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The Syrian Civil War: Why Did it Get So Bad?



**O G L E T H O R P E**  
U N I V E R S I T Y

Honors Thesis

Reading Committee:

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Abstract:

Although initiated a decade ago, the effects of the Arab Spring can still be seen throughout the Arab world. While some nations benefitted from this wave of protests, others suffered from their leadership's response, but arguably, none suffered as badly as Syria. The popular uprising of March 2011 escalated into a bloody civil war attracting significant international attention. The conflict has become more complicated as the opposition fractured into different groups, and additional parties saw the weakness of the Syrian state as an opportunity to fight for independence. Many of Syria's beautiful towns, countryside, and major cities have been reduced to rubble, with the population suffering from mass emigration, displacement, high death tolls, and heavily disrupted infrastructure for over ten years. Why did this war escalate to the length and severity that it did? What effect did international intervention have on this conflict? Why was Syria different from the other nations touched by the Arab Spring? Could things have been different? Why were international mediators unable to stop the conflict?

Introduction:

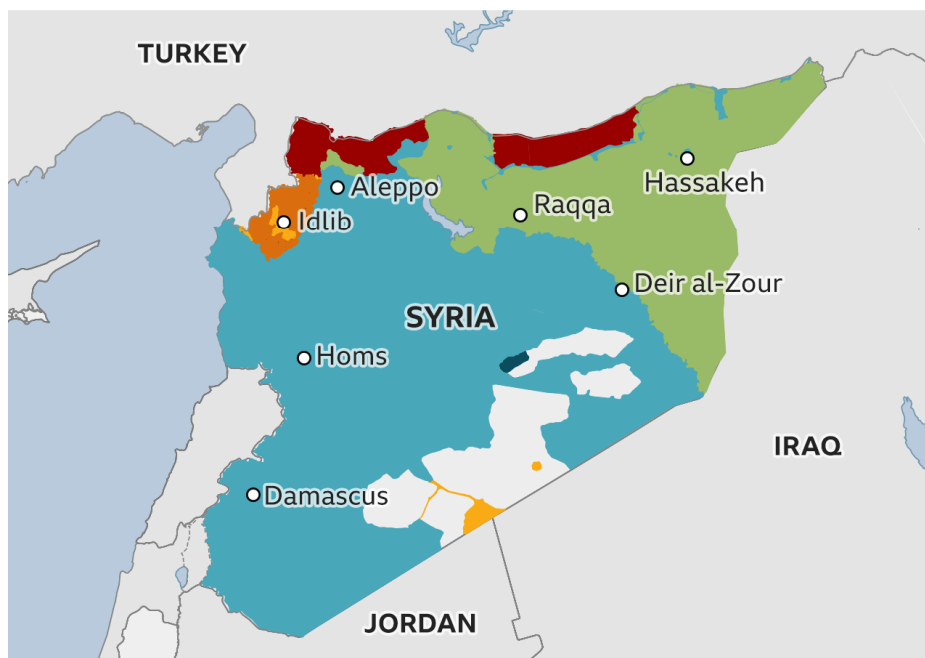
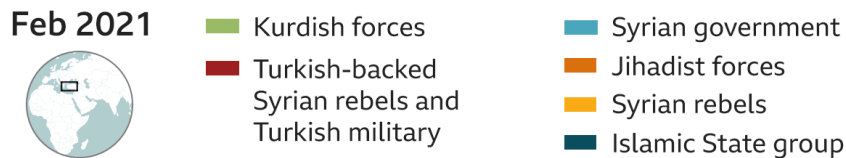
Beginning in 2011, the Syrian Civil War has inflicted nearly a decade of constant violence on the citizens of Syria. Despite the original intentions behind the demonstrations against Bashar al-Assad, the ensuing chaos and instability was seen as an opportunity for different groups, based both domestically and internationally. This opportunity was for power, land, influence, reputation, or even gains in an external competition against another power with stake in the issue. These alternative ambitions held by parties involved sometimes worked at cross-purposes with the goal of ending the war. However, this resulted in very few decisions being made that would benefit the Syrian population by ending the war. Because of this nature of decision making accompanied by the continued international involvement makes the Syrian Civil War an example of the failure of

international intervention by international organizations supposedly designed to maintain an international order. However, in this situation, there is no international actor blameless for the worsening of the conflict. The main international actors that will be mentioned are the United States, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, with the UN, the EU, France, Germany, Israel and Jordan mentioned but not focused on due to their peripheral involvement relative to the initial six mentioned. Kurdish forces also entered into the conflict, but not in the form of a state but rather through militias and organizations created as political counterparts to those militia or to attempt to be representatives of the Kurdish people. There was also significant participation by Arab non-state actors such as Hezbollah, or Jabhat al-Nusra, who are distinguished from the opposition due to their history and motivation for their involvement. Finally, there is the Islamic State which emerged in the midst of the Syrian Civil War, but not as a friend of the regime or the opposition but rather as an external actor with ambitions of taking over territory already being fought over by the regime and the opposition. Between these actors, as well as more who will be introduced in context, agendas for what could be gained from the conflict abounded, without many parties' priority being ending the conflict over gaining what they wanted from the situation. The Syrian Civil War became so devastating because of the unique characteristics of the Syrian people and Bashar al-Assad himself, the participation of international actors, and the intervention of radical organizations which split focus for all parties involved.

Data on the impact of the Syrian Civil War is largely inconsistent and has proven difficult for even major organizations to track. This is due to the difficulty of maintaining consistent monitors or officials safely within Syria's borders, as well as the ever-changing and evolving nature of the opposition. According to a BBC report in March 2021, 387,118 deaths, including both combatants and civilians, have been documented, with 205,300 people missing and presumed

dead.<sup>1</sup> The BBC also cites that the Syrian government, led by Bashar al-Assad is responsible for over 150,000 of those deaths. The opposition, however, has only been connected to 34,606 documented deaths throughout the war, with no other force being responsible for more than 15,000.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these deaths, 5.6 million people have been displaced out of Syria, becoming refugees across the world, but mainly in Turkey and Jordan. 6.7 additional people have been displaced within Syrian borders.<sup>3</sup> As of February of 2021, the country is still divided with six different groups controlling significant portions of the land.

## Who controls what in Syria



Source: Janes Conflict Monitor

BBC<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Why has the Syrian war lasted 10 years?" *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229>. Accessed March 18, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> "Why has the Syrian war lasted 10 years?" *BBC News*.

<sup>3</sup> "Why has the Syrian war lasted 10 years?" *BBC News*.

<sup>4</sup> "Why has the Syrian war lasted 10 years?" *BBC News*.

A common understanding of the Syrian Civil War recognizes the complexity of the issue as well as the confusing nature of the players, specifically in that there are so many of them. In order to analyze this issue, this paper will make a few adjustments in order to better understand the conflict as a whole. First, only English names will be used where they exist comparably, as for organizations or descriptions for different types of militia, reserving Arabic names for when necessary, to distinguish groups from each other. In this same vein, this paper will use the transliterations of Arabic names as they appear in the media, recognizing that these sometimes do not follow the transliteration rules between the two languages, but that it will make the paper more legible. For example, 'Assad' will be used rather than 'Asad' because the former is more common in English literature on this subject, even if the latter is the proper transliteration.

Next, one of the reasons that this conflict has drawn such international attention, even outside the actors involved, is the atrocities that have been committed against the Syrian people. The violence has mounted a large death toll as well as displacing millions of Syrians both internally and externally. However, this paper will refrain from listing statistics on these matters except for where immediately connected to a change in the conflict dynamic, such as when chemical weapons were used, blatant attacks on civilian centers, or the jarring brutality of the Islamic State. This is not to dismiss the importance of these lives lost or damaged, but rather to focus on the conflict itself, with the understanding that the consequences of the decisions made by the belligerents and their patrons were endured by the Syrian people more than anyone else.

Moreover, 'Syria' will be used primarily to discuss the geographic location or population rather than as the label for an actor. Since there was no cohesion amongst the opposition that would represent the Syrian people against Assad, it does not seem fitting to allow one group above another to be called 'Syria.' Assad's side of the conflict will be referred to as the regime, Assad,

or Damascus, since no opposition group was able to effectively displace the regime from their capital. The opposition, if mentioned broadly will be called the opposition or the rebels, but since the opposition is fragmented for most of the conflict, most often different groups will be referred to by their name or their major association, such as local militias under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Although many individuals had a hand in each nation's Syria policy, this paper will exclude names in favor of impact, except for major leaders whose personalities shaped both their interactions with Syria as well as their interactions with other nations. For example, Obama's administration will be differentiated from Trump's, since the two leaders were divergent on several international issues, or the significance of Crown Prince bin Salman al-Saud being named successor to the Saudi Arabian throne rather than Prince Nayef. Because of this the only individuals mentioned by name will be heads of state or state policy, and influential leaders of non-state actors. This will also highlight the inability of the opposition to unite around one leader or group of leaders collectively.

The purpose of this paper is not to discriminate against different practices of Islam, or methods of belief by Muslims. Although religion has a role to play in this conflict and thus must be discussed, this paper will focus on the differences between sects of Islam as well as with other local religions. It is important to note that there are members of some sects which espouse violence and members which do not. The description of different radical religious groups is not meant to be applied as a generalization to the entirety of the religious sect which they claim, but rather to help characterize the group mentioned specifically.

Finally, this paper will only analyze the development of the Syrian Civil War up until the end of 2019. Since this conflict is ongoing, and the coronavirus pandemic became a factor around

the beginning of 2020, this analysis will isolate itself from complications caused by that outbreak in order to keep from obscuring the analysis of the situation.

### Introduction of the Players:

Before giving a summary of what Syria has endured for the past decade, it is important to understand the players who will command a significant role throughout the conflict. Moreover, it is important to begin the conflict having an idea of the relationships that already existed so that interaction in Syria can be understood in its wider context. This explanation will begin with Assad's regime and then expand to the external state actors (Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, and the United States) and finally the external non-state actors (Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State, PKK, Hezbollah). The explanation of the opposition as actors will be included in the chronology of the war's events.

First, there is the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. It is against his rule that the uprising began. Bashar al-Assad came to power after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, in June 2000.<sup>5</sup> Hafez al-Assad was able to claim power in Syria in 1970 via a coup, ending a series of over fifteen coups in Syria from 1948 to 1970.<sup>6</sup> Because of the history in the Syrian government of instability and disloyalty resulting in the plethora of coups, Hafez al-Assad quickly cleansed the government of any loyal to his predecessor and replaced those positions with family members, friends, or extreme loyalists who relied on his protection. This was especially important for the religious minorities in Syria, including the Shiites, Christians, and Alawites, with the Assad family being members of the Alawite sect. In the majority Sunni country of Syria, there had been a history of mistreatment of religious minorities, so to have the protection of the 'Alawi ruler was significant.

