



*Quicksilver War: Syria, Iraq and the Spiral of Conflict* by William Harris.

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Writing current history is challenging. Official records, already reduced by the advent of email, are often unavailable for years because of security restrictions. Government and opposition announcements distorted by spin control and information manipulation obscure the true intentions of insurgent groups and other non-state actors for decades if not forever. In light of this, we must applaud the few writers who can overcome such dire handicaps. One such scholar is William Harris (Univ. of Otago), a specialist in the history of the Levant. In *Quicksilver War*, he uses Arabic and Turkish news sources as well as human rights reports and interviews to write a succinct (174-page) analysis of the interactions of great powers, local governments, ethnic or religious groups, and insurgents in the region of Syria and Iraq in 2010–17. Two chapters concern the overall sequence of events, especially in Syria and Iraq. Another two consider the same developments from the perspective of the Kurds and the Turkish government.

Harris correctly stresses that, despite the later involvement of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the United States, what he dubs the “quicksilver war” comprised two unrelated insurgencies that metastasized and merged. Hence, he warns, “terming the crisis a ‘proxy war’ risks devaluing the criminal responsibility of local agents” (6). Though both Syria and Iraq had suffered from decades of secret police repression by the Ba’ath Party, the causes of the uprisings of 2010–11 were independent of each other. President Bashar al-Assad presided over a multi-year drought and corrupt exploitation of the state, then used live ammunition to repress non-violent demonstrations by reformers. Meanwhile, Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, bent on retaining power after losing the 2010 elections, stoked Shi’a sectarianism, alienated Sunni groups, and eliminated their leaders in the security forces. Just as in the reign of Saddam Hussein, a regime that valued loyalty over competence paid a heavy price on the battlefield.

At this point, Iran and its Hezbollah allies strove to increase their own influence in the region. Moreover, “much of the growth of Iraqi Sunni jihadists and Shi’a militias alike came from the attractions of Sunni and Shi’a causes in the Syrian warfare of 2012–13” (44).

Still, Harris eschews facile stereotypes about Islamic confessional groups, stressing instead the actions of specific individuals. Besides Assad and Maliki, he emphasizes the bad decisions of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In Harris’s telling, the Turkish leader embraced the idea of Syrian regime change only because Assad rejected his advice about political reform. Thereafter, “Erdoğan’s ‘evangelism,’ risk-taking, self-assurance, erratic impulses, and religiously inclined neo-Ottoman world-view” (136) spawned ineffectual policies about Syria and ISIS. Perhaps influenced by Turkish domestic concerns, Erdoğan engaged in seemingly contradictory behavior. Longstanding fears of Kurdish terrorism inside Turkey prompted Ankara to quash the Syrian Kurdish rebellion against Assad; yet, at the same time, Erdoğan was informally allied with the Kurdish regional government inside Iraq. As Harris observes, Erdoğan’s policies on Syria often failed because he was loath to invest the “hard power” needed to achieve them.

Similarly, both the American and Russian governments had clear if unspoken limits on what they would risk to further their policy goals in the Middle East. Though Vladimir Putin entered into the Syrian conflict to shore up a Russian ally, even he recognized that Assad's use of chemical weapons went too far and risked American intervention. "Russia's strategic interests only required ascendancy in western Syria" (100), not total victory for the Assad regime.

After a decade of indecisive struggle in Iraq and Afghanistan, presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump both lacked public support to make credible threats or actually intervene to achieve their policy goals. Instead, the Iraqi government had to negotiate separately with Teheran for ground troops and with Washington for air power and advisors in order to retake territory lost to ISIS in 2014. Harris observes that the success of the US-supported, rebuilt Iraqi Army and its Kurdish allies temporarily weakened the political position of the Shi'a Popular Mobilization Forces and their Iranian backers, although ultimately Teheran profited from the chaos.

Just as in the former Yugoslavia, extremist violence in the Syrian-Iraqi theater of war bred opposition. Mindless intolerance by the al-Assad regime, ISIS, and al-Qaeda offshoots prolonged the conflict when reasonable compromise might well have quieted their opponents and garnered increased support. So too, internal rifts and open warfare between non-state groups contributed greatly to the defeat of ISIS and Syrian revolutionaries.

Though Harris concentrates on the political/diplomatic aspects of this tortuous situation, he does not neglect relevant military and other matters. He is especially good on economic factors that determined the course of the war. Money from the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia funded the Syrian resistance, while the oil fields of eastern Syria financed the rise of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other extremists. Kurdistan and the central government in Baghdad often seemed more pre-occupied with their petroleum revenues than with quelling the radical Islamist threat to both regimes.

*Quicksilver War* is a welcome first draft of a history of the (thus far) bloodiest conflict of the twenty-first century. William Harris's perceptive chronicle of this multifaceted struggle will engage and enlighten anyone interested in Middle Eastern history or international security and modern conflict more broadly.