The Political Science of Syria's War

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PROJECT ON
Middle East Political Science

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Henry Luce Foundation. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.

The Political Science of Syria's War

Syria is about to enter its third year of a brutal conflict which has killed more than 100,000 people and driven millions from their homes. What began as a peaceful civil uprising inspired by the successful Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings has long since devolved into a complex, protracted civil war fueled by an array of external interventions on all sides. It's hardly the first complex civil war to scar the modern world, though. Indeed, the study of civil wars is arguably among the richest current research programs in all of political science.

So what does the political science literature on civil wars and insurgencies have to say about Syria's evolving war and how it might be ended? To find out, last month I convened a workshop through the Project on Middle East Political Science (which also sponsors the Middle East Channel). I invited more than a dozen of the leading scholars of civil wars to write memos applying their research to the Syrian case. These scholars were joined by a number of Syria specialists, and a range of current and former U.S. government officials with responsibility for Syria.

This special POMEPS Brief collects the memos prepared for that conference, along with several articles previously published on the Middle East Channel. The overall conclusion of most of the contributors will come as no surprise: The prospects for either a military or a negotiated resolution of Syria's war are exceedingly grim. But that's only part of the story. More interesting, perhaps, are the reasons that Syria seems so resistant to resolution — and how international policies have contributed to the problem.

People like me often throw around political science findings like "negotiated settlements fail 68 percent of the time" or "external support for insurgents typically makes conflicts longer and bloodier." But hold up. Those findings only really apply if the universe of cases is roughly comparable — and Syria proves remarkably difficult to compare in all its dimensions. Few, if any cases, resemble Syria's combination of a relatively coherent regime with strong external supporters controlling the capital and the strategic territorial core of the country, while a variety of competing local opposition factors and foreign jihadist factions drawing on diverse external supporters fight over control of the rest. The closest comparisons — Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Congo in the 2000s — offer absolutely dismal prospects for the coming decade.

At the same time, many features of Syria which seem unique really aren't. The fragmentation and internal battles of the opposition are entirely typical. So are the pernicious effects of uncoordinated external support to armed insurgency factions. The targeting of civilians for tactical reasons and the politicization of humanitarian assistance is grimly familiar. There is nothing unusual about the emergence of political economies of war, the consolidation of local warlords and profiteers, or the relentless slide toward extremism. And by comparative standards, at less than three years running, Syria's war is still young.

So what did the collected brain trust of civil war scholarship see in Syria? First, the intensity of the violence against civilians and the enormous scale of displacement are typical of the type of war waged in Syria for the first couple of years — but this could change along with the nature of the war. The regime violence is so intense and barbaric in part because it aims not only at militarily defeating insurgent opponents or capturing lost territory, but also to block rebel efforts to build legitimate alternative governance structures. As Vassar's Zachariah Mampilly points out, rebels have a strong political incentive to demonstrate that they can provide services and stability in areas they control, while the regime has just as strong a reason to undermine those efforts through indiscriminate rocket fire, denial of humanitarian aid, and other seemingly irrational military acts.

Meanwhile, the highly fragmented nature of the insurgency makes it completely unsurprising to see rebel groups often fighting against each other more than against the regime. Rebel groups do want to overthrow a hated regime, but they also fear that their intra-insurgency rivals will win the fruits of victory. As MIT's Fotini Christia has documented in cases from Afghanistan to Bosnia, rebel groups that lack a legitimate and effective over-arching institutional structure almost always display the kind of rapidly shifting alliances and "blue on blue" violence which have plagued Syria.

Even if the war drags on, Stanford's James Fearon suggests, the toll on civilians may begin to decline as the conflict settles into a more conventional war with better defined front lines. The University of Virginia's Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl argues that rebel factions are most likely to engage in fratricidal violence when they feel safe from the regime, so their declining fortunes could conceivably impose an unwanted truce among bitter rivals. Violence could also fade as local power relations settle into more predictable patterns, since, as Yale's Stathis Kalyvas and others have argued, much of the violence typically understood as part of a master narrative of civil war is actually highly local with a wide, diverse range of local, selfish motivations.

The fragmentation and internal fighting of Syria's opposition is, again, typical of a certain type of civil war — the type least amenable to diplomatic resolution, most open to unconstructive foreign meddling, and least likely to produce post-war stability. This fragmentation was built in to the early nature of the uprising, and then exacerbated by foreign interventions. Syria's uprising broke out across the country in a highly localized way, with little real centralized leadership or institutional cohesion. The initial lack of cohesion had long-lasting implications, as the University of Chicago's Paul Staniland argues, "Once a parochial structure is in place, factional unification is extremely challenging."

Syria's uprising by some standards held together more than many would have expected, as Northwestern's Wendy Pearlman notes, particularly in the early period before armed insurgency fully overtook civil protest. But the pressures of war and the uncoordinated arming of the opposition broke apart this social (if not institutional) unity in highly predictable ways. External

support for a unified, organized rebel movement might be a source of strength, but as Staniland argues, that is rarely the case for fragmented rebellions. Where there is no single point of entry for foreign money and guns, as Pearlman puts it, self-interested external powers "typically use material support to gain influence over groups within the opposition, if not bring new groups into existence." Those resources empower the local players, but make them dependent on the interests and agendas of their foreign sponsors. This is no mystery to Syrians, Pearlman found in her research, "Disheartened Syrian citizens lament that fragmentation in the sources and distribution of money to the revolt is the single greatest cause of disunity within its ranks."

Many have argued that the United States might have changed all of this by offering more support for the Free Syrian Army. But Stanliand is dubious: "Groups with strong organizational structures will take resources and effectively use them; groups with weak organizations will erupt in battles over cash and turf when given the exact same resources. Pumping material support into parochial groups might buy some limited cooperation from factions that need help but is unlikely to trigger deep organizational change. This means that foreign backing for undisciplined groups will not do much." This suggests that Washington was right to prioritize the creation of a viable, effective Syrian political opposition — and helps explain why those efforts failed.

The foreign support for the Syrian rebels has thus produced what Schulhofer-Wohl views as the worst of all possible worlds: "modest external military support to the Syrian opposition … has in fact exacerbated the dangers of fratricidal infighting and the rise of extremist groups. Military aid to the Syrian opposition has sustained its fight against the Assad regime. In some areas, opposition groups have secured strong defensive positions. In this military posture, the rebels ensure their survival against the regime but lack the ability to defeat it in decisive battles." Barring direct military intervention by the United States or some other dominant military power — which almost all the contributors view as extremely unlikely — the literature suggests that the arming of a fragmented Syrian insurgency is likely to make the war longer, bloodier, and less open to resolution … just as such attempts to arm fragmented opposition has repeatedly done in other cases.

Most contributors are deeply pessimistic about the prospect for ending Syria's civil war any time soon. Syria has among the worst possible configurations: a highly fragmented opposition, many veto players and spoilers, and foreign actors intervening enough to keep the conflict raging but not enough to decisively end the war. Maryland's David Cunningham points to the number of "veto players" in Syria, actors who can derail a settlement if their interests are not met. Fearon notes the centrality of the "completely typical" commitment problem inherent in any negotiated agreement, in which neither side can possibly trust the other to not continue the killing if they lay down arms. Opposition such as Syria's, Fearon explains, almost always pushes for regime change rather than promises of reform because it correctly believes that the dictator will renege on commitments as soon as the threat to his survival has passed. Fragmented oppositions make this even more intense, as Maryland's Kathleen Cunningham notes, since there is little reason to

expect the political opposition to be able to enforce a deal on its own side. Without some sort of international peacekeeping force, it is difficult to envision how these fears could be overcome. It is a small wonder that UCSD's Barbara Walter concludes that, "the likelihood of a successful negotiated settlement in Syria is close to zero."

Virtually everything, then, seems to line up in support of the expectation that Syria's war will grind on for a long time. But Duke's Laia Balcells and Kalyvas warn against such an easy prediction as well. They argue that there might be some glimmer of hope in that, in their view, the Syrian war *already* looks more like a conventional war than an irregular one. Their data shows that conventional civil wars, with "pitched battles, visible frontlines, and urban fighting," are more intense, shorter, and less likely to end in regime victories than irregular civil wars. Syria, they argue, resembles Libya more than is generally believed — and therefore has a good chance of ending quickly, surprisingly, and in a regime defeat. While they are very much in the minority among the contributors to this collection, the possibility of a sudden dramatic reversal should not be discounted. Foreign support could be crucial in such a sudden shift in fortunes, in either direction: either the Assad regime or the opposition crumbling quickly should it lose the support of key external sponsors.

What about after the war? Unfortunately, the contributors found little reason to believe that a post-war Syria is going to recover anytime soon. It isn't only the scale of the death and displacement, and the unlikelihood of the easy restoration of a normal economy or the return of refugees. Protracted civil wars create entrenched local political economies of black markets and local warlords whose social power depends on the continuation of conflict. And then, as MIT's Roger Petersen notes, "violent insurgencies often involve death, destruction, and desecration — all of which can create powerful *emotions*." How could communities that have suffered so greatly be expected to go back to a normal life under Assad without seeking revenge, or those associated with his regime not fear their vengeance? What are the long-term psychological and social effects of the boundless brutality of the war, so much of it captured for posterity on YouTube?

The 17 memos collected in "The Political Science of Syria's War" offer a state of the art tour of the scholarship on civil wars and insurgencies. They show graphically why efforts to end the fighting have failed, the perverse effects of the efforts to arm the opposition, and the many barriers to ending Syria's suffering. They do not lead to easy policy prescriptions … even if, as the Brookings Institution's Jeremy Shapiro observes, policymakers were listening.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
December 18, 2013

I. DEFINING THE CONFLICT
Theoretical Perspectives on Syria's War

What Can Civil War Scholars Tell Us About the Syrian Conflict?

By Fotini Christia, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This memo presents some insights on the ongoing fight in Syria, as drawn from the contemporary literature on civil wars. Taking into account the context of this specific war, I first reference findings on the technologies of civil war, as well as the role of identity, violence, and warring group behavior to explain dynamics of the conflict. I then draw on the civil war literature to offer an assessment of the Syrian war's duration and prospects for termination.

Though Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has consistently called the opposition forces confronting his government terrorists, the Syrian conflict, with over 100,000 estimated fatalities in its two and a half years of fighting, has long surpassed the 1,000 battle death threshold that would qualify it as a civil war (Sambanis 2004). The general power dynamic, of a strong government facing a weak opposition, classifies the conflict as an insurgency (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010).

Contemporary works on insurgency largely rely on the U.S. experiences in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These are all cases in which the United States found itself on the side of the embattled government. As a result, findings tend to be normatively biased toward what would make the government an effective counterinsurgent. In Syria, however, where the ruling regime has been repressive and ruthless, the United States has sided with the opposition, while also vocalizing concerns about its affiliations with jihadi groups. We therefore need to assess what Assad's capacity as a counterinsurgent (per the literature) actually means for the Syrian rebels and for prospects for peace.

Conflict Dynamics

The media has cast the brutal fight, which started with peaceful protests against the Assad regime in March 2011, in largely sectarian terms. The Sunni-versus-Alawite cleavage, however, is overly simplistic as it ignores ethnic distinctions among the different Sunni groups in Syria (such as Kurds versus Arabs) and fails to account for religious minorities such as the Christians and Armenians.

Instead, there are multiple underlying ideological, ethnic, tribal, religious, and sectarian narratives that seem to be operating at once, including a repressed majority versus a dominant minority divide, with notable center-periphery tensions (Fearon 2004; Buhaug et al 2009; Fearon and Laitin 2011); and a secular-versus-religious/jihadist cleavage, which overlaps partly but not fully with the ideological, Baathist versus non-Baathist cleavage. This complex empirical reality in the Syrian conflict dovetails with the literature that suggests patterns of alignment and violence in civil wars are not consistent with an exclusive macro-cleavage, but rather play out across several dimensions of identity that are often invoked and shifted instrumentally (Kalyvas 2006; Kalyvas and Kocher 2007; Christia 2012). In the Syrian case specifically, it was certainly true early on, and seems still to be the case, that large numbers of Sunnis (especially those in the middle and upper classes) have stayed "loyal" to the regime or have been unwilling to join the rebellion, an explanation locals often invoke for the regime's resilience in Aleppo, among other places.

Indeed, violence in the Syrian conflict has emerged along an array of different cleavages, including, for instance, an aggrieved Sunni majority against the Alawite dominant minority (Petersen 2002); or undisciplined foot soldiers who cannot be controlled by warring group leaders targeting civilians (as arguably the Bayda and Baniyas massacres or the Houla and Qubeir massacres in Syria), either because of ethnic fragmentation or because they are in the fight for material incentives (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Christia 2008); or because of the challenge of observing and sanctioning deviant behavior in a complex conflict environment (Johnston 2008). Much of the violence in the Syrian war is not carefully targeted. Rather, wanton violence appears to be rampant, often

perpetrated by groups of thugs on both sides (Mueller 2000, Kalyvas and Kocher 2007).

The Syrian government appears to be using indiscriminate violence as a deliberate tactic, predominantly but not exclusively via aerial bombing (there are numerous cases such as Deir al-Zour, where the city is contested but the larger region is basically under rebel control). Recent work on aerial bombing as a counterinsurgency tactic suggests that it drives civilian populations to support the insurgents (Kocher, Pepinsky and Kalyvas 2011). Moreover, such tactics also increase the number of attacks from insurgents, who respond to bombings in an effort to maintain their reputations for effectiveness through fighting against the counterinsurgent (Lyall 2013).

The dynamics of displacement and violence suggest that people feel endangered in areas of high contestation (Kalyvas 2006) and therefore either flee to Syrian regions where one group is firmly in charge or become international refugees. At least 2 million Syrians, from a prewar population of 23 million, have fled the country and over 4.5 million are internally displaced. Displacement in a sense works to the government's advantage as it allows it to separate cooperators from defectors (Qusayr may have been an extreme case of this with Assad having to empty the town to retake it). The Syrian government appears to also be using tactics of "drying up the sea" by blockading and starving neighborhoods that are considered supportive of the insurgents as per recent reports out of the Moudamiya neighborhood in Damascus.

In terms of provision of goods and services to the embattled population, recent work out of Iraq found that service provision reduced insurgent violence (Berman Felter and Shapiro 2011) though those results coincided with the surge so it is hard to separate out increased force from service provision. Development aid provided by civilian organizations in Afghanistan has also been found to work in winning hearts and minds of the rural population (Beath, Christia, Enikolopov 2013), but only in areas that are not already in full-blown violence, further suggesting that aid can only inoculate areas from becoming

violent but cannot flip really violent areas. This could be a potential lesson for whether and how the United States could provide civilian assistance and support to the local councils that have been created in the areas occupied by the Syrian rebels, although it is not clear if this literature applies to goods and services provided by rebels instead of the government.

The Syrian conflict has also seen a very high use of communication technology. While cell phones might help insurgents coordinate their actions, they also provide opportunities for civilians to relay information privately to a counter-insurgent. Indeed, when US provision of non-lethal aid was in the news, satellite phones were often mentioned as a key component of this aid to rebels. Literature out of Iraq finds that cell phone coverage reduced the likelihood of IED attacks (Shapiro and Weidmann 2012), but had no effect on direct- or indirect-fire incidents, supporting the conclusion that cell phones made it easier for Iraqis to tip-off U.S. forces, and therefore served as an effective counterinsurgency tool. Recent work out of Africa, however, finds that the availability of cell phones has a positive effect on conflict initiation: Where counterinsurgents are not present, cell phones should generally favor the production of anti-government violence by undermining the effects of government propaganda, making selective punishment within dissident groups easier, and improving the coordination of rebel operations (Pierskalla and Hollenbach 2013).

