


Book Review: The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East by Christopher Phillips

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*In **The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East**, Christopher Phillips looks at the Syrian conflict as part of a wider geopolitical puzzle, focusing on the role played by six key external protagonists: the USA, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Daniel Falkiner recommends its valuable insight into the dynamics of what Phillips describes as 'the greatest humanitarian catastrophe of the twenty-first century'.*

***The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. Christopher Phillips. Yale University Press. 2016.**

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When the first protests broke out in the southern town of Deraa in March 2011, Syria had a population of around 21 million. Since that time, some 500,000 of the country's people have been killed, nearly two million have been injured, another five million have fled the country and more than six million have been internally displaced. The average life expectancy of a Syrian has dropped from 70 to 55 years. Christopher Phillips is therefore not exaggerating when he writes that the battle for Syria has given rise to 'the greatest humanitarian catastrophe of the twenty-first century'.

In fact, Phillips's refusal to engage in hyperbole is a distinguishing feature of his new book, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. So too is his focus on the broader geopolitical puzzle in which the Syrian conflict is just one particularly brutal and bloody piece. As he rightly notes, reports about the crisis in Syria have tended to focus excessively on the internal dynamics of the war, and this is unfortunately more often a reflection of political bias than it is of sound analysis.

Although Phillips does not deny the agency of Assad and his various domestic opponents, he is at pains to make clear that from the very beginning of the conflict in Syria, external actors have been essential in guiding and facilitating the actions of both the regime and the opposition. His goal in this book is to show how the war's character, scale and scope have all been greatly impacted by these foreign influences.

The Battle for Syria begins with an uncontroversial sketch of the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East as it stood on the eve of the Syrian crisis in 2011 – namely, as one in which waning United States influence had created the conditions for a power struggle between regional states, and in particular between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Phillips then gives a brief overview of the strategic outlook and interests of each of the six countries that would become the most important external players in the Syrian conflict (the US, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar), providing just enough detail to make the analysis convincing without his descriptions becoming cumbersome or distracting.





Image Credit: Saadallah al-Jabiri square, Aleppo, 3 October 2012 (Wikipedia Public Domain CC BY 2.0)

Chapters Two through Five explore the early months of the conflict, the key period during which the path to civil war was paved. The escalating violence of the Syrian regime over the spring and summer of 2011 quickly sapped the international community's patience with Assad: former partners in Qatar and Turkey decided to abandon him, while leaders in the US and Europe began imposing sanctions. All of these decisions were taken on the assumption that Assad and his regime would quickly collapse under the combined pressure of domestic unrest and international isolation. According to Phillips, however, this rested on a serious underestimation of the resilience of the Syrian government, and it would come to have fateful consequences for US policy on intervention (or, in the early days, a lack thereof).

The next three chapters consider the reasons why the major external powers chose to back the various players they did and the important ways in which these decisions shaped the conflict. Most significant in this respect was the support given by anti-Assad regional powers to Islamic extremist groups in Syria. While Islamists had been present among the opposition from early on – Assad released many extremists from prison in an attempt to radicalise the protest movement and thus legitimise his crackdown – covert support from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar for extremist elements helped to ensure that the insurgency took on an ever-more vicious and sectarian ideological hue. The supplementation of Assad's exhausted military forces with Shiite militiamen from Lebanon, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan has only fanned these flames.

The final three chapters of the book explore both actual and threatened direct intervention by foreign militaries. Phillips explores the controversy surrounding the Russian-brokered solution to Assad's breach of President Obama's 'red line' with an admirably even hand, drawing out the negative consequences of Obama's reticence without ignoring the constraints the US President was facing. The subsequent discussion of the US-led intervention against Islamic State is sound, but it does not provide much original insight. Phillips compensates for this, however, with an incisive analysis of the ongoing Russian military intervention in Syria which has tipped the balance in favour of Assad without creating the conditions for his final military victory: the rebels and their foreign backers still remain committed to the fight. We are thus left with the rather unhappy conclusion that 'until the various external actors involved either have their goals sufficiently satisfied or cut their losses and leave the stage, the war is likely to continue in some form'.

Phillips writes that he does not intend *The Battle for Syria* to be a history of the Syrian civil war, but rather ‘a study in international relations, which utilises broader approaches from that discipline to to increase our understanding of the origins, expansion and continuation of Syria’s conflict’. This characterisation is not entirely accurate: the content of the book is, in general, more descriptive than it is analytical or prescriptive. One unfortunate consequence of this is that we are not offered many insights into how the direction of the war could or should be changed. This lack of forward-looking analysis is especially regrettable in view of the potential for a US-Russia rapprochement in Syria under the incoming Trump administration. These points notwithstanding, Phillips does provide some genuinely valuable insight into the dynamics of a tragedy that will undoubtedly remain at the centre of the world’s attention for many years to come.

Daniel Falkiner is a London-based political analyst with Sibylline Ltd. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics, and has taught on security, conflict and geopolitics at the LSE and Queen Mary University. [Read more by Daniel Falkiner](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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