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The Syrian Crisis: Effects on the Regional and International Relations*, by Dania Koleilat Khatib, Springer, 2020. 242 pp. ISBN: 9789811550492

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The examination and scrutiny of the protracted Syrian crisis, recently the longest of its kind marked by rampant instability, terrorism proliferation, arms race, and various humanitarian catastrophes, have had ramifications extending far beyond the borders of Syria. In addition to the involvement of non-state actors, this crisis also served as a battleground for the competition between regional and global powers. Hence, due to its diverse geographical scope and the influence of foreign stakeholders, the crisis merits in-depth study and analysis. Dania Koleilat Khatib undertakes this task in her book, delving into the motives, policies, and utilization of significant tactics by influential stakeholders involved in the Syrian crisis. The actors include Russia, China, the United States, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, as well

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as non-state actors to a certain degree. The resulting 13-chapter volume, titled *The Syrian Crisis: Effects on Regional and International Relations*, serves as an attempt to deepen the understanding of the crisis and its genesis regarding foreign power intervention.

The introductory first chapter sets the stage for the subsequent analysis. The second chapter by Dania Koleilat Khatib and Ayman Saleh Al-Barasneh delves into the complexities of Turkish-US relations, specifically the divergence over the Kurdish issue. The chapter also sheds light on the contentious withdrawal of American forces from northern Syria. In the third chapter, Hichem Karoui expertly dissects China's role in the Syrian crisis. The chapter uncovers China's strategic moves, including vetoing resolutions condemning the Syrian government and supplying weapons to Assad, as a response to perceived threats from the Uyghurs of the Turkestan Islamic Party. The fourth chapter, crafted by Shady Mansour, explores Saudi Arabia's strategic shift in the wake of recent geo-strategic developments. The chapter investigates the country's adoption of a "wedge strategy" strategically creating discord between Assad, Russia, and Iran.

In the fifth chapter, Dania Koleilat Khatib delves into the intricacies of Iran's involvement in Syria; touching upon Hezbollah, the challenge to Iranian influence by Russian military presence, and the decline of Iranian soft power. Following this chapter, Ashraf Mohammed Keshk explores the conflicts of interest between Iran and Russia, as well as the close relationship between the two countries. The author furthermore dissects the growing alliance between Egypt, Turkey, and countries in the Persian Gulf, all under the shadow of Iran's close relationship with Russia. In the seventh chapter, Sinem Cengiz employs the rational actor model to analyze

the divergent policies and approaches between Russia and Saudi Arabia. The chapter highlights the way in which rationality ultimately serves as the common ground for preserving and enhancing the relationship between the two countries.

In the eighth chapter, by applying Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, Kaan Namli and Fadi Farasin show that the Astana process was an alliance due to the shared perception of a common threat from the United States. However, Persian Gulf Arab countries were divided regarding the perception of the threat. The ninth chapter by Mihai Chihai examines China's strategy in Syria and how to balance the relationship with Iran and Persian Gulf Arab countries and finally, the oil supply. The next chapter, by Vladimir Kukushkin, deals with hydrocarbons, especially oil and gas, and the politics and position of the actors involved, especially the United States in support of the Kurdish control over Syrian oil, Russian challenges, and the Iranian role.

The eleventh chapter by Angus Taverner examines the role and importance of non-state actors and the use of these actors by foreign powers as proxies. This chapter ends with a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of these non-state actors. In the next chapter, Radu G. Magdin investigates the media means of Russian propaganda to justify its military presence in Syria as the fight against terrorism supported by the West, the White Helmets as Western agents, and the illegality of sanctions against the Syrian government are discussed. The main focus of the last chapter by Ammar Kahf is the patterns, challenges, and opportunities facing the local governance institutions. In addition, conceptual structures related to decentralization as a Peacemaking Mechanism are proposed. Ultimately, the positions and blueprints of foreign actors are mentioned.

Embracing the complexities of the Syrian crisis, this book delves into a diverse range of issues, providing a comprehensive and multifaceted picture of the actors involved. From regional powers to trans-regional and transnational actors such as opposition groups and non-state organizations, the authors of this volume offer differing perspectives that add depth and nuance to the literature. By examining conflicting threat perceptions, the chapters highlight the impact on interstate relations, as well as the dynamics between governments and non-state actors within the tumultuous Syrian landscape.

One noticeable shortcoming of this publication is the absence of a distinct theoretical approach - a fundamental element that lends cohesiveness to any written work. The book also needs to be strengthened methodologically. Despite the title and introductory claims that promise insights into the impact of the prevailing crisis on foreign actors and variables, one is struck by the apparent subjectivity of foreign actors and the objective stance of Syria in most of the chapters. In the fifth chapter, the author argues that Iran's actions align with a "Shia crescent" even though sectarianism is explicitly ignored in the Iranian foreign policy, which is a principle established by Ayatollah Khomeini himself and ingrained in the broader strategy against Israel and accompanied by Syria known as the Axis of Resistance. (pp. 69 and 85)

Throughout the text, the claim is repeated that the Saudi involvement aimed at containing Iran, as if the Saudis do not have independent interests of their own, therefore how would their dispute with Qatar be analyzed? The author claims that one of Saudi Arabia's goals was to prevent the region from becoming the birthplace of terrorists, while in fact, one of the most important supporters of extremists was Saudi Arabia. Where is the

explanation for this contradiction? (p. 119) Whereas the focus of the 12th chapter is media outlets such as RT Arabic and Sputnik as means of Russian narrative warfare and propaganda, research neutrality reminds us that their rivals such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, which have a larger audience in the Arab world, are worth discussing (p. 195).

Although the book covers a wide range of topics and actors, perhaps more analysis could have been given to the indirect effects of the crisis on Iranian policy in Yemen, the empowerment of non-state actors in Iraq, and the blockade of Qatar by some Arab states. Therefore, chapters dealing with Iranian-Saudi and Qatari-Saudi relations would have been interesting.

Despite the above-mentioned criticisms, the book not only fills a void in the literature, but also embodies a rich tapestry of various viewpoints and diversity. This is evident in the diverse backgrounds of the contributors. Furthermore, written in plain language, it is designed to be accessible to both general and academic readers.

The book boasts a profound exploration of crucial but often overlooked themes on the Syrian crisis. Notably, it delves into the realm of Syrian hydrocarbon reserves and exposes the influence wielded by foreign forces over these valuable resources. In addition, the book goes beyond simple analysis and elucidation, offering a holistic remedy for the crisis by advocating the empowerment of local councils and promoting decentralization.