Duration and Prospects for Termination

Though the Syrian conflict is often cast in binary terms of government versus opposition, the rebel forces are particularly divided. The high number of actors within the rebel movement-with estimates from the Institute for the Study of War reaching 1,000 or so distinct rebel groups — empirically suggests that the conflict will last longer as it is harder to get them all to the negotiating table and to reach an acceptable agreement (Cunningham 2006, 2011; Christia 2012). Group fragmentation and splits also lead to longer conflicts by further increasing the number of

warring actors (Christia 2012) as groups keep vying for post-conflict power. This is the case now with jihadi groups openly aligned with al Qaeda fighting against Free Syrian Army groups that oppose them, as well as between Kurds and the jihadi/Islamic State of Syria (ISIS)/Jabhat al-Nusra groups in the northeast. In the Syrian conflict, as in any conflict, more warring actors translates into more potential veto players — that is, groups that would need to agree before a peace settlement can take effect and who have the power to continue the fighting if the offer on the table is not to their liking (Cunningham 2006, 2011).

This concern in the Syrian case extends beyond veto players to include spoilers, groups that by definition have no interest in seeing the conflict come to an end (Stedman 1997), such as several of the jihadi groups presently fighting in Syria. Spoilers often perpetrate wanton violence to sow mistrust among other groups trying to reach an agreement and make it harder to get to peace (Kydd and Walter 2002), which is consistent with recent suicide attacks perpetrated by jihadi groups in light of potential peace talks scheduled for the end of November.

Some have suggested partition as a possible way to resolve ethnic civil wars (Kaufmann 1996), while others indicate that the history of partition has been troubled (Sambanis 2000; Sambanis and Schulhofer-Wohl 2009). The rebels have not made any separatist claims and have rather been fighting for control of the center. Though it is difficult to envision how Syria could be partitioned given the degree of ethnic fractionalization and the distribution of minorities such as Kurds, Christians, and Alawites in non-contiguous territories, there is plenty of commentary placing a future Alawite state on the coast or mountains, a Kurdish state in the northeast, and a Sunni state in the heartland. It would nevertheless be hard to see how regional powers such as Turkey would ever allow for this and how partitioned territories would not be hijacked by Iran and Saudi Arabia, respectively, creating continuous regional tensions.

The media has also cast the Syrian conflict as a civil war taking on the character of a proxy war in which regional and global rivalries are fought out in a subnational arena.

Foreign assistance that is flowing to both sides — as is the case in Syria with the government receiving support from Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia and the opposition from the West as well as from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar and from jihadi groups — is not just relevant for a potential partition. Such inflows lead to longer lasting conflicts (Balch-Lindsay et al 2008). Groups that have stronger social ties are more likely to use these external resources more efficiently (Staniland 2012), which suggests that the Syrian government potentially has an advantage in that regard over the foreign-fighter infested jihadi groups. Outright military victory is often the result if one side ceases receiving external support (Fearon and Laitin 2008).

During the Cold War, civil wars were more likely to end in outright military victory than negotiated settlement, although trends have changed in the post-Cold War era with an increase in negotiated settlements and cease-fires (Fearon and Laitin 2008; Kreutz 2010). For negotiated settlement to work, an outside arbiter, such as the United Nations, is necessary that can enforce the agreement and do away with the underlying commitment problems and the fears of smaller parties: namely, that after demobilization and disarmament, the stronger party will renege from their promise of power sharing (Walter 1997). U.N. peacekeeping operations have been shown to increase the duration of peace post conflict (Doyle and Sambanis 2000), but do not shorten ongoing conflicts (Gilligan and Sergenti 2008). It is important to consider if a U.N. peacekeeping mission would be viable in the context of Syria, given what many see as the to-date-successful developments in the chemical weapons disarmament process.

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Technology of Rebellion in the Syrian Civil War

By Laia Balcells, Duke University and Stathis Kalyvas, Yale University

* A version of this piece was previously published on the Middle East Channel on ForeignPolicy.com.

Will the civil war in Syria prove to be an endless Afghan-style quagmire? We argue that the Syrian civil war resembles the war in Libya more than it does Afghanistan's conflict. NATO's intervention, following U.N. Resolution 1973, made all the difference in Libya: By strengthening the rebels' hand and severely weakening Muammar al-Qaddafi's forces, it turned what appeared to have been a sudden military defeat into rapid victory, against all forecasts of protracted war. The reason why the Libyan conflict was headed toward a relatively quick resolution is fairly straightforward: It was a conventional rather than an irregular war. Let us explain.

The analysis of warfare in civil wars has been plagued by an imprecise use of terminology. Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria are all described as "insurgencies," a term frequently used as synonymous of civil war. This is a problem because not all civil wars are guerrilla wars or irregular wars or insurgencies. A guerrilla (or irregular) war is a type of military contest characterized by a steep military asymmetry between the rival sides, whereby the weak side has no alternative but to fight a war of evasion and ambush against the strong side. The objective of rebel combatants in guerrilla wars is typically to win through attrition. This produces long wars that frustrate the ability of conventional armies to translate their military superiority into victory. Counterinsurgency is notoriously hard, like "eating soup with a knife," to use a well-known metaphor. No wonder that Vietnam and Afghanistan turned into military quagmires.

However, the civil wars in Libya and Syria are no guerrilla wars; despite the initial military superiority of the regime forces, these conflicts look more like conventional than guerrilla wars. Unlike guerrilla wars fought in mountains or jungles by elusive bands of fighters, conventional wars entail pitched battles, artillery contests, and urban sieges across clearly defined frontlines. In the news from Syria,

we can read examples of clear-cut victories in battles indicating that the war is being fought conventionally. Also, conflict maps show large, contiguous areas that are militarily held by the rebels or the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Many cities are being fought over, with frontlines bisecting them.

Conventional civil wars go back a long way: just think of classic conflicts such as the U.S. and Spanish civil wars. More recently, conventional civil wars were fought in Bosnia and Azerbaijan. In our research (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010) we find that conventional civil wars are much more common than generally thought; they represent 34 percent of all major civil wars (i.e., those causing over 1,000 battlefield fatalities per year) fought between 1944 and 2004. More significant is the fact that conventional civil wars have increased in proportion after the end of the Cold War: They account for 48 percent of all civil wars fought between 1991 and 2004. In contrast, guerrilla wars have declined from 66 percent during the Cold War to just 26 percent after its end.

In a recent paper (Balcells and Kalyvas 2012), we compare conventional with irregular wars and a third type we call symmetric, non-conventional (SNC) — basically wars in failed states — and find that the former tend to be less bloody on the battlefield, causing on average 62,000 fatalities, as compared to 84,000 for guerrilla wars. However, once we control for war duration, we find that conventional wars are much more intense, causing on average 3,000 deaths per month compared to 1,250 for irregular wars. Another striking difference between these two types of war is their duration: Conventional wars are shorter, lasting an average of three years, whereas irregular wars last an average of nine years. We also find that irregular wars produce significantly more violence against civilians as compared to conventional and SNC wars. This result is consistent with the idea that civilians constitute much more of a valuable resource in insurgencies than in other conflicts and they are targeted because of it (Kalyvas 2006). Lastly, we find that 66 percent of insurgencies end with a government victory,

compared to just 38 percent for conventional wars and merely 19 percent of SNC wars, which tend to end in draws.[1] In a multivariate analysis on civil war outcomes, we find that civil wars that have conventional features are significantly more likely to end in rebel victories (the marginal effect dy/dx of conventional civil war on rebel victory — as opposed to incumbent victory — is .29). That is the case even when controlling for external support received by rebels and incumbents. Quite intuitively, external support for rebels has a positive impact on rebel victory (the marginal effect dy/dx is in this case 0.18).

In short, we find that conventional civil wars are more intense, shorter, and less likely to end in regime victories than irregular civil wars. How about Syria then? As we said above, with its pitched battles, visible frontlines, and urban fighting, this conflict resembles the Libyan war. Thus, if past record can serve as a guide, the Syrian civil war may well turn out to be shorter than generally anticipated and result in the regime's defeat.

As of November, the war looks like it is headed toward some kind of stalemate. The reason is that both sides are receiving substantial amounts of external assistance. The rebels are supported by the Arab Gulf states, Turkey, and to some measure the West, whereas the Assad regime is backed by Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon's Hezbollah faction. Furthermore, substantial numbers of foreign fighters are currently operating in Syria. The extent of foreign assistance and that it appears to be quite balanced between the two camps helps explain the current stalemate. However, let us not forget that this war is still (unfortunately) young. Already processes of centralization are taking place within the rebel camp and major shifts in foreign assistance on either side may help tip the balance and produce a decisive military outcome.

Let us close by recalling an intriguing historical analogy. Just before World War II, the Spanish Civil War became a focal conflict in Europe, the ideological and military battleground where fascist and anti-fascist forces clashed while the entire world stared. Today, Syria has become the key battleground of Sunni and Shiite ideologues and activists. The stark ideological dimension of the Spanish Civil War was expressed in extensive external support by foreign powers

and massive participation in combat by foreign volunteers. The decisive assistance provided to the Republican camp by the USSR — which turned out to be much more substantial compared to the limited Anglo-French assistance — led to the centralization of the highly fragmented Republican camp, but also its eventual domination by the communists; however, this came too late to counterbalance the massive assistance offered to the Nationalists, on both ground and air, by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy — and which eventually helped tip the balance in favor of the Nationalist rebels. The ideological dimension of the Spanish conflict had a clear geopolitical stake, the domination of Europe, very much like the ideological dimension of the Syrian civil war overlaps with a geopolitical conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the domination of the Arab world. Lastly, the Spanish Civil War witnessed intense violence on the battlefield, widespread atrocities against the civilian population, and mass displacement — all related to extensive political polarization (Balcells 2010). Unlike Spain, where this polarization was associated to ideological identities, the violence in Syria is connected to sectarian identities. Yet, even a cursory examination of the patterns of violence in Spain (e.g., Preston 2012) suggests how ascriptive and non-ascriptive identities alike can produce high levels of violence in the context of a civil war.

In the spring of 1938, the Spanish Civil War had gone on for about two years and many observers thought that it was headed toward a stalemate. A year later, it was over.

Laia Balcells is an assistant professor of political science at Duke University. She is the author of "Continuation of Politics by Two Means: Direct and Indirect Violence in Civil Wars" in the Journal of Conflict Resolution and the forthcoming Rivalry and Revenge: The Politics of Violence in Civil War based on her dissertation research. Stathis Kaylvas is Arnold Wolfers professor of political science and director of the Program on Order, Conflict and Violence at Yale University. He is the author of The Politics of Violence in Civil War (2006). Balcells and Kalyvas's research focuses on warfare dynamics during conflict and determinants of political violence. They have co-authored "International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict" in the American Political Science Review, and "Endgame in Syria?" on the Middle East Channel.

Syria's Civil War

By James D. Fearon, Stanford University

* A version of this piece was previously published on the Middle East Channel on ForeignPolicy.com.

Humor me, please, while I sketch a more-or-less rationalist account of the onset and continuation of the civil war in Syria. I am sure that this is not sufficient and that people with actual regional and country expertise will be able to identify major problems. But perhaps it is useful to set down as a sort of baseline that can be used as a starting point.

The civil war in Syria has been extremely intense, brutal, and destructive. With more than 100,000 deaths in less than three years, it ranks in the top 20 most intense of around 150 civil wars since 1945.[2] Why were the several parties unable to avoid the escalation in 2011 that has led to this massive destruction and suffering? Why are they unable now to cut some kind of negotiated deal to bring the destruction and suffering to an end, or at least reduce it?

What prevents a deal that would stop the war?

Let's begin with the second question, concerning what has prevented a deal since the war got going. What explains the continuation of an extremely costly civil war like this one? Without discounting factors like extremist ideology, hatred, and desires for vengeance, there are two principal strategic obstacles to a negotiated deal.

Most international proposals for ending the Syrian war imagine a negotiated settlement in which the main parties to the conflict agree to share power by having representatives from all sides in high-level offices, at least until elections can be held (and which would probably need to be highly engineered to ensure congruence between the political and military balances). Power sharing is preferred to pushing for and helping one side to militarily crush the other, both on humanitarian or moral grounds, and due to practical concerns about feasibility and long-run stability. If Syrian President Bashar al-Assad

crushes the rebels, he continues to run a minority-based government faced with a large, angry Sunni majority with tremendous potential for continued terrorism, just as is the case for the Sunni minority in Iraq. If the rebels managed to defeat the regime, there is a valid concern that Alawites and other minorities would be massacred in revenge violence and repression, and that there might be a continued civil war among Sunni factions.

In any event, it doesn't seem likely that either side can completely crush the other, due to the fact that this has also become a proxy war in which the international parties will adjust their support to prevent complete military elimination of their clients. Although the regime appears to have the upper hand at the moment, it will likely face manpower constraints even if the conflict drags on at a lower level (which is almost inevitable, since it is impossible to sustain such an intense war indefinitely).

So why don't the Syrian parties to the conflict themselves move quickly to an agreement on sharing power, given how horrifically costly the conflict is, costs which include serious risks for leaders on both sides? There are two main obstacles.

1. What would the terms of an agreement be?

2. Even if they could agree on terms, how could each side be assured that the terms would be implemented and upheld into the future?

What would the terms of an agreement be?

Even if they could agree on terms, how could each side be assured that the terms would be implemented and upheld into the future?

The literature on civil war since the end of the Cold War mainly views the second problem as dominant, or "the

critical barrier to civil war settlement," as Barbara Walter (1997) famously put it (see also Fearon 1994, 1998, 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2007). In my view this is basically right, although I will argue further below that the two problems are more closely entwined than is generally appreciated.

Why does power need to be shared at all? Why can't a deal be struck in which the Assad regime, or some important regime supporters, stays in power but agrees to implement policies that the opposition want? In other words, why is this a fight over political power and not, in the first instance, regime policies?

In this respect the Syrian civil war is *completely typical*, and in a way that proves the point about commitment problems being the central reason that civil wars are so difficult to end. That is, rebel groups almost never say, "We will fight until the regime accepts our demand that its policies should be X, Y, Z, ..." Instead, rebel groups virtually always demand not changes in policies from the existing regime, but all or a share of political power. This is obviously because they understand that if they were to stop fighting and undertake some measure of demobilization and disarmament, the government would renege on any policy concessions once the military threat from the rebels diminished. In fact, once they have mobilized and engaged in a war as intense as the Syrian war, the rebel leaderships can anticipate that if they were to demobilize and disarm, the regime cannot be trusted not to jail and kill them as much as they can. These are the commitment problems that drive most civil wars once they have begun, and they are the reason that rebel groups make outright control of a government — whether at the center or in a region — their central objective.

This explains why the rebels aim for political power rather than agreements to change policy, but not why government and rebels can't reach an agreement on sharing political power. Here the core obstacle is again credible commitment: How can the parties to a power-sharing agreement commit themselves not to try to seize an opportunity to coup, or use some minor advantage in control of political or military institutions to convert

that into total control? In principle, one can imagine a detailed power-sharing agreement that preserves each side's military threat and forces political decisions to be made by mutual agreement on important matters. In practice, however, such agreements appear to be extremely difficult to construct when the parties correctly expect that the other side would kill them given any opportunity. Agreements are just pieces of paper, and power-sharing in political institutions and the military is a complex matter that can't be easily reduced to an ex ante contract that anticipates and guards against all contingencies that might arise and that might favor one side or the other. Given enormous downside risk — wholesale murder by your current enemies — genuine political and military power-sharing as an exit from civil war is rarely seriously attempted and frequently breaks down when it has been attempted.[3]

This story has very grim implications for Syria. It suggests that we should expect no negotiated settlement to the conflict unless one or more powerful third parties decides to intervene to end the fighting and/or credibly guarantee a power-sharing arrangement. But that doesn't seem at all likely at this point, because (a) the major and regional powers are aligned on different sides of the conflict (more or less) and intervention in the face of major power and regional power opposition implies greater costs, and (b) regardless of the international lay of the land, intervention would be extremely costly because the Islamist radicals would surely continue fighting. They would keep fighting against foreign interveners even if the interveners were to depose the Assad regime.

