.cit.*

⁴⁷ Lin Nouheihed, Alex Warren, *op.cit.*, p. 216.

⁴⁸ David W. Lesch, *op.cit.*, pp. 264-267.

⁴⁹ Jason Szep, Shadi Bushral, „Egypt says coalition must battle ISIS and other terrorist”, *Reuters* quoted by *The Daily Star Lebanon*, septembrie 2014, available at: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Sep-14/270602-egypt-says-coalition-must-battle-isis-and-other-terrorists.ashx#axzz3FtjIHaNZ>, accessed on October 3, 2014.

we chose, and martyrdom is our deepest desire”, these are the MB's principles⁵⁰, the first form of Islamism.

*Jihad*⁵¹ would be, firstly, effort of self-purification to achieve perfection, to become a good Muslim. It also means an obligation to defend the Muslim community from external threats⁵². The term has experienced a political transformation and has become synonymous with terrorism with religious justification.

What is ISIS? Al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya, ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant⁵³ or IS- Islamic State, is a special organization, precisely because it defines itself as „state”, not „group”. If we translate from Arabic exactly the term „al- Dawla”, this means „country”. It also covers a territorial expanse, and refers to an official designation of a country, so it is preferred the translation of the term by „state”.

ISIS is known for extreme violence directed not only against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad and the Iraqi regime, but also against „moderate rebels” in Syria. It controls a territory in Syria and Iraq „the size of Belgium”⁵⁴. It promotes total war within Islam and against the West and in June 2014, it proclaimed, on internet, the Caliphate.

The term *halifa*, caliph, is used in the Quran as „caretaker for law enforcement”⁵⁵ and it means successor to the Prophet. For the first time, the caliph role was assumed by Abu Bakr as-Siddiq (634 C.E.). The third caliph, Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan (685-705) took the title of *halifat Allah*, „God's Deputy”⁵⁶. Caliph should manage as a representative of *dawla* („state”) the relation between religion and the world, is the guarantor of Islamic law and the key-tool of authority. „Under the caliphs, the community of Medina (...)grew in a century into a vaste empire, and Islam became a world

⁵⁰ According to Dumitru Chican, *op.cit*, p. 148.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 160.

⁵² Albert Hourani, *Istoria Popoarelor Arabe*, Publishing House Polirom, Iasi, Bucharest, 2010, p. 165.

⁵³ territories of Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Israel and Cyprus

⁵⁴ Elena Zacchetti, „Che cos'è l'ISIS, spiegato bene”, *Il Post*, June 19, 2014, available at: <http://www.ilpost.it/2014/06/19/isis-iraq/>, accessed on October 3, 2014.

⁵⁵ Laura Sitaru, *Gândirea politică arabă. Concepte-cheie între tradiție și inovație*, Publishing House Polirom, Iasi, Bucharest, 2009, p. 43.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

religion”⁵⁷. Bernard Lewis says that the theory of the Muslim law foresees there could be only one Muslim State, House of Islam⁵⁸, and only one ruler, the caliph. The Caliphate, which has experienced a Golden Age during the first four „orthodox” caliphs, was abolished only in 1924 by the Turkish Republic.

ISIS’ religious fanaticism, beheadings posted online and the other forms of extreme violence that are designed to induce terror, are considered „a marginal fact”: „Instead, there is a conflict in the Arab-Islamic world, in order to exploit gaps left by the destruction of state power in countries such as Syria or Iraq”⁵⁹. The UN⁶⁰, as countries and media from around the world as well, declared the Islamic State a terrorist organization. Researchers of Arab political thought show that ISIS, as any jihadist organization, primarily focuses its actions on Muslims, residents of countries in which it operates and then on the foreigners. „The duty of Jihad (...) is to destroy the tyrant at home and thus make possible the restoration of a truly Islamic society”⁶¹.

Roberto Iannuzzi⁶² sees in ISIS a symptom, and not the cause of the catastrophic situation of the Arab-Muslim world. „The authoritarianism of Arab regimes, corruption, lack of freedom and social justice, but also the continuing external interference and regional conflicts have created a fertile ground for the growth of extremist groups such as IS”⁶³. Iannuzzi sees a solution to the situation of Syria only in the context of diplomatic actions of the USA and other international political actors, which can bring political

⁵⁷ Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History- Ideas, People and Events in the Middle East*, New Edition, Revised and Explained, Open Court Publishing Company, Illinois, 2002, p. 262.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 318.

⁵⁹ Marco Todarello, „ISIS, Silvia Colombo: «Non è solo guerra santa»”, în *Lettera 43*, September 5, 2014, available at: http://www.lettera43.it/fatti/isis-silvia-colombo-non-e-solo-guerra-santa_43675139959.htm, accessed on October 6, 2014. Silvia Colombo is a researcher at Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome (Italy), expert in Middle East politics.

⁶⁰ ***, „Security Council concerned about illicit oil trade as revenue for terrorists in Iraq, Syria”, *UN News Centre*, July 28, 2014, available at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48363#.VAjLAxaRYxB>, accessed on October 2, 2014.

⁶¹ Bernard Lewis, *Islam....*, p. 379.

