

RETROSPECTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION IN SYRIA AND CONCEPTUAL THREATS TO BULGARIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract *The article represents a retrospective analysis of the military-political and geostrategic dynamics in Syria. The author seeks to identify the major driving forces influencing the development, the repercussions, and the outcome of the internal confrontations that have been ravaging the Syrian society throughout history. The article argues that, depending on the geopolitical and historical context, these forces would either instigate conflict, or be a converging factor around common national interest. Similarly, they would generate long-term tension and pave the way to foreign intervention, or instead, if steered in that direction, they would lead to temporary appeasement and reconciliation. Furthermore, the Salafi jihadist movements, their inception and activities are described as one of the recent driving forces shaping the current security environment in Syria. The article concludes with the affirmation that revealing the ex-post mechanism of the geopolitical factors is a way to forecast their future development, thus uncovering the emergence of potential threats to the national security of Bulgaria. Finally, the infiltration of foreign fighters, radicalization, and soft targets are highlighted as the gravest possible threats requiring a clear precautionary response.*

Keywords Salafi jihadist movements; Islamic State; National Security; Syria; Terrorism; Soft targets; Foreign fighters.

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to its geographical location, Bulgaria is in close proximity to the conflict zones in the Middle East, which are a source of challenges, risks and threats to security. Alongside our geopolitical position, our membership in the European Union and NATO, we are on the frontline of the geostrategic threats coming from the Middle East region. The high military-political dynamics in Syria is a catalyst that determines the increasing challenges facing Bulgaria's national security.

This article outlines four interrelated historical factors either defining the internal dynamics in Syria or representing the outside influence upon Syrian society. Although their overall impact is quite controversial, the internal driving forces contributed significantly to the process of national unification, whereas the foreign ones largely prevented the establishment of lasting stability within the country and across the region. They both manifest a pattern of action that is not limited in time and has the potential to be replicated in Syria and in other countries. Nevertheless, they continue to influence the security environment and the military-political situation in Syria nowadays.

Understanding these patterns of action by the Bulgarian government, especially by the intelligence and security services, is of great importance for the proper conduct of a proactive policy to prevent and counter potential threats.

- First, Syria's cultural-historical heritage is the driving force overcoming the strong socio-political divisions due to kinship and religion and merging the various tribes, clans, communities, and religious groups into a common national entity;

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- Second, the nation-building process established Syrian sovereignty, but simultaneously stirred to action a powerful factor – the government’s internal and foreign policies prompted by the interests of the ruling elite and provoking tensions both domestically and regionally;

- Third, the geopolitical interests of the world powers and the involvement of regional and neighbouring countries in Syria’s intrastate conflicts often had a negative impact upon local and regional security;

- Fourth, the Salafi jihadist movements represent a foreign interference as well, but their substantial impact deserves to be a separate element. They are a force of influence that emerged and gained momentum in the late 20th century.

This article explores the findings of various sources highlighting important aspects of the problem which the paper covers: Boas, M., Ben-Nun, G., Engel, U., & Osland, K. (Eds). (2025); Stankov, V. (2019); Veldkamp, J., Askar N, & Joubin, R. (2025), etc.

The article’s methodology includes both a comparative historical approach and geopolitical and strategic analysis. A very important point was to follow the chain of events without making judgments of right and wrong, totalitarianism and democracy, legitimate and illegitimate military action, etc. Detailed description of facts has been avoided due to the need to reveal the overall interrelation between events, trends, and processes.

The use of original documents allows for a full interdisciplinary study of the topic and contributes to modern situational awareness and threat assessment.

In assessing a source, their professional background was taken into account – historian, diplomat, political scientist, military, journalist, analyst, etc. Moreover, there was a need to ascertain whether the source tried to adapt the text to the viewpoint of an intended target audience. Therefore, the reliability of a source depended largely on the existence of corroborating independent sources, the lack of bias vis-à-vis the main argument in the original narrative, and the source’s correct use of references and quotations..

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND SOURCE STRATEGY

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3. ANALYTICAL FINDINGS

3.1 A Historical and Geopolitical Overview

Historically, the political, military and social dynamics of the security environment in Syria is determined by important cultural aspects created by the Arab worldview. They are fundamental to how Syrians and other nations in the region perceive the world in the 21st century and realize their place in it. Their way of thinking, which shapes their concepts of government, religion, and state, differ from European concepts.

Their cultural and historical perceptions are defined by strong genealogical memory that amplifies collective attitudes towards socio-political events. Even though an event occurred centuries ago, its ensuing projection on public apprehensions is usually very strong and generates a powerful common sentiment.