Without significant third party intervention to credibly guarantee a power-sharing deal, the expectation would be that the fight would continue until one side basically wins on the battlefield.[4] As noted above, although one can imagine, at this point, the Assad regime gaining the upper hand, it seems hard to imagine (to me anyway) that he could get things back to where they were in 2010. As in Iraq, terrorist attacks by Sunni radicals would seem very likely to continue even if the regime can gain back nominal control of the areas currently held by rebel groups.

This theory of the conflict implies that while it will probably become less deadly over time — in large part because it is simply difficult to sustain such an intense, lethal war for more than a few years, because people leave the country, it becomes harder to recruit and keep fighters, populations sort at the village and neighborhood level, and so on — it is unlikely to be decisively ended either by a power-sharing deal or a definitive military victory. Just as the internal war in Iraq never ended and continues today, war in Syria is likely to drag on and on.

Then why did the conflict start?

The above account of why the conflict continues and is unlikely to be settled by a relatively balanced power-sharing deal has much to recommend it, I think.[5] But one thing it fails to do is to explain why this incredibly violent conflict started in the first place. If civil war is like a giant trap that can be exited only by a relatively decisive military victory, even in conditions where decisive military victory is not likely, then shouldn't the parties have been able to negotiate an ex ante deal to avoid falling into the trap? Why couldn't the Assad regime have compromised with the opposition in early 2011, before violent conflict escalated, large numbers of rebel groups formed, and the commitment-problem trap was sprung?

The regime appears to have tried, to a limited extent. In the first few months of 2011 it mixed selective repression with various concessions (International Crisis Group, 2011).

The basic problem, arguably, is another instance of a political commitment problem. What caused the war was that the Arab Spring produced a *temporary shock to the relative capabilities of opposition/rebels versus the regime.* Contagion effects from Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt led to an unprecedented (for Syria) degree of popular mobilization and coordination in February and March. The key feature of the shock is that, in the absence of military mobilization and violent escalation, all parties could reliably expect that this wave of mobilization and coordination would be temporary. If Assad could ride out the wave making only policy concessions, he could take these back piecemeal

down the road, after popular mobilization and attention subsided. So, this account would go, the opposition/rebels were facing a situation where fighting then gave them a chance at locking in very significant gains (fall of the regime), whereas accepting policy concessions and minor opening up would probably lead to withdrawal of these in the future (because the mobilization threat would subside or be undermined). In effect, this argument sees the onset of civil war in Syria as a sort of preventive war fought by the rebel groups who saw a temporary window in which they could seize an unusually high chance of gaining actual political power. If or to the extent that this is right, this would be another way in which the Syrian civil war is quite typical. In my view, civil wars often start due to shocks to the relative power of political groups or factions that have strong, pre-existing policy disagreements ("grievances," from the perspective of those out of power). War then follows as an effort to lock in the (or forestall the other side's temporary advantage.[6]

A possible weakness of this account in this particular case is that the Assad regime didn't exactly bend over backwards to try to appease the initially largely peaceful opposition. Although it is not a clear prediction of the commitment problem account, one can argue that we should have observed the regime trying to convince the opposition it will make concessions and make nice into the future.

Something the argument to this point has neglected may explain the paltry concessions and increasingly violent repressive tactics of the regime: namely, the regime's concern about "looking tough." The ICG report on this period notes, on a number of occasions, the concern of regime officials that too much in the way of concessions would cost Assad a reputation for toughness which, if lost, could open greater flood gates of mobilization, opposition, and perhaps even regime defections. In that report, the regime is portrayed as trying to walk a fine line in early 2011, between making limited concessions while at the same time signaling a willingness to repress. Due to the commitment problem just described, it is not clear that bigger concessions would actually have worked to defuse the situation — why should the opposition have

trusted implementation if Assad did not actually step down, or credibly tie his hands politically (and it's not clear how he could do this)? But certainly the absence of greater flexibility from the regime must have made the window of opportunity considerations, which were increased by the regime's increasingly violent response to demonstrations, look all the more attractive to the more extreme members of the opposition.

Fighting to influence the terms of a deal, and/or in the hope of crushing the other side.

A possible weakness or objection to the account above is that not every civil war ends with a completely decisive military victory or massive third-party intervention to guarantee a power-sharing deal. Indeed, it often seems implausible that the foreign involvement could provide reliable assurance all by itself. Would the foreigners, or the United Nations, really be willing to fight to prevent return to war? Further, in the long run a post-civil war peace deal has to be self-enforcing among the domestic parties to it. The foreigners can't normally stay or commit to intervene forever (perhaps Bosnia is an exception).

For example, quite a few civil wars in which the government is fighting against regional rebels who want independence or greater autonomy and local control end, or die down, with what amount to power-sharing deals that give regional rebels a share of local government control. The Philippine government's conflict with Moro rebel groups in Mindanao provides several instances. And note that regional autonomy agreements to settle civil wars have only rarely involved international PKO "enforcement." Based on the arguments above, it is not immediately obvious how such agreements could be possible and stable.

In a recent paper (Fearon, 2013), I argue that for some civil wars and some interstate wars as well, long duration may be better explained as driven by the government's (and in principle, the rebels') inability to discern if the rebel group (government) is a type that can be crushed militarily. In this account, the point of fighting is in effect to learn whether

the rebels can be crushed and disarmed by force, or if this is not possible in which case ultimately some kind of serious offer needs to be made. If it becomes sufficiently clear that the rebels can't be militarily defeated, a stable, self-enforcing peace deal may become possible based on the understanding that if the government were subsequently to renege, the rebels could restart their fight. In general this may be a more plausible story for separatist or autonomy-seeking rebellions, since in these cases control and dominance in a particular patch of territory can make the rebels' ability to threaten to return to violence more credible.

Why does the government have to use actual fighting to learn whether the rebels can be crushed militarily? Why can't it make an offer that is enough that a rebel group that knows its long-run military prospects are not so good would accept, but a rebel group that expects it has relatively good prospects of survival (perhaps based on observations of local support) would reject? In other words, why can't the government distinguish between types of rebel group based on bargaining rather than fighting?

In bargaining in domestic economic contexts — for instance, buyer-seller bargaining or bargaining between a firm and a union in contract negotiations — if an offer is accepted, contracts and the legal system give some recourse if one side reneges and changes the terms later. As a result, even though making a concession today reveals that you are willing to concede *at least* that much and thus quite possible more, the contract and legal system protect you against the other side using this new information to push you even further.

By sharp contrast, in the essentially anarchic contexts of civil and interstate conflict, if, say, the rebels agree to a deal proposed by the Assad regime, they have revealed that they are willing to accept at least that much. What stops the regime from pocketing this concession and demanding more, say, by partially reneging on its side of the deal? The problem is that accepting any offer reveals private information that you are willing to accept at least that much rather than keep fighting, but without a legal

system or third parties who can ensure that this will be durably implemented into the distant future, the other side now has every incentive to push for more. In fact, it has an incentive to keep pushing to get you down to the level that makes you just willing to accept rather than fight.

And if accepting an offer in this context is tantamount to a deal that in the end will be little better than what you expect to get from continued fighting, *then why not just keep fighting in hopes of survival and possible reversal of fortune*? Continued fighting and refusal to make serious offers maintains your reputation for possibly being a type cannot be crushed militarily and so has to be given a significantly better deal in order to get peace. When bargaining in anarchy, the parties thus have much stronger incentives to care about their reputations than in contexts where third-party enforcement is possible. And this can make them prefer just fighting to bargaining in the normal sense of exchanging serious offers that have a positive probability of being accepted.

By this account, what is going on in Syria is that the regime is trying to use fighting to learn whether the rebels are a type that can be militarily crushed, or will eventually have to be offered some set of non-trivial concessions because otherwise the conflict will just continue indefinitely at a perhaps low but still costly and risky level. What is preventing a settlement, in this story, is that if the rebels (or a large number of them) accepted an intermediate deal now — which both sides might prefer if it could be guaranteed — the government would not be convinced that they are the "uncrushable" type, and would renege and effectively push for more. This sort of thinking is echoed in the arguments that the rebels don't or won't or shouldn't want to go to Geneva to negotiate seriously now, as making a deal now would ratify or express their weakness.

To the extent that this story reflects what is going on — and I believe there are reasons to think the more standard story about a commitment problem preventing power sharing is probably more important in this case — then without third-party intervention to credibly guarantee that the regime would uphold a deal with the rebels, the

natural course of the conflict would be to continue till either one side loses on the battlefield or until the Assad regime eventually decides the rebels are not crushable and makes an offer that an uncrushable type would be willing to accept.[7] Third party intervention could help end the conflict if it could provide credible guarantees for the rebels against reneging and continued or escalated abuse by the regime, or some sort of power-sharing deal in which regime forces retain significant power. On that score, the policy implication is the same as for the standard commitment problem story (although the mechanism by which it brings about agreement is different).

In this account, the conflict is not just about the problem of constructing durable power-sharing institutions among enemies who have been killing each other en masse, but also a problem of private information about military capabilities and its implication for agreement on "the terms of the deal," the first strategic obstacle listed above. If the government and rebels had a shared understanding of their relative military prospects, then a deal might become feasible that would be implicitly policed by the rebels' option to return to violence if it were sufficiently violated. A possible example: An arrangement of this sort might be the most natural way that a durable peace could ultimately be achieved in Iraq. Hopefully, Nouri al-Maliki's government comes to understand that the Sunni areas have the capacity for sustained, long-run, low-level rebellion, and as a result decides to offer enough to Sunni leadership in the western provinces to buy their assent and participation in getting rid of al Qaeda affiliated groups.

For Maliki and Assad, however, such an approach has major risks. Strengthening potential opponents with a deal could be used against them in the future — that is the "standard story" commitment problem again, concerning power sharing. Alternatively, they may face lethal threats from their own side if they are perceived as giving away a dangerous amount to a dangerous adversary. Certainly, on both sides there are men with guns who believe that anything less than the annihilation or complete submission of the other side amounts to suicide or a failure of religious duty.

Factionalism

What about the extreme factionalism and divisions on the rebel side? How does that matter? Pretty clearly, factionalism and fighting among the rebel organizations reduces the military threat and challenge the rebel side poses to the regime. Factionalism also gives the Assad regime the option of attempting to make a deal with the relative moderates while isolating the more extreme groups — such as the al-Nusra Front and Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). An interesting question is whether divisions on the rebel side actually make a deal more feasible than it would be if the rebels were unified. It could be, for example, that an implicit option to return to fighting with the extremists makes the commitment problem described above less severe for a moderate group contemplating a deal. Perhaps the less Islamist rebels would accept a proposal to make common cause with the regime against some of the more extremist groups.

This isn't clear, however. Relative moderates on the rebel side ought to worry that making a deal would give the regime the increased strength to defeat the remaining armed opposition, in which case it might be in a fine position to renege on them. There are also the reputational concerns described above. We don't currently have a good understanding of the strategic implications of rebel factionalism, although we do know that across conflicts factionalism is correlated with both longer total war duration and a greater likelihood of partial deals between regime and subsets of the rebel side (Cunningham 2006, Cunningham 2012).

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Roles and Mechanisms of Insurgency and the Conflict in Syria

By Roger Petersen, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The organizers of this conference have asked participants to contribute a memo discussing how their research might apply to the Syrian case. Over the past 15 years, one major line of my research has applied a particular form of process tracing to the study of insurgency. In this brief memo, I will outline that method, briefly list some findings, and then discuss what promise the methods and findings hold for understanding the Syrian conflict.

Social scientists, and human beings in general, often try to understand complex things by breaking them down

and building them back up again. In studying insurgency, I try to break down the conflict into its component parts and then build up toward an understanding of the evolution of the insurgency as a whole. The most fundamental component parts are 1) the roles played by the population during the course of insurgency and 2) the mechanisms that affect individual movement among this set of roles. After breaking down an insurgency into these component parts, a second step involves understanding how mechanisms work in sequence to form the processes underlying rebellion.[8]

Every insurgency has its own particular sequence of mechanisms; no two may be exactly alike. However, by "breaking down and building up" different insurgencies and by making comparisons among them, we may be able to establish the power and prevalence of certain mechanisms and processes. Through this manner of detailed "process tracing" and comparison, some measure of accumulation in our understanding of insurgency can be gained. I have employed, to various extents, this method of "breaking down and building up" to study several insurgencies in different regions of the world.[9] The examination of those insurgencies, and the specification of their underlying mechanisms and processes, produces possible insights for the Syrian case.

Breaking Things Down I:
A Spectrum of Individual Roles

At the most fundamental level, individual decisions determine variation within an insurgency. If seen primarily as political contests, the outcome of an insurgency is determined not only by the actions of ethnic and religious group leaders or violent organizations, but by the decisions of individuals across the society. Insurgency involves individuals moving across a set of multiple possible roles. In much of the insurgency or rebellion literature, individuals are portrayed as deciding between just two choices, two roles — either to "rebel" or "not rebel," — and then the analyst tries to determine the payoff structures between these two choices. Such treatment obfuscates the set of individual roles underlying most insurgencies. More realistically, individuals move along a set of roles that can be aligned along the following spectrum:
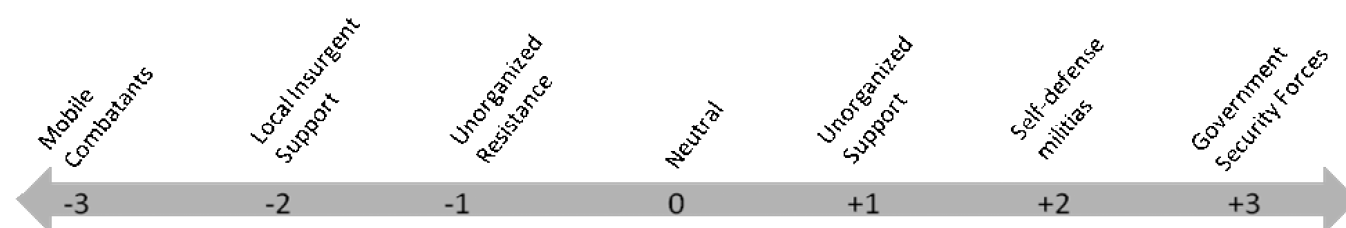
Neutral (0): During any conflict between a government and its opponent, many individuals will choose neutrality; these actors will try to avoid both sides and go about their daily lives with a minimum of risk. They will not willingly provide information or material support to either the government or the insurgents nor will they not participate in public demonstrations for either side.

Unarmed, unorganized insurgent supporter (-1): While avoiding any armed role, some individuals will occasionally provide information, shelter and material support for the insurgents. While unorganized, these individuals may show up at rallies supporting the insurgents and will boycott elections and other activities that could legitimize the government.

Armed local insurgent (-2): Some individuals will adopt a role of direct and organized participation in a locally based, armed organization. In the absence of a powerful state, individuals in this role often take the form of local militia members. In the presence of a powerful state, such individuals may appear as average citizens or neutrals by day, but play the role of active fighter at night. Even the most powerful states can have trouble identifying and neutralizing actors in this role.

