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WILL ISLAMIC STATE SAVE BASHAR AL-ASSAD?

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That's what Bashar al-Assad himself expects. The brutality of Islamic State (IS), (previously the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)), is contributing to Assad's appearance, both inside and outside Syria, as a lesser evil and a necessary collaborator in their containment. This despite the fact that without the Damascus regime's own brutality since March 2011, IS would not have been able to recruit as many combatants (above all, those from outside Syria and Iraq) and its funding channels would be neither so numerous nor so profitable. The threat of IS jihadism expanding is giving Assad the oxygen to breathe, even if it means choking the whole region.

It reinforces the official discourse of the regime. From the start of the conflict, Bashar al-Assad has characterised all opposition as terrorist, lumping together the considerably weakened "Free Syrian Army" and the various Islamist militias. That the best-armed enemy with the greatest territorial control is a group such as IS—whose violence and radicalism even al-Qaeda considers excessive—helps the anti-terrorist discourse to take hold inside and outside the country. The fact that radicalised young people of **more than eighty nationalities** are fighting within IS ranks helps Damascus to stir up fear in chancelleries, interior ministries and intelligence services, especially those in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

It contributes to the perception of the conflict in Syria as a sectarian confrontation that is regional in dimension. Since the majority of the Syrian population is Sunni and the regime in Damascus calls itself secular, Assad cannot present the actions of his government or of his security forces as a fight against the Sunnis, but he *does* insist that the opposition, to which he adds groups that share neither the IS vision nor its methods—is looking to impose Sunni power on minorities. This strategy of fear-mongering seeks to secure the loyalty (and in the worst cases, the neutrality or demobilisation) of minority groups in Syria, as well as regional support from Iran and Iraq (both Shia-majority countries) and Hezbollah, the armed wing of the Lebanese Shias. One of the risks Assad runs is that those same allies understand that he is part of the problem and that his remaining in power only aids IS. This could be his true Achilles heel, especially if **Saudi Arabia and Iran**, who have both used Syria as a venue for regional confrontation, join forces to stop a common enemy. The doubt is whether Russia would continue to support Assad on its own. Nevertheless, there is as yet no

sign of this kind of reasoning taking place in Tehran and still less in Moscow. Assad is also playing with the fears many European and American political leaders and opinion-makers have for the fate of the Middle East's Christians. And while it is difficult to see this being translated into explicit support for his regime, it increases the hesitance and division over what to do in Syria.

What is more, Damascus has contributed to the growth of IS in three ways. First, by freeing prisoners as it did in May 2011 from **Sednaya military prison**, some of whom took the opportunity to swell the ranks of Islamic State. Second, by targeting other rebel groups, and avoiding direct conflict with IS until a few weeks ago: despite IS being, on paper at least, the principle threat, **Assad's army did not bomb their operations base in Raqqa until June 2014**. Regime officials **have denied** that the government controls or gives orders to IS, but they haven't denied that attacking them was not a priority before now. And the third contribution Damascus has made is that of **financing IS by consciously buying gas and oil reserves from** fields that are now in the hands of the terrorist group in north-eastern Syria and north-western Iraq.

As well as Assad's regime, the Kurds and Iran may benefit from IS becoming the principal threat to regional security. The Kurdistan regional government in Iraq (KRG) is an indispensable actor in stopping the advance of IS in Iraq. The KRG and its security forces—the peshmerga—receive arms, humanitarian aid and financial support from the U.S., France, United Kingdom, Germany and Iran, and they collaborate with other Kurdish groups such as the **PKK** and the **PYD**. In the medium term, the Iraqi Kurds aspire to greater international recognition, to incorporating new territories **through a referendum in Kirkuk** and to a better deal in the division of oil income, even if it means putting off (but not abandoning) their desire for independence. The other regional actor who may take advantage of this situation is Iran. Tehran has already sent **military assessors and equipment** to the Kurdish militias in order to combat Islamic State and, in the same way that it collaborated with the United States against the Taliban in Afghanistan; it could **extend its hand to Obama**. Although Tehran has officially refused to be part of an international coalition, the US insists on keeping **the door open to any future collaboration**; as this coincides with advances in the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear dossier, such an agreement (if it succeeds), could contribute to the détente between Washington and Tehran that so worries Israel and Saudi Arabia. In sum, while Bashar al-Assad is not the only beneficiary of the strengthening of IS, the other actors who see their influence or relevance in the region growing pose no threat to his regime.

In contrast to what **Obama stated** the 28th of August, it seems not only that Assad has a strategy but that it is bringing him results. And it is the second time this has happened. The first was the series of chemical weapons attacks in August 2013 and the subsequent offer to destroy his chemical arsenal. This manoeuvre made him an interlocutor who was not only valid, but essential. With regard to IS, the basic idea was to confront his citizens and the international community with the dilemma of choosing between his regime and a greater evil. The message has got through to the extent that **Richard N. Haass**, president of the highly influential Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, opened the door to collaborating with Assad by invoking one of Churchill's famous phrases: "If Hitler invaded hell I would make at least a favourable reference to the devil in the House of Commons".

That the strengthening of IS has improved the chances of survival for Bashar al-Assad's regime is not by chance. It is the fruit of the strategy that Damascus has been implementing from the start of the conflict. The price he pays is having to govern a state that is failed, broken and devastated in an increasingly combustible region. Parts of the territory are, and will continue to be, beyond

government control, some of them in the hands of IS or a new mutation of it. Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon are suffering from the consequences of this threat, and other countries in the region may soon join them. Bashar al-Assad is buying time, even if it means laying mines throughout the whole Middle East. Demining it will require an inclusive government in Damascus (improbable or even impossible with Assad at its head), a rapprochement between the principal regional powers, beginning with Saudi Arabia and Iran, and sustained international support.