

## THE SYRIAN CRISIS: A CHALLENGE TO THE BLACK SEA STABILITY

*The Syrian crisis has shaken the Levant region for nearly three years now. Located a few hundred miles from Syria, the Black Sea region may be concerned by a possible spillover of the conflict. The Black Sea region remains characterized by a real potential for conflicts, and the risk that the Syrian crisis may fuel local instability is high. This paper assesses the security challenges to stability of the Black Sea emanating from the Syrian conflict through an analysis of issues raised by the resumption of activity of Russia's Black Sea fleet, by the displacement of people from the Levant to the Black Sea area, and by the ongoing energy competition.*

**Key words:** *Levant, Black Sea region, Syrian crisis, Russian Black Sea fleet, Ethnic tensions, Terror threat, Caucasus, Energy security.*

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### Introduction

The ongoing Syrian crisis has shaken the Middle-Eastern and the Eastern Mediterranean stages for more than two years now. Located a few hundred miles from Syria, the Black Sea region appears directly concerned by a possible spillover of the crisis. The Syrian conflict has given an impetus to Russia's naval return on the Eastern Mediterranean stage and prompted the need for Moscow to achieve the upgrading of the Russian Black Sea fleet. The human factor has furthermore been highlighted by the crisis with regards not only to the dramatic stream of displaced people, but also by the possible fragmentation of Syria on an ethnic basis, as well as the growing number of jihadists fighting against the regime. Moreover, the energy competition taking place behind the scene of the Syrian conflict has been a key driver of the conflict.

### The Syrian conflict and the return of the Black Sea naval dimension

The Syrian conflict has highlighted the Black Sea naval dimension, which was put on the backburner, even during the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008. It has first boosted Moscow's naval return on the Mediterranean stage, emphasizing the need for Russia to maintain a capable navy in the Black Sea. The naval teachings of the crisis have demonstrated, if not confirmed, the accuracy of the priority given by the Kremlin for the buildup the Black Sea fleet in the framework of the Russian State Armament Program 2011-2020. Maintaining an operational and modern fleet in the Black Sea will be furthermore important for Moscow since Russia ambitions are to dispatch a Mediterranean squadron on a permanent basis in 2015. As stated by the Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu in February 2013, the Black Sea fleet will be the backbone of the naval squadron which should include up to 10 units and will

carry out conventional deterrence tasks of threats to Russian interests in the region.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing lessons from the Libyan episode, Russia has deployed from the very beginning of the conflict its navy in the Eastern Mediterranean in order to prevent any ‘regime change’ in Damascus. Russian vessels, coming from the four Russian fleets, namely Northern, Baltic, Black Sea and Pacific fleets, have furthermore supplied the Syrian regime with weapons and have also carried out regular intelligence missions in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Red Sea. Russia has regularly flexed its naval muscles in the area where the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, Moscow’s unique aircraft carrier, has been dispatched every year since 2008. In January 2013, prior to the announcement of the resurrection of a Mediterranean squadron, Russia sent nearly 20 warships and three submarines, including a nuclear one, and conducted the largest naval drills ever held by Russia in this area.<sup>2</sup> In September 2013, while the probability of an American led intervention in Syria was growing, the Kremlin maintained 11 units in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the increase of Russian naval activity in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean has highlighted two elements: the inability of the Russian Black Sea fleet to rely on its own capacities to carry out support missions beyond the Turkish Straits, and the global ability of the Russian navy, despite its poor shape, to operate on a permanent basis in the Eastern Mediterranean for almost two years now. Aging vessels from the Black Sea fleet, displaying an average age of 30 years, have been unable to conduct supply missions in Syria, leading the Russian Navy to deploy units from the three other fleets to sustain naval activity on the theatre. Russian officials admitted that the general state of the navy could not be called satisfactory, especially in terms of poor servicing and maintenance of the vessels. Sergei Shoigu stated in February 2013 that “*a significant part of the fleet has to be operated with extended periods [of time] between repairs, while many ships and vessels have only a limited number of combat-ready armaments and military equipment*”.<sup>4</sup> As for the logistic support and the refueling of the warships, Moscow has relied on Cyprus and Russian tankers have regularly resupplied in Limassol during the two past years.<sup>5</sup> In the perspective of the coming deployment of the Mediterranean task force, Russia should be able to rely on Montenegrin, Greek, and Cypriot ports in addition to Tarsus and Latakia in Syria.<sup>6</sup> The Syrian crisis has consequently prompted the urgent need for Russia to carry out to completion the modernization of the Black Sea fleet which is today one of the most obsolete components of