To explain the complexity of the worldview of the Syrians, we have to remember that they perceive themselves as heirs to the great Akkadian Empire. Although the Assyrian nation emerged about 4,500 years ago, the people of the region nowadays, Christians and Muslims alike, see themselves as Assyrians, heirs to the empire. Genetically or genealogically, the present population is hardly related to that of 4,500 years ago, but in terms of social psychology the relation remains as an important part of their identity. Politically, Syria today occupies a small part of the ancient Assyrian territories, comprising the present-day Iraq, Syria, Iran, Turkey and Lebanon, which are regarded successors to the Assyrian legacy as well. Geopolitically, this fosters competition more than a sense of unity, as different players are striving to restore the ancient glory.

The Middle East has been an arena of confrontation not only today and during the Cold War, but for centuries before that. After the collapse of the great empires in the Middle East at the end of the first millennium, the region came under Mongol and then Ottoman rule. After a number of crusades in the Middle Ages, the population was depleted, and the most prominent families were gradually weakened over the centuries. Historically, the crusaders' brief sojourn in the region was a fleeting moment, but culturally it left a significant negative imprint on the East-West and Arab-European perceptions.

The cultural-historical heritage brings about a sense of belonging to a common legacy waiting to be restored to its former glory. This notion often mitigates domestic discord, transcends local animosities, rallies the people behind a national idea, and fuels the resistance to outside forces.

For instance, World War I was a period of inter-communal and inter-religious unity for Syria, as the population, led by the local clergy, Muslim and Christian alike, actively fought on the side of Britain and France. The famous Lawrence of Arabia's political-military mission, as well as the promises of a bright future, gave impetus to the Arab cause, but after the war the victors, France and Britain, actually divided the Middle East between themselves.

At the official conference in Paris in 1919, the region sent three delegations to demand the fulfillment of the promises. The Persian delegation had been forced by Britain to leave Paris; the Iraqi delegation was allowed to participate assuming it would visit London first, where it was detained until the signing of the Versailles Treaty. The third delegation arrived unhindered from the United States, as the delegates were US citizens representing the Assyrian people.

In his petition to the conference, the Rev. Joel Verda concluded: We have clear evidence that the Assyrians were incited by the officials of Great Britain, France and Russia to enter the war on the side of the Allies and encouraged to remain in a state of war by the most solemn promises of the establishment of a sovereign state. The Assyrians, who risked the very existence of their nation for this reason and made appalling sacrifices on the altar of freedom, want the promises made by the allied governments to be fulfilled". (Bover, 1938, p. 211) The geopolitical powers did not keep their promises. It pays tribute to the representative of the British military intelligence, Lt Col Thomas Edward Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) that he remained at the Paris Conference and ardently defended the promises made by the Allies to the Arabs.

All the decisions of Versailles were confirmed by the League of Nations on August 5, 1920. The mandated territories were allocated to the great powers at the San Remo Conference on May 16, 1920, where Great Britain got a mandate over Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Pakistan; and France got a mandate over Syria.

Afterwards the Assyrian people put up a strong resistance against the English and French occupiers. In Syria, from 1920 to 1925, the French army lost 6,040 men. For the second half of 1925, during the second Syrian uprising, the French suffered 11,000 casualties (Provence, 2005). Resistance to the occupation continued with occasional guerrilla campaigns.

In Syria, following the elections on March 1943, the government of Shukri al-Quwatli's National Patriotic Union with Saadallah al-Jibiri as Prime Minister came to power. The Syrian parliament rejected

the articles of the constitution that referred to the French mandate. In July 1944 the then Soviet Union and the United States formally established diplomatic relations with Syria and Lebanon. In accordance with the agreements between Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill for membership in the United Nations, Syria and Lebanon declared war on Nazi Germany on February 27, 1945.

Nevertheless, France did not recognize the sovereignty of Syria and Lebanon and occupied Beirut with three infantry battalions, which were later reinforced by a contingent of 1,500 men. The intense fighting for Damascus and the fierce bombardment of Syrian cities created a situation so appalling that British, Soviet and American diplomats strongly condemned the French atrocities. Diplomatic pressure from the entire Arab world escalated. The Iraqi government was ready to provide military aid to Syria. Eventually, the French government withdrew and, represented by general Charles de Gaulle, handed over the command of the "Syrian Special Forces" to the Syrian government. This act gave real control over the army to the Syrians themselves.

Something very rare happened in the international political arena at that time. The great powers, their leaders Stalin and Truman in particular, agreed not to allow any political and economic advantages to be gained by any foreign country in the Middle East. Benefits could only be granted by the people of the Middle Eastern countries. To Syria and France, it meant that Truman would not stand in the way of giving Syrians special rights, provided the Syrian people granted them voluntarily (U.S. Department of State, 1960). Syria and Lebanon were eventually admitted to the United Nations on July 26, 1945.

This unifying episode of Syrian history had a profound influence upon Syrian patriotism and nationalism. It demonstrated that belonging to a common idea could erase all dividing lines. However, the pursuit of independence was not enough to preserve the national unity once the main objective had been achieved.