Mobile armed insurgent (-3): Some individuals will join mobile and armed organizations becoming members in a guerrilla unit or rebel army. These individuals will fight outside of their own local communities.

Figure 1: Spectrum of participation in insurgency and counter-insurgency

These four roles form one side of a spectrum of participation. At the onset of an occupation or violent conflict, many individuals will begin at neutrality but then move into a role of support and then move to even more committed and violent roles. Of course, individuals may also move along a parallel spectrum of roles in support of the government. These roles essentially mirror those above:

Unarmed, unorganized government supporter (+1): While avoiding any armed or organized role, some individuals will willingly identify insurgents and provide the government with valuable information about insurgent activity. These individuals may show up at rallies supporting the government and will be inclined to vote in elections and participate in other activities that legitimize the government.

Armed local government supporter (+2): Some individuals will adopt a role of direct and organized participation in a locally based, armed organization that is either formally or informally connected with the government. In Iraq, organizations such as the "Sons of Anbar" provided these roles. More formally, states often develop paramilitary organizations or expanded police forces which create opportunities for armed local government support.

Mobile armed government forces (+3): Some individuals will join the mobile and armed organizations of the government, namely, the state's military.

A few points should be emphasized here. First, these roles are based on observable behavior and not attitudes. Second, it is critical to emphasize that the same individuals pass through different roles in the course of insurgency. The next question is what drives them along this spectrum.

Breaking Things Down II: Forces that Move Individuals along the Spectrum of Roles (Mechanisms)

Keeping with the goal of breaking down insurgency into its most elemental parts, the method seeks to identify the small, generalizable forces that drive individuals across this spectrum of roles. In social science language, these small

causal forces are often called mechanisms. Mechanisms are specific causal patterns that explain individual actions over a wide range of settings.[10]

The question here is what specific mechanisms are at play at specific points on the spectrum. What mechanisms move individuals from -1 (insurgent support) to neutrality (0) or government support (+1)? What mechanisms move individuals into insurgent armed roles (either at the -2 or -3 levels)? Developed from knowledge of a variety of cases of insurgency, at least six types of mechanisms can theoretically play a role: rational calculation, focal points, social norms, emotions, status considerations, and psychological mechanisms.

The mechanism underlying most theories of insurgency is *instrumental rational choice* related to a relatively narrow set of economic and security values. Individuals are seen as coldly calculating costs on one hand and benefits on the other. Much counterinsurgency theory concentrates on "sticks and carrots" used to influence the operation of this rational calculation mechanism.

While economic calculations are fairly straightforward, safety calculations may be more complex. One of the primary inputs when calculating threats is a "safety in numbers" estimation. If an individual is at the neutral position (0), he or she will not wish to move to support of insurgents (-1 or -2) unless there are enough other individuals also moving to that position to create a "safety in numbers" effect. It is dangerous to be one of a few individuals moving to a risk-laden role. This discussion of "safety in numbers" leads into a consideration of informational mechanisms. How does an individual gauge how many others are moving to positions across the spectrum? Individual decisions depend on the decisions of others. Is the rest of the population moving out of neutrality toward government support or is it moving the other way toward the insurgents? Here, *focal points* may become important. Focal points are events, places, or dates that help to coordinate expectations and thus actions.

Under the influence of *social norms* individuals do not

calculate costs and benefits but rather follow accepted rules of behavior. Norms are often customary rules that coordinate actions with others. Social norms can be crucial mechanisms in insurgencies in societies with strong family, clan, or tribal elements. For example, consider an individual member of a clan who wishes to remain neutral (at the 0 level) early in the conflict. If other members of the clan move to -1 support, the social norms of the clan will also impel this individual to support the insurgents in similar fashion. If the clan moves to -2 level of organized and armed support, this individual, following social norms of reciprocity, will likely be pulled along despite a personal inclination toward neutrality.

Violent insurgencies often involve death, destruction, and desecration — all of which can create powerful *emotions*. During insurgencies, either the situation itself, or political entrepreneurs, are likely to create the emotion of anger or the emotion of fear, both of which can move individuals along the spectrum. As with social norms, the emotions of anger and fear affect behavior in ways that can override the "sticks and carrots" policies of an occupier. One of the most relevant emotions to invasion, occupation, and state-building is resentment. Perceptions of unjust group subordination create this emotion. Prior to the conflict, group A might have held most of the visible positions of power and authority over groups B and C. Under new conditions, the formerly subordinate groups B and C may be able to assert new dominance over A. Members of group A, filled with resentment, are unlikely to easily come to terms with this new reality.

While resentment forms from group-based status considerations, individuals may also have *status considerations* within their community. In many cultures, becoming a visible early supporter or organizer may confer status as a "leader" or "big man."

Finally, several *psychological mechanisms* have relevance for insurgency. While some of the mechanisms above help explain the "triggering" of insurgency (movement from 0 to -1 and -1 to -2), psychological mechanisms would appear to most help explain how insurgency is sustained

(staying at -2, -3) in the face of declining insurgent power. These mechanisms include the "tyranny of sunk costs" as well as "wishful thinking and the "tyranny of small victories" (In this case, the ability to inflict some pain on the government, that is, to carry out occasional successful operations against the government, will distort a rational evaluation of the overall course of the conflict).

C. General Connections among Types of Mechanisms and Movement on the Spectrum of Roles

Figure 2 essentially sums up the "findings" from previous case studies. In previous cases, the mechanisms outlined in the figure were found to be prevalent in generating movement across the spectrum of individual roles in many, but certainly not all, cases. In essence, Figure 2 serves as a theoretical template that outlines a hypothetical set of mechanisms and processes that trigger and sustain insurgency.

Consider the mobilization of insurgency. The framework outlines a series of mechanisms and suggests how they combine to trigger and sustain rebellion. For the movement from neutrality to unorganized non-violent resistance (0 to -1), the framework predicts that some combination of four mechanisms — emotions, rational calculation of safety, focal points, and status consideration is likely to be at work.

For the movement into local, armed, organized resistance, a move that involves higher risk, social norms are likely to be a crucial mechanism. For movement into the crucial -2 position, the relationship of "first actors," those willing to take high risks to violently act against the government, with other members in their community is crucial. If first actors are deeply embedded within tight-knit communities, or are in a position of leadership in those communities, they can act as catalysts to move much of the community from the 0 or -1 positions to the armed, local -2 level.

Individuals often join mobile armed organizations (the -3 position) either as part of an already formed local unit (-2)
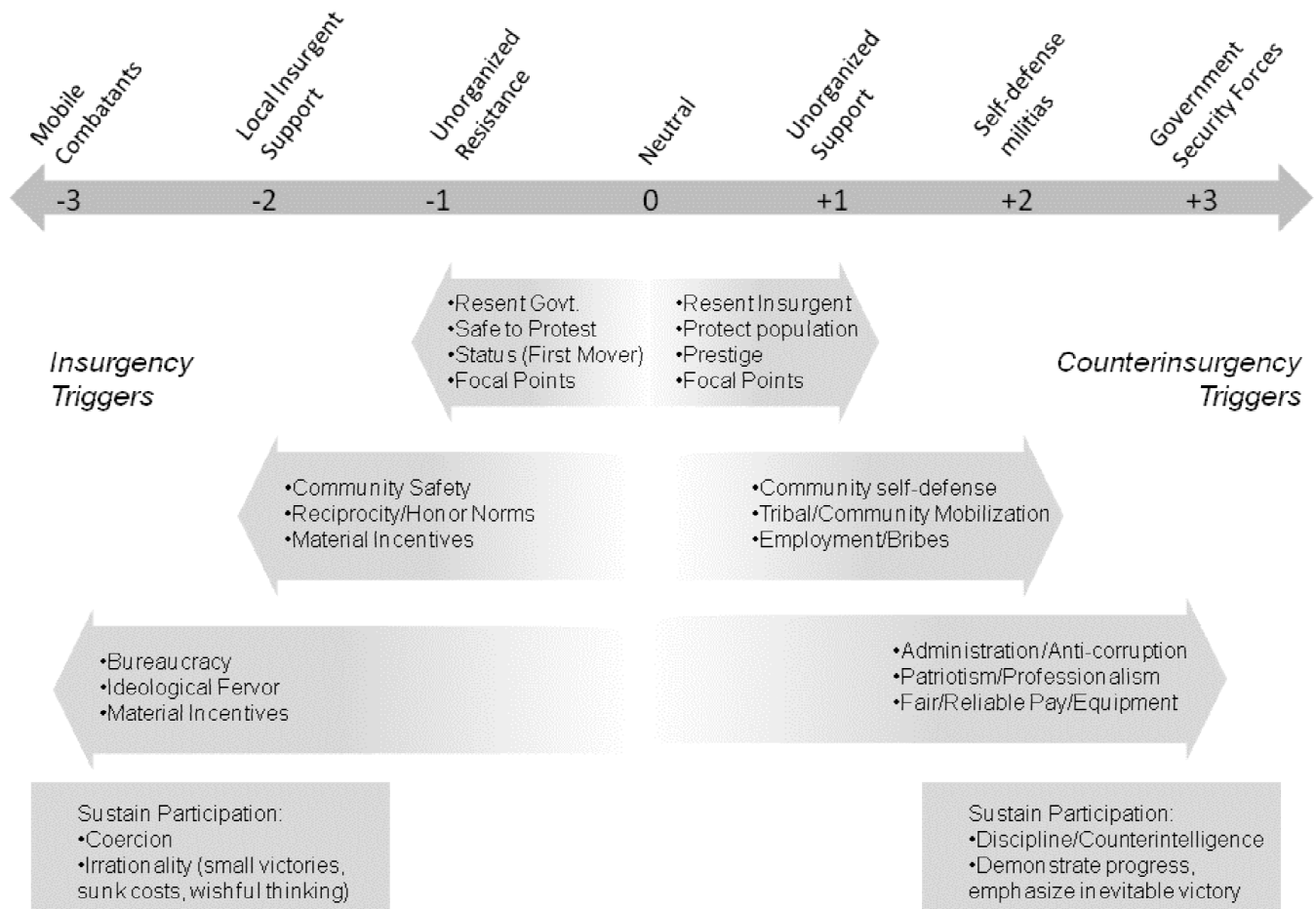
Figure 2: Specification of Mechanisms along the Spectrum of Roles

or for ideological/religious/patriotic or economic reasons. Insurgent organizations sustain themselves through rational mechanisms such as coercion and threats against defectors, but also through psychological mechanisms such as the tyranny of sunk costs, small victories, and wishful thinking.

The framework serves to focus the analysis of any specific insurgency. It forces the analyst to look for the smaller-grained causal forces that move individuals across a set of connected roles. The mechanisms and process approach is a middle ground between a variables-based method and description. This method is particularly well-suited to analyze complex events like insurgency. The question here is whether this framework can help productively guide an analysis of the Syrian conflict.

Relevance to the Syrian Conflict

This framework is most applicable to irregular civil war, that is, civil war without clear front lines and with a balance of force in favor of the incumbent. Some argue that the Syrian conflict falls into the category of regular civil war. Yet, descriptions of the mobilization of rebels in Syria do suggest the value of this mechanisms and process framework. Consider the following passage from an August 2012 *New York Times* article ("Life with Syria's Rebels in a Cold and Cunning War"):[11]

From Protests to Arms

For the people of Tal Rifaat, a city of roughly 20,000 on an agricultural plain, the uprising moved in stages from peaceful demonstrations to open war. It began with protests

in early 2011, which the government tried to smash.

By midsummer 2012, Abdul Hakim Yasin had formed a guerrilla cell with fewer than 10 other residents. They began with four shotguns and hunting rifles against a government with extensive internal police and intelligence apparatus and a military with hundreds of thousands of troops.

Last September, security forces scattered a protest at the city's rail yard with gunfire; 83 people were wounded. One man, Ahmed Mohammed Homed, 32, was killed. Mr. Yasin said he knew then that they were at war. "Everyone in Tal Rifaat formed into teams," he said.

(In a later passage from the article) The main fight had shifted to the city, where many fighting groups, including Mr. Yasin's had coalesced under the black flag of al-Tawhid, a relatively new brigade that sought to organize and unify the province's disparate rebel units.

In this brief passage, we encounter first reference to peaceful demonstrations against the government (movement from the 0 to -1 position). Then we hear of the organization of a small group of rebels by Abdul Hakim Yasin. The framework above would direct the analyst to find out how these original kernels of rebellion were formed. It is likely that social norms of reciprocity among family, work, or clans operated to develop these first acting groups (which had moved from the -1 to -2 position). Then we see a reaction against a government crackdown followed by widespread movement of the population into teams (a wider percentage of the population moving into the crucial -2 position). The template above suggests that social norms, as well as signals that resistance would be widespread enough to create some measure of safety in numbers, were the mechanisms that produced this movement. In a third step, Mr. Yasin's group then coalesced with other local-formed groups under the banner of the al-Tawhid Brigade (here the movement is from -2 to -3 on the spectrum of roles).

The evolution of the Syrian conflict can clearly be broken down into component parts that fit the spectrum of roles. The framework can guide a tracing of the processes

whereby specific sequences of mechanisms produced movement from neutrality to unarmed resistance to local rebellion to mobile militias. Understanding these fine-grained causal processes provides us a better understanding not only about how rebellion has formed, but what can be expected in the future. What should we expect if the Assad regime manages to defeat larger mobile armed groups (those at -3)? If these movements break down into the cohesive norm-driven local units (back to -2), we should expect some significant level of rebellion to persist. Such expectations and predictions can best be made with knowledge of the processes that formed the rebellion in the first place.

The framework also suggests mechanisms driving other important outcomes. For instance, on the critical question of how the regime prevents defection from its armed forces, the framework points toward mechanisms of discipline and maintaining expectations of victory.

Furthermore, one of the clearest findings emphasizes the importance of ethnically-based emotions. In a situation of clear ethnic hierarchy, the emotion of resentment primes a population for rebellion and violence (moving the population from neutrality to the -1 or +1 position). Much recent scholarship has shown the power of group status reversals. Once a group has established itself in the dominant position in an ethnic status hierarchy, it does not readily accept subordination (or even equality). In a sweeping statistical study, Lars-Erik Cederman and his collaborators have found that groups that have undergone status reversals are about five times more likely to mobilize for violence than comparable groups that did not experience status reversals. The framework suggests that if Syria is ever to come together as a stable and coherent state, it will have to come to terms with the power of this mechanism.

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II. BARRIERS TO WAR RESOLUTION

Veto Players and Civil War in Syria

By David E. Cunningham, University of Maryland

All civil wars end, but many of them last for an extremely long time before that end. Historically, most civil wars have ended in military victory. However, since the end of the Cold War, there has been an increase in the proportion of civil wars ending in negotiated settlement.

Civil wars last longer, and are more resistant to negotiated agreement, when they contain more actors who can block settlement. All conflicts contain a set of actors with the ability to continue the war on their own even if the other actors reach agreement, and we can think of these actors as "veto players." Civil wars are less likely to end in periods in which they have more veto players, and thus conflicts with more of these actors last substantially longer. The international community has worked to build peace in multiparty conflicts, but international peacebuilding efforts are much more successful in civil wars with only two veto players than in conflicts with more (Cunningham 2006, 2010, 2011).

In this memo, I discuss the effect that an increasing number of veto players have on civil war generally and apply this logic to the case of Syria. I argue that the conflict in Syria is very resistant to resolution in part because of the barriers to settlement presented by many veto players, both internal and external. I discuss conditions under which international actors can promote resolution of multi-party civil wars and examine implications for international conflict management efforts in Syria.

