

Christopher Phillips. *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-0-300-23461-9. Pp. 332. Pb.: £22.99.

Christopher Phillips' *The Battle for Syria* is an excellent analysis of the role that external state and non-state actors have played in the Syrian civil war since 2011. The main state actors include Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Russia, Iran, and the US, while the main non-state include ISIS, Hezbollah, and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). Phillips's central argument is that these actors 'have been key in shaping the conflict' (p. vii), especially the 'character, scale, and scope' of it (p. 3). Based on experiences elsewhere, Phillips rightly argues that 'involvement by external parties is likely to extend a civil conflict if they suffer relatively low costs in blood and treasure, as they have little incentive to negotiate' (p. 7). As he describes, the conflict is the greatest disaster of the 21st century thus far, with, at the time of writing, the numbers of 470,000 killed, 1.9 million wounded, and 6.6 million displaced; 80% of the population is living in poverty; and the country has seen a regression of 40 years in human development and a decrease in life expectancy from 70 to 55 (p. 1).

Phillips claims that international forces have shaped the war's character and continuation. The shifting regional balance of power away from a US-led order towards multipolar competition is driven by regional (e.g., Turkey, Iran, Gulf states) and global actors (e.g., Russia), ideologies (e.g., jihadism, Kurdish nationalism), and an increased Sunni-Shia rivalry. At the same time, however, Phillips recognizes that, *inter alia*, economic stability and social divisions, and how the Asad regime dealt with them through *agents provocateurs*, disinformation, shabiha, torture, etc. have also been key factors. Relatedly, he acknowledges that regional instability caused by the 2003 Iraq war has also affected the course of the conflict.

With regard to the US, while Phillips acknowledges America's post-Cold War dominance in the region, he urges caution in what he considers to be an overstatement of American hegemony in the 1990s. In his view, while US military strength was unparalleled, he contends that the US was unable to transform the region's politics as evidenced by the failure of the 2003 Iraq war to instill a pro-western, democratic regime in Iraq or across the Arab world, and the subsequent regional instability resulting from the war and the growth in strength of anti-US forces (e.g.,

Iran, ISIS). As they relate to Syria, Phillips avers that the US' failure in Iraq led to the collapse of the post-Cold War order and the rise of regional competitors (e.g., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey) with the Iran-Saudi rivalry being the most significant; an expansion of sectarianism, jihadism, and Kurdish nationalism across the region; and a decline in American influence in the region more generally (p. 18).

By 2011, according to Phillips, with the Arab Spring and the other factors mentioned above, both state and non-state actors grew in influence throughout the region and through a mix of different tools—military, economic, diplomatic—and with interests not only in Syria but across the region (p. 25). Phillips argues that Russia's interests evolved to prioritize domestic security concerns (e.g., counterterrorism), regional economic relations (e.g., energy trade, arms sales), and geopolitics (e.g., proposing itself as an alternative to US allies and enemies) (p. 29). According to Phillips, Russia's involvement shifted the balance toward Asad, even though it did not lead to a decisive victory for him (p. 214), and although claiming to fight ISIS, Russia actually focused more on non-ISIS rebels, which it viewed as a greater threat to Asad (p. 218). Iran's interests were focused on expanding its political, economic, and military influence throughout the region, especially where Shia populations were present (e.g., Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria), to counter the US and Syria, and to be the preeminent force in the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia focused its efforts to counter the rise of jihadism and Iran's increased influence resulting from the 2003 Iraq war. Turkey faced the challenges, claims Phillips, of jihadism and Kurdish separatism, as well as opportunities to expand its economic and political influence by taking a 'neo-Ottoman' approach to regional engagement (p. 35). Qatar's stature grew, resulting from its significant wealth, hosting of the Al-Jazeera media network, and housing of a US airbase. In sum, avers Phillips, after the 2003 Iraq War, 'the previous balance of power was upset to the advantage of Iran, in turn provoking more active policies from Saudi Arabia and creating opportunities for ambitious states such as Turkey, Qatar, and Russia,' while exacerbating sectarianism, jihadism, and Kurdish separatism, mostly advanced by non-state actors (p. 39).

In terms of Bashar al-Asad, as noted by Phillips, Asad thought the Arab Spring would miss Syria since it appeared stable, but domestic problems were prevalent—power was heavily concentrated; the security apparatus remained powerful; independent opposition was forbidden; the population grew significantly, but was not met with commensurate

economic opportunities; the social safety net was in decline and income inequality was rising; and social divisions along ethnic and sectarian lines and religiosity were growing. However, on that last point, Phillips argues that ethno-sectarian divisions in Syria have often been overstated given that political, economic, tribal, and other interests could be just as divisive (p. 48). Asad was able to, at least initially, per Phillips, limit the impact of the Arab Spring's first wave on Syria due to certain policies, or 'buy-ins,' that afforded economic benefits, patronage, and freedoms to certain benefactors, and 'coup-proofing' that ensured a loyal military and security services. Nevertheless, Asad's heavy-handed approach, such as the killing and torture of demonstrators, made civil unrest spread. According to Phillips, it appears that Asad 'underestimated both the receptiveness of Syrians to the Arab Spring, and the resilience of their protests' (p. 57). Thus, he avers, Syria's uprising revealed that Syria's underlying problems were not dissimilar to that of its neighbors, despite having segments of the population bought off and the loyalty of the military and security services.

In terms of assessing the 'winners' and 'losers' of the war thus far, Phillips believes that Turkey fared the worst among the external actors given the rise in refugees, terrorism, Kurdish separatism impacting it. Qatar also fared poorly with a decline in its regional stature. Saudi Arabia emerged stronger than Qatar by maintaining its regional status, surviving low oil prices, and countering Iran. Russia fared better geopolitically, but not as well in terms of its domestic security. Iran fared satisfactorily, but its regional reputation took a hit. While the US's reputation declined given that it is perceived to have done too little. In sum, in the author's view, all of the external actors bear responsibility for the current situation. The US in particular, in Phillip's account, did not manage the transition to a post-American Middle East well thereby facilitating greater assertiveness on the part of others. He also believes that Washington should have focused more on promoting de-escalation since the beginning (p. 259). Phillips ends by stating that the 'battle for Syria was just one in a wider confrontation between numerous powers in the post-American Middle East that looks likely to continue for some time' (p. 262).

In closing, *The Battle for Syria* is highly recommended reading for policy-makers and scholars. Phillips' examination of the historical context at the onset of the conflict and changes since then, including which sides in the conflict were backed by whom and why, is a major strength of the

work. His analysis of the linkage between the interests of external actors and their ability to exploit internal Syrian cleavages is illuminating. While he acknowledges the shift in US policy toward the Middle East from the George W. Bush Administration to the Barack H. Obama Administration, his analysis would have been strengthened by providing recommendations as to how best to shape the role of external actors in a positive manner that contributes to the end of the conflict. A brief review of lessons learned from similar conflicts would have been helpful in this regard.

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