The nation-building process, leading to the inclusion of all communities into a unitary nation state, began when the young Syrian state was caught in the maelstrom of international events. After a long series of uprisings and struggles, it seemed that the people of Syria would finally enjoy their freedom in peace. However, the new state faced a lot of challenges, because the Syrian people, despite their deep history and culture, were once again deprived of the opportunity to determine their own destiny. The main traits of the political-military situation after 1945 were as follows:

- The state borders of Syria and other countries in the region were artificially drawn without any regard to the realities on the ground. This represented a constant source of inter-ethnic, inter-national, and religious tensions. Syria, same as many countries in the region, had problems with all its neighbours.
- The Syrian nationalists condemned European politics and its duplicity and wanted the Arab peoples to have self-rule and independence.
- The newly introduced parliamentary governance was not fully compatible with the indigenous political tradition of rule by sheikhs in tents and sheikhs in cities, under the leadership of the most powerful one.

Suddenly it was clear that true independence was decades away. The nation-building had to proceed in a security environment ripe with disputes and potential military conflicts. This is an important reason why the concept of governance in Syria is far from the contemporary Western understanding of politics. There's parliamentary democracy, there's elections, but political affiliations are based on previous divisions. This is a prerequisite for enduring conflicts, coups, political assassinations, and an unstable political environment.

The period from 1945 to 1954 witnessed five military coups in Syria. Military governments were backed by the West. After the parliamentary elections in 1954, patriotic elements opposed to Syria's involvement in international military alliances came to the fore. The national economy and industry, along with the territory, became a new reason for unity, as the people had to defend them throughout the enlarging disputes over oil deposits and other natural resources. The competition for water, the region's most precious resource, gained strong momentum. Keeping the flow of the rivers constant and building dams on their own territory became a matter of vital strategic importance to a number of countries in the region. Nobody wanted its upstream neighbours to build dams and use the water for themselves. This issue continues to periodically escalate between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. The old tribal saying, that the one who inherits the water is the most influential, manifests itself in national politics. In fact, defending these

strategic interests represents another opportunity to strengthen the state and its institutions. However, this should be a national effort involving the people and the government.

There is hardly a period of a stable political system throughout Syrian history. The typical governance model had become an outer shell of the old partitions, affiliations and coalitions.

In 2025, Boas, Ben-Nun, Engel & Osland (Eds.) found the following:

Many of the military officers who seized power in 1963 in the name of the Baath Party belonged to religious minorities. Hafez al-Assad, who eventually took over and became president in 1970, was an Alawite. Despite the fact that the Assad regime proclaimed adherence to Arab nationalist ideals, sectarianism quickly became a central tool of governance. Seeking people he could trust, Assad appointed Alawites to the most sensitive positions within the coercive apparatus of the state. By doing this, he would create an organic bond between his regime and the Alawite community he belonged to. (p.156)

Syria's turbulent political history had been replaced by a period of relative calm and ostensible stability, not because of a deep understanding of the new political system, or empowerment of the right individuals and groups, but because of the establishment of a one-party political system based on power. The ruling Ba'ath Party through the government power structures controlled all aspects of public life, including civil society, political activities, economy, religion, culture, etc. However, the ruling elite failed to address any of the internal divisions:

- The social divide along ethnic, tribal, community, sectarian and religious lines.
- The economic divide was widening, with the state exploiting natural resources and local communities remaining poor. The new socio-economic environment deepened the existing class antagonism.
- The population of entire regions was deeply divided into urban and rural.

Thus, the strife for national independence slowly degraded into a local pseudo-chauvinism. Moreover, the involvement of foreign geopolitical interests, that is the world powers, the regional and neighbouring countries, only aggravated the internal confrontations. The ruling elite's inability to resolve the issues and ease the rising tensions brought about a powerful destructive force – the Jihadist movement, which had the ambition to provide an enduring solution to all the problems in the country.

The geopolitical interests of world and regional powers were manifested along two major lines of interference, the first one affecting the core social entities (tribal and religious groups, communities, families), and the second one targeting the government and the concept of national unity.

Retrospectively, the influence over the core social structures is a lasting social and political phenomenon leaving its mark on Syrian society even today, although the means and the scope might differ throughout history. The impact mechanism can be explained with an example about the invasive geopolitical interferences in the internal political and religious confrontations in Syria.

In the second half of the 19th century a bloody conflict broke out between the Druze and the Maronite communities. The clashes started with hostilities between villages and random assaults by outlaws. The Syrian territory was then part of the Ottoman Empire, but the local Ottoman-Syrian authorities took no action, in many cases siding with the Druze Muslims. It is noteworthy that regional administrations were totally dependent on the policies of the Sublime Porte (the Ottoman central government), but were at the same time largely self-governed and had full discretion over matters of local security. For this reason, along with bureaucratic tardiness and corruption, initially there was no significant response from the authorities.