⁶² Roberto Iannuzzi is a researcher at UNIMED, Unione delle Università del Mediterraneo.

⁶³ Roberto Iannuzzi, „I rischi della strategia di Obama contro lo Stato islamico”, *Affari Internazionali - Rivista online di politica, strategia ed economia*, September 13, 2014, available at: <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=2804>, accessed on October 9, 2014.

and economic reform in the Middle East, not only by military action. „U.S. warplanes have carried out almost 90 percent of airstrikes against the ISIS while Arab and European countries all together carried out the remaining 10 percent”⁶⁴. „The stakes are very high: the territorial integrity of countries such as Syria and Iraq, providing energy to the West and political and economic stability of the planet”⁶⁵.

Giuseppe Cucchi⁶⁶ believes that the lack of major conflicts in Europe after the Second World War made the European countries believe in a future free of violence, to think they need only „sham armies”⁶⁷ which intervene only in peacekeeping missions. He also considers that the United States believed that through what is called *smart strategy*, ie the Obama administration's strategy of putting the responsibility to intervene on the shoulders of regional allies „without undermining the power of the United States”⁶⁸, will work in the Middle East conflicts. What is the worst in the eyes of European governments and United States, is the fact that among fighters ISIS there are thousands of European and American *citizens*, most of them Muslims. The fear is that this conflict will be no longer „on the borders of Europe, but at home”⁶⁹.

4.2. Who are the European Jihadists?

Who are European Muslims who choose to fight in extremist groups, in countries with they do not have seemingly any connection to? This is the question that troubles the European governments and the United States. It is not news that ISIS seeks followers from Europe. Al Qaeda made the same. „The Map of Al Qaeda recruitment do not corresponds to the conflicts in the Middle East, because it contains young European Muslims from the second

⁶⁴ ***, „U.S. dominates military campaign against ISIS”, *Al-Arabiya News*, October 7, 2014, available at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/10/07/U-S-Air-Force-dominates-campaign-against-ISIS.html>, accessed on October 10, 2014.

⁶⁵ Roberto Iannuzzi, *op cit*.

⁶⁶ General Giuseppe Cucchi was permanent military representative to NATO, and EU military adviser to the President of the Council of Ministers.

⁶⁷ Giuseppe Cucchi, „Il campanello d'allarme: Grazie, Califfato! Grazie, Califfo!”, *Affari Internazionali - Rivista online di politica, strategia ed economia*, October 6, 2014, available at: <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=2825#sthash.qIl2jpDK.dpuf>, accessed on October 10, 2014.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

generation”⁷⁰. In fact, ISIS was part of Al Qaeda until it was deemed too violent even for it. At the end of 2013, the leader of Al Qaeda, Zawahiri, urged ISIL fighters to stay away from Syria, because there Al Qaeda was already represented by the extremist group Jabhat al-Nusra. Al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIL, the new caliph, rejected the proposal, and Al Qaeda has publicly⁷¹ recanted ISIL.

Two renowned researchers drew attention to recruiting European Muslims from the second or third generation by extremist groups: Olivier Roy and Bernard Lewis. The foundations of such a choice seem rather cultural.

Bernard Lewis explains that until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Muslims could not live in other territories but in those where Islam prevails, considered „the land of peace”. This is because Europe was called Christendom and also „the land of war”. Initially, a Muslim did not choose willingly to settle in Europe. Muslims came to Europe for employment, education and freedom of expression, etc. But first they define themselves as Muslims and then as Syrians, Egyptians, Turks. This brings compact Muslim communities in European territory, which must provide a way of life according to the Quran.

Olivier Roy⁷² argues that Islamic fundamentalism is the result of a „territorial deprivation” of Islam and that „*Islamic identity of the second or third generation of immigrants in Western countries, which have been formed as personalities outside their traditional and cultural area, incite feelings of rejection of Western values, like of democracy and modernity, even stronger*”. Roy also stated that „*youngsters who join (...) jihads currently, they do it on a failure, a breaking*”⁷³ with the family, entourage, country of origin or the country where they live now.

Bernard Lewis sees in Saudi organizations, that accords material and financial support to Muslims in Europe, the source of radical sunnism. He points to the case of Germany, where generations of Muslims studied Wahhabi⁷⁴ Islam exported from Saudi Arabia: „*The last time I looked,*

⁷⁰ Olivier Roy, *Semiluna și haosul*, Publishing House Nemira, Bucharest, 2010, p. 45.

⁷¹ According to Elena Zacchetti, *op cit.*

⁷² Olivier Roy *apud* Cristian Barna, „Resurgența terorismului fundamentalist islamic în era globalizării”, *Terorismul azi*, vol. IV-VI, October to December 2006, Cluj-Napoca, pp. 47-48.

⁷³ Olivier Roy, *op cit.* 114.

⁷⁴ In Saudi Arabia, Sharia is substitute for Constitution.

twelve Turks have been arrested as members of Al Qaeda- all twelve of them born and educated in Germany”⁷⁵.