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<sup>5</sup> David S. Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins: The Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War*. (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2016) p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 16.

Hafez al-Assad knew this and kept those in his inner circle reliant on him, either in this capacity or due to familial or friendly connections. For important public positions, Hafez al-Assad used loyal Sunnis, in order to keep the majority Sunni population satisfied that they were not being governed entirely by a minority.<sup>7</sup> Hafez al-Assad also benefitted from the oil boom in the 1970s which helped him better the economy, as well as the ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. After avoiding direct conflict in 1973, the region was generally understood to be under Soviet control, which kept other international forces at bay, giving Assad time to build up his government.<sup>8</sup> Hafez al-Assad created his government in such a way that there was no room for any political opposition to his party, the Ba'ath party, since such opposition was avidly protected against and punished.<sup>9</sup> It was into this political environment that Bashar al-Assad was elected, after running unopposed in July 2000.<sup>10</sup>

Bashar al-Assad's ascension to presidency was welcomed by the West, since his education in London and platform promising reform indicated that he may change the autocratic system that was in place in Syria.<sup>11</sup> Some argue that Bashar al-Assad's early claims for desiring reform and economic liberalization were genuine, but that the remnants of his father's government, or the Ba'athist 'cronies', would not allow any changes in the system that threatened their powerful positions.<sup>12</sup> Assad spent his first few years in office positioning himself as a part of the anti-Western movement in the Arab nations, which gained him popularity among Arab nations, while simultaneously earning international isolation due to enmity with the United States. However,

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, (London: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 22.



Assad clawed his way back into the international community by supplementing and cultivating his relationships with Russia, Turkey, and Qatar.<sup>13</sup> Simply put, Assad wants to stay in power, and will not concede.

Turkey was among the first to accept Assad as ruler and incorporate him back into the international community. Prior to the 2000s, Turkey had been more inclined towards the West than their Arab neighbors. This was as a result of the adherence to Kemalism, a political style in Turkey established by Turkey's founding father. Kemalist policies propagate limited interaction with the Middle East as a result of bitterness from the betrayal of the Arab nations towards the Ottoman empire.<sup>14</sup> However, Turkey's current ruler, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan forged a personal relationship with Assad, and overcame historic issues between the two nations as a part of Turkey's "no problems with neighbors" initiative.<sup>15</sup> Despite having won successive elections since 2002, Erdogan remains a polarizing figure in Turkish politics. He has defined himself domestically as a conservative, anti-elitist, nationalist with a confrontational position towards those citizens whose political leanings or background precluded them from likely ever becoming his supporter.<sup>16</sup> Erdogan pioneered a split from Kemalist policies, with the goal of not only being included in the Arab world, but to be a leader in it. The relationship between Erdogan and Assad developed into an economic, cultural, and diplomatic relationship between the two nations, until 2011. In the early 2000s, Turkey's foreign policy was angled towards repairing relationships with Arab nations and taking on a leadership role. This diversion was driven by the dangers facing Turkey, including Kurdish separatism, militant Islamism, and sectarianism, as well as the opportunity of the power

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<sup>13</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Soner Cagaptay. *The New Sultan: Erdogan and the Crisis of Modern Turkey* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p. 24.

vacuum left by the United States' withdraw.<sup>17</sup> However, Turkey's capabilities did not match Erdogan's ambitions, and Erdogan remained broadly committed to Turkey's relationship with the United States and other NATO countries, reflected by his desertion of Assad early on in the war.<sup>18</sup> In the Syrian Civil War, Turkey is firmly in the anti-Assad camp and broadly against Russia and Iran. However, Turkey retained a trading relationship with Russia and even cooperated with Russia on several occasions regarding the issue of Assad. Turkey is also against the Kurdish separatists. The Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) are two Kurdish militias involved on the side of the opposition to Assad, and who are enemies of Turkey. This becomes important when arming the rebels becomes a part of the international intervention. Furthermore, in 2016, a coup against Erdogan was attempted in Turkey, distracting the ruler and causing a shift in Turkey's participation in Syria, as well as fundamentally in Erdogan's foreign policy and leadership style.<sup>19</sup> A common theme in Erdogan's interaction with the Syrian conflict is his opposition to support of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, (PKK), which has been deemed a terror group by Turkey and several other countries, including the United States.<sup>20</sup> Between summer of 2015 and the end of 2016, Turkey was suffering heavy attacks from both PKK and ISIS which resulted in the deaths of nearly 550 people.<sup>21</sup> This aided in Erdogan's refusal to cooperate with Kurdish groups on the topic of the Syrian Civil War, as well as his outrage at other international actors for any support, tacit or active, which they gave to the PKK specifically and Kurdish groups in general.

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<sup>17</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Cagaptay, *The New Sultan*, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Cagaptay, *The New Sultan*, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Cagaptay, *The New Sultan*, p.2.

After the start of the war, Qatar is also in the anti-Assad camp. As a small country surrounded by Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabian influence, Qatar sought to separate themselves from the Saudi shadow and to emerge as a regional leader. Part of this confidence and ambition came from Qatar's seeming success early on in the liberation of Libya. Qatar differed from some of the other allies of the opposition because of the nation's amiable relationship with Iran. Part of Qatar's goals in the conflict was to manage this relationship, while simultaneously garnering more support from the Arab world and becoming a regional leader, distinguished from Saudi Arabia.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that Qatar and Saudi Arabia had their own rivalry, partially over influence in the Middle East as well as regional conflicts arising from their proximity. Qatar's participation was connected heavily to two things. First, Qatar claimed responsibility for the successful efforts in Libya, and claimed that the same success could be had in Syria. Much of this confidence came from before the early years of the conflict, when the coup in Libya seemed to have brought nothing but success. Second, Qatar's competition with Saudi Arabia to be a regional leader drove Qatar to be an outspoken opponent of Assad, and led to hastily provided funding and aid given to the rebels. Thus, cooperation between the two was not always assumed and the two nations engaged in their own scuffles outside of the Syria conflict, and even distracted each other from that priority. Qatar also houses Al-Jazeera, a prominent news source in the Middle East with a slightly anti-Saudi bend to many of their stories.<sup>23</sup>

In 2011, Saudi Arabia was being led by King Abdullah. However, at this time Abdullah was 87 and had failing health, so part of Saudi Arabia's participation in the Syrian Civil War was affected by the eventual power transition and all of the domestic pressures of that event mid-way through. However, Saudi Arabia, overall, had a distinguishable Syrian policy. Saudi Arabia

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<sup>22</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>23</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 37.

historically had a good relationship with the United States, however that relationship was strained in 2011 due to personality differences between US President Obama and his predecessor President Bush. This relationship was also strained by Obama's pursuit of détente with Iran. Saudi Arabia had a distinct regional interest in containment of Iran, which was endangered by the diminishing of Iraq, a historical counter to Iran, alongside potential US-Iran cooperation.<sup>24</sup> Regarding Saudi relations with Syria, they were tense due to ideological differences, with Saudi Arabia having Sunni, monarchical leadership and Syria having Alawite and Shia leadership in a nationalistic style. However, these differences were not so stark to prevent Saudi Arabia and Syria from creating temporary alliances in the past when faced with a common enemy, such as Israel in 1973 or Iraq in 1990.<sup>25</sup> In the Syrian Civil War, Saudi Arabia aligned themselves in the anti-Assad camp, however it was clear that the priority was to combat Iran and any sign of Iran expanding influence over Saudi Arabia's neighbors. Saudi Arabia wanted to maintain their position as regional leader as well. It is also important to note that Saudi Arabia is a largely Sunni state, with a large population prone to flux coinciding with changes in the economy.<sup>26</sup>

The final major state player in the anti-Assad coalition is the United States. For the first half of the Syrian Civil War, Barack Obama was in leadership in the U.S., to be succeeded by Donald Trump in 2017. The differences between the two leadership styles here are important and will be discussed later, but the overall priorities of the United States can still be examined outside of these personalities. After the Iraq War and the domestic turmoil leading towards a fall in support for foreign wars, the United States entered a period of retrenchment, led by Obama.<sup>27</sup> Although there was still the understanding for a need of analysis on a case-by-case basis, the U.S. was largely

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<sup>24</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 26.

trying to reduce its physical presence in the Middle East and rebuild the U.S. reputation both in the Middle East and in the larger international community. Finally, the United States sought to repair relationships with former enemies, Iran and Russia. This was especially clear in the presidency of Trump, who was more sympathetic to Russia than his predecessor.<sup>28</sup> Prior to 2011, US policy tried to nudge Syria towards the pro-Western Saudi bloc of the Middle East as a way to put pressure on Iran to comply with non-proliferation attempts and olive branches extended by Washington.<sup>29</sup> In the conflict, the US, along with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, wanted the removal of Assad from power, alongside its private goals. A major influence on the US policy in Syria was the desire to keep from entanglement in another foreign conflict. This contrasted with the perceived continuation of US dominance in the area, and although that perception did not match reality, it did shape actions of the opposition.<sup>30</sup>

The first major ally to Assad is Russia. Led by Vladimir Putin, Russia involvement in the Middle East extends past loyalty to Assad into an overall desire to break from the post-Cold War, American dominated system. Thus, Putin viewed the Middle East in three distinct lenses. First, Putin was involved heavily in order to prevent the spread of the Arab Spring or jihadist Islam to affect the Muslim population in Russia and encourage them to revolt or to launch a holy war. Second, Russia was involved in trade with the Middle East, largely Turkey in both oil and arms sales. Third, Putin saw the Middle East as a zero-sum game in which any gain for Russia was a loss for the US, so Russia courted all members of the Arab world regardless of their ties to the US. This tactic intended to position Russia as a third player rather than an enemy of the US, which would hopefully transition into Russia pushing the US out through better relationships.<sup>31</sup> Through

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<sup>28</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 23-24, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 29.

the conflict, Russia refused to allow for any resolution in which Assad would be taken from power. However, this did not stop Russia from trading with Assad's enemies, namely Turkey, nor did it preclude Putin from working with Washington and Turkey when constraint of Assad seemed necessary. Russia worked in concert with Iran to help Assad, but it is also important to note both Russia and Iran worked towards the same end, of preserving Assad in power, but also with the understanding that they were competing for influence in the post-war Syria.