Veto Players and Civil War Bargaining

Veto players are actors that have the capability to unilaterally block settlement of a civil war. All civil wars contain at least two veto players — the government and one rebel group — because if either of these actors could not unilaterally continue the war it would end. Many civil wars contain more than two veto players because they contain multiple rebel group veto players. Additionally, external states can function as veto players when they are heavily involved in civil war and bring their own agenda beyond trying to help one side win the conflict.

When civil wars contain more veto players, it is harder to find a negotiated settlement that all of these actors prefer to continued conflict because the set of agreements that all actors prefer to conflict is smaller, it is harder to assess the relative balance of power across all veto players, and each individual actor has incentives to hold out to be the last signer in a peace deal. These problems are compounded when external veto players are involved, because these actors may not directly bare the costs of conflict and because negotiated settlements often do not directly address the goals of these external parties. Because of these barriers to bargaining, civil wars with several veto players last much longer than those with only two.

The conflict in Syria contains myriad rebel groups. It is difficult to determine at this stage which of these actors are veto players because organizations are still coalescing and because there are a number of umbrella organizations that may (but often may not) coordinate the activities of several rebel groups. As such, the civil war not only contains the barriers to settlement represented by a large number of veto players, but also an additional barrier — it is difficult for the government, the rebels themselves, and the international community to determine who the veto players are who would have to be included in any negotiated settlement to the war.

In addition, the Syrian civil war has a strong international dimension. Both the government and various rebel groups receive support from external states. It is likely that some of these states bring independent preferences to the conflict and, as such, represent additional veto players. Finding a negotiated settlement to the Syrian civil war is challenging because these external actors either will have to agree to any settlement or will have to be prevented from undermining it.

International Efforts to Resolve Multi-Party Civil Wars

The presence of multiple veto players, both internal and external, and the shifting nature of the Syrian civil war mean that it is unlikely to end any time soon and that barriers to negotiated settlement are extremely high. The civil war is likely to last much longer than it has, despite international efforts to work toward a peaceful resolution. International efforts to resolve civil wars are much less successful when there are more than two veto players involved. A prominent study argues that the United Nations was "successful" in about 50 percent of peacebuilding missions undertaken between 1950 and 2000 (Doyle and Sambanis). Dividing these cases into two and multiparty wars shows that peacebuilding was successful in 10 out of 16 two-party wars (63 percent) and only 3 out of 11 multiparty wars (27 percent).

Despite the barriers to resolution in multiparty civil wars, however, there are examples in which the international community has used successful strategies to address these conflicts and where negotiation has succeeded. One such strategy that the international community can use when one or more veto players are opposed to settlement is to impose an agreement upon them. That is essentially what happened in the former Yugoslavia, as the Dayton Accords were backed up by a large NATO-led peacekeeping mission. This approach requires large resources because it typically requires a long-term large-scale commitment of forces to enforce the peace. There is still a significant peacekeeping mission in the former Yugoslavia nearly two decades after that war ended.

A second potential strategy for addressing civil wars containing both internal and external veto players is to sequence negotiations to address each dimension of the conflict. With the external dimension removed, it can be easier to reach accord with the internal parties. Additionally, the external states can apply leverage to their internal patrons to encourage them to negotiate. In Angola in the 1980s, for example, the U.S.-led negotiating team worked first to reach an agreement between Cuba and South Africa addressing the external dimension of the conflict. This agreement was followed by an agreement between Angola and the main rebel group UNITA, albeit an agreement which broke down.

In some cases, then, the international community uses strategies that can address the barriers to bargaining presented by multiple veto players and can help facilitate the resolution of these wars. Often, however, international conflict resolution efforts make settlement less likely by exacerbating the barriers present in multiparty civil wars. In particular, international actors often refuse to allow certain veto players to participate in peace processes, thus virtually guaranteeing those processes will fail.

In Burundi, for example, the two main rebel groups — CNDD-FDD and Palipehutu-FNL — were barred from participation in the 1998 to 2000 peace process in Arusha. That process led to an agreement among the participants, but failed to end the war as CNDD-FDD and Palipehutu-FNL continued fighting after the Arusha Accords. Another example is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict where Fatah is included as the sole representative of the Palestinians, despite the fact that Hamas, at least, is clearly a veto player with the ability to undermine any agreement reached.

While there are strategies that international actors can use to build peace in wars with multiple veto players, it appears unlikely that these may succeed in Syria. Imposing a peace on unwilling combatants requires a willingness to deploy significant resources, which does not exist in Syria. Sequencing negotiations to address the external dimension first is more likely to be viable, but would require actors such as the United States to work directly with actors such as Iran. Additionally, it is unclear that the external dimension is the primary barrier to settlement in Syria, and thus resolving that dimension, if possible, might not lead to agreement between the internal parties anyway.

Additionally, international efforts to address the conflict in Syria have the potential to exacerbate barriers to settlement by excluding veto players. Several of the most powerful rebel groups in Syria are Islamist in nature, and these actors are almost certainly veto players. Additionally,

Iran is heavily involved in the conflict and likely has its own agenda, making it a likely veto player as well. International actors, including the United States, have been hesitant to deal with Islamist rebel groups and with Iran, but they would likely need to be part of any political settlement to the war.

Conclusion

For civil wars to end in negotiated settlement, one of two things has to happen — all the actors (both internal and external) that have the ability to continue the conflict unilaterally have to agree to a settlement and actually stop fighting, or international actors have to be willing to impose a peace on unwilling veto players. When there are many veto players, as in Syria, it is extremely difficult to find an agreement that all veto players can agree to, and thus conflicts drag on. In Syria, the level of international

commitment required to impose a peace is lacking, and, while there are strategies that international actors can use to assist veto players in reaching negotiated settlements, they are unlikely to work there. The civil war in Syria, therefore, is likely to last much longer and the prospects for any sort of negotiated settlement are extremely low.

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The Four Things We Know About How Civil Wars End
(And What this Tells Us About Syria)

By Barbara F. Walter, University of California, San Diego

*A condensed version of this article was originally published as a blog post on Political Violence @ a Glance *on October 18, 2013.*

The Obama administration continues to insist that it would like to see a diplomatic solution to the civil war in Syria. This was made clear in U.S. President Barack Obama's September speech to the U.N. General Assembly. According to Obama: "I do not believe that military action — by those within Syria, or by external powers — can achieve a lasting peace. Nor do I believe that the United States or any nation should determine who will lead Syria — that is for the Syrian people to decide." Instead, Obama

insisted that the best way to respond to the violence was with "dogged diplomacy that resolves the root causes of conflict."

On the surface this strategy seems reasonable. Pushing for a power-sharing agreement between moderate elements avoids embroiling the United States in another Middle Eastern war, helps ensure that anti-American Islamists will not come to power, and has the added benefit of being politically popular at home. But when one compares what we have learned about how civil wars have ended over the last 70 plus years to the conditions that currently exist in Syria, it becomes clear that diplomacy will almost certainly fail.

Here are three things Obama should keep in mind as he considers the feasibility of pushing for a negotiated settlement in Syria, and one big conclusion:

1. Civil wars don't end quickly. The average length of civil wars since 1945 has been about 10 years. The average duration has declined somewhat since the end of the Cold War, but this still suggests that Syria is in the early stages of its conflict and not in the later ones that tend to encourage serious negotiations (Fearon and Laitin 2003, Fearon 2004).

2. The greater the number of factions, the longer a civil war tends to last. Syria's civil war is being fought between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and at least 13 major rebel groups whose alliances are relatively fluid. This suggests that Syria's civil war is likely to last longer than the average civil war (Cunningham 2006).

3. Most civil wars end in decisive military victories not negotiated settlements. Governments have won about 40 percent of the time, rebels about 30 percent of the time depending on which dataset you use. The remaining wars tend to end in negotiated settlements. This suggests that the civil war in Syria will not end in a negotiated settlement but will rather end on the battlefield (Walter 1997, Fearon and Laitin 2007).

The civil wars that end in successful negotiated settlements therefore tend to have two things in common. First, they tend to divide political power amongst the combatants based on their position on the battlefield. This means that any negotiated settlement in Syria will need to include both the Assad regime and the Islamists, two groups that have no real incentive to negotiate at this point in time. From Assad's perspective, any real offer to share power would be tantamount to a decisive defeat. Agreeing to open up the political process to Sunnis (who represent 70 percent of the population) would be tantamount to accepting a minority position in government. And a minority position

in government would make him vulnerable to reprisals in the form of imprisonment or death at the hands of a vengeful population.

Even if Assad were to agree to a compromise deal, the opposition has its own reasons to reject a settlement. Assuming that opposition factions could unite (an outcome that is unlikely), they have little reason to believe that Assad will honor an agreement once they demobilize and disarm. As a result, rebel factions will do everything possible to consolidate their own power and decisively defeat Assad. This will allow them to impose their own preferred policies and avoid an agreement that will be difficult to enforce over time.

Finally, successful settlements almost all enjoy the help of a third party willing to ensure the safety of combatants during this vulnerable demobilization period. This means that even if all sides agree to negotiate (due to the increasingly heavy costs of war or a military stalemate), it is unlikely that any country or the United Nations will be willing to send the peacekeepers necessary to help implement the peace. Thus, while Obama and other state leaders claim that they would like to see a negotiated settlement to the war in Syria, none of them are willing to make the commitment needed to help enforce the agreement over time.

What does this all mean? It means that the likelihood of a successful negotiated settlement in Syria is close to zero despite the efforts of the Obama administration to convince us otherwise.

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Conflict Outcomes

By Erin Simpson, Caerus Analytics

The ongoing conflict in Syria can be viewed through a surprising number of research lenses. The contentious politics crew has much to say about dynamics of protest and repression, social mobilization, and the strategic choices of opposition groups. The evolution of urban protests in Syria to a violent national insurgency raises many questions that have lain dormant for far too long. Similarly, those focused on the coercive diplomacy and bargaining literatures, were reinvigorated by the chemical weapons crisis in the fall.

Figure 1: Distribution of Civil War Outcomes by year

Much political commentary has focused on the "civil war" dynamics of the Syrian conflict, especially war termination and outcome. There are some reasonably strong empirical patterns. Governments enjoy an overall win-loss advantage in civil wars (though the table below indicates how sensitive that finding is to certain coding rules).

Table 1: Distribution of Civil War Outcomes

	Gov	Rebel	Draw	Settle	Ongoing	N
COW (1945-1998)	60 (58%)	28 (27%)	0 (0%)	7 (7%)	8 (8%)	103
Fearon (1945-2002)	40 (33%)	20 (17%)	5 (4%)	29 (24%)	26 (21%)	120
Sambanis-Doyle (1945-1998)	38 (30%)	27 (22%)	15 (12%)	34 (27%)	10 (8%)	125

However, that advantage is short lived. If rebels survive the first year, they have a markedly increased chance of victory. Depending on how we time the onset of the civil war in Syria, it is either in its second or third year. That suggests the time is ripe for the opposition — but the window of opportunity is limited. Past the third year, the chances of outright victory equalize, then diminish in favor of truces and settlements.

However, the war in Syria is not a textbook insurgency — or at least, not *just* a textbook insurgency. Some may describe it as an internationalized civil war or a proxy war. I have previously written about "hybrid wars" (though that terms has been much abused in policy circles for the last
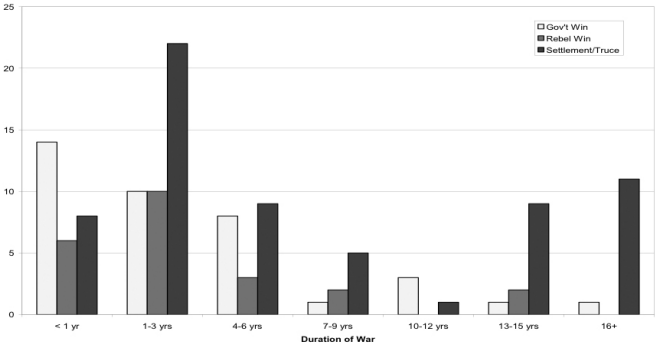
five plus years). Regardless of the specific typology applied, one key feature of the ongoing Syrian conflict is the opportunity for multiple forms of external intervention.

The most obvious research frame is the literature on third-party interventions in civil wars. However, this literature is plagued by non-random selection: foreign powers and international organizations don't just select wars to intervene in out of a hat. My own efforts to analyze the effects of intervention using propensity scores yielded largely indeterminate results. That is, when accounting for the propensity for "treatment" (e.g., being on the receiving end of an intervention), it was not possible to discern whether the war's duration would increase or decrease.

My dissertation research offers another avenue of approach. The central puzzle from that work begins with a startling empirical observation: third parties have won only six overseas counterinsurgency campaigns since 1945 (see Table 3). This stands in stark contrast to the advantage afforded governments in more traditional civil wars. Why do (often) powerful third party interveners fare

so much worse than domestic governments in fighting and defeating insurgencies?

The short answer is selection effects and intelligence. Putting the former aside for the moment, I argue that intelligence — or information availability — serves a powerful constraint on third party strategic choice. You may want to pursue a sophisticated, high value targeting campaign, but you might not have the intel to do so. (Perhaps interestingly, the theory is agnostic as to whether and how states choose to target).

Table 2: Strategic Interaction of Information and Targeting

Approach/Information	Low Info	High Info
Population	Mass killing	Local security
Insurgents	Raiding	Targeted Killing

How does Syria fare on this score?

Based on the available measures — GDP per capita, density of road networks — Syria would have above average information availability. Good, but not great. Based on my understanding of how information affects strategic choice by third parties, it would be a borderline case making it difficult to predict if one should expect to see a mass killing strategy. Obviously we have observed mass killings in Syria — though by the local regime, not (yet) a third party.

How does this inform the U.S. policy debate about the conflict in Syria? First and foremost, it's important to remember that the primary candidates for a third party COIN intervention in Syria are Russia and Iran. One key finding from my work is that regime type strongly affects the likelihood of a third party win — but it's democracies that have the advantage. (Indeed democratic states are the only ones to claim outright wins.) This bodes poorly for Syria's sponsors.

One further finding in my research — and much of the research on insurgencies over the last decade — is a recognition of the importance of problematizing military strategy and behavior on the ground as a key

element of conflict studies. The literature on war onset and termination provides many useful insights about the nature of intrastate conflicts. But scholars — both IR and comparative — had long placed a black box around questions of war conduct. But developments within academic and policy circles over the last few years have created demand for new theories and research strategies in ongoing wars.

Indeed, many of the elements of the policy debate have focused on local conflict dynamics in Syria including territorial control, insurgent governance, fracturing of the opposition. (USAID in particular has an interest in understanding local governance as it identifies potential implementation partners.) Much of this discussion draws on research conducted over the last several years as academics engaged more deeply in studies of insurgency and counterinsurgency — especially Stathis Kalyvas.

One topic not immediately addressed on the agenda, but worthy of attention, is research methods in conflict environments — from personal safety to duplicitous research managers, to everything in between. Even if scholars and analysts are better able to model the endogeneity of control and brainstorm observable indicators, there remain myriad logistical and ethical challenges to collecting that data in the field.

But for all the gains made in understanding insurgent behavior, the endogeneity of control, and varying forms of rebel governance, there are still many gaps in our understanding of these conflicts (and our ability to reliably collect data on them). On the policy side, one yawning gap is our limited knowledge of about so-called "unconventional warfare" strategies — namely, third parties providing aid *insurgents.* There are case studies of course, but few strong empirical findings to inform the debate.