Later on, as the conflict persisted, Mehmed Fuad Pasha, a prominent Ottoman statesman and diplomat, twice appointed Prime Minister and Foreign Minister by Sultan Abdulaziz, was sent to the conflict-stricken territories of Syria and Lebanon on a mission to pacify the Druzes and punish those guilty for the bloodshed. He soon identified the conservative Muslims, opposed to any and all reforms, as the root cause of the conflict, and undertook firm measures to resolve it. Ahmed Pasha, governor of Beirut, along with a hundred military personnel and 67 members of the highest-ranking Muslim families in the region, were sentenced to death and executed. This looked like an opportunity for a lasting solution to the conflict between Druzes and Maronites, until a powerful geopolitical factor came into play.

In an attempt to gain strategic advantage, Napoleon III of France ordered the invasion of Syrian and Lebanese territories under the pretext of defending the rights of Catholics in the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman-French Treaty of 1740, which renewed and expanded the Ottoman capitulations before the European powers, entitled the French Monarch as Protector of Catholics in the Ottoman Asian territories, thus marking the apogee of French influence in the Ottoman Empire.

Public opinion was orchestrated by European media prior to the military offensive. The primary objective of the campaign was presented as «The separation of Egypt and Syria from the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of peace and quiet in the East under the auspice of France» (Farah, 2000) French troops invaded the present-day territories of Syria and Lebanon, even before the start of diplomatic talks with the Ottoman Empire. In August 1860 a French expeditionary corps of 6 000 troops made a landing operation in Beirut, under the command of General Beaufort d'Hautpoul.

On the global geopolitical scene this was viewed as severe violation of the established political and diplomatic order. Opponents to the French intervention were the British Empire, Austria and Prussia, while Russia remained neutral due to its recent loss in the Crimean war of 1853-1856. At the conference held in Paris in August 1860 France tried to delay the decision-making against it, because the French expeditionary corps had quickly overcome the resistance of the Druzes and had penetrated deeply into Syria and Lebanon. None of the Great powers consented and the French troops withdrew in April 1861. Although this French «humanitarian» adventure did not entail any positive territorial developments for France, it did trigger huge impact on the future strategic plans for the following reasons:

- The French already viewed Maronites as part of the Catholic world and hoped to make their lands a French protectorate;
- Intense propaganda of Catholic missionaries was launched among Maronites in view of their close relations with France and for the purpose of promoting pro-French attitudes;
- The French demonstrated distrust and animosity towards Druzes and the other Muslims;
- The French policy in that part of the Ottoman Empire instigated religious division and alienation among communities.

Those events, alongside with the Ottoman style of governance that tolerated autonomous local authorities, as the Empire only coordinated policies and collected taxes, actually intensified territorial and religious controversies. This past situation is quite similar to the present-day dynamics in Syria and reveals how disputes between two neighbouring villages escalate into an armed conflict, how an argument may grow further to include entire clans and community groups, how the Great powers can benefit from a local dispute to achieve their strategic goals, and finally, how a disagreement can evolve into a lasting feud. This example demonstrates the way a foreign power's interference aggravates native community controversies based on clan, tribe, sect, religion, etc.

Foreign influence over government policies started as early as the beginning of Syrian independence, when the young country found itself in the turmoil of large-scale geopolitical events. On 13 December 1945 France and Great Britain signed a treaty for common action in the Middle East (Louis, 1984). The Arab countries realized the need of unity and established the League of Arab States. (El-Salamoni, 2003, p.53) This was an extraordinary progress in the understanding and awareness of the Arabs about the new geopolitical situation in the world. On the global geopolitical scene, however, the Cold War brought about the two global powers – the US and the Soviet Union.

The US Central Intelligence Agency could very well perceive the trends in the Middle East, understanding that Great Britain and France were losing their capacity to intervene, as the attitudes of the bigger part of the Arab population was against them. Therefore, due to the bloc controversies, the USA were compelled to follow a nontypical geopolitical strategy to protect their interests. (CIA Reading room, 1966) This changed substantially the American foreign policy and the attitudes of the Arabs towards the USA.

The Soviet Union also played a part in the events in Syria. Soviet intelligence managed to quite adequately assess the political trends and reorient its priorities. Previous Soviet connections in the region are being quite adequately utilized by Russia even today. This is not surprising, as the intelligence mechanism was among the most powerful weapons of the former USSR. (CIA Reading room, 1948) Nowadays, the Russian intelligence capabilities to influence internal events through supporting some

groups, attacking others and collaborate with the government in office has the potential to significantly change the state of affairs in Syria.

The reason why the former USSR had enormous influence was the support the West provided to Syria's local opponents, and not because the Syrian people had anti-western attitude. Syria received considerable military aid from the Soviet Union to fight the wars with Israel, and part of it was redistributed to other Arab countries. This indicates the strategic adaptability of the Soviets, given that the military and economic aid enhanced substantially their influence in the region. (CIA Reading room, 1967) However, it did not help the conflicts to fade away either, since the parties involved could not be exhausted and therefore were not prone to peace initiatives.