The final state actor which played a major role in the conflict is Iran. Iran has clear priorities guiding their Syria strategy, and more broadly their foreign policy. Those goals can be identified as: (1) to counter US/Israel plans for influence in the Middle East, (2) to support Palestinians and Lebanon against Israel, (3) to pursue nuclear power for independence and prestige, and (4) to be the key player in the Islamic World.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Syria was Iran's oldest ally, so preservation of Assad's regime was a priority for Iranian leadership prior to 2011, which differs from both the US and Russia, neither of whom saw Syria as a priority.<sup>33</sup> Iran presides under two leaders, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei rose to "Supreme Leader" in 1989 and retains that position today. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005, which represents the height of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the party of which Ahmadinejad was a member.<sup>34</sup> Through the Syrian conflict, the Iranian priorities were to maintain Assad's regime, support Hezbollah, preserve Iranian lines of communication through Damascus, and emerge as the key Islamist nation in the Arab world.<sup>35</sup>

An early non-state actor was Jabhat al-Nusra, also known as al-Nusra or the Nusra Front. This coalition of Islamic extremists was claimed by Abu Bakr Baghdadi, who credited himself

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<sup>32</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 31.

<sup>34</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 30.

<sup>35</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 30, 307.

with the formation of the organization and appointing Abu-Mohammad al-Jolani to lead, although Jolani denies this and claims to be founder.<sup>36</sup> Nusra is an extremist organization and considered to be a terrorist group by the UN, and especially the United States. However, it is important to distinguish Nusra from ISIS. In April 2013, Baghdadi claimed he founded Nusra and that now Nusra would be merging with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), to create the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). However, Jolani denied this and refused the merger, importantly dividing Nusra from the Islamic State. These two groups eventually grew to be enemies, and fought each other.<sup>37</sup> For this reason, Nusra is better understood as a radical player on the side of the opposition, since it rejected any affiliation with the Islamic State and thus should not be analyzed as an extension of the IS despite their early connections. Nusra should be recognized though, as the most radical player on the side of the opposition. Often Nusra and IS are mentioned in concert because of their radical beliefs and brutal methods, however recognizing their differences and even their enmity prevents unnecessary confusion in the conflict.

Ahrar al-Sham is another militia deemed to be extremists. The group is Salafist in nature, and originated in Idlib as a militia. However, Ahrar claimed a reputation exceeding that of the more moderate militias, since the soldiers of Ahrar al-Sham were known for their discipline, fighting skill, and their restraint from looting in the way that other militias operated. Nusra and Ahrar are also often mentioned in concert since both represent radicalism in the opposition, but neither reaches the level of IS in reputation, international focus, or brutality.

Hezbollah is a Lebanese militia formed in the 1980s with the assistance of Iran. The group is largely Shi'a and thus feared a Sunni government in Syria that may shift the balance of power in Lebanon towards the Sunni population. Hezbollah then is a supporter of Assad and a cooperative

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<sup>36</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 133.

<sup>37</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 61.

of Iran. Hezbollah also enjoyed significant popularity in the Arab world for a success against the Israeli army in 2006, which spurred them to intervene in defense of Assad, another anti-Western leader.<sup>38</sup>

Kurdish groups represent another series of interests. The Kurdish people represent an ancient civilization whose major complaint is the loss of cultural autonomy in the form of their own state. A common domestic stress in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq are the separatist inclinations of the Kurdish populations. There is also animosity between Kurds and Arabs connected to a long history of violence between the two groups. More recently though, Kurdish complaints have centered around deprivation of rights and opportunities in Arab societies.<sup>39</sup> Groups representing this race of people include the PKK, or the Kurdistan Worker's Party, a Turkish-based militant Kurdish group. This group has been labeled as a terrorist organization by Turkey and Turkey's NATO allies due to attacks and violence from the militia with the end goal being autonomy for Turkey's Kurds.<sup>40</sup> Another Kurdish group was the YPG, or the People's Protection Units, which is a Kurdish militia in Syria, which joined with other opposition militia under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF.<sup>41</sup> The SDF was created by the political counterpart to the YPG, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), formed in Syria as a leading opposition force to Assad. The SDF notably combines Kurdish forces with Arab forces, to the end of toppling Assad's regime.<sup>42</sup> However, despite their common goal, Turkey and any Kurdish forces do not cooperate well together because of the history between Turkey and the PKK and Kurdish militia in general, which adds to the divisions among the opposition. Kurdish aims are also fragmented. Some Kurdish

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<sup>38</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 157.

<sup>39</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 227.

<sup>42</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 227.



forces operate in concert with Arab forces in Syria focusing on toppling Assad. Some attempt to use the Syrian war as a distraction and an opportunity to grab land and possibly create a Kurdish state. Because of this, Syrian opposition early on attempted to woo the Kurdish militias with the promise of a better life in Syria, post-Assad, but they failed to do so.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, the Islamic State, as they are self-identified and thus how they will be referred to for the duration of this paper, emerged as its own party in the war. The emergence of the Islamic State was not an attempt to topple Assad specifically, but rather a transnational Islamic movement towards the establishment of a Caliphate in which religion and politics are not divisible.<sup>44</sup> The Islamic State is a Sunni organization, with brutal interpretations of Islam and the adherence to Shari'a law, although Shari'a law is supposed to be a law of the people, the Islamic State showed no inclination towards allowing criticism of its governance or interpretation of religion.<sup>45</sup> Announced, June 2014 by Abu Bakr Baghdadi, the Islamic State proved to be a threat globally with the ability to conduct war efficiently, as well as launch successful terrorist attacks against targets abroad, as was witnessed by the Paris attacks in 2015. The goals of the Islamic State in Syria then was to gain territory and establish permanent and widespread borders in which to raise the Caliphate. This differentiated IS from the opposition since IS did want to topple Assad because of Assad's transgressions, but rather wanted territory, power, and did not recognize the lines drawn as boundaries or the modern idea of state sovereignty.<sup>46</sup>

With all of these actors there can be identified four broad camps. First, the regime and the pro-Assad fighters, including Assad, Russia, and Iran, as well as China but to a lesser extent. Because of China's limited role, it will not be discussed explicitly in this paper. Next, the anti-

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<sup>43</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 111.

<sup>44</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 69.

<sup>45</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 66.

<sup>46</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 66.

Assad camp, including the opposition, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, as well as the UN, the EU largely. Since the EU and the UN operated in concert with other western leaders, their position will not be explicitly explained, but their participation will be noted when significant. Third, there are the Kurdish fighters who may sometimes be anti-Assad but also have a distinct agenda dictated by their cultural identity. Finally, there is the Islamic State, which cannot be categorized alongside anything else due to its divergent ambitions and transnational goals.

Statement of Facts:

The religious aspect of the Civil War cannot be ignored, but it should not be overstated. While many of the international headlines were dominated by stories of the religious radicals and their role in the conflict, this was likely more connected to the headline appeal of those stories rather than a reflection of the level of importance sectarian divides held in the conflict. In the context of the Arab Spring, the Syrian conflict distinguishes itself from the others because of the role of religious sectarianism, which was prominent in Syria, but not as prominent in other uprisings of the Arab Spring.<sup>47</sup> An understanding of specific differences between sects of Islam are important to have an understanding of how they interact with each other, particularly in the context of the Syrian Civil War. The main argument differentiating Sunni Islam from Shi'a Islam is the argument over prophetic succession. Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of Islam and believe that prophetic succession should consist of those selected by the community of believers at the time of the Prophet rather than the Prophet's family. Shi'a Islam includes many different sects, each with a different interpretation on the proper succession to the Prophet, but with most connected to a succession determined by the lineage and family of the Prophet Muhammad. Included in the Shi'a sect are the Zaydi, followers of Zayid ibn Ali, half-brother of the fifth Imam,

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<sup>47</sup> Noah Feldman, *The Arab Winter: A Tragedy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 84.

or the Isma'ili who believe that the rightful seventh Imam was Ism'ail ibn Jafar, who was the last true Shi'a descendent of the Prophet. A product of the Shi'a sect of Islam is the Alawite faith. The Assad family is Alawite, and thus are followers of the Prophet's son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib.<sup>48</sup> There is resistance with in Shi'a Islam as to whether Alawites should be considered Muslim, which notably prompted Assad to elicit a fatwa from a Shiite cleric in Lebanon declaring Alawites as true members of Shiite Islam.<sup>49</sup> There is also a debate among the Sunni sect as to the legitimacy of several Shi'a sects as true members of Islam, which is understandable since their dividing difference is over who is proper to follow after the death of the Prophet. However, the separation has led to mistreatment between the sects resulting in anxieties from both sides over the prospect of a radical government of the opposing sect. Alawites have received mistreatment from both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims in the past since both have large swaths of followers which contest the right of Alawite Islam to be considered a part of Islam at all.<sup>50</sup> Christians also have a significant population in Syria and there is disagreement between different Islamic groups over what type of treatment should be given to the Christians because of the Islam practice of protection over them as "peoples of the book" in some sects. This leads to further divides within Islam, especially between fundamentalists, radicals, and moderates.<sup>51</sup>

### Timeline

The Arab Spring, beginning in Tunis in December of 2010, was a mass movement of Arab populations demanding the downfall or reform of autocratic regimes. This movement was met with enthusiasm by the West initially because of the hope of the establishment of democratic governments in place of the autocratic predecessors. It was an unspoken assumption in the west

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<sup>48</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 84.

<sup>51</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 10.

that the successful displacement of dictatorial presidents would be followed by the implementation of constitutional democracy as the new political system.<sup>52</sup> However, it quickly became evident that each uprising would be accompanied by some kind of violence, and many begged for international intervention. It is also important to note that the chants of the protesters were not for democracy, but rather “freedom, dignity, and social justice.”<sup>53</sup> In Syria, however, there was little belief that the Arab Spring would spread within the borders; one among these believers was Assad himself. Assad was overly confident in the stability of his regime, and possibly even saw himself as a man of the people with a population content enough not to feel the need to demand change.<sup>54</sup> In an interview prior to the outbreak of the protests, Assad commented “Syria is stable because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people... When there is divergence between your policy and the people’s beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance.”<sup>55</sup>

However, the Arab Spring did spread to Syria. On March 6, 2011 a group of young people were arrested in Dera’a, Syria for anti-regime graffiti that they had done publicly. Accounts differ and some claim that these were teenagers drawing anti-Assad slogans on the school walls<sup>56</sup>, while others claim they were young adults putting graffiti up in the town.<sup>57</sup> Regardless, reports agree that these youths were arrested and tortured extensively, with one of them dying as a result. This sparked a series of protests against the regime and the brutality of the security forces in Dera’a.<sup>58</sup> The security forces in Dera’a responded lethally by firing into crowds, resulting in civilian deaths. Because of modern technology, images and videos of this brutality were taken and posted on social

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<sup>52</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 24.