the Russian navy. The Kremlin initiated the buildup of the naval forces more than two years ago, in the framework of the State Armament Program 2011-2020. Moscow intends to spend up to €500 billion for this program, 25% of which for the modernization of the navy.<sup>7</sup> The Black Sea fleet is slated for the navy’s most ambitious rearmament program with the commissioning of 15 new units (9 surface ships and 6 classic submarines) which are today at different stages of completion in Russian naval shipyards. In 2014, the Russian Navy in the Black Sea will be supplied with 3 new submarines of the 636.3 Project, the B-261 *Novorossiysk*, the B-237 *Rostov on Don* and the *Stary Oskol*, and a new frigate of the 11356 Project, the *Admiral Grigorovitch*.<sup>8</sup>

More broadly, the naval balance in the Black Sea is likely to be affected in the years to come. Bulgaria officially decommissioned its sole submarine in 2011, the *Slava*, a Soviet Romeo class submarine (Project 633), and sold its wreck in December 2013. Ukraine inducted the U-01 *Zaporizya* (Project 641, Romeo class) in January 2013 after Russia had helped Kiev to repair this 41 years old vessel. Romania has decided to modernize and reactivate its unique submarine, the *Delfinul*, a Kilo class submarine, commissioned in 1986.<sup>9</sup> The Turkish fleet remains the most capable Black Sea navy with, as for January 2014, 16 frigates and 14 classic submarines, 8 corvettes and 25 fast attack craft. Ankara has decided to beef it up and has ordered 6 more Type 214 submarines. Turkey has also planned to induct a new type of vessel in its navy: a landing platform dock (LPD). In December 2013, Istanbul selected local shipyard SEDEF Gemi Insaati and the Spanish Navantia for its \$3 billion LPD tender.<sup>10</sup>

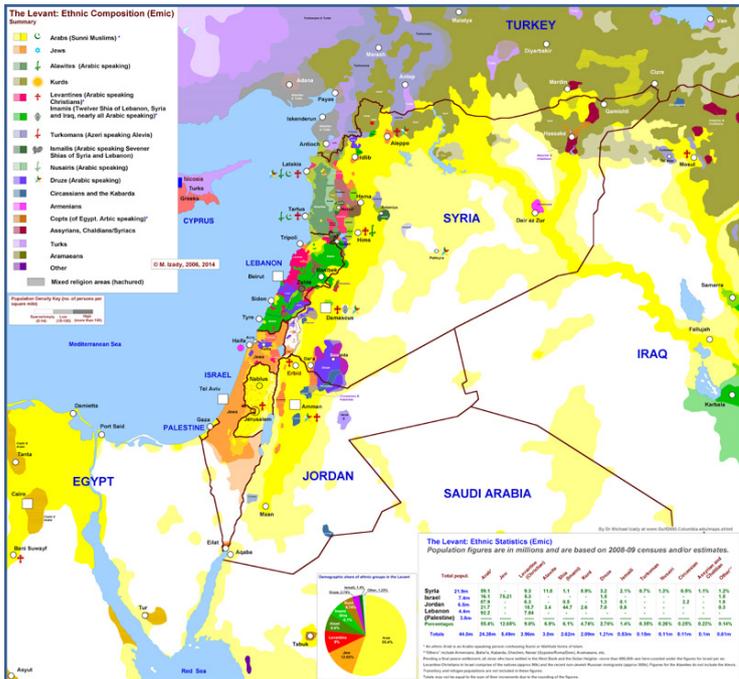
The Syrian crisis has thus put forward the naval dimension of the Black Sea. The local naval balance is set to be reshaped with Russia and Turkey, two historical regional *hegemon*s, confirming their security condominium on *pontus euxinus*.

### **Toward a fragmented Syria?**

Today, the question of having an ‘Afghanistan’ on the Eastern Mediterranean shore, putting al-Qaeda on NATO’s border for the first time, is raised.

Foreign actors have used the diversity of the Syrian people to gain a foothold in the conflict. A fragmented Syria on an ethnic basis and the subsequent reconsideration of the Sykes-Picot order could fuel politico-ethnic tensions in the Black Sea area.