Currently, the figures show more than 3,000 Europeans⁷⁶ fighting on the side of ISIS. Olivier Roy considers, also ISIS, just a sign of a crisis of Islam: „The number of converted people is also a sign of crisis: 20-25% of the jihadists are converted. Check out the video: all speak a perfect English or French. Most jihadists are converted Americans, followed by French”⁷⁷. Europeans and Americans, converted to Islam, is related to a „call of fundamentalists”: „Fundamentalists call is heard because it invites people to participate, as opposed to a political culture that reduces citizens to mere spectators and asks them to leave everything to leaders”⁷⁸. Olivier Roy mentions the same cultural causes: young jihadists are activists, „often uprooted (...)Islam gives a global dimension, perhaps a mystical name for a cause. Today, jihad is the only issue on the market (...)We refuge in the clash of cultures, without seeing the global aspect of the phenomenon. However, these conflicts are symptoms of the same cultural collapse”⁷⁹.

5. A Few Conclusions:

1. Even if the Assad regime will fall as a result of internal/international interventions, or even due to the voluntary resignation of Bashar Al-Assad, „the episode illustrated the ethnic, religious and geopolitical tightrope that any future leaders in Syria will have to walk”⁸⁰

2. Syria could „disintegrate” in several territories, on ethnic and religious bases. This would encourage also the creation of a Kurdish state in

⁷⁵ Bernard Lewis, *Faith and Power-Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, pp. 163-164.

⁷⁶ ***, „Islamic State crisis: '3,000 European jihadists join fight'”, *BBC News Middle East*, September 26, 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29372494>, accessed on October 9, 2014.

⁷⁷ Catherine Calvet, Anastasia Vécir, „Olivier Roy: «Le jihad est aujourd’hui la seule cause sur le marché»”, interview of *Liberation*, October 3, 2014, available at: http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2014/10/03/le-jihad-est-aujourd-hui-la-seule-cause-sur-le-marche_1114269, accessed on October 10, 2014.

⁷⁸ Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament*, apud Fareed Zakaria, *Viitorul libertății-Democrația neliberală în Statele Unite ale Americii și în lume*, Publishing House Polirom, Iasi, Bucharest, 2009, p.125.

⁷⁹ Catherine Calvet, Anastasia Vécir, *op cit.*

⁸⁰ Lin Nouheihed, Alex Warren, *op.cit.*, p. 239.

the Iraq-Syria-Turkey joint area and claim a different status for the Kurds in Turkey.

3. Instability in Syria and Iraq could trigger a new Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and between the United States and Russia⁸¹, their major allies.

4. The „Power vacuum” in Syria has enabled the rise of extremist groups, which are now claiming a role in the management and organization of political and social life.

5. Europe - and I understand both EU member states and non-member states, such as Turkey - needs to reach an unified and clear standpoint, in terms of both Syria and other MENA countries that have experienced political changes after 2011. In the absence of common concept of action, for example, Turkey and Italy are hardly facing the wave of migrants from MENA, while European community does not allocate sufficient funds or other resources to solve the crisis. UNHCR data⁸² shows that in 2014, over 165,000 refugees and migrants arrived by sea in the Mediterranean, compared to 60,000 in 2013. 140,000 of the 165,000 refugees, have arrived in Italy, about 500 refugees were rescued each day under Italian navy operation „Mare Nostrum”. Half of the refugees are from Syria and Eritrea. In December 2013, Amnesty International⁸³ accused the EU of „shameful behavior against Syrian refugees”, given the decisions of countries to not receive any refugees or to receive only a small number, while Turkey⁸⁴ is striving to receive and provide asylum to more than 1 million Syrian refugees.

⁸¹ Russia considers NATO a Cold War institution, which has to be abolished, despite the establishment of the Russia-NATO Council in 1997, according to Radu-Sebastian Ungureanu, *Securitate, Suveranitate și instituții internaționale*, Publishing House Polirom, Iasi, Bucharest, 2010, p. 155.

⁸² ***, UNHCR Report „So Close yet so far from Safety”, October 2014, available at:

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opensslPDFViewer.html?docid=542c07e39&query=refugees%20italy%20sea>, accessed on October 10, 2014.

⁸³ ***, „Amnesty International denuncia il vergognoso comportamento dell'Unione europea nei confronti dei rifugiati siriani”, December 2013, report available at: http://www.amnesty.it/Vergognoso_comportamento-ue-verso-rifugiati-siriani, accessed on October 9, 2014.

⁸⁴ According to AFP, „Almost one million Syrian refugees in Turkey”, *apud Al Arabyia*, April 2014, available at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/04/22/-Almost-one-million-Syrian-refugees-in-Turkey.html>, accessed on October 9, 2014.

6. In the absence of concrete measures to integrate immigrants from the Arab-Muslim world, in the presence of phenomena such as Islamophobia, and also given a cultural and identity crisis of Europeans seeking causes for which to fight (in the light of thesis submitted by Olivier Roy and Bernard Lewis), the risk of deepening the phenomenon of joining extremist groups and initiating terrorist actions in Europe is increased. „Moving toward an violent act is very fast when people return to religion or converting to”⁸⁵, notices O. Roy.

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⁸⁵ Olivier Roy, *op. cit.*, p.114.

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