<sup>54</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 32.

<sup>55</sup> Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012) p. 178.

<sup>56</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 49.

<sup>57</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 33.

media. Before the regime could contain the issue, people in cities all over Syria had seen the violence and heard the story. The demonstrations spread to other regions, many rural communities like Dera'a. However, each region brought to their demonstrations their own complaints against the regime, many unique and local.<sup>59</sup> Broad themes were deciphered from the protests though, which allowed outsiders to get a broad understanding of most regions' complaints. Syria's population was frustrated with the concentration of power to a few elites, with no room for independent opposition or a democratic voice of the people.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the Syrian population was burdened by economic stress, including a high unemployment rate which was especially high for younger people, coupled with visible nepotism and wealth disparities.<sup>61</sup> Since the economy was largely controlled by the state, with state control of planning and distribution, many complaints against the market systems established were rightly placed on the government rather than firms or the wealthy class.<sup>62</sup> Finally, there was an element of social divisions along sectarian lines. Specifically, the complaint of a majority Sunni population to the actual and perceived favoritism offered to Alawites within Assad's government, especially with such a visible wealth advantage given to some Alawites.<sup>63</sup>

Assad's response to these demonstrations was sporadic. He was silent as his troops shot at civilians, until a few weeks after the original uprising when he publicly insulted the demonstrators and later the opposition as traitors, terrorists, and criminals.<sup>64</sup> It was this proclamation, and later supporting statements which led to increased radicalization later on. As Assad turned the language

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<sup>59</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 50.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>61</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 45-47.

<sup>62</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 26.

<sup>63</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>64</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 33.

more sectarian, the nature of the conflict changed.<sup>65</sup> It was in this response that Assad attempted to cement his support in the minority religious populations by reminding them of the dangers if he got overthrown. When violence continued Assad made several superficial concessions, enough to satisfy some of the older generations, but not enough to convince large portions of the population to abandon the uprising.<sup>66</sup>

In July and August 2011, several major turning points for Assad occurred. Turkey and Qatar abandoned their relationships with Assad, with Turkey's betrayal being more damaging since Turkey was a major supplier of arms.<sup>67</sup> On August 11, 2011, the US, among other Western nations, demanded for Assad to step down, with the US trapping itself as a player in the conflict under the assumption that Assad's regime was unstable and would fall quickly. Later that month, the Syrian National Council (SNC) was created in Istanbul, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, a historically anti-Assad organization with ties in other countries including Egypt.<sup>68</sup> July also witnessed the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) when a colonel defected from Assad's military released the announcement in a video.<sup>69</sup> In November 2011, the Arab League suspended Syrian membership, soon followed by sanctions.<sup>70</sup> By February 2012, the SNC was recognized as the representative of the Syrian people by over sixty countries.<sup>71</sup> The next few years see several attempts at a peace process. The first UN plan to be put in place was pioneered by Kofi Annan in April 2012. The first step was a ceasefire agreed upon April 12, 2012. It was reported broken within a month. By August 2012, the mission was recalled and the mandate ended.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 84.

<sup>66</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 55.

<sup>67</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 60.

<sup>68</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 72, 80.

<sup>69</sup> Backzo et al, *Civil War in Syria*, p. 34.

<sup>70</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 89.

<sup>71</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 46.

<sup>72</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 100.

Annan's second plan was the Geneva Communique which was an attempt to unite the opposition. This failed largely because external actors came to the table with conflicting views of what they would achieve. The US expected to create a blueprint for Assad's removal, while Russia anticipated Assad overseeing the transitional government as one of the members of the government to remain in place. In addition, there was an inability, or unwillingness, of the external powers to prioritize ending the conflict over their personal agendas.<sup>73</sup>

The SNC's ability to represent the population of Syria was fragile from the beginning, and failed to unite Syria's Kurds into their government, partially due to disagreement in the SNC over whether they should be included at all. Thus, a portion of the Kurdish population formed the Kurdish National Council, KNC in October of 2011.<sup>74</sup> Animosity between the Kurdish population and the Arab population drove a wedge between these two groups from both sides, making cooperation impossible from the beginning. An assault on Homs launched by the regime in February 2012 is largely recognized by the end of the beginning of the Civil war,<sup>75</sup> both a testament to the ambiguity which this conflict started with, as well as the sluggish recognition of this issue by the international community. In March 2012, the SNC abandoned its no violence policy in order to keep from further alienating itself from the forces on the ground. However, this was not enough to offset the little credibility which the SNC commanded and it was replaced in November by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), which included members of the SNC but kept them in the minority.<sup>76</sup> The SOC had issues from the start as well though. Qatar and Saudi Arabia fought for control of the organization and seats and leadership was based largely on whose patron gave more money rather than who was better suited or more

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<sup>73</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 101.

<sup>74</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>75</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 86.

<sup>76</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, pp. 88-90.

competent. The SOC was able to incorporate the KNC, although not until August of 2013.<sup>77</sup> In July 2012 the FSA attempted to capture Aleppo. However, this attempt was stalled by miscommunications and fragmentation within the opposition's militia. Also, Kurdish forces saw the conflict as the opportunity for them to claim a section of the city. In the resulting stalemate, there were three forces facing each other, the rebels, the regime, and the Kurds. Attempting to counteract the internal divisions, in December 2012 the FSA formed the Supreme Military Council to assist in organizing the militias.<sup>78</sup> The FSA's common complaint to the SNC, and later the SOC, was the inability of those political organizations to orchestrate and distribute a steady supply of arms and ammunition.<sup>79</sup> Although the two groups had largely the same agenda, save the alternate agendas being pushed in the SOC by Qatar and Saudi Arabia, there was division even among them. The SNC operated largely out of Turkey, and the SOC was in Qatar. The FSA was in Syria, on the ground, fighting daily and having to organize around sieges by the regime and power outages making communication difficult.

In summer of 2012, a Hezbollah commander was killed in Syria, forcing the US to acknowledge publicly an understanding that Hezbollah was operating in Syrian affairs in conjunction with the regime.<sup>80</sup> Also in August 2012, Obama identifies the use of chemical weapons as a red line past which the United States would have to interfere.<sup>81</sup> This was in response to a statement by Assad's government admitting to having a stockpile of chemical weapons, but insisting that those weapons would never be used on Syrian people but only on external actors should they invade Syria. This was received as a thinly-veiled threat to any western or opposition

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<sup>77</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 115.

<sup>78</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 128-129.

<sup>79</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 49.

<sup>80</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 157.

<sup>81</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 175-176.



foreign allies considering sending in substantial military support for the rebels.<sup>82</sup> This ‘red-line’ statement was important for two major reasons: (1) it signaled to the opposition that there was a point at which the US would get heavily involved, and (2) it signaled to Assad that there was a point up to which he could approach possibly up until he could cross it. From this notice on, it seemed that Assad was not deterred from using violence against his people but rather decided on how to do it conventionally so that he technically was not transgressing this boundary but butting up against it. Assad’s use of conventional military equipment against the population increased in the months after until in December of 2012, Assad used scud missiles against the rebels.<sup>83</sup> Later in December, the regime reportedly orchestrated a chemical attack on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, killing seven people.<sup>84</sup> Assad’s tactics during this time resembled brinkmanship, escalating the scale of his violence towards civilians slowly to gauge the international response. When nothing of significance came, he escalated further, until ultimately the regime used a chemical attack and no immediate reaction came.

It was not until March of 2013 that a mission to investigate the allegations of chemical weapons use was formed. This mission was led by the United Nations and initially formed not after Assad’s chemical attack in 2012, but rather after attacks in early 2013 which were allegedly orchestrated by the rebels against regime positions in Aleppo.<sup>85</sup> France and the UK urged the UN mission to investigate the regime for chemical attacks as well as the rebels. In April 2013, the US stated that they believed that chemical weapons had been used, alerting congress to this development. The UN mission did not arrive in Syria for five more months after its conception due to stalling from Assad. Three days after the UN mission arrived, on August 21, a large

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<sup>82</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 175.

<sup>83</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 176.

<sup>84</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 176.

<sup>85</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 93.

chemical attack was carried out killing 1,400 people in Damascus, with both the rebels and the regime blaming each other for the assault. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, the US and the UK send warships to the Mediterranean, four from the US and two from the UK, with the plan to commence a bombing campaign to last for 48 hours starting on September 2.<sup>86</sup> However, UK Prime Minister Cameron rushed to Parliament to get approval and was ill-prepared costing him the vote and the approval of Parliament to participate in the campaign. The UK withdrew their ships and the US sent two more to replace them. On August 30, Obama also decided to seek Congressional approval for this campaign before beginning this attack. The result of this move was to prompt senators and representatives to search out alternative possibilities to using military power, thus stalling the initial timeline.<sup>87</sup> The UN mission retreated in September, stating that their investigation yielded the conclusion that chemical weapons were being used, but did not specifically say by whom.<sup>88</sup> The combination of Obama's search for congressional approval, with the UN unwilling to assign blame for the chemical attacks resulted in September 2 coming and going without any US military intervention. Instead, the US and Russia organized a meeting with the goal of coming to an agreement regarding the role of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict. By October, under pressure from both the US and Russia, Assad agreed to destroy his chemical arsenal under the supervision of Russia and the US, completing this project by mid-2014.<sup>89</sup>

The second round of Geneva talks began January 2014. These talks were as unfruitful as their predecessor, with the major sticking point being the role of Assad in the government. The Syrian foreign minister, backed by Russia, argued that there was no entity which had the authority to withdraw the legitimacy of the president other than the Syrians themselves, so Assad's position

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<sup>86</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 179

<sup>87</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 180.

<sup>88</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 70.

<sup>89</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 178-180.

of power was not to be negotiated.<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, the US representative was adamant that it would be impossible for Assad to regain his legitimacy as the ruler of Syria after all that had happened in the past three years.<sup>91</sup> Notably, both regime representatives and SOC representatives were in attendance at the second round of the Geneva talks. This was significant however, unhelpful ultimately. Neither wanted to be there, but each were there under pressure from their external patrons. Assad's regime had been experiencing a successful swing of military victories relative to the ground lost in 2012 and 2013, and thus believed in his ability to win overall. The rebels were also under the assumption of their own impending victory, provided they could secure more aid from their supporters, namely the US.<sup>92</sup> With no true motivation on either side for the end of the conflict, nothing was achieved and a third round of talks were scheduled.