Table 3: Distribution of Outcomes in Third-Party Counter-insurgency Campaigns, 1945-2000

Third-Party Victories		
Third Party	*Conflict*	*Years*
France	Madagascar	1947-48
UK	Malaya	1948-56
UK	Kenya	1952-56
France	Cameroon	1955-60
UK	Borneo	1963-67
Insurgent Victories		
France	Indochina	1945-54
UK	Palestine	1946-49
France	Algeria	1954-61
UK	Aden	1963-67
US	Vietnam	1965-73
Pakistan	Bangladesh	1970-71
USSR	Afghanistan	1976-89
Draws		
Morocco	Polisario	1975-88
Settlements		
Netherlands	Indonesia	1945-49
UK	Cyprus	1953-59
Portugal	Angola	1961-75
Portugal	Guinea-Bissau	1962-74
Portugal	Mozambique	1965-74
South Africa	Namibia	1966-89
Israel	PLO	1969-82
Indonesia	East Timor	1973-99
Israel	Hezbollah	1982-2000
Israel	First Intifada	1984-93
Ongoing Conflicts		
Israel	Second Intifada	2000-present
US	Afghanistan	2002-present
US	Iraq	2003-present

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III. OPPOSITION FRAGMENTATION AND GOVERNANCE

Actor Fragmentation and Conflict Processes

By Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, University of Maryland

Much of the influential quantitative literature on conflict has treated actors as unitary, or at least assumed that they can and will act as if they are unitary. The internal dynamics of states and opposition movements, however, have profound effects on their ability to bargain with one another. My research has shown that internal divisions in actors have predictable and consistent effects across a variety of disputes around the world. Here, I highlight two key issues for conflict and conflict resolution from this work, emphasizing 1) the substantial credibility problems internally divided non-state actors face and 2) the incentives that divided non-state actors create for states to pursue limited or partial settlements that are unlikely to resolve underlying disputes. The combination of these dynamics means that negotiations between states and fragmented oppositions result in negotiated settlements more often than with less divided oppositions, but that these deals are less likely to fully resolve disputes.

Commitment problems and negotiated settlement

The internal political dynamics of actors in civil conflicts affects the credibility that these actors have, and this has important implications for the ability of these actors to resolve disputes. The majority of civil wars that have taken place since the end of the Cold War have ended in negotiated settlement. Getting to these settlements, as well as their eventual success or failure, depends on what parties to the conflict believe will happen in the future. That is, all parties are worried about whether conflict actors will abide by a negotiated deal or renege on it and return to war. Making credible promises about the future is difficult for many actors, but is particularly problematic for fragmented opposition groups.

Fragmented oppositions, such as the current opposition movement in Syria, face significant challenges in making credible commitments about the behavior and intentions of "the opposition movement" for several reasons. In the absence of a near universally recognized figurehead for the opposition, no specific faction or individual can speak with authority about the desires of the opposition, nor guarantee that certain concessions will satisfy them.

It is difficult for opposition factions to make credible promises about the behavior of other factions in the future, or about their ability to reign in factions with more extreme demands because opposition factions can typically act independently of one another. Empirically, few opposition factions exercise a large degree of authority over other factions claiming to represent the same interests of the same set of individuals. Even actors such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization, that have had widespread recognition as a legitimate representative of their group, are not consistently able to exercise control over other factions in the group.

Both the capability and legitimacy of a particular faction to exert authority over others is difficult for states to assess. This exacerbates credibility concerns because it is unclear whether any specific faction within the opposition can "deliver" its movement and implement the terms of any agreement made with the state. There are a number of reasons that some opposition factions might resist a particular compromise deal even if it involved substantial concessions. Some opposition factions may fear marginalization and the loss of influence over politics if a particular settlement is pursued, and thus, will be reluctant to accede to the authority of another faction in the opposition even when concessions seem likely.

Many opposition movements also lack a clear and uncontested leader that can make a commitment about the future behavior of all or even most factions in the movement. The potential for quick leadership change means that opposition factions, and thus the larger opposition movement, may not have the internal continuity necessary to make longer-term commitments

about their behavior. Competition among opposition factions can result in particular factions dominating others at different times. This can happen through cooperation among factions, or through intimidation and coercion among factions. Even within a dominant faction, there is not typically a consistent and stable process for selecting leaders. Problems of succession and struggles for power within factions can create unstable leadership in opposition factions.

Opposition factions that negotiate a deal with the state can try to persuade or force other factions to comply once it has been made. This can be done by offering compensation, eliminating opposition factions, or by decreasing their strength to the point that they cannot prevent agreement implementation on their own. However, the state and other opposition factions will be uncertain whether they can achieve compliance with a new deal. This uncertainty makes getting to a conflict ending settlement more difficult as the state is wary of opposition promises about the future. As such, negotiations between states and fragmented oppositions are less likely to result in settlements that fully resolve conflicts.

Incentives for partial/limited settlements

While negotiations between states and fragmented oppositions rarely fully settle conflicts, more limited concessions are common. More fragmented movements create incentives and opportunities for states to strategically make concessions that are limited in nature, and this type of accommodation is unlikely to resolve underlying issues quickly. This means that should the opposition and the Assad regime get to the table to negotiate an end of the war, the fragmented opposition provides more potential bargaining partners, and may give the regime incentives to try to use limited concessions to undermine the opposition's ability to present a coherent challenge to the state.

When faced with a divided opposition, states can use accommodation strategically to both reveal information about the strength of different demands in the opposition

and to strengthen moderate factions. A multitude of opposition factions present states (as well as the international community) with an information problem. That is, it is not clear exactly what specific factions might settle for, or what kind of deal would adequately address the underlying issues under dispute and lead to lasting peace.

Internal divisions in the opposition provide an opportunity for states to use concessions to reveal information about what opposition factions want, and this helps the state to gauge what minimum amount of concessions would have a positive influence on the dispute. By negotiating concessions with specific factions in the opposition, the state can observe the response of other factions to the concessions and thus learn more about what kind of accommodation might satisfy key factions in the opposition. States, then, can use concessions to reveal information about what the group would settle for.

Moreover, when the opposition is internally divided, states can use negotiated limited settlements strategically to try to strengthen moderates. Instead of working to fully settle the dispute, concessions can be designed to benefit moderate factions. Resources passed to these factions through accommodation can bolster factions that participate in the settlement, influencing the intra-group competition between factions.

Making deals that appease and strengthen moderates is a way to try to reduce the costs that the opposition can put on the state by decreasing the size of the challenge to the state. However, strengthening moderate positions in the opposition through limited settlements can also be a longer-term strategy designed to minimize what the state must concede in the future if pushed to come to a final, more comprehensive settlement with all factions in the opposition. Internally divided oppositions, then, provide incentives for states to use concessions to reveal information and strengthen moderates. However, this path to settlement will not satisfy all parts of the opposition, and conflict is likely to continue at some level.

Fragmentation and the Syrian opposition

The Syrian opposition is highly fragmented, and shows few signs that substantial progress toward cohesion is eminent. Moreover, the underlying sources of fragmentation are diverse meaning that it is unlikely that organizations will be able to overcome this fragmentation. There is clearly some recognition that there are costs to extreme fragmentation and the Syrian opposition, with international support, has tried to generate greater cohesion, and several umbrella organizations have emerged to coordinate the struggle. Yet, the opposition remains highly fragmented, both in terms of operations on the ground, and as a political actor more generally. As such, commitment problems are likely to plague any settlement attempts, and the Assad regime will face incentives to pursue only the most minimal settlement that is unlikely to end conflict.

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Insurgent Organization and State-Armed Group Relations:
Implications for Syria

By Paul Staniland, University of Chicago

This memo addresses two strands of my research. The first seeks to explain the cohesion and organizational structure of insurgent groups. The second studies how governments deal with non-state armed groups. This memo focuses on the first, but offers brief thoughts on the second line of research.

Organizing Insurgency

In my forthcoming book, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Cornell University Press, 2014), I study how insurgent groups are organized and explain why their structure changes over time. The evidence is drawn from comparisons of groups within

the Kashmir, Sri Lanka, and Afghanistan civil wars, and comparisons of groups across the Malaya, Indochina, and Philippine communist insurgencies.

Types of Insurgent Groups

I identify four insurgent organizational structures. *Integrated* groups have a well-institutionalized central command and control over local units. These tend to be the most militarily effective groups, able to carefully coordinate strategy and keep fighting even in difficult situations. The Tamil Tigers from the mid-1980s onward, the Afghan Taliban, and Hamas are cases of integrated groups.

Vanguard groups have a strong central command but weak local control. Local units defy or ignore the central leadership. They are the most likely to change, either by being wiped out through leadership decapitation or becoming integrated by building local alliances with local communities. Al Qaeda in Iraq in the early days of the Iraq war was a vanguard, as were the Bolsheviks during the 1917 Revolution. They are often dominated by urban, foreign, or elite leaders without strong ties to local communities.

Parochial groups are made up of powerful local factions that lack a powerful, unified central command. They resemble militarized coalitions, even if under a common organizational umbrella. Agreeing on and consistently implementing strategy is difficult. The Jaish al-Mahdi in Iraq during the mid-2000s and the contemporary Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are examples of parochial groups.

Fragmented groups lack central cohesion or local control, and tend to be quickly marginalized. The Irish National Liberation Army in Northern Ireland is a good example. They are hard to reform and usually die out or become irrelevant after the first couple of years of war.

Insurgent Origins and Change

The book makes two arguments. First, the original structure of armed groups when they are created is determined by the structure of prewar political networks: Political parties, religious associations, student networks, and tribal ties, for instance, are often the underpinning of new insurgencies. These social bases are usually nonviolent and not built for war. Insurgents go to war with the networks they have, creating new organizational structures by mobilizing the ties of information, obligation, and trust they have access to it.

Within these social bases, strong horizontal ties between leaders create robust central commands; strong vertical links between leaders and local communities create reliable local control. When horizontal prewar ties are weak, new central commands will be divided. Strategy will be disjointed across different factions. When prewar vertical ties are weak, insurgent leaders will have trouble building local presence. Foot soldiers will not be carefully vetted or trained and local units will have autonomy from the central command. Prewar politics shape what new insurgents can do when wars come.

Second, there are different pathways of organizational change depending on with which structure a group begins. Initial structures are difficult to change, but each type of group has different strengths and weaknesses that shape how they might change over time.

Integrated groups are the most resilient. There are two major pathways through which they shift into a weaker structure. Militarized state-building counterinsurgency that controls local areas and consistently eliminates top leaders can break these groups down from the outside. This is very difficult for counterinsurgents, especially those without political resolve or competent state apparatuses. Integrated groups are also vulnerable to rapid, mismanaged expansion that can weaken the social ties that make institutions able to function, but this is a fairly rare outcome. Most integrated groups end up winning (the 1990s Taliban), cutting a deal (Provisional IRA), or being totally destroyed through intensive brute force (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, LTTE).

Vanguard groups are the most interesting. They can decay into fragmented groups — often en route to elimination — when leaders are decapitated by the state. Weak local presence means that there is no reliable second rung of cadres to take over (i.e., Che Guevara in Bolivia). Similarly, revolts from below by disloyal local units can undermine a vanguard group, as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar experienced from 1995 to 1996 as the Taliban pulled away his local units and left him without fighting power.

But originally vanguard groups can also create local alliances by taking advantage of conflicts and feuds on the ground. Local alliances bridge the gap between leaders and communities, creating trust and connections that make possible the creation of effective, loyal units. Local alliance

is a difficult strategy, one that I go into more detail about in the book, but it can convert a vanguard group into an integrated one. The NRA in Uganda and Viet Minh in 1940s Indochina shifted from isolated urban and elite-dominated organizations to locally powerful insurgents through this mechanism. If I am reading some of the Syria coverage properly, this may be what has happened with some of the foreign and jihadist elements in the country.

Parochial groups are hard to change. Counterinsurgents find it difficult to totally root out embedded local units, but the factional structure of the organization builds "veto players" into the organization who are resistant to becoming subordinated to other factional elites they do not know or trust. A totally unified international community that demands integration may be able to induce factional leaders to meaningfully unify (which occurred with some anti-colonial rebels in Africa) and indiscriminate state violence can lead to a more tenuous cooperation under fire. But moving from a parochial to integrated structure is much easier said than done. This may be the case with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Syria, which seems to be built around local units and lacks a cohesive central command.

Implications for Syria

First, rapid organizational change is very difficult. Once a parochial structure is in place, factional unification is extremely challenging. In an environment with weak ties of trust and information between commanders, deep cooperation is hard to build. Vanguards are vulnerable initially, but once they embed themselves in local communities they can integrate and be far more difficult to defeat. The FSA will be hard to build up, and Jabhat al-Nusra hard to break down.

Second, external sponsors cannot easily control their ostensible proxies on the ground. In Sri Lanka, the Indians ended up at war with their previous ally, the LTTE. In Afghanistan, the Pakistanis can broadly influence but cannot control the Taliban. In Kashmir, the Pakistanis were not able to stop one of their favored groups from engaging in the fratricidal targeting of other Pakistan-backed groups.

In Syria, no major external player is going to have an easy time managing the behavior of its favored proxy especially when it comes to local feuds.

Third, guns and money don't have any single effect on insurgent groups. Groups with strong organizational structures will take resources and effectively use them; groups with weak organizations will erupt in battles over cash and turf when given the exact same resources. Pumping material support into parochial groups might buy some limited cooperation from factions that need help but is unlikely to trigger deep organizational change. This means that foreign backing for undisciplined groups will not do much. It may be better to sponsor particular sub-factions that look fairly effective and integrated rather than relying on ineffectual central leaders.

Fourth, mass popular support and ideology aren't reliable guides to organizational outcomes. Some Islamist, nationalist, and communist groups have successfully built integrated groups; others have failed miserably. Similarly, some apparently quite popular groups (like the JKLF in Kashmir) have fragmented while less popular rivals became disciplined war machines. The Huks in the Philippines, for instance, read Mao and had peasant support, but ended up a factionalized disaster. We need to be very cautious about assuming that there is an intrinsic link between particular ideologies or support bases and organizational outcomes.

Armed Groups and the State

My current book project studies how states try to manage and manipulate non-state armed groups. One finding is that states treat armed groups in very different ways, often creating formal and tacit alliances with them that achieve various government political goals even while undermining the state's monopoly of violence. We see "wartime political orders"[1] of shared sovereignty, collusion, spheres of influence, and tacit coexistence that blend state and non-state power, often alongside neighboring areas

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1   Paul Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 2012), pp. 243-264.

of intense combat. There is huge diversity in state-armed group relationships.

In Syria, we see these conflict dynamics. In Kurdish areas and with Alawite militias, there appears to be extensive collusion between the state and non-state armed groups. In some areas it appears that insurgents have made pragmatic cease-fire accommodations with the Assad regime. In these areas of overlapping state or non-state power, various heterodox governance arrangements are likely to emerge. If the conflict continues as a stalemate, large areas of Syria will lie between war and peace, with the central government making hard choices about allocating its coercive capacity. It will abandon irrelevant regions, try to create "indirect rule" situations in which control is sub-contracted out to local armed allies, and seek to contain threats in politically peripheral areas by cutting local pragmatic deals with armed groups. It will focus suppression on major perceived political-military threats, with extraordinary violence.