Relations with other Islamic countries have their own particular meaning as well. Thus, for example, after the regime of the Ayatollahs came into power, the influence of Iran in Syria started growing. Their relations began strengthening as early as in 1980, when Syria supported Iran in the war with Iraq. (Stankov, 2019, p.33) This fact also explains the support for Assad's regime by Iranian military advisors, troops and the help of Hezbollah.

When looking at a larger timeframe, the geostrategic aspects of the controversies during the Cold War seem to represent a mere historic projection of the well-known and never-ending strategic factors, points of conflict, and political and cultural circumstances. However, the vigorous technological and social developments of the 21st century brought about a new phenomenon – the adaptive evolvement of the Salafist movement, which transformed these regional disputes into a global issue.

The Salafi jihadist movements are the most recent and most important factor that changed the security environment and had a profound impact upon the military-political landscape. We need to look deep into Arab history to trace the roots of religious fanaticism. The numerous conflicts and wars gradually turned Arabia from a realm of culture, science and freedom, to a dominion of feud and controversy, and eventually to a place of radical ideologies. We have to bear in mind that Islam is not a belligerent religion per se, but the radicals are inclined towards controversial interpretations of the Islamic religious sources in order to promote their political agenda.

Therefore, the Salafi jihadist ideology needs a careful analysis from a political and strategic perspective. When reviewing the present structure of Islamic State, we have to look at Al-Qaeda as the organizational ascendent, which gradually evolved from a paramilitary unit to a terrorist group motivated by religion. The suitable conditions for the emergence of a jihadist organization were already present:

- the social and political tensions were combined with religious hostilities, which added fuel to the existing confrontations between religious communities;
- the central government, despite being weak, applied a policy of violence and suppression.

To present an alternative, the Salafi jihadist doctrine easily denounced the current socio-political order as non-Islamic and proclaimed the anti-government armed struggle to be a sacred obligation to all true Muslims. Thus, all supporters of the existing order became enemies that should be destroyed.

Boas et al. (2025) found jihadism to be the conviction that armed confrontation with political rivals is a theologically legitimate and instrumentally effective method for socio-political change, whereas Salafism is described as the idea that believers should exclusively and strictly abide by the example of Salafis (the early generations of Muslims), by renouncing all other sources of influence.

The doctrine of jihadism started to gradually evolve after the establishment of Al-Qaeda in the Peshawar Mountains by Osama bin Laden in 1988. Al-Qaeda is a mobile group applying the principle of clandestine cells. Its objective is to launch terrorist attacks against its adversary. It is controversial whether Al-Qaeda went through a process of deliberate change in ideology, since it was leader-oriented and divided into battle groups. Every separate warlord was also an ideologist, who would contribute to the doctrine according to his own judgement. However, Abu Musab Al-Suri is considered to be an important theoretician, whose major achievement is the transformation of the ideology of struggle. He wanted to «encourage young Muslim immigrants to wage a war in Europe to trigger Islamophobic response, which, in turn, would urge European Muslims to join jihadist groups». In January 2005 Al-Suri uploaded his book entitled «A Call to Global Islamic Resistance», describing Europe as the target of a widespread jihad, whose troops would be recruited out of the 45 million Muslims living in Europe. (European Parliament, 2017).

The political and security environment in Syria and Iraq was suitable for the emergence of a radical group. The beginning was set in Iraq, where the central government and the local power structures were unable to oppose a new powerful player.

Further research (EP, 2017) found out that:

«The Islamic State project has as its ultimate goal the establishment of a caliphate where Muslims from all over the world could settle in. It aims to establish the caliphate on a territory, wherefrom an international jihad war could be waged. Thus, this project differs from the one of Al-Qaeda and was carried out for the first time in Iraq due to the deep destabilization of the country. Islamic State continued with its expansion in Syria because of Bashar al-Assad's lack of control over the entire territory, and established its «capital» in the city of Raqqa. »

Jihadism in Syria was indeed a rare phenomenon up until 2003, when Assad's regime permitted jihadists to travel through the country to join the fight in Iraq. (Boas et al., 2025, p.155). This triggered a gradual rise of Jihadism and eventually led to the birth of Islamic State in Syria. Unfortunately, the wind of change in the Islamic world enflamed the jihadist fire in Iraq and Syria. A number of sources indicate that the onset of the people's rebellion of 2011 in Syria was inspired by the «Arab Spring» (Stankov, 2019) and the events in Tunisia and Egypt. When the Syrian revolution started in 2011, its slogans echoed those of the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia. Protesters called out that all the people wanted to overthrow the regime. However, this assumption carried with it a form of counter-oppression, as there were certain segments of the Syrian, Egyptian or Tunisian population that were simply not willing to revolt against the rule of Assad, Mubarak, or Ben Ali, respectively. (Veldkamp, Askar & Joubin, 2025, p.58)

Many of the original «revolutionaries» later turned into radical jihadists, thus enabling Al-Qaeda to infiltrate local structures and stir conflicts. The Syrian regime had released from prison some of the most prominent jihadist leaders, detained in the last ten years. Defectors from the Armed forces, predominantly Sunnis, formed the Free Syrian Army. Islamic separatist groups began to appear, some led by jihadist warlords released from prison. Members of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, later to be named ISIS, created Jabhat al-Nusra in 2012. A year later it fragmented itself into ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (Boas et al., 2025).