June 2014 sees the rise of the Islamic State, IS, and the entrance of a third class of participant in the conflict. IS, also known as ISIS meaning the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, but self-proclaimed the Islamic State, or simply IS, proclaimed its presence as an enemy both to the regime and the opposition, as well as a threat to Iraq, after capturing Mosul on June 10, 2014.<sup>93</sup> The IS moved to a central role on the international stage, receiving international attention for the brutality with which it shocked and bullied submission from its conquered territories.<sup>94</sup> The radicalism of the IS was appealing, especially to young men feeling trapped in their everyday lives, enticed by the opportunity to reinvent themselves in something completely new.<sup>95</sup> The threat of the IS shifted western attitudes towards the conflict, convincing the US to training to moderate Syrian rebels and increasing support for Iraqi forces. Domestically in the US and much of the west,

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<sup>90</sup> Nikolaos Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria*. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p. 141.

<sup>91</sup> Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 141.

<sup>92</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 193.

<sup>93</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, pp. 40, 58.

<sup>94</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 58.

<sup>95</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 72.

the publicity of IS's brutality stoked outrage and freed and even pressured western leaders, specifically the US to get involved.<sup>96</sup> The unique nature of the IS's entrance was that now every party involved was fighting a semblance of a two-front war. The rebels were specifically not allied with the IS, even the radical organizations such as the Nusra were more antagonistic towards the IS than anything. The regime was not allied with the IS since the IS ultimately wanted to compromise Syria's borders, but Assad used the distraction of the IS to the west to justify some of his attacks on rebel footholds, claiming they were targets related to the IS. Even the Kurdish forces fought the IS. Ultimately, the IS threatened everybody, and was threatened by everybody, although any cooperation of external powers against the IS did not facilitate a better effort towards reconciliation in Syria.

For the bulk of the end of 2014 and much of 2015, Assad was losing ground to the IS, the rebels were able to earn several hard-won victories over the regime, including capturing Idlib and moderate successes by the Saudi-backed moderate Southern Front.<sup>97</sup> There were even hints of issues within Assad's inner circle as his Political Security Directorate was mysteriously arrested and killed in April of 2015.<sup>98</sup> In response to these setbacks, which ultimately seemed to threaten Assad's position significantly, Russia intervenes in August of 2015.<sup>99</sup> The agreement between Russia and Assad initially seems like a cooperation in order to attack IS targets, by giving the Russian air force the ability to use a Syrian air base. This gives the appearance of a legitimate reason for Russia to be present in Syria, which Russia blatantly contrasts with any US presence, since the US was never invited by the 'legitimate' Syrian government, whereas Russia was.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, 207.

<sup>97</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 215-216.

<sup>98</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 215-216.

<sup>99</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 217.

<sup>100</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 217.

Russian aid was crucial, and the tide turned back in favor of the regime. In Aleppo, the regime, along with Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and Shia Iraqi forces fought the rebels in the west and the IS in the east. Russian soldiers also carried out diplomatic plans to try to woo rebel leaders back under Assad's reign by offering them humanitarian aid and resources.<sup>101</sup> Reports persisted about Russian attacks being aimed at rebel targets rather than the IS, but verifying those claims was difficult. Regardless, with Russian assistance, the regime was able to oust the rebels from the Latakia province entirely by January 2016. The Institute for the Study of War asserted in February 2016 that the presence of Russia in the fight had essentially "reset the military balance in Syria."<sup>102</sup>

In 2015 another organization developed supposedly with the intent to resolve the issues in Syria. This organization was called the International Syria Support Group and was led by the US and Russia as co-chairs out of Vienna. Notably, no Syrian representatives were actually present during the deliberations, but their foreign allies were.<sup>103</sup> At the last communiqué of this group in November of 2015, the ISSG agreed on the importance of a nationwide ceasefire and published a resolution "stressing that Syria's unity, independence, territorial integrity and secular character were fundamental, and that the political process should be Syrian-led and Syrian-owned and that the Syrian people should decide on the future of Syria."<sup>104</sup> This was problematic for a few reasons, but primarily many of the religious organizations within the opposition rejected these statements especially due to the inclusion of "secular character" as a fundamental aspect of Syrian government.<sup>105</sup> Regardless, it was this resolution that was unanimously agreed upon by the UNSC in December, being passed as UN resolution 2254.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 218-219.

<sup>102</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 219.

<sup>103</sup> Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>104</sup> Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 143.

<sup>105</sup> Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 143.

<sup>106</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 225.

In December of 2015, a greater development was made in Riyadh, where most of the opposition forces both within and outside of Syria were invited to meet.<sup>107</sup> From this meeting, many agreements were reached to a broad level of satisfaction amongst the different groups, but most importantly, a Higher Negotiations Council for the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, HNC, was formed and delegation from this council was selected to enter into communication with the regime. This move represented more cohesion than the opposition had previously enjoyed as well as a broad commitment to resolution, even that involving working with the regime.<sup>108</sup> Notably excluded from this conference was the Kurdish PYD. In response the PYD held their own conference and united other Kurdish forces as well as some Arab forces under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF, and a partner political organization named the Council of Democratic Syria, CDS.<sup>109</sup> Because of this, as well as some doubts as to the HNC's genuine control over opposition forces in Syria, the CDS and the HNC were essentially rival organizations of opposition, both with radical and moderate aspects, and neither cooperative with the other.

In this environment, the third round of Geneva talks began in February 2016. The new lead of these talks was Staffan de Mistura. The talks were initially stalled by HNC refusals to cooperate if their demands for humanitarian aid, lifting of sieges, and a cessation of Russian air strikes were not met first. These demands were not met, but the HNC was pressured into attendance anyways. Russia had also insisted on the inclusion of the CDS in the talks, but Turkey objected due to the CDS's connection with the PYD, ultimately resulting in the inclusion of CDS representatives not affiliated with the PYD. Initially, Mistura tried to avoid past mistakes of these conferences by having the parties meet with mediators before they ever met with each other, but this was so

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<sup>107</sup> Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 148.

<sup>108</sup> Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 148.

<sup>109</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 227.

disastrous that it was abandoned in two days. Part of the reason for this early failure was an attack launched on Aleppo by the regime at the same time, causing the HNC to threaten to leave and amidst accusations from Assad of being a puppet for Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>110</sup> The US and Russia pressured the talks to continue, ultimately salvaging them and agreeing to a ceasefire on February 11, which was notably not implemented until February 27, after Russia's attack had achieved its immediate ends in Aleppo. Also, the ceasefire was to exclude any attacks on the IS, which was considered a broader threat.<sup>111</sup> In March the talks resume, and Putin announces that he will be withdrawing his forces.<sup>112</sup> The third round of Geneva talks was effectively ended by a regime bombing of a civilian area causing the HNC to leave the talks in April 2016.<sup>113</sup>

Inevitably, domestic issues in the borders of the external actors bled into the Syrian conflict. In July 2016 a coup was attempted against Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which led to Erdogan claiming a state of emergency in Turkey, which gave him increased control over Turkish foreign policy, including policy regarding the Syrian issue. This resulted in Turkey launching Operation Euphrates Shield, which was a cooperative effort between Turkish military forces and a faction of the rebels, with tacit cooperation from Russia, which sought to push PYD and IS forces away from the Turkish border. This move was the first direct, occupying infringement on Syrian borders by another established state, which aggravated Assad, especially since Russia had allowed it to happen through a rapprochement with Turkey.<sup>114</sup> Turkey kept moving capturing several towns in northern Syria away from PYD and IS and in some cases the regime, until March 2017, when Erdogan claimed the end of Euphrates Shield.<sup>115</sup> However, this

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<sup>110</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 228.

<sup>111</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 228.

<sup>112</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 228.

<sup>113</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 234.

<sup>114</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 237.

<sup>115</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 238.

success was not one sided, and in return for Russia allowing Turkey to invade Syria, Turkey removed their support for the rebels in Aleppo, allowing the regime to recapture that lost territory in December 2016.<sup>116</sup> The fall of Aleppo was the first major loss suffered by the rebels which signaled their inability to win the war overall. As with other lost territories, a ceasefire was mediated with an agreement to allow rebels to be evacuated to Idlib, among other rebel-held areas.

The next major peace process undertaken began in summer 2016 between Turkey and Russia and was labeled the Astana peace process. These talks excluded Nusra, IS, SDC, and the western states. Between its beginning in 2016 and May of 2017, the Astana peace process negotiated a nationwide ceasefire, excluding Nusra and IS held territory, drafted a new constitution alongside Jaysh al-Islam, although that was dismissed, and created safe-zones which would be protected by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, stopping regime attacks and allowing humanitarian aid in.<sup>117</sup>

The Astana process did not invite the SOC or the HNC, but rather only invited fighting groups active in Syria, which helped to dispel any debate over the representative debate. While this process was going on, the fourth Geneva convention began in February of 2017, but it was quietly recognized to be a farse compared to Astana, where the real decisions were being made.<sup>118</sup>

2017 represented another turning point year for the war in Syria. A major shift was caused by the transfer of power in the US from Obama to Trump. Trump's campaign had championed a harsher approach to IS than Obama had taken with a heavier reliance on the full force of military intervention that the US was capable of. However, despite strong rhetoric interspersed with some rash statements, some argue that Trump's foreign policy was not too different from Obama's. One major difference was the attitude towards Russia, with Trump being more willing to be friendly to

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<sup>116</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 239.

<sup>117</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 241.