The political orders that have emerged already bear resemblance to the Burmese, Philippine, Iraqi, and Pakistani

armed peripheries, with an intricate mix of conflict and cooperation, and the future likely holds more of this diverse patchwork of authority and control. These dynamics will complicate conflict termination because new power holders have emerged with a stake in maintaining local power and control. Many will be unexcited about being subsumed into either a reformed regime or a new revolutionary government. However, the emergence of various forms of armed local rule also may allow for areas of relative quiet and stability that can provide a basis for rebuilding effective governance and organizational innovation.

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Understanding Fragmentation in the Syrian Revolt

Wendy Pearlman, Northwestern University

Beginning as nonviolent demonstrations against decades of authoritarianism, the Syrian uprising has generated not insignificant sympathy from around the world. Yet it has also garnered recurrent criticism of its internal fragmentation. A headline in a September 2011 issue of the *Economist* asked "Syria's opposition: Can it get together?" Five months later, the *New York Times* called the opposition a "fractious collection of political groups … deeply divided along ideological, ethnic or sectarian lines, and too disjointed to agree on even the rudiments of a strategy." Reporting on the Syrian National Coalition, *National Public Radio* concluded, "The various factions of the coalition are giving every appearance of caring more about their own share of power than their ability to represent the Syrian people." Commentators increasingly highlight fighting in the rebellion's military sphere as well as its political one. The growth of extremist Islamist groups, and their bloody clashes with nationalist battalions, has prompted headlines such as "Rebel vs. Rebel" and "Syrian rebels turn on each other."

Skeptics of the Syrian rebellion cite these divisions as reason to fear the collapse of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Rebellion supporters cite them as a major reason that Assad's regime is yet to collapse. Both U.S. President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton highlighted the opposition's disunity as a justification for the hesitation of the United States to give it greater support. Given such fragmentation, pundits say, there are no assurances that military aid will not wind up "in the wrong hands."

These concerns are in no way unique to Syria. Obstacles to political unity have challenged movements ranging from the South African anti-Apartheid struggle to Basque separatism to the Republicans in Northern Ireland. In these and other movements, adherents agree on the basic goal of overthrowing a system of political rule, but face divisions on strategy, ideology, organization, and the distribution of decision-making power. In consequence, movements often contain numerous and fluid groups that differ over a range of issues. A central leadership or structure can be difficult to form. When it does, it might face still other difficulties in making its authority effective on the ground.

Scholars give increasing attention to the causes and effects of fragmentation in non-state actors and situations of civil war. Indeed, the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* recently devoted two special issues to these themes.[13] Toward an understanding of fragmentation in the Syrian revolt, it is thus useful to look to lessons from other cases across time and space. The Palestinian national movement is one such example. Based on my prior research, I highlight a few relevant points from the Palestinian experience.

First, political fragmentation, meaning the lack of coordination among actors producing unified political action, is distinct from social fragmentation, referring to the cleavages that divide a population. Observing the Palestinian or Syrian movements, many conclude that the former is a mirror of the latter. In an exemplary analysis of the Palestinian struggle penned two and a half decades ago, one scholar argued, "They have never overcome the drawbacks of the traditional Middle Eastern social structure as a 'mosaic system' of clannish, tribal, and ethnic in-groups."[14] Similar commentaries on Syria abound today. Closer analysis, however, shows that disunity in a movement for political change is not an automatic result of pre-existing social identities. Rather, it is a contingent consequence of conflict processes and structures of power. For this reason, a movement's degree of political unity or disunity can vary over time even as its underlying social structure remains relatively constant.

Second, even where the political and social dimensions of fragmentation overlap, the flow of causal influence might be from the former to the latter as much as vice versa. Such is the case when regimes provoke or exacerbate disunity within a movement in a strategy of "divide and conquer." Dealing with Palestinians, British Mandate authorities tended to accentuate religious or familial loyalties at the expense of national ones. Similarly, Israeli policies have often encouraged, directly or indirectly, Palestinians' ideological and factional divisions. In the Syrian context, the Assad regime plays upon sectarian cleavages in effort to bolster its claim to be the protector of minority communities against a vengeful majority. Some believe that, on the same strategic logic, the regime has also facilitated the emergence of extremist Islamist trends within the opposition.

Third, impetuses to political fragmentation lie both internal and external to a movement. In a struggle against a more powerful state adversary, rebels are rational to welcome political, economic, or military assistance from other states. In turn, these states typically use material support to gain influence over groups within the opposition, if not bring new groups into existence. External patronage can give factions the resources to act independently of an official leadership or institutional framework. It thus undermines command and control, adding new interests, goals, and identities to those already dividing a movement's ranks.

Both the Palestinian and Syrian movements illustrate these dynamics. With the rise of the Palestinian Fedayeen in the 1960s and 1970s, Arab regimes competed by funding rival groups or creating their own proxies. This contributed to the proliferation of factions, subsidized their ideological disputes, and increased their operational autonomy. In this situation, the official Palestine Liberation Organization leadership did not impose a unifying strategy as much as negotiate contradictory pressures in the search for minimally acceptable compromises. Likewise facing the Syrian revolt, a multitude of government, supranational, and individual patrons are supporting an even larger number of rebel trends, organizational formations, and

projects. Patrons' competing agendas duplicate themselves within the Syrian struggle. Disheartened Syrian citizens lament that fragmentation in the sources and distribution of money to the revolt is the single greatest cause of disunity within its ranks. Unity is likely to remain elusive unless external actors cooperate in instituting a transparent, accountable centralization of financial support.

Finally, amid criticism of fragmentation in both the Syrian and the Palestinian movements, it is helpful to appreciate that the extent of their cohesion is no less remarkable. Both are cases in which populations forged and sustained revolutionary movements despite tremendous obstacles. The Palestinian struggle has faced the daunting challenge of winning territorial concessions from a state adversary of tremendously greater strength. This challenge has been made all the more formidable by a history of dispossession, territorial dispersal, the gap between an exiled political leadership and grassroots activists organizing protest on the streets in the homeland, and the intervention of numerous parties with incompatible interests. Under such conditions, it is no small feat that Palestinians built a movement with sufficient organizational cohesion to sustain itself and compel the recognition of the world.

Likewise, those who lament divisions within the Syrian opposition should acknowledge that it is no small feat that it has cohered as it has. A movement for change emerged in a context in which civil society was severely repressed for decades. Having minimal pre-existing organization on which to build, the movement managed to construct a mobilizational infrastructure during the very process of rebelling. Grassroots committees came together to organize protests, manage media outreach, collect and disseminate information, and distribute humanitarian relief. In areas no longer under regime control, communities are building structures of governance and service provision, including judicial systems and developmental projects. These efforts persevere even as bombs fall and the arrest, killing, or displacement of activists have removed tens of thousands of those best positioned to unite people on the ground.

However, no movement's unity is immune from the cumulative strain of repression, an intransigent adversary, or unhelpful stances on the part of international parties. In the Palestinian experience, the denial of the basic goal of self-determination is the context in which the national movement has faced one blocked path after another, each setback leading to some measure of dissension about how to proceed. Similarly in Syria, divisions have worsened as time has worn on, the goal of toppling Assad proved elusive, and the regime's onslaught intensified. Clashes between nationalist and al Qaeda-linked groups were unthinkable during the initial months of the uprising, when al Qaeda-linked groups had no presence on the ground. That they now threaten prospects for a democratic, civil state in Syria is a tragic consequence of the prolongation of conflict.

In this sense, the lack of effective intervention by the international community to end the conflict is a cause contributing to fragmentation in Syrian rebels' ranks as much it has been a reaction to that fragmentation. Had the international community done more to support an initially unarmed popular uprising, the Syrian conflict might never have evolved to reach the stage of fragmentation and violence that now consume it. That the United States and other international actors now invoke the rebellion's fragmentation as reason for not giving it greater support is, therefore, a cruel irony.

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Fighting Between Allies and the Civil War in Syria

By Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, University of Virginia

Concern about the Syrian rebels has become central to debates on diplomatic solutions to the war, foreign intervention, assistance to the opposition, and even humanitarian aid. Policymakers dread the possibility that moves toward a political settlement or actions that weaken the Assad regime could strengthen extremist jihadi groups including al Qaeda affiliates. Worse still, were the military balance to change decisively, the fear is that a bleak future looms for post-Assad Syria — either a collapse into ongoing warfare pitting opposition groups against each other or a take-over by extremists. All such scenarios would harm the interests of the United States and its allies.

While these fears have been clearly laid out in the public debate, the nature of the interaction between the various rebel groups in Syria is less systematically understood. The issue goes beyond the specifics of the Syrian civil war. Outright violent conflict between armed groups that are on the same side of a civil war — what I label "on-side" fighting — finds little explanation in the existing literature on civil wars.

I argue that threats to survival play an important role in generating cooperation among armed actors. Reprieves from being violently eliminated by the enemy cause

cooperation between allies to break down. The assurance of survival pushes an armed actor to fight its allies, with whom it competes most intensely for political support, with an eye toward increasing its political power in the eventual post-war period. At the same time, the macro-level process of the war continues to tie the fratricidal groups together as meaning allies.

This theoretical account focuses squarely how the progress of the war shapes relationships between on-side armed groups. In doing so, it fills in important gaps in existing explanations of infighting in civil wars, which emphasize the role of structural factors. The structural accounts do generate expectations about why average levels of fighting between armed groups might vary across wars. But they are unlikely to be able to account for disparate experiences within the same war, and for unusual patterns such as variation in levels of cooperation between the same armed groups according to the location in which their forces are fighting.

Until now, modest external military support to the Syrian opposition — favored over robust alternatives as a way to minimize the unintended consequences of interference in the civil war — has in fact exacerbated the dangers of fratricidal infighting and the rise of extremist groups. This conclusion come from analysis of Syria and a hard look at Lebanon's 15-year civil war. Observers often use Lebanon to illustrate the folly of trying to affect change in a brutal sectarian conflict. But that lesson ignores a crucial aspect of the military dynamics: the stalemate that fomented extremism in Lebanon endured due to the small scale and inconsistency of outside involvement. The United States and its allies can still change course on Syria to avoid these pitfalls.

Military aid to the Syrian opposition has sustained its fight against the Assad regime. In some areas, opposition groups have secured strong defensive positions. In this military posture, the rebels ensure their survival against the regime but lack the ability to defeat it in decisive battles. In interviews I conducted with former commanders on all sides of the Lebanese civil war over the course of a year and

a half, I learned that such a situation creates fertile ground for fighting between nominally allied groups, and the resulting chaos encourages the rise of extremists.

In Lebanon, terrain and urban settings gave the advantage to defenders. This left the two principal sides relatively secure from each other; front lines scarcely moved after the second year of the war. Military support from foreign governments allowed each side to defend its enclaves but never provided sufficient strength to go on the offensive against the enemy.

In this setting, each side turned in on itself. Civil wars raged within the war and were immensely damaging. The Lebanese Forces militia and the Lebanese Army tore apart the Christian enclave of East Beirut in a "War of Elimination;" yet both represented the same conservative Maronite position in the war. Hezbollah and Amal brought war to the Shiite community of which they were both protectors, vying for supremacy in Beirut's southern suburbs and across southern Lebanon. The overarching theme of these and numerous other incidents was that safety from the enemy ushered in periods of violent power struggles and the rise of extremists on both sides of the war.

Similar dynamics are now at play in Syria. Infighting among the armed opposition has raged in many areas that were wrested from the regime's control. Opposition forces took the provincial capital of Raqqa in mid-March. When the regime proved unable to take back the city, armed groups there turned on each other. On August 15, fighters of the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria, by far the most radical of all the groups, attacked the more moderate Islamist opposition group, Ahfad al-Rasul, killing its leader and seizing its headquarters. Hasaka province has seen intermittent but intense infighting ever since regime forces lost a pivotal border town in November 2012. Now, Kurdish militias are essentially at war with the extremist Islamic State. Yet on hotly contested central and southern fronts in the war, the pressure of high-stakes fighting against the regime has pushed some of the same opposition groups enmeshed in infighting elsewhere to be flexible and successfully cooperate to confront the threat.

In Syria now, the longer opposition forces carve out safe havens but lack the strength to rout the government, the more we will see infighting and the rise of extremism. This state of affairs is a direct, though unintended consequence of the current course set by outside powers supporting the opposition with half measures.

Policymakers have viewed military action as the risky choice when it comes to choices about Syria. But this emphasis ignores the consequences of inaction. Continued hedging on Syria will only increase the chances that an opposition victory will bring about Syria's further collapse into ongoing warfare or the rise of an extremist government, rather than finally ending its massive human tragedy.

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Rebel Governance and the Syrian War

By Zachariah Mampilly, Vassar College

According to rough estimates, insurgents in Aleppo, the largest Syrian city primarily under rebel dominion, control the lives of over a million people (Baczko, Dorronsoro and Quesnay 2013). In March, rebel leaders established a rudimentary civilian administration that despite receiving only about $400,000 in international aid has managed to reestablish some basic public services including power, water, and trash collection. A police force is slowly coming into being, with very limited capacity to restore public order. The rebel government has also reopened some schools and hospitals. But conditions on the ground remain challenging. Faced with limited resources and daily fighting with the military forces of the Bashir government as well as from competing armed groups, conditions for civilians remain dire. But through collaboration with civilians, many of whom initially took up the task of providing governance through autonomous local councils during the anti-government protests, many areas of rebel-controlled Syria have not descended into the chaos commonly imagined.

Though dire, the conditions faced by the insurgent civil administration in Syria are not dissimilar to those faced by armed groups elsewhere. "Rebel governance," refers to the development of institutions and practices of rule to regulate the social and political life of civilians by an armed group (Mampilly 2011a, 2011b). This system can include a police force and judicial structure, health and educational systems, a tax regime to regulate commercial activities, and even representative structures that give civilians a voice in governing themselves. It also includes the maintenance of infrastructure such as road networks and supply lines for foods, medicines and other basic commodities. In addition, armed groups often devise symbolic practices, such as the adoption of flags and anthems in order to lend the rebel government an air of legitimacy.

Though the study of rebel governance systems has only recently come to the fore, scholars and practitioners are increasingly recognizing its importance for a variety of concerns. Militarily, civilian governance is an essential

task for armed groups seeking to gain an advantage against the often superior forces of the incumbent regime. Though some groups like the Lord's Resistance Army eschew holding territory or controlling populations, many others deem it a central concern, recognizing the strategic import of gaining civilian support for their broader struggle. Relatedly, most theories of counterinsurgency similarly recognize the importance of popular support in determining the outcome of conflicts and emphasize civilian governance as a central concern.

Beyond the military struggle, understanding rebel governance systems is also important for ensuring the protection of civilians during war. Understanding and engaging with the actual structures that attempt to meet civilian needs is an essential task for international agencies and humanitarian organizations alike. Though attention is mostly paid to the lives lost by civilians due to armed force, the truth is that far more civilians suffer and die from the broader breakdown of social and political order. Whether hospitals shutting down due to the lack of qualified personnel; the inevitable breakdown of social order without a functioning police; or the destruction of infrastructure that inhibits the arrival of basic medicines and food, rebel governance systems can often be the difference between a crisis that kills thousands versus those that kill millions.

What determines the effectiveness of rebel governance systems? The viability of a rebel government begins with territorial control. This is not simply a function of military strength, however, because once rebel armies gain control of a territory, they must figure out how to get the civilian population to identify with the rebel cause. Rebels thus turn to governance to address the needs of their fledgling constituencies. Controlling territory is merely a first-order condition that allows a rebel movement to provide local services. But in and of itself, it is no substitute for actually providing those services.