As the conflict in Syria gained momentum, ethnic separatist movements began emerging, the Kurdish and the Druze being the most prominent. The Kurds managed to create a formidable military force in the Kurdish areas, referred to as Rojava. Presently the local communities are divided because of the erosion of the traditional power structure. Tribal leaders do not represent authority, neither among the rebels, nor among the government forces. They keep a strange neutrality, by merely being absent from public life. (Boas et al., 2025) This fact shatters the strongly traditional communal and tribal unity.

The economic power base of ISIS in Syria was quite robust. The jihadists adopted laws, collected taxes, had judicial and penal systems, sold natural resources, antiquities and regulated the water supplies. They also had their own currency, the gold dinar. Thus, they became the richest terrorist group in the world. (EP, 2017) Islamic State controlled 60% of oil production in Syria and 10% of that in Iraq. In mid-November 2015 news media reported the extraction of 35 000 up to 40 000 barrels a day. Jihadists in Syria controlled 253 oil boreholes, 161 of them active. During its largest expansion Islamic State levied taxes on the economic activity of over 8 million people. The total budget of ISIS was estimated as more than USD 2 billion per annum. (EP, 2017)

After 2010 the already expanded Islamic State was already a real threat to all Arab regimes. The earlier review of its religious and political ideology shows that all other forms of political power in and outside the country were its opponents. For that reason, the Middle East countries took decisive action to stop, contain, and reduce its funding. (Ardemagni, 2016). Nevertheless, grey zones continued to exist, such as the «Hawala» money transfer system. The jihadists adapted and intensely utilized both old and new ways of raising and transferring funds.

The combination of military and economic strength enabled the Islamic State to rise up to a new geostrategic level. Foreign terrorist fighters, apart from manpower, were also a source of income. They would use their contacts in Europe to send money to the organization through European bank accounts. Supporters controlled those bank accounts outside the conflict zones to withdraw money and send it to the jihadist warlords. (EP, 2017) Foreign fighters were able to coordinate donations through encrypted mobile apps, send funds as virtual assets or, if collected in cash, send them via couriers.

The foreign ISIS fighters in Syria comprised ex-military, not just ordinary soldiers, but also highly qualified officers from Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces, as well as young people recruited through large-scale propaganda. The tactical capacity of jihadist forces was enhanced with the influx of people from the Iraqi intelligence and the Ba'ath party. This provided high-level strategic, institutional and political experience.

In 2014 jihadists in Syria considerably upgraded the methods of recruiting troops. The growth in the number of fighters coming from all over the world was unprecedented. According to the US intelligence agencies for the year 2014 they numbered 20 000, among them Europeans and Americans. Intelligence agencies found it rather difficult to track them down. (CIA Reading room, 2018) Subsequent UN reports already contain more accurate figures, owing to the joint work of security services of the numerous member states. Over the period from 2014 until 2016 the influx of foreign terrorist fighters to Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic reached unprecedented levels. By 2017 assessments indicate that more than 42 000 people from over 120 countries had travelled to join terrorist organizations.

Foreign fighters included mercenaries (military professionals) and religious extremists, followers of the Salafi and jihadist ideology, promoted by ISIS.

After the defeat of ISIS, foreign fighters were scattered in several directions. Some went to camps in Syria and Iraq, others returned to their countries of origin, or continued to fight and were killed in action. Nevertheless, after 2018 there was a huge discrepancy between the total number of foreign fighters and the number of those registered as killed, detained, returned or relocated.

The return of foreign fighters to their home countries poses a real problem for Europe and the US. For example, the US intelligence fears that some of the foreign fighters would return to their homes in Europe and in the USA to perform terrorist attacks. Francis Taylor, Under Secretary of Homeland Security for Intelligence and Analysis, voiced concerns that Americans, affiliated to extremist groups in Syria, could be trained in combat techniques and could eventually be persuaded to perform organized or «lone-wolf» attacks against the USA and the Western world". (Govinfo, 2015)

3.2 The Present Political and Security Dynamics in Syria

Syria today has its savior, that is the rebel leader Mohammad Al-Julani (Ahmed al-Sharaa). On 8 December 2024 Bashar Assad's regime was overthrown by the military union of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), where the leading force was Jabhat al-Nusra. HTS and al-Sharaa put an end to Assad family rule that lasted more than 50 years. In the 14-year armed conflict at least 500 000 had been killed, and over 13 million had been displaced.