<sup>118</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 242.



the traditional US rival. With a renewed energy against IS, the rebels and the US-backed PYD fighters were able to regain several swaths of territory in late 2016 through the first half of 2017.<sup>119</sup> Also, Trump loosened restrictions on field commanders allowing them more autonomy over their targets and operations, which inevitably resulted in more civilian casualties than had been seen during Obama's administration, alongside the progress.<sup>120</sup> Thus, 2017 saw increased involvement by the US, but also by Russia. In July, Putin designated a third permanent military base within Syrian borders, while also negotiating a ceasefire with Trump and the US.<sup>121</sup> This was coupled with most involved parties in some way attacking IS territory to take it back, pushing IS further to the southeast in Syria, after SDF, Iraqi forces, rebels, and Assad had taken much of the territory in the rump of Syria back, as well as removing IS from Mosul in Iraq.<sup>122</sup> However, by July 2017, Trump decided to end the Pentagon's ongoing aid program to the rebels, Timber Sycamore, signaling the withdraw of the US. Other states including Saudi Arabia and Qatar ended comparable programs.<sup>123</sup> Operation Timber Sycamore was a program put in place by the Obama administration and run by the C.I.A. with the goal of arming and training the opposition in Syria.<sup>124</sup> The operation took over \$1 billion in the four years in which it was active, and was one of the most expensive and long-standing efforts of the U.S. in Syria. However, there was tension between the U.S. and Russia because of it, since arms and teams from Timber Sycamore were directly in conflict with

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<sup>119</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 243-245.

<sup>120</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 244.

<sup>121</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 252.

<sup>122</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 255-258.

<sup>123</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 263.

<sup>124</sup> Mark Mazzetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmidt. "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria." *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html>. Accessed April 22, 2021.

Russian forces on the ground. There is suspicion that this tension was a direct cause for Trump repealing the program, as a means of improving relations with Trump's ally, Putin.<sup>125</sup>

In January 2018, Russia tries to host another peace conference, but it was largely a failure. This was a result of both the SOC and the HNC boycotting it. However, the peace process did agree on the constitution of a new Constitutional Committee charged with drafting a new Syrian Constitution, and would include UN representatives, regime officials, and the opposition along with their foreign patrons. This agreement was promising but ultimately disappointing since arguments over who would be included in the committee chewed up two years, not allowing the committee to be selected until October 2019, when Assad had already destroyed most rebel strongholds.<sup>126</sup> In March 2018, Turkey invaded the self-proclaimed Turkish territory of Afrin, largely as a part of Erdogan's desperation to consolidate power in his position after narrowly winning a vote to change the constitution to give his position more power in 2017. This plan was also a result of the US decision announced January 15, 2018, to place a large military force along Syria's border with more than half of the troops coming from the SDF.<sup>127</sup> However, by invading Syrian borders Erdogan gave Syrian forces, both regime and opposition, a common enemy by not respecting the integrity of serious borders, which both Assad and the opposition agreed should be protected. This led to an unprecedented cooperation between the regime and the opposition. In March 2018, Assad allowed for SDF troops to pass through regime territory in order to combat Turkish forces occupying Afrin. This also operated as a distraction to Kurdish forces in the SDF that were combating Assad in Aleppo. So, when Turkey invaded Afrin they gave opposition forces another front to which they had to divert resources essentially leaving us Aleppo to Assad and

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<sup>125</sup> Mazetti et al., "'Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria.'" *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017.

<sup>126</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 262-264.

<sup>127</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 260.

eventually resulting in a loss for the opposition.<sup>128</sup> Ultimately Erdogan's occupation was supposed to result in a safe zone for Syrian refugees in Turkey to return to easing some of the burden which had been pressing on the Turkish economy since 2015.<sup>129</sup>

By the middle of 2018, Turkey was the only outside nation which remained heavily present in Syria, and it seemed as if the international community's attention span for Syrian had finally been spent. As Assad carried out attacks on the remaining rebel strongholds, including the Badia, where Dera'a is located, Rhastan, and Ghouta. Some of these attacks included chemical warfare undeniably and there were large death tolls, with more rebels being shipped to Idlib after their stronghold was defeated, leaving Idlib as the only remaining pocket of rebels.<sup>130</sup> The remaining strongholds of IS were hunted down in 2018, until finally, in February of 2019 the IS caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi escapes the siege of the last IS stronghold, only to kill himself with a bomb vest in October. The stronghold fell in March to the SDF marking the end of the IS.<sup>131</sup> The US continued to impose heavy sanctions on Syria through 2018 and into 2019 because of Assad, but no further significant military intervention to displace him was made.<sup>132</sup> Assad's attacks on Idlib were met with little international concern because of a historical understanding of Idlib as a town heavy with Al-Qaeda connections.<sup>133</sup>

As 2019 drew to a close, Idlib remained the only standing haven for the rebels. Assad launched an attack attempting to control the M5 highway – a major trade route and significant strategic advantage since it runs between Hama and Aleppo, right past Idlib, and was successful

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<sup>128</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 261.

<sup>129</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 262.

<sup>130</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 277.

<sup>131</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 259

<sup>132</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 283.

<sup>133</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 298.

in gaining complete control of the areas surrounding the M5 in February 2020.<sup>134</sup> Turkey was heavily invested in the rebels housed in Idlib at the end of 2019, having sunk time, money, and troops in protecting the area. Yet at the end of 2019, Assad essentially surrounded Idlib, with every other stronghold having fallen to him within the past two years.

At no point during the Syrian Civil War was the conflict viewed in a vacuum. The uprisings began in the context of the Arab Spring, so all parties involved, including the opposition, looked to other cases for insight as to what could happen. Notably, foreign actors equated the Syrian position to those seen in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. However, this comparison was mistaken, A common theme in the deliberations of the foreign actors was the lack of insight to the structure of the Syrian government and the Syrian population.

First, the population of Syria and Bashar al-Assad are fundamentally different than any other nation in the Arab world. The population of Syria is not as homogenous as those of Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. From the beginning of the demonstrations in 2011, it was clear that the uprising was not a popular revolution of all the people against a small coalition surrounding the oppressive leader. Not all Syrian's protested, and some even orchestrated pro-Assad rallies early on, which were held in Damascus and parts of Aleppo. Assad's government was designed to give large portions of the population reason to desire the continuation of his regime for the implicit protections which they enjoyed. Some of Assad's economic reforms benefited the middle class broadly, especially those in urban areas often at the expense of rural citizens. Some tribes in Syria chose to back the regime based on the history of patronage that that tribe held with Assad. Some Syrians supported Assad's foreign policy enough to overlook the damage he was doing domestically. His anti-Western and anti-Israeli rhetoric was appealing to many in Arab

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<sup>134</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 300.

communities that felt victimized by the West. In a majority Sunni Muslim Arab world, Assad had strategically positioned himself as a counterweight for Shi'a Muslims and other minorities.<sup>135</sup> Many religious minorities enjoyed protections under Assad that were unprecedented and even impossible in the past or in other states. Christians, Alawites, and Shi'a had reason to fear the establishment of a hostile Sunni government in a pendulum swing away from the Alawite government that Assad led. At best, these religious minorities could expect to become second-class citizens in the wake of a new Sunni government, and at worst, there was reason to fear ethnic cleansing.<sup>136</sup> Finally, Assad's Syria was oppressive, autocratic, and at times brutal, but it was stable. The expectation of the government was stagnant and although it was not good, it was not volatile the way the government of revolving coups was prior to 1970.<sup>137</sup> Assad leaned on these benefactors in order to try and counter the rebels, and his weak promises of reform were meant to turn the pro-Assad citizens against the opposition, framing them as terrorists in the face of a reformist government.

After the division in the population based on support for Assad, there was further division in the opposition itself. Prior to the conflict, Syria was lauded for the diversity of its population with many referring to Syria as a 'mosaic.'<sup>138</sup> This continues to be true, and many of these diverse people groups and beliefs were able to coexist relatively peacefully for centuries in the past. At the start of the Syrian Civil War, the population of Syria was 74% Sunni, 12% Alawi, 9% Kurdish Sunni, 3% Shi'a groups, 10% Christian, and 3% Druze.<sup>139</sup> However, these divisions led to the fragmentation of the opposition. There are four major divides that have the ability to fragment the

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<sup>135</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 83.

<sup>136</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>137</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>138</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 9.

<sup>139</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 10.

Syrian population: (1) religious government vs secular government, (2) Sunni vs Shi'a, Alawite, Christian, Druze, etc., (3) Kurdish vs Arab, and (4) rural vs urban.<sup>140</sup> There are degrees to which large portions of the population subscribe to either side of these divides or to the idea that there should exist animosity between the groups, making them spectrums rather than hard lines. A way to view the fragmentation of the groups could be to try to identify all of the possible combinations of these four major arguments. For each combination, there are groups for the degree to which they are radical in their beliefs, so even groups that agree broadly, they would still fragment based on how radical or moderate parts of the group are. Then, as fragmentation yields more issues, different groups would try to unite under the umbrella of larger groups, creating coalitions with cross-purposes. For example, Jaysh al-Fatah is a coalition of different jihadist groups which includes al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, both of which are radical groups. However, Jaysh al-Fatah also included more moderate groups who were Sunni, but disagreed with the radical demands of a strictly Sunni religious government, or were more willing to fight for a democracy rather than a theocratic regime.<sup>141</sup> However they were still included in this coalition while working towards a different goal than their radical co-members.

Bashar al-Assad was also a different type of ruler than those overthrown in Libya or Egypt, and his regime a different type of regime. Assad's regime had been born through his father in the 1970s from an era of revolving coups. The government had been taken over, betrayed, and reconquered so many times, that Hafez al-Assad knew his biggest threat was his own government and his own military. Moreover, the government of Syria is a minority regime governing a majority. The role of sectarianism appears here again as the dynamic of an Alawite dominated government ruling a Sunni majority state differentiates Syria from other nations touched by the

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<sup>140</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 50.

<sup>141</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 50.

Arab Spring.<sup>142</sup> This also feeds into an issue of ultimate concessions. It has been noted that Assad's actions exhibit extreme stubbornness regarding his resolve to remain in power. However, the support for Assad is represented in the minority populations of Syria. Thus, accountability of the government to its people as a solution does not hold any power, when a majority of citizens have no interest in compromising with a minority.<sup>143</sup> In light of this, the structure of the government and the employees within it were designed to prevent any type of betrayal seen in Libya or Egypt.<sup>144</sup> The structure of the elite forces, especially the security Mukhabarat, was designed so that none acted with autonomy. The Mukhabarat are an elite fighting force, begun by Hafez al-Assad. This group was also the recipient of several of the common complaints of the Syrian people regarding their brutality and intimidation of Syrian citizens. There were fifteen different divisions of the Mukhabarat in 2011, and each division was charged with spying on the others, so that any potential traitors were quickly sought out and the possibility of an entire unit defecting was nearly inconceivable. The regime suffered defections in beginning on a large scale in 2012 and continuing in bulk until 2015 when they became less common, but still significant. However, while individuals chose to abandon the military, there were no accounts of entire units defecting and thus bringing their unity and equipment to the opposition.<sup>145</sup> In response to the protests, the Mukhabarat were placed with the regular Syrian troops with orders to shoot any soldier unwilling to fire on the civilians. This was the relationship of the elite fighting forces with the regular Syrian army, and exemplifies their loyalty to the regime over the people. Assad structured his protection of the elites

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<sup>142</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 78.