## Ethnic Map of the Levant



By Dr. M. Izady at [http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Levant\\_Ethnicity\\_summary\\_lg.png](http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Levant_Ethnicity_summary_lg.png)

As a complex ethno-religious country and a linguistic mosaic, Syria falls within the patterns of deeply divided societies susceptible to ethnic conflagrations.<sup>11</sup> According to some sources, with the help of Iran, the Syrian regime has started to rearrange the ethnic map of the country in order to strengthen its dominance in the region located in the south of Homs. Since 2011, Syria allegedly has given Syrian citizenship to 750 000 Shiites coming from various Middle Eastern states and has granted them land with Iranian financial assistance to Syria worth \$2 billion.<sup>12</sup> The aim of the regime has been to strengthen its positions around the so-called Alawite spine that runs south-east towards Damascus, in order to create a safe haven for Alawites if the Syrian state collapses.<sup>13</sup> The Syrian crisis has furthermore already triggered population displacements to the Black Sea region. There are a minority of 200 000 Circassians and Kabardians living in the southern region of Syria, as well as a minority of Armenians. The Circassians and the Kabardians escaped from the Russian conquest of Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, several thousands have requested permission to resettle in the Russian North Caucasus. So far, the Russian government has only allowed just a few of them in order not to complicate an already complex ethno-political situation in the area.<sup>14</sup> Bulgaria has also become a destination for 6 500 Syrian refugees. Although this number may seem tiny in comparison with the 570 000 people sheltered in Turkey, it has strained the resources of one of the poorest EU countries.<sup>15</sup>

The Syrian conflict has also impacted on the Kurdish question. The Syrian Kurds have faced ethnic cleansing by Islamist groups. Although the Kurds have not sided either with the Syrian government or with the rebels, they have been attracted in the conflict since summer 2013. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), one of Syria's most powerful Kurdish parties, is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK); it also belongs to the Supreme Kurdish Council, an umbrella group that was formed under the mentorship of Massoud Barzani, the Iraqi Kurdish leader. Today, there is a clear historical opportunity for the Syrian Kurds to gain a greater autonomy within the current Syria. Fighting al-Qaeda groups which operate across the Iraqi-Syrian border and along the Turkish-Syrian border, the Syrian Kurds are key actors in the crisis, and have gained influence regionally. The PYD has sought to represent itself at the Geneva 2 peace conference, a position backed by Moscow.<sup>16</sup> The Kurds made the first step toward a broader autonomy in November 2013. After having captured the Iraqi border crossing in Yaroubiya in late October, the PYD declared that it would form a transitional government in spite of Ankara's protests.<sup>17</sup> Facing a deadlock on Syria, Turkey has recently initiated a sharp shift on its foreign policy, and today, it has reengaged some of its neighbors through a 'win-win' strategy. Cyprus will be a key test case since, as stated by Victoria Nuland, the US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, "a settlement will have benefits far beyond the island. It will also have a profoundly positive effect across the Eastern Med and on NATO-EU relations".<sup>18</sup> Ankara has also taken steps to crack down on some of the border jihadists' activities, which have raised concerns among the international community.<sup>19</sup>

Another key security issue remains the highly possible arrival or return to the Caucasus of jihadists who have been fighting Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. The bombings, which occurred in Volgograd, in Southern Russia, in October and December 2013, have been seen as direct backlashes of the Syrian conflict. In early July 2013, Guennadi Gatilov, the Russian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister had warned that the Syrian conflict was spreading to neighboring states. Quoting the Libyan example, he stated that there was a real risk the conflict could affect the whole region.<sup>20</sup> The insurgency has been more and more dominated by elements who have an Islamist agenda, either local and/or international. Opposition forces fighting against the Syrian regime are today assessed at almost 100 000 fighters, half of which are said to be jihadists belonging to various bands.<sup>21</sup> According to the Russian Federal Security Service, between 300 and 400 Russian citizens would be involved in the battle against Bashar al-Assad.<sup>22</sup> These Russian jihadists are fighting under the Al-

Qaida-tied Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Jabhat al-Nusrah (JN) in a sub-unit of some 1 000 foreign fighters, called the Jeish Mujahirin va Ansar (The Army of the Émigré Jihadists and Helpers). The emir of this subunit, as well as his deputy, is a Chechen from Chechnya, and the commander of the ISIL's northern front, making him and his Caucasus mujahedin major players among the Syrian jihadi rebels.<sup>23</sup> The scenario feared not only by Russia, but Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan is the return of these jihadists to the Caucasus. Having improved their fighting capabilities, the jihadists would bring back with them not only experience, but new supply channels, new recruits and perhaps chemical weapons or at least some components and knowledge on how to manufacture chemical weapons. In 2004-2005, Moscow managed to pressure the Gulf monarchies to reduce their financing of jihadist groups in the North Caucasus, and since then, rebels groups have suffered from a lack of funding and from their isolation from other combat areas (Iraq and Afghanistan). However, the jihad taking place in Syria has opened new funding possibilities and put Russian jihadists in direct contact with other groups operating in Iraq. In Syria, the militants gain experience of urban warfare against Soviet and Russian type armed force and of large-scale sabotage and hit-and-run attacks against infrastructures.<sup>24</sup> The turnover process of foreign militants fighting in Syria has begun with some of them returning to their home countries. The Caucasus Emirate, led by Doku 'Abu Usman' Umarov, would greatly benefit from their combat experience. The potential strengthening of the Caucasus Emirate remains a serious concern, especially with regard to the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, but more widely, for the stability of the Caucasus. Sochi is only 635 miles away from Tartus, and Doku Umarov stated that he would prevent the Games from being held or that he would target them should they start.