Jabhat al-Nusra itself emerged as the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, but was later separated after clashes with ISIS over the natural resources in the eastern part of Deir Ez-Zor Governorate. Following the creation of HTS in 2017, Al-Julani started to gradually transform Al-Nusra according to his ambition to turn HTS into a legitimate political player. He proceeded to eliminate the extremist groups that protested against the moderate approach towards other groups and the international organizations. According to (Keilberth, 2024), the Syrian wing of Islamic State referred to him as an infidel and an enemy.

After the victory at the end of 2024 al-Julani instructed his fighters not to shoot at anybody who puts his weapons down, nor chase anyone who is running. He promised Kurds and Christians the same rights as those of Sunni Syrians. After Aleppo was conquered Al-Sharaa appealed to civil servants loyal to the regime to return to work. There are experts who regard the transformation of the rebel leader as a unique opportunity for the country, torn by civil war. From an extremist, who banned music and all Western values, he turned into a person, who advocated conciliation with the enemy. Although many Syrians have doubts, Ahmed al-Sharaa represents an opportunity to avoid a new wave of violence. » (Keilberth, 2024). However, researchers (Veldkamp et al., 2025) indicate an important detail of the present situation in the following way: «Most of the fighters, marching towards Damascus, were aged between fifteen and twenty-five. These «children of the revolution» were brought up in classrooms, where Quran contests, Sharia lessons and charity campaigns replaced the Ba'athist secular practices. »

The Kurdish issue in Syria is one of the most pressing and sensitive issues in the region. Kurdish forces played an important role in the combat against Islamic State and Assad's regime. However, Kurds

are not politically united, they have common goals and self-awareness, but also intra-tribal and clan-based divisions. Thus, for example, the Autonomous administration and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Northeast Syria (Rojava) face internal divisions, as Kurdish fractions do not share a common political vision. They are supported by the USA, but at the same are attacked by Turkey, which aims to suppress Kurdish separatism.

Presently, the people in Syria are still divided into clans, tribes, communities and sects. There is a new line of division, caused by the newly enriched tribal members, who challenge the authority of the old-time leaders. The recent large-scale conflicts at all levels indicate no improvement in tribal relations, as compared to the situation in 1860.

The new central government, and Ahmed al-Sharaa in particular, seem to display willingness to put the country in order. There are, however, series of questions as to how the new Syria should look like. What kind of autonomy should be granted to each group? How is the government going to take control over the natural resources? Regardless of the types of political moves Al-Sharaa would initiate, armed clashes between individual groups are likely to occur. All groups have weapons and trained military units. Currently, it is hard to envision an easy and peaceful settlement of all the unresolved issues in the country.

The geopolitical factor remains an important driving force, as the internal developments in Syria continue to be a part of the regional dynamics. Regional forces, such as Turkey, Iran and Israel play a substantial role, each of them defending its own interests. (Stankov, 2019). The Gulf countries are apprehensive of the Syrian situation and refrain from initiating decisive steps towards renewal of political cooperation. Western forces, mostly the US and France, remain committed to stabilize the regions under Kurdish control and curb Iranian influence. (Jamous & Haenni, 2025)

The geostrategic importance of Syria spreads out to powers such as Russia, China and India, each of those having differing interests. Russia needs its military bases in Syria, as they are an essential part of the Russian strategy about Africa and the Middle East. China and India have long-term economic interests. Syria is involved in many important trade corridors, which also pose routes for influence. (Stankov, 2019).

The terrorist threat is evolving and the Salafi jihadists are adjusting their modus operandi to the changes in the security environment. Victories over these groups are short-lived, and the extermination of the next warlord in a row is not an adequate solution. Financial flows are being decentralized. Small financial cells are being created within the individual terrorist groups. Crypto currencies are being widely used, such as Monero, KuCoin, MEXC, Huobi and Totalcoin. (United nations [UN], 2025a)

Jihadists gradually add substance to their main idea for transferring their fight into the Western world. The jihadi propaganda intensifies in the social media, as the Islamic State uses artificial intelligence to promote its cause among a broad audience. (UN, 2025b) Upon the return of foreign fighters, new threats to Western societies emerge. Jihadists start financing themselves through crowdfunding.

4. DISCUSSION: TRANSNATIONAL THREAT PATHWAYS AND INTERPRETIVE LIMITS

After this retrospection of the major problems and challenges Syria faces today, we can conclude that a significant improvement or an appeasement of the situation are unlikely to happen in the near future, because the old rivalries, feuds, and disputes are far from being reconciled. The Syrian conflict is indeed a reflection of lasting controversies; however, it also poses an opportunity for reconstituting the state in a way that embraces its diversity. To build a common future, the new Syria should establish a political system based on citizenship, equality and inclusiveness. This requires true political will, strong international cooperation and long-term stability.