<sup>143</sup> Walter, Barbara. "Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 7. (Sage Publications, 2015) p. 1246.

<sup>144</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 51.

<sup>145</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 126.

of society and the government, his close comrades, and the elite divisions of the military so that their loyalty could be assumed.<sup>146</sup> This was unlike any other government.

Assad's regime had been created and designed to prevent the possibility of a coup, and in addition had the support of Iran and Russia. Moreover, Assad and his father had built this regime and the legacy that Hafez al-Assad had left to Bashar was significant. Bashar al-Assad had no intention of letting this legacy end with him, and the abdication of the throne was never an option to Assad, as it may have been to other rulers during the Arab Spring. Assad was entrenched, and would "rather rule rubble than not rule."<sup>147</sup>

Assad's relationship with Russia and Iran was also different than any external actor, including his allies, was prepared for. Both these nations supplemented his military, and Russia kept the United Nations Security Council from being able to pass possibly effective resolutions. Russia's loyalty to Assad had several sources, but the most commonly cited reason for such cemented support is Russia's desire to counter the U.S. as a regional power. Because of American history in the Middle East, perceived or accurate, the U.S. has a position of power in the Middle East unparalleled by any other western country. With the U.S. in a period of retrenchment, Russian officials saw an opportunity to fill the vacuum, with Syria as the seat of Russian power in the Middle East. Iran similarly wanted regional power, but was also bound to the regime along sectarian lines, as both Iranian and Syrian governments are considered Shi'a Islamic. Because of this, Assad had firm support from both, and neither Russia nor Iran had much in common outside of their support for Assad, Assad was able to remain a free agent, susceptible to pressure from either ally but far from a puppet. Assad's actions were often unilateral and he proved difficult to restrain. Despite the public disapproval from Russia on the use of chemical warfare, or blatant

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<sup>146</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>147</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 284.



brutality on civilian populations, Assad continued to use underhanded tactics and to attack civilian targets, including hospitals and civilian centers, allegedly aided by Russia in some cases.<sup>148</sup> Iran was unable to entirely take over military operations, but rather had to settle for a supplementary role with input on training and tactics. Neither Russia nor Iran had enough unilateral sway over Assad to force him to make concessions or reform of a meaningful scale or to maintain ceasefire agreements. However, with their unwavering support, Assad had an advantage over other autocratic leaders in that he could not be fully isolated, and he was even advocated for by a member of the UNSC.

Research suggests that the optimal time for a political solution mediated by a third party would be within a narrow window of time.<sup>149</sup> As a revolution grows, it is nearly inevitable that the ratio of moderate oppositionists to radicals will be pushed towards the radical side. This results from public outrage at the increasingly brutal actions of the leader taken in order to maintain control.<sup>150</sup> A second trend expected in revolutions is the weakening of the resolve of security forces and military forces as they are likely increasingly asked to commit questionable acts in defense of a leader in whom they are losing confidence. Thus, with a decreasingly loyal security force and depleted military force, a dictator would be susceptible to doubts as to his ability to win the conflict at a reasonable cost.<sup>151</sup> A political solution would be most effective before the opposition is radicalized to the point of the radical element having more control than the moderates, but after the dictator has had enough time to lose sufficient forces and doubt his own abilities and the mounting costs of maintain his position.<sup>152</sup> Examining these two trends in the Syrian conflict

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<sup>148</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 234.

<sup>149</sup> John Orme. *Political Instability and American Foreign Policy: The Middle Options*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) , p. 120.

<sup>150</sup> Orme, *Political Instability and American Foreign Policy*, p. 120.

<sup>151</sup> Orme, *Political Instability and American Foreign Policy*, p. 120.

<sup>152</sup> Orme, *Political Instability and American Foreign Policy*, p. 120.

reveals a very interesting phenomenon which is a direct consequence both of the characterization of the opposition as well as the government and character of Assad.

For the first trend, radicalization occurred within the first two years among elements of the opposition, but it could be argued that the truly damaging radicalization was not until 2014, when the Islamic State emerged. Assad's response to the initial protests created a denominational cleavage between the protesters and any religious or ethnic minority within Syria.<sup>153</sup> Assad specifically framed the uprising as a Sunni attempt to overthrow the minority-dominated regime.<sup>154</sup> While this did not immediately radicalize the opposition, it did impact the way that the uprising was viewed by the regime and their supporters, and those of a minority who had not chosen whom to support yet. By characterizing the conflict in this way, Assad effectively sunk the possibility of a settlement involving compromise or a peaceful transfer of power.<sup>155</sup> The important and elite sections of the military were, by design, not Sunni and thus Assad made their safest option aligning themselves with Assad. Assad's choice to respond with brutality was not surprising to those who had taken to the streets. This brutality made marginal groups which already espoused violence more attractive to the population, especially young men, who were enraged by the actions of the Mukhabarat. Because of their allure, by March 2012, the SNC was forced to abandon its policy of non-violence for to maintain it would be to further alienate the aspiring governing body from the forces on the ground in Syria.<sup>156</sup> It is important to remember that the SNC was not operating on the ground in Syria but rather was comprised of Syrian nationals across the border in Turkey. So for forces on the ground, it was men who were not in direct danger ordering them to abstain from violence when their enemy was showing no such restraint. From that perspective, the impatience

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<sup>153</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 84.

<sup>154</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 85.

<sup>155</sup> Feldman, *The Arab Winter*, p. 85.

<sup>156</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 111.

of the ground forces is understandable, as well as their frustration during this time with the SNC, and later with the SOC.<sup>157</sup> As the opposition's radical forces became the loudest and best organized, including the Kurdish PYD, the moderate fighters were shown to be less effective and less organized, manifesting in the constant reorganization of the moderate opposition political leadership. With more frustration with moderate leadership, and the comparative successes of the radical groups, membership in moderate resistance forces suffered, spurring the SNC to their abandonment of non-violence. Even with the SNC supporting fighting groups, there was no shortage of participation from jihadist groups. As more jihadist groups joined the opposition, it was more difficult for international actors to contribute money and training to the opposition as the likelihood of that support going to groups labeled as jihadist or terrorist. Moreover, by the end of 2012 several militias had formed by splintering from the FSA, who had become disillusioned by the FSA and many of which favored an Islamist ideology.<sup>158</sup> What worsened this situation was the lack of discipline which haunted the FSA and more moderate katibas, or militia groups. Many radical groups included allusions to the looting, crime, rapes, and warlord-type activity which accompanied several of these ideologically moderate groups into their occupied territories.<sup>159</sup> This fracturing was to be expected from what began as a leaderless organization with a strategically decentralized structure.<sup>160</sup>

The second trend never fully came to fruition. While Assad's forces did diminish, the losses were not substantially enough for his regime to be destabilized. In addition, any lack of consistency in his forces was made up for by his allies, especially Iran early in the conflict. In May 2015, when

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<sup>157</sup> Van Dam, *Destroying a Nation*, p. 147.

<sup>158</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 130.

<sup>159</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 131.

<sup>160</sup> Backzo, Adam, Gilles Dorronsoro, and Arthur Quesnay. *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 37.

he did begin to doubt and even admit to the troubles faced in his military, it was only a matter of months before Russia established a significant military and air force presence to supplement Assad's forces.<sup>161</sup> Because of the structure of the Mukhabarat and the intense coup-proofing which informed the fundamental structure of institutions in Assad's government, Assad did not have to be worried about his entire military betraying him, as was seen in other governments subjected to the Arab Spring, such as Egypt and Libya. Thus, it could be argued that there was no good time for a political solution to be put in place since there was no favorable intersection of these two circumstances to facilitate it, in addition to the other obstacles present.

Despite this situation, there was no lack of participation of international actors, although their participation was not always fruitful. With all of the international intervention, there was none strong enough or consistent enough to act as a sufficient counter to either the regime or the opposition. At the encouragement of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, the rebels escalated the fighting to the level of a full-fledged war under the false premise that the Americans would come and put an end to Assad the way that they orchestrated the attacks against Gaddafi in Libya. In 2011, the international community viewed the intervention in Libya as a success, with Qatar especially championing the victory as a result of Doha's leadership. This promise was corroborated early on by the declaration led by Obama for Assad to step down made in August 2011.<sup>162</sup> This signaled to both Russia and Iran that western intervention was imminent. However, rather than deterring participation, this only encouraged the two anti-US states to solidify their agreement to back Assad's regime, sweetening the agreement with the promise of directly contradicting the US. Russia and Iran, and China to a lesser degree, were adamant on the preservation of Assad's rule, while the US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and many of the other western states were adamant

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<sup>161</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 213.

<sup>162</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 76.

about his removal, but not much else. This is evidenced by the sluggish international response to reports of chemical warfare against civilians, as well as the many failed Geneva conventions, which ultimately resulted in the creation of ineffective committees or ceasefires which were thinly veiled advantages to the regime and Russia. Ultimately the western states did not want to get involved. Saudi Arabia and Qatar wanted to be involved but only so far as their interests carried them. Once the opportunity for regional leadership had passed attention from these two initially involved nations turned back to other disputes, namely disputes amongst themselves.

Turkey was heavily invested in the opposition, and was the only one left after late 2017. When Turkey operated within Syria though, there was a constant and apparently insurmountable divide preventing complete cooperation between Turkey and the rebels. The inclusion of Kurdish groups within the opposition essentially ensured a divide from Turkey, since Turkish animosity towards Kurdish groups overwhelmed Turkey's desire to support the downfall of Assad. This was evident with the continuation of Turkish trade with Russia, as well as the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia achieved in 2016 to allow Turkey to fight Kurdish forces and Assad to regain Aleppo, alongside Russia.<sup>163</sup> However, Turkey was invested in the rebels, and in the fall of Assad, although that demand was eventually dropped in 2016 as regime advances heavily outweighed rebel victories against the regime.<sup>164</sup> Turkey was the primary recipient of the waves of refugees fleeing the conflict and as the cost mounted, Turkey became more desperate to alleviate this strain, ultimately invading Syria as no nation, besides the IS, had done for the entirety of the conflict.

Finally, the US policy for the majority of the conflict showed extreme caution and hesitation. Although that policy is not necessarily unwarranted given recent US history, including the occupation of Iraq, as well as a domestic trend favoring a less internationally involved US, it

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<sup>163</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 238.

