



Book Launch

‘Siria il Perché di una Guerra’

(Syria: Reasons for War)

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) hosted, on 6th March 2018 at its headquarters, Via Gregoriana 12, Roma, Domitilla Savignoni (TG5 reporter) and Matteo Bressan, (Analyst at the NATO Defence College Foundation), authors of the book *Siria il Perché di una Guerra*. The book explains the causes, dynamics and future trends of the ongoing Syrian Civil War.

The first word went to, Cinzia Bianco, EGIC’s Vice President for Research, who stressed how this book is one of the most comprehensive, recent, Italian language works that analyses Syria’s 7 year-old conflict. The book is particularly useful as it sheds light on the information war which took place with regard to Syria which contributed to widespread misrepresentations of the realities on the ground.

Savignoni confirmed this point by outlining how the book deals with the challenges derived from the conflicting and often unverifiable information coming from Syria’s battlefields. According to Savignoni, it is especially important to counter mainstream media simplifications and make extra efforts to verify information sources. The high risk of sending independent reporters to the field is a direct cause of the increased reliance on bloggers and social media. However, bloggers and social media are also used by the warring factions to deceive their enemies. Fact checking agencies used by prominent independent institutions, such as Amnesty International, are not enough to limit the proliferation of fake news related to the Syrian conflict. Savignoni argued that foreign powers, such as Russia, are also responsible for providing misleading information for their own public consumption. The book tries to address those events considered as key for the unfolding of the Syrian war, which are also the most politicised by the media, such as the Aleppo offensive and the use of chemical weapons in Khan Shaykhun, Idlib Province and East Goutha.

Bressan points to the Syrian conflict as a case study of the different theoretical frameworks studied by International Relations scholars. Particularly relevant, according to Bressan, are the challenges Daesh posed to state boundaries established by the Sykes-Picot agreement, as well as those posed to international law by external powers intervening in Syria. In particular while, regime allies such as Russia, Iran and Hezbollah claim the legitimacy of their position as they have been invited by Syria’s government to provide assistance in the fight, the actions of Israel and Turkey are often seen as being illegitimate. Bressan described the chronological development of the conflict stemming from the 2011 internal uprising, to the rise and prominence of Daesh in 2014, to the greater involvement, in 2018, of external powers which, according to both authors, has the potential for triggering a major regional conflict.

Savignoni and Bressan are particularly worried about escalations in North-West Syria, where Turkey’s military recently launched an air and ground assault, denominated “Operation Olive Branch” to rid Syria’s Afrin province of Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) fighters which are considered members of a terrorist organisation by Ankara. YPG fighters are not only supported by the US and its other Western European allies due to their prominent role in defeating Daesh, but are also joined, in their fight against Turkey’s military, by Syrian regime’s forces allied to Moscow and Tehran. Another dangerous flashpoint lies on the border between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Israel perceives the presence of Hezbollah fighters near its borders as an existential threat. This is evidenced by air strikes conducted by the Israeli air force inside Syria throughout the conflict. Both

authors argue that Israel is likely to increase its military involvement in Syria as the Assad government is incrementally forced to rely on Iranian-trained and Hezbollah militias to maintain control over Western Syria.

As the US continues its disengagement from the Middle East, Russia is the only power politically and militarily able to limit and force back the aforementioned escalations. However, Russian authorities have already signalled they are seeking an exit strategy from the Syrian conflict. At the same time the Moscow-organised Astana peace talks and the Russia-Iran-Turkey coordination efforts have not succeeded in halting the fighting on any of Syria's multiple theatres. The authors argue that an escalation between external powers in Syria, will not be prevented unless all external players, including the US, Israel and the Arab monarchies of the Gulf are invited to the negotiating table.

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre, through its analyses, conferences and cultural events is constantly working at building a network of experts in relevant fields with the ultimate goal of contributing guidance to policymakers for effective cross-regional and international peace building. This book launch, and past events, constitute some relevant examples of how we address current international challenges such as the ongoing civil war in Syria, and the consequent refugee crisis, which are affecting Europe and the Arab Gulf states alike in several different ways.