The transnational security threats emanating from the situation in the Middle East are, in all probability, closely monitored by the security services in Europe and elsewhere. They deserve a detailed academic scrutiny as well, because their present repercussions can be identified through a retrospective analysis of the recurring patterns manifested throughout history. The political and strategic dynamics in Syria represents a threat to the national security of Bulgaria along several lines.

First, the foreign «migrant” terrorist fighters passing through Bulgarian territory on their way to their countries of origin are a tangible potential threat. It is noteworthy that our security structures apply

adequate policies for preventing the entry of such persons. (Yanev, 2023) However, after the defeats the Islamic State suffered in Syria, the group has further enhanced its ability to adapt. Now individual jihadist groups exchange experience and are aware of our domestic and border security systems. Presently, Islamic State tasks well-prepared foreign terrorist fighters by assigning them the role of scouts to pave the way to future infiltrations. They have established illegal passage channels, proven over time, and connections with organized crime. They have recruited experienced professionals from the Syrian intelligence services, who undoubtedly contribute with new approaches. One of those approaches is the frequent use of females as couriers. (UN, 2025a)

The new jihadist strategy provides funding to a foreign fighter when they need legal assistance or a business startup. Thus, a jihadist may come to Bulgaria from another European country not to necessarily perform acts of terrorism, but to recruit supporters and build a network. He might be mapping out vulnerable targets and planning future attacks. Foreign terrorist fighters are presently among the biggest threats. (UN, 2025a)

Syria was a universal consumer of mercenaries, but could become a worldwide donor of such, should the situation calm down. These might be well-trained, small combat units that have gone out «on the market». Most probably, they wouldn't be pro-European minded, which would make them easier to be employed by anti-Western jihadists.

Second, the possible radicalization of European Muslims is another security risk that needs to be monitored closely. Following the victory over the Islamic State and the loss of their core territory, Salafi jihadists had come even closer to reaching their main goal – the radicalization of Western Muslims. The jihadists always had a good propaganda system, but now the circumstances have motivated them to further upgrade and develop it. (UN, 2025c)

The traditional radicalization, through Salafi sermons among the population or in the mosques continues, however it is no longer the main one, because of being too conspicuous. Sermons are performed on the Internet and the social media by various pseudo-social and non-governmental organizations. We have to bear in mind that the Internet is another jihadi battlefield.

Radicalization is a slow and surreptitious process. The analysis of the countermeasures undertaken in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Serbia (Boas et al., 2025) clearly indicates the need of coherent long-term policies involving all government and civil society structures.

Third, the vulnerability of the «soft» targets needs to be addressed within the overall national anti-terrorism effort, as they are likely to be the primary objectives of the jihadists. The potential soft targets are easily accessible public places (events), which would provide an opportunity for casualties and broad publicity, e.g. sports events, schools, marketplaces, etc. In July 2024 the French security services arrested an 18-year-old man who had planned to perform a terrorist attack at a soccer match in Saint-Étienne during the Olympic Games and had been related to a member of ISIS belonging to a group active in the Syrian region of Badia». (UN, 2025c) Besides, Islamic State has been increasingly using small remotely controlled aerial vehicles (drones), which are freely available. Al Qaeda and ISIS share their experience with other jihadist organizations to enable the global use of remotely controlled aerial vehicles (UN, 2025a).

Fourth, the society relies and depends solely on the government to protect the soft targets. This is because the government neither promotes, nor sufficiently integrates the civil society in the anti-terrorist effort. The resource-oriented strategy should evolve into a target-oriented one. (Slatinski, n.d.) A government will never have all the resources needed to protect soft targets. What is necessary is to adapt and apply the measures, identified by the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED):

- enhance risk assessment and information sharing;
- apply comprehensive solutions, involving civil society, the local leadership (incl. religious leaders), and the private sector;
- develop public-private partnerships, given that many «soft» targets are privately owned and managed;
- combine physical security with public resilience against terrorist attacks and threats. (UN, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

Bulgaria and our allies have to continue monitoring the internal confrontations in Syria, the policies of the new government vis-à-vis the need for a broad national reconciliation, and the Salafi jihadists, who are still there, adapting and regrouping.

To that end, Bulgaria needs to develop further its intelligence analysis capabilities, strengthen the cooperation between the law enforcement institutions, prepare for close collaboration between security services and key business sectors and companies, enhance ties with civil organizations and structures from Syria, the Middle East, and their branches in Europe.

Furthermore, Bulgaria's national security demands proactive monitoring of trends in the policy and the geostrategic aspirations of the countries that have vested interests in Syria, that is the regional countries and the global powers, which are going to protect them by either cooperating in the commercial, economic, cultural, and defense areas, or interfering directly in Syria's domestic affairs.

Ultimately, Bulgaria holds good positions in its attitude towards Syria and the Arab states. There is a good basis for a proactive approach, including the restoration of cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges with Syria and the Middle East.

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