<sup>164</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 236.

is contradicting to the perception of US power in the Middle East, as well as the confrontational messages given by both presidents during this time. The perception of US power and presence was still very much alive in the Middle East, despite the popularity of anti-Western Arab states.<sup>165</sup> However, that perception was met with the reality of inaction after strong rhetoric condemned Assad. Even the unilateral military strikes ordered by Trump were symbolic largely, and did not aim to or achieve crippling the regime and its allies. Any damage done in the airstrikes on the air bases was minimal and did not interrupt its functionality for more than a few days.<sup>166</sup> While the official reason was to protect the norm of not using chemical attacks, this action, although actually moderate, was more intense than any his predecessor had attempted after he had backed away from the red line transgression in 2013.<sup>167</sup> However, both of these actions, Obama leading warships into the Mediterranean and Trump firing on air bases, were not sufficient to alter any course of the war. Rather they were warnings, or threats, with little intention of actually removing Assad as a result.

The most involved states were Russia and Iran. Iran sent military support, leadership, equipment, and training to Assad; however, this was largely able to supplement his military's losses due to defecting and lack of leadership and training. If this was the extent to which Iran could offer support in full, then it was sufficient to keep Assad propped up but not enough to quickly eradicate the rebels. Russia sent money, troops, and air support, but again not enough to end the war. Russia's involvement was enough to be considered permanent, as is evidenced by the permanent military bases established in Syria, but not enough to end the war. The near-constant engagement of conferences discussing Syrian issues made it difficult for Russia to justify a long-term openly violent against the rebels' strategy, while simultaneously, supposedly, urging peace

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<sup>165</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 17.

<sup>166</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 248.

<sup>167</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 180.

and trying to negotiate a ceasefire. There is evidence though, that while under the guise of fighting the IS, Russian forces targeted rebel strongholds and even violated international law by targeting hospitals in 2016.<sup>168</sup> Regardless, none of Russia's intervention was sufficient enough to earn a largescale public outcry against them, possibly because of media manipulation but mostly because of the muted and sluggish response from the West, who continued not to want to get entangled in this issue. This was made even more glaring when Trump came to office in the US. Trump's policies regarding Russia were much more willing to cooperate and find common ground than his predecessor's. Trump adopted a hard-line against Iran, but never against Russia. So even when Trump was actively engaged in Syria in the first half of 2017, none of his attacks were aimed at Russian property and there is evidence that Trump warned Russia ahead of time so as not to put strain on their relationship.<sup>169</sup>

Ultimately, no level of disagreement over Syrian issues was sufficient to fully end regional relationships with external patrons, such as with Turkey and Russia. Involvement from Assad's allies were enough to keep him operating, but not enough to convince concession by the opposition. Involvement from the allies of the opposition was enough to continue to give the opposition hope for success, but not enough to actually deliver that success, until essentially all of the support was withdrawn, nearly 7 years after the fighting had begun. Simultaneously, external rivalries and ambitions shaped the involvement of the external players perpetuating their presence in the hopes of getting what they initially wanted from the situation in the first place.

The external actor who did make a significant impact on the conflict, although not in the same way as the allies of the belligerents, was the Islamic State. In June of 2014, the establishment of the Islamic State created another player in the Syrian conflict. However, the Islamic State was

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<sup>168</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 234.

<sup>169</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 247.

fundamentally different from any other external actor, and thus IS interaction in Syria had multiple consequences. First, the IS appeared as another group trying to establish dominance over Syrian land. This ambition was not in response to an oppressive government or in defense against the rebels, but rather this was a part of a larger goal of creating the Caliphate, an entity with full cohesion between religion and politics and no differentiation between the two. The Caliph, Baghdadi, did not recognize the sovereignty or legitimacy of any modern state, so there was no intention to combat Assad for Assad's crimes, but rather to take Syrian land because "Syria" did not matter in the wake of the Caliphate. This poised IS against both the opposition and the regime.

Moreover, the Islamic State issued global orders toward Muslims all over the world, which drew international attention to the threat which the IS posed. So, the IS was not only against the regime, and the opposition, and Iraq, where they also took territory, but also was perceived to be against the world. The Islamic State was also organized, well-funded, well-trained, and effective, with methods which were stealthy, surprising, and brutal which lent to their ability to recruit and to establish sleeper cells which kept the international community on edge. The Islamic State retained a quality which made it more threatening to established states than the Syrian opposition: it was cohesive. The structure of the IS government was not conducive to criticism, and any opposition to the Caliph or the Caliphate was seen as treason and risked harsh punishment. The state was governed by Shari'a law which extends beyond typical state jurisdiction in to personal matters, with clear punishments for transgressions. Shari'a also demands a certain process by which the accused are proven guilty before the administration of punishment. Any who critiqued Baghdadi and his followers for their interpretation of the law and the religion were undoubtedly labeled traitors and punished.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Sorenson, *Syria In Ruins*, p. 66.



With the IS in play, everyone had a new enemy and a new threat. Even radicals within the opposition distanced themselves from the IS and actively confronted them. The IS introduced a drain on resources as well. When Mosul was taken, many Iraqi Shia militias were recalled to Iraq in order to defend their homes, since the IS threat at home took precedence over fighting a foreign war.<sup>171</sup> While this disadvantaged the regime initially, when Russia entered the fray, in 2015, much of Putin's justification was his intention to assist in the fight against the IS at the behest of the Syrian government.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, attacks on the IS were repeatedly cited as the reason for firing on certain areas in Syria by the regime, so no ceasefire agreement was a true ceasefire, since none of them recognized Nusra or IS as protected. This allowed the regime, and, in some cases, the rebels to continue raids and fighting during "ceasefires" until the agreements inevitably collapsed. In this way the IS undermined many of the attempts of the political entities to stop the bloodshed long enough to talk.

The IS also acted as a distraction. With its radical claims and orders to Muslim populations all over the world, there was good reason for the fight against the IS to be prioritized over goals in Syria. It was also easier to mobilize support for the fight against the IS, especially after the public attacks in Paris in 2015, and all over Europe around the same time. At that time, there was a near constant barrage of IS threats all over the world, and while only a fraction were successfully carried out, it was enough for populations to support their governments operating a foreign military campaign in order to eradicate the organization. Thus, much of US and European attention was given to that end.<sup>173</sup> This distraction also allowed Turkey to begin to give support to more radical organizations in Syria, such as Ahrar al-Islam,<sup>174</sup> since the US was not really looking and thus did

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<sup>171</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 202.

<sup>172</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 215.

<sup>173</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 224.

<sup>174</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 215.

not object. However, this ultimately served to distance Turkey from the US even more, feeding the eventual departure of the US from the conflict overall.

While the states were still scrambling to re-allocate resources, and the fight between belligerents still raged in Syria, also occupying Iraqi forces, the IS was highly successful. The chaos that gave it the opportunity to be born also perpetuated its early successes.<sup>175</sup> Ultimately, however, IS became the focus of all international efforts. With little external support, no air force, and dwindling resources, the IS fell. The IS could only thrive in chaos, but when its opponents became organized and were able to utilize their resources, the IS could not measure up to their abilities. However, while it was able to remain viable, the IS prolonged the suffering of the Syrian people, as another actor just trying to get what they could from the opportunity presented in the turmoil.

While most of this paper has discussed the political processes behind the events in the Syrian Civil War, it is important to remember that while all of these discussions were happening, and committees were being formed, dissolved, renamed, restructured, and disputed, civilians were dying at the hands of both the rebels and the regime. So, who won the Syrian Civil War? Assad did not win. His government has been devastated, and his reputation has been completely lost. His security forces are a fraction of what they were a decade ago, and even if he retains control of the state, the heavy sanctions being imposed on him currently and that will inevitably continue to be imposed on his regime are costly and harmful to the already crashing Syrian economy. The rebels did not win. At the close of 2019, Idlib is all that remains of rebel territory. Assad is still in power, and hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost in combat, as collateral damage, as prisoners, from torture, from raids and looting. Millions have been displaced and many of the beautiful relics

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<sup>175</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p. 258.

housed in the world's oldest city, Damascus, have been destroyed. Iran and Russia did not get what they wanted. Iran has been greatly weakened, and Russia did not gain a positive reputation in the Arab world, even if they were able to preserve some of their contacts in the Middle East, the Russian reputation will be associated with Assad and the brutality of Assad's campaign against his own people. Saudi Arabia and Qatar did not win. Their leadership roles were dissolved and neither was able to effectively end the conflict through their leadership roles when they did have them. No foreign power was involved enough to win, so it is also true that no foreign power lost a significant amount in the outcome of the war. Possibly Turkey would have lost the most due to Erdogan's heavy investment in the rebels and occupation of Syrian territory. So, if nobody won, who lost the most? The answer there is easy: the Syrian people. The Syrian population sacrificed the most, only to have the reason for their sacrifice to remain in place as their leader. The Syrian Civil War was devastating and prolonged. Ultimately this conflict represents a failure of the international system to affect the establishment of order, despite continued involvement, although often half-hearted involvement. The UNSC as essentially crippled since one of the members was an ally of Assad, which limited the effectiveness of the UN forces. The US was in the process of abdicating its position as a leader in the Middle East and thus did not want to take the lead or make any sufficient impact, and every leader who emerged trying to fill that role could not. Ultimately, the international system failed the people of Syria.

So, why did this conflict get so bad? First, Assad designed his nation and his regime to withstand a coup, and thus was prepared for a threat to his rule long before the mass protests started. Syria itself is a diverse nation but no official avenue for political opposition, thus when war started, the opposition remained decentralized and yet stubborn. This kept the opposition difficult to defeat and yet unlikely to win. Second, international actors on the side of Assad did

not let him fall victim to his people or to the international community's disapproval of him. The international actors on the side of the opposition were involved enough to give the opposition hope for another nation or organization to act as a saving grace but not enough to displace Assad and his allies. Finally, the growth of the Islamic State in the middle of the Civil War created an international distraction, an obstruction to the implementation of effective ceasefires, and a third enemy competing with every other actor in the vicinity for control of Syrian land. These characteristics of the situation differentiated Syria from other Arab nations who experienced effects of the Arab Spring, and the persistence and stamina of the combatants now leaves Syria in a bloody stalemate. While this is only a chapter in Syrian history, this is an important one. There is hope that stability will come to the weary and berated Syrian people, and that this war will end. However, Syria will likely never return to what the nation was before, and that may be a good thing.