However, the Caucasus Emirate has not only a regional terrorist agenda: it planned and participated in three plots which ultimately were uncovered and interdicted: in Belgium in 2010, in the Czech Republic in 2011 and in Azerbaijan in 2012. It is also suspected of having inspired the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013.<sup>25</sup> Apart from Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are directly concerned by any potential strengthening of the Caucasus Emirate's capabilities. The three Caucasian states could be targeted by terrorist groups because of their respective interests. Georgia remains oriented toward the Euro-Atlantic community and has been a reliable contributor to the war in Afghanistan. Armenia has increasingly been integrated to the Eurasian space, and hosts Russian troops. Azerbaijan's political model is almost secular

and remains a challenge for the jihadists. However, Ukraine may also be directly concerned if the security context worsens in the North Caucasus. On 4 October 2013, a man blew himself up at the Russian-Ukrainian border at the Bachevsk border point. The man was travelling in a bus with a Moldovan plate, and sought to enter Ukraine. While the identity of the man remains unknown, the *modus operandi* is similar to that used by jihadists. The man was carrying an explosive belt he detonated as he was being interviewed by officers.<sup>26</sup>

The Syrian conflict has highlighted a set of key security questions tied to the 'human factor'. Possible ethnic fragmentation, the new impetus given to the Kurdish question as well as concerns raised on the flux of jihadists could all reverberate throughout the Black Sea region.

### Energy competition behind the scene

The Syrian crisis has been fueled by energy competition between several actors: Qatar and Iran, Turkey which aims at becoming an energy hub between East and West, and Russia which seeks to maintain its monopoly on gas supply to Europe.

Qatar and Iran share the biggest gas fields in the world: the North Dome and the South Pars fields, located in the Persian Gulf. The Qatari North Field contains about 910 trillion cubic feet (tcf, i.e. 27,3 trillion cubic meters, tcm), which accounts for 14% of the world's natural gas reserves. The South Pars field, contains an estimated 280 tcf (8,4 tcm) of natural gas. Thus, this single accumulation contains about 20% of the world's natural gas reserves. Based on current production capacity, the North Field has reserve-production ratio of more than 400 years.<sup>27</sup> In 2009 Bashar al-Assad refused to sign a proposed agreement with Qatar that would run a pipeline from the North Field through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey, with a view to supply European markets.<sup>28</sup> Damascus refused to betray its Iranian patron as well as to threaten Moscow's interests since Russia is Europe's top natural gas supplier. Instead, Syria carried on negotiations with Iraq and Iran in order to come to an agreement to build a pipeline running from the Iranian South Pars field to Syrian ports (Latakia, Tartus and Baniyas) through Iraq. The three stakeholders signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the project in July 2012. The pipeline, later named "Pipelineistan", or Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline, is estimated to cost \$10 billion, will be between 760 and 885 miles long, and should start working in 2016, carrying up to 110 million cubic meters per day (40 billion cubic meter a year).<sup>29</sup> Iran (which is banned from exporting oil and gas to the EU) expects to soon export to Syria

twice as much gas as its Caspian counterparts do to Europe: indeed, the Turkish Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) is expected to have a 16 bcm capacity while the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) should have a 10 bcm capacity. Moreover, the so-called “Southern Corridor” is mainly fuelled with Azeri gas and is unlikely to meet an increase in the European market demand. In fact, the South Pars gas field is believed to be 20 times bigger than the Azeri Shah Deniz gas field.<sup>30</sup> On February 2013, Iraq signed the framework agreement for the construction of the gas pipeline, and the works were supposed to start during summer 2013.<sup>31</sup>

