

**Book Review**  
**By**  
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**Christopher Philips,**  
***The Battle for Syria:***  
***International Rivalry in***  
***the New Middle East,***  
**(London: Yale University**  
**Press, 2016) 238**

Two months from now will mark the sixth anniversary of Syrian war. What started in March 2011 as a peaceful revolt against the government of Bashir al-Assad soon morphed into a macabre civil war. The light of dawn the peaceful protestors heralded turned into a night of chaos and blood. The devastating war has had a severe toll on Syrian people. Approximately half a million people are dead (though, one should be skeptical when quoting these figures given the level of propaganda, lack of physical access to journalists and difficultly to sift truth from unverified reports filed to satiate the need of incessant demand information from a war zone); close to five million have sought refuge outside the country and more than 6 million are internally displaced. The economy is devastated and thousands of civilians have lived for years under sieges of both government and rebel forces. The harrowing images coming from rebel-controlled eastern Aleppo are a testament of the brutality of war wrought on people. The moral outrage it has rightly evoked should not bar us from critically analyzing the war and discussing the role of internal and external factors that have contributed in the lengthening and lethality of the war.

Christopher Philips's *The Battle for Syria* is an insightful work in this regard, specifically vis-à-vis the role of external powers in Syrian war. The narrative of this book is driven by the proposition that the regional and international actors have played a very central role in Syrian war and shaped the war in crucially

important ways. His main hypothesis is that on the eve of Syrian war, political and security landscape in Middle East had considerably changed. The perceived American hegemony in the region was weakening due to the failures of Operation Iraqi Freedom, election of Barack Obama who criticized the military adventurism of his predecessor and the lack of military commitment in the aftermath of 2008 financial crisis. These significant developments inevitably increased the role of what Christopher calls 'the role of regional agency' to fill the vacuum. Moreover, American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq indirectly benefitted Iran to expand its influence in the region. The Iran-friendly Shia majority government of Iraq extended the 'Arc of Shia Influence'. Hezbollah, thanks partly to Iranian financial support and arms with Syria being the conduit, had already emerged the dominant power in Lebanon, carving a greater political niche for Lebanese Shias and battling Israel to protect Lebanon's territorial integrity. Gulf countries generally and Saudi Arabia particularly perceived both 'a military and ideational threat from Iran. The 'threat' of Iran emerging as a regional hegemon has always been a source of concern for the Gulf countries. These states saw in the Syrian uprising an opportunity to undermine growing Iranian political clout in the region by helping the rebel forces to topple the government of Assad and supplant it with Sunni majority government, cutting the most important link between Iran and Hezbollah.

One of the important results of the post-Iraq invasion was the establishment of Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, prompting Turkey to exploit the prospect of cheap oil from the autonomous Kurdish region as well as to perceive a security threat that the KRG model in Iraq might inspire Turkish Kurds to demand greater autonomy. Moreover, Turkey had been trying to

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chart an independent course of action that did not necessarily align with American's. In addition, Qatar too had been asserting its profile as a moderator in regional conflicts, helped by its huge oil sources and media house, al-Jazeera. Christopher Philips argues the political environment and regional alignment in Middle East coupled with the internal political dynamics of Syria (a minority Alawite government that has been ruling a Sunni majority nation for decades) made the civil war inevitable. This is not to suggest that the author is externalizing the indigenous peaceful uprising of Syrian people and reducing the latter at the level of stooges of outside powers devoid of any independent agency.

The first few chapters draw a succinct regional sketch and shed light on the early period of the Syrian uprising, whose genesis is traced to the southern city of Deraa where students registered their protest through witty graffiti. Rather than conceding the genuine political demands of the protestors Assad regime relied on brute force to quash the movement. The subsequent militarization of Syrian conflict thanks to internal Syrian dynamics and external support is detailed in chapters 5 and 6.

According to Philips, regional protagonists thought the sponsorship of rebel and Islamist/Jihadist/Salafist forces coupled with internal chaos within Syria would ultimately force Assad to relinquish power. This was a misperception that did not take into account the strength of Syrian armed forces despite defections and pro-government militias, so was their hope that like in Libya, USA would intervene in Syria on the side of rebels. The American ambivalence emanated from multiple factors: reluctance of Obama administration to commit American forces in the quagmire of another war, a position buttresses by American experiences in both Iraq and Libya; then there was the fragmented opposition,

divided into plethora of factions supported by different regional actors to have greater influence over the course of movement that dissuaded America to militarily intervene. But more importantly, this was also a reflection of declining American power in the region. Philips questions the assertion that American intervention would have tilted the balance of war in favor of rebel forces and given a coup de grace to Assad regime. According to him, there is no guarantee that American intervention would not have lengthened the civil war in Syria.

According to Philips, Iranian financial and arms support has been vital in sustaining Assad regime. The economic sanctions, control of substantial oil resources by rebel and Islamist forces, and lack of productivity brought Syrian economy under severe strain. Moreover, the regime required greater financial resources to continue a brutal war on multiple fronts. Iran not only financially sustained Syrian government, but also helped it in cyberspace and media. Besides this, Iran provided Assad regime with weapons and advisers from Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had been present in Syria in the initial stage of the war. Qassim Sulemani of IRGC established the National Defense Force (NDF) that fought alongside Syrian government forces, Iraqi Shia militias and Hezbollah. At the latter stage of the war, when the Iraqi Shia militias were forced to go back to Iraq when the so-called Islamic State (IS) declared its caliphate after routing the Iraqi government forces in Mosul.

According to Philips, Russian military intervention was preceded by a substantial amount of arms transfer that included Yakhont anti-ship cruise missiles, SA-17 surface-to-air missiles, MiG helicopters, and small arms. Russia also sent military advisers. The Russian military in September 2015 was prompted by both

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domestic and geo-strategic factors. Putin was genuinely concerned about the internal threat the Russian Islamists fighting in Syria could possibly pose to the security of Russia. Moreover, Russian invasion of Ukraine was followed by sanctions and global isolation. To revitalize its role as a global power, Syria provided Putin with an opportunity to flex its military muscles.

All in all, *The Battle for Syria* is a significant study on the role of external powers in Syrian war. Though largely descriptive, it is interspersed with insightful analyses of policy rationales of different actors. In the deluge of propagandistic literature regarding the Syrian war, Philips' work presents an uncontroversial narrative of the role of foreign protagonists in Syrian war. The fragile country-wide truce in Syria effected on 30 December, 2016, by Russia, Turkey and Iran endorsed both by US and UN, gives some credence to Philips' assertion that international actors have played an instrumental role in lengthening the Syrian civil war and their role would be vital in any resolution of the conflict.

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