This project deeply interferes with Turkey’s objective to become the hub of the East-West route to supply Europe’s energy needs. Turkey is Gazprom’s second-largest customer and its whole energy security architecture depends today on gas from Russia. Ankara aims at diversifying its source of supply in exporting gas and oil from not only Russia, but also from the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, Iraq and Iran. However, Syria appears as a serious competitor with promising potential since it could be connected to Qatari gas and oil as well as Iraqi, Iranian and Egyptian resources through the Arab Gas Pipeline. Syria’s energy strategy relies on the ‘Four Seas Policy’ - a concept introduced by Bashar al-Assad in early 2009: it consists of an energy network linking the Mediterranean, the Caspian, the Black Sea and the Gulf.<sup>32</sup> Ankara’s deep anti-Assad stance partly illustrates how strategic is its objective to become a key energy hub. At the same time this implies an extremely complex relationship with no fewer than nine countries: Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. Yet, Ankara’s recent new neighborhood policy as well as the visit paid by Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan’s newly re-elected president, to Turkey in November 2013, confirm that energy remains one of the key drivers of Turkish foreign policy.

Taking into consideration the huge reserves of the South Pars gas field, if the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline comes to fruition, it could have serious implications for the Black Sea energy scene in the middle or long term. On the one hand, any regime change in Damascus as well as an improvement in the relations between Washington and Teheran, and the possible subsequent lifting of sanctions on Iranian gas exports, would result in an increased availability of gas for the European market. This would raise a serious challenge for the Southern Corridor. On the other hand, the role of the Black Sea as a corridor for energy supplies could be upgraded, although any increase of the European gas demand is unlikely to be met only by Azeri supplies. In the long term, the Southern Corri-

dor relevance would be seriously enhanced by Turkmen gas, paving the way for a greater economic integration between the Caspian basin, and the European market. Moreover, projects for the building of LNG terminals on the Georgian and Ukrainian coasts as well as prospects undertaken for shale gas off Romania and Ukraine<sup>33</sup> would favor a greater energy independence for the neighboring states and consequently, an increased volume of gas would be available for Western customers.

Meanwhile, Russia has continued to broaden its positions in the Levant: the Russian company SoyuzNefteGas and the Syrian Ministry for Oil signed a deal on December 2013. According to this agreement, SoyuzNefteGaz has been granted the right to undertake prospects for gas and oil in an area of 2 190 square kilometers off the Syrian coast. The deal covers a 25 years period and the cost of the prospecting is assessed at nearly \$100 million.<sup>34</sup> Considering the tiny amount of the deal, this Russian-Syrian agreement has more to do with political influence than with business. However, it illustrates the ongoing dynamic in the Levant with regard to energy: according to the US Geological Survey, there are 1,7 billion barrels of recoverable oil and 122 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas in the Levant basin.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has given an impetus to Russia’s influence in the Middle East and in Eastern Mediterranean. Moscow’s Navy has been a key tool for its involvement in the Levant, and its activity is set to increase in the years to come. While not being a direct consequence of the crisis taking place in Syria, the buildup of Russia’s naval presence in the Black Sea is likely to reshape the naval balance in the *pon-tus euxinus*, and beyond the Turkish Straits. Furthermore, the Black Sea remains subject to a spillover of the Syrian conflict through the human factor. A possible ethnic fragmentation of Syria could reverberate throughout the Black Sea area, which is plagued by ethnic tensions of various intensities. The possible return to the North Caucasus of militants from Syria is likely to fuel this instability as well as to connect local terrorists to Al-Qaeda tied groups, and to import instability from the Middle East. Finally, the competition for energy, a traditional pattern of activity in the Black Sea area, has also characterized the Syrian crisis. Both areas are connected through antagonistic policies, which are likely to contribute, in the long term, to an increased availability of gas supplies. Yet, the Syrian crisis has also underlined growing security issues tied to the energy competition taking place in the Levant.

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Igor Delanoë holds a PhD in modern and contemporary history from the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis in Nice (France). His primary areas of research interest concern Russian defense and security issues, Russian interests in the Mediterranean and in the Middle East, and the geopolitics of Russia and post-Soviet space. During his post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard University (JFK School of Government and Ukrainian Research Institute), he expanded his field of study to include US interests and security issues in the wider Black Sea area.

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The Center for International and European Studies (CIES) at Kadir Has University was established in 2004 as the Center for European Union Studies to study Turkey’s European Union accession process. Since September 2010, CIES has been undergoing a major transformation by widening its focus in order to pursue applied, policy-oriented research and to promote debate on the most pressing geostrategic issues of the region.

Its areas of research and interaction include EU institutions and policies (such as enlargement, neighbourhood policies and CFSP/CSDP), cross-cutting horizontal issues such as regional cooperation, global governance, and security, inter alia with a geographical focus on the Black Sea Region (including the Caucasus), the Mediterranean, Southeastern Europe, Turkish-Greek relations, and transatlantic relations.

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