Many assume that when rebel groups do begin to govern, they are driven by ideological principles. During the cold war, policymakers believed that leftist militants

were more likely than ethnic or religiously motivated insurgents to provide basic services, based on the Maoist strategy of using the distribution of public goods as a tool for popular mobilization. More recently, many have claimed that militant Islamist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah are more disposed to establish governments consistent with the Islamic practice of zakat, or almsgiving, which leads to the commingling of charitable work with more political activities. Though ideology may provide some sense of why rebel leaders are inclined to establish a government, it cannot account for why some are able to establish relatively effective and legitimate governments while others struggle to establish even a modicum of public order. This should not be surprising: governments are highly complex actors involved in varied negotiations with a number of social and political actors. Just as it can be difficult to predict the behavior of the U.S. government by asking which political party is in control, there is no single dimension that can adequately account for variation in rebel governance performance.

More important is the rebel government's interactions with the society in which it holds sway. For example, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka were forced to respond to the demands for basic services from a restive Tamil population that was accustomed to generous public goods from the Sri Lankan state prior to the conflict. In Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) faced a civilian population divided along ethnic lines, a cleavage that eventually resulted in war between the two largest communities. In response, rebel leaders developed a unity government that brought together the southern population in their war against the Khartoum regime. Congo's Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) provides an interesting example of a group that attempted to develop a government but failed. Wary of the RCD's sponsors in Rwanda and Uganda, the population in rebel-controlled areas violently rejected the organization's multiple efforts to set up a legitimate government.

Understanding variation in rebel governance performance then requires an appreciation of the distinct set of challenges armed groups face in contemporary conflict

zones. These challenges emerge from a variety of different overlapping levels. At the local level, armed groups must often negotiate with pre-existing societal actors in order to establish social order. These may include local religious or community leaders who step into the vacuum of authority to provide succor to populations harmed by the devastation of war. Or it may include business owners and traders who ensure the flow of goods even in the midst of battle. In addition, the composition of the armed group itself can matter, with groups riven by high degrees of factionalization commonly struggling to address civilian concerns. Incumbents also can intervene within these internecine struggles, pitting factions against each other and leading to increased civilian suffering.

At the national level, the incumbent state has many levers with which to undermine the capacity of the armed group to provide civilian governance. Beyond violence and other attempts to infiltrate a rebel group, governments also frequently impose embargoes or sanctions that restrict the movements of people and goods into rebel-controlled territories, with detrimental effects on civilian governance. Responding to such embargoes poses unique challenges for aid organizations and international agencies. Navigating the many barriers placed by both the incumbent government and international law can make relief efforts less effective. For example, after the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka, humanitarian organizations were hamstrung when the government in Colombo prevented them from working with Tamil Tiger relief operations. In Libya, humanitarian aid could only get to Benghazi with the support of NATO forces, a dangerous convergence of military and humanitarian agendas.

Finally, the treatment of armed groups within international society can also have substantive impacts on the ability of rebels to develop an effective civilian administration. Premier among these is the question of recognition. Recognition of rebel governance systems can allow armed

groups to participate fully within international society, while rendering those unrecognized pariahs under international law. Remaining unrecognized poses threats for rebel leaders as they seek to negotiate with foreign governments, and importantly, from the perspective of ensuring civilian protection, international agencies and relief organizations. It also makes legitimate commerce impossible, since the goods and resources brought out of insurgent-held territory are technically neither legal nor illegal, as international law applies only to formal states and not to areas under the control of insurgent organizations.

Recognition of rebel governments is currently a unilateral affair, in which each state decides for itself. But this ad hoc process can cause even greater suffering to civilian populations residing in areas of rebel control as states support or undermine the rebel government according to individual political motives. In Syria, figuring out whom to recognize is a particularly thorny affair, hamstrung by the ongoing struggle between moderate and radical factions within the insurgency and the distinct positions over the insurgency taken by key members of the U.N. Security Council. One solution would be to allow international agencies and human rights organizations to work together to determine the effectiveness of rebel civil administrations in meeting civilian needs. Those deemed to be operating according to minimal standards could be offered a limited degree of recognition, thereby facilitating engagement with the international community.

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Syria's Foreign Fighters

By Thomas Hegghammer, Norwegian Defence Establishment (FFI)

* A version of this piece was previously published on the Middle East Channel on ForeignPolicy.com.

Sometime in the spring or summer of 2013, history was made in Syria. That was when the number of foreign fighters exceeded that of any previous conflict in the modern history of the Muslim world. There are now over 5,000 Sunni foreign fighters in the war-torn country, including more than a thousand from the West. The previous record-holder — the 1980s Afghanistan war — also attracted large numbers overall, but there seems never to have been more than 3,000 to 4,000 foreign fighters *at any one time* in Afghanistan. This influx of war volunteers will have a number of undesirable consequences, from strengthening the most uncompromising elements of the Syrian insurgency to reinvigorating radical communities in the foreign fighters' home countries. Not all of these fighters can be considered jihadists, of course, but many can, and more will be radicalized as they spend time in the trenches with al Qaeda-linked groups. At this rate, the foreign fighter flow into Syria looks set to extend the life of the jihadi movement by a generation.

But why is Syria attracting so many war volunteers? How could this happen only two years after the Arab spring and the death of Osama bin Laden prompted many to predict the decline of jihadism? The short answer is that *it's easy to get there.* Not since the early days of the Bosnia war has it been less complicated for Islamists to make it to a war zone. This was stated in a recent *Washington Post* interview with a Syrian facilitator:

"'It's so easy,' said a Syrian living in Kilis who smuggles travelers into Syria through the nearby olive groves and asked to be identified by only his first name, Mohammed. He claims he has escorted dozens of foreigners across the border in the past 18 months, including Chechens, Sudanese, Tunisians and a Canadian. 'For example, someone comes from Tunisia. He flies to the international airport wearing jihadi clothes and a jihadi beard and he has jihadi songs on his mobile,' Mohammed said. 'If the Turkish government wants to prevent them coming into the country, it would do so, but they don't.'"

The obstacles facing Syria volunteers today are smaller than those faced by most other foreign fighters in the past two decades. A Saudi showing up at Islamabad airport in 2002 humming jihadi *anashid* would be on the next plane to Guantanamo, and woe to the Arab caught in combat gear on the Chechen border. It is not just the border crossing which is less complicated; the risk of legal sanctions at home also seems lower, thus far at least, for Syria-farers than for their predecessors. A European Islamist with al Qaeda in Yemen would face almost certain prosecution on his return. The United States has been even less forgiving, sending several Somali-Americans to prison for merely trying to join al-Shabab. Thus far, few if any European countries seem to be systematically prosecuting foreign fighters returning from Syria, although some E.U. officials have called for stricter legislation.

There are two fundamental reasons for this situation. The first is that many states, including in the West, support the same side of the conflict that the Sunni foreign fighters are joining. This geopolitical configuration makes it politically difficult for both departure and transit countries to stem the flow with repressive means. In most previous conflicts, such as post-9/11 Afghanistan, Iraq, or Somalia, foreign fighters were joining the "wrong" side. Now they are on the "right" side, as they also were — guess when? — in 1980s Afghanistan. Popular support for foreign fighting in Syria is especially strong in the Sunni Muslim world, where mainstream clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi have been allowed by their governments to publicly urge people to go and fight in Syria.

The second reason for the ease of access is that Syrian rebels control territory along the northern border,

which means nobody on the Syrian side is systematically preventing foreign fighters from entering. The job of policing the border for infiltrators is effectively left to one country — Turkey — instead of two. This is in contrast to many previous foreign fighter destinations, where international borders were at least nominally controlled by the incumbent regime or some other force hostile to foreign fighters.

The low constraints on war volunteering for Syria have a number of striking effects aside from the sheer numbers of people making it there. One is that there are foreign fighters moving in and out of the country at regular intervals, effectively commuting to jihad. Some European recruits, for example, are reportedly going into Syria for a few months, then back to Europe for a few months (presumably to recruit others or to recuperate) and then back to Syria again. Islamist foreign fighters have not enjoyed this freedom of movement since perhaps the Afghanistan war in the 1980s.

Another effect is the unusual demographic diversity we are seeing in the foreign fighter population. The bulk of the volunteers are of course young men in their early 20s, as in other militant populations, but in the Syrian case there are relatively more very young, very old, and women. These are all groups that would arguably not have made it to the war zone, at least not in the same numbers, had the obstacles been higher. It is no coincidence that the last time there was equally strong representation from the margins of the population pyramid was in 1980s Afghanistan, when young teenagers, older men, and even older women were joining the fight against the Russians. It is worth noting, however, that the number of women foreign fighters from Europe is so high — perhaps over 100 — that it cannot be explained by constraints alone; there may also be a normative shift among European Islamists regarding the participation of women in war.

The presence of these unusual population segments reflects another crucial feature of Syria as a foreign fighter destination, namely the relatively low in-theater risk that outsiders face once they get there. Given that

rebels control large portions of territory, especially in the north, it is entirely possible to take part in the jihad while avoiding both combat and deadly enemy raids. Jihad in Syria is by no means risk-free, but it is less dangerous for foreign fighters than many previous conflicts. In post 9/11 Afghanistan and post 2003 Iraq, for example, foreign volunteers had no real safe haven and faced the formidable war machine of the U.S. military. Syria, by contrast, offers foreign fighters the option of taking risk or avoiding it. Here again Syria resembles the 1980s Afghan jihad, where risk-averse volunteers could hang out in Peshawar, stick their toe into Afghanistan, and then go home claiming to have waged jihad. This allows Syria to attract not only extreme risk-seekers but also the relatively risk-averse, thus drawing from a larger pool of recruits.

Of course, ease of access and low risk alone cannot account for the size of the foreign fighter contingent in Syria. There must be factors on the motivation side that make so many young people want to go there in the first place. The most obvious is the extreme brutality of the Syrian regime and the resulting images of unspeakable civilian suffering, which prompt many — not just Muslims — to want to do something about it.

To understand why so many Muslims — as opposed to young people in general — *act* on their outrage, it is necessary to look to the intra-Sunni solidarity norm that has long been present in many Sunni communities, not least among Islamists. The norm creates a general inclination to support "fellow Muslims in need" and helps explain many aspects of Muslim politics, from the large size of the Muslim charitable sector to the near-universal support for the Palestinian cause. In the 1980s, radical ideologues such as Abdullah Azzam began interpreting this solidarity norm in martial terms, arguing that Muslims should also help each other militarily. Azzam's message became an inspiration and justification for the foreign fighter phenomenon that has manifested itself in so many conflicts in the Muslim world since 1990. In other words, the young men and women who go to Syria see its people as their own and feel a moral and religious obligation to defend them. Like foreign fighters before them, they see

themselves as providing a militarized form of humanitarian assistance — i.e., as aid workers with Kalashnikovs.

It is worth noting, however, that the Syrian war differs from previous foreign fighter destinations in that the conflict schism follows sectarian rather than interreligious lines. In the past, most foreign fighters tended to join conflicts pitting local Sunnis against a non-Muslim enemy. Conflicts with a sectarian structure, such as the Iran-Iraq war or the Sunni-Shiite infighting in Pakistan, never attracted many foreign volunteers, nor did intra-Sunni conflicts such as the Algerian civil war. This preference is also reflected in two decades of foreign fighter recruitment propaganda, virtually all of which stresses the fight against infidel invaders, not that against Shiites or Arab regimes. It is not clear why there is now a break with that pattern in Syria, but the Iraq conflict in the 2000s, with its combined interreligious and sectarian features, may have helped prepare the ground for the ideological shift. In any case, the Syria case suggests that the foreign fighter doctrine is more about who you help than who you fight.

Some have suggested that Syria attracts more foreign fighters not despite, but *because* of its sectarian features. This seems implausible, for the simple reason that foreign fighters didn't care that much about sectarian conflicts in the past. Iraq post 2003 would constitute a possible exception, were it not for the declared motivations of foreign fighters going there which suggest that anti-Americanism was a much more important motivator than anti-Shiism. Moreover, the foreign fighter flow to Iraq all but stopped after the U.S. military withdrew, even though sectarian violence continued. More likely than not, the anti-Shiite rhetoric coming from Syrian foreign fighters and their recruiters today is a post facto rationalization of a military project undertaken for other reasons, such as the desire to protect a suffering Sunni population or to build an Islamic state. To be sure, it is easier for Sunni Islamists to legitimize jihad against an Alawite regime than against a Sunni one, but it is too early to conclude that anti-Shiism is a stronger motivator than, say, hostility to Western military interventions in Muslim countries.

Another explanation in the commentary on foreign fighters in Syria is the theological significance of the territory. Syria holds a special place in both Islamic history (as the first territory conquered by Muslims outside the Arabian Peninsula) and in Islamic eschatology (as the venue for the second coming of Jesus). This is indeed something that features in recruitment propaganda for Syria, and foreign fighters sometimes bring it up in interviews. However, here again this is probably a post facto rationalization. Why? Because many other foreign fighter destinations in the past have also been presented by recruiters as having a special significance in the Islamic tradition. Afghanistan was the place from which the "black banners of Khorasan" would return to the Middle East to re-establish Islamic rule; Yemen (or more precisely Aden and Abyan) was the place where an "Army of Twelve Thousand" would emerge and "give victory to Islam and his Prophet," while Iraq was a symbol of Muslim power as the seat of the Abbasid caliphate for five centuries. Islamic history and eschatology are so rich that, to some extent, there is a story for every territory. Moreover, if Syria really was that significant, there would have been more efforts by non-Syrians to liberate it in the past. This is not to say that the symbolism of Syria does not help recruitment, only that it cannot alone explain the very large numbers of foreign fighters.

Among what the recruits are saying about why they go to Syria there are several of the abovementioned arguments, but there are also heartfelt expressions of belief in afterlife rewards for the individual. Many say they go because jihad is a duty whose shirking invites divine punishment and whose fulfillment pleases God. Many express a wish to die in Syria, so as to become a martyr with all the afterlife benefits that this supposedly entails. Some talk more about divine rewards than anything else, as if the future of Syria or even that of the Islamist movement were secondary. However, this religious individualism is not unique to the foreign fighters in Syria; it has been present in all militant Islamist groups for decades. Thus, even if these testimonies are taken seriously — which they should be — belief in afterlife rewards cannot explain why Syria in particular, at this exact point in time, should attract such large numbers of fighters.

The same is true of more mundane "proximate incentives" for participation, such as the pleasure of agency, the thrill of adventurism, and the joys of camaraderie that come with war volunteering. Although active fighters rarely emphasize such motivations, ex-militants often admit they were paramount to their initial involvement. There is plenty of circumstantial evidence that such factors are also behind many decisions to go to Syria. However, they do not explain why recruits choose Syria over other destinations or foreign fighting over other forms of high-risk activism.

What about the Internet and social media? Clearly this plays an important role, and it may well help explain the scale and speed of the mobilization. Syria is probably the most "socially mediated" conflict in modern history, and the Internet is chock full of propaganda from Syrian jihadi groups as well as practical travel advice for budding foreign fighters. However, this does not mean that social media in and of itself drives recruitment, for the Internet is a double-edge sword for rebels. When poorly policed, the web is a very powerful instrument of mobilization, because it transmits information (such as propaganda or practical advice) fast, far, and cheaply. However, when targeted by security agencies, digital communication can be a liability, because it allows governments to locate and detain its users. In the Syrian case, social media helps foreign fighter recruitment precisely because repression is low. If Western governments targeted online recruitment to Syria with the same intensity that they target online recruitment to "high-value" organizations such as al Qaeda Central, then social media would be much less useful. There is a reason why there are several blogs with travel advice for Islamists interested in going to Syria, but none for those wanting to join al Qaeda in Waziristan or Yemen.

The bottom line is that record numbers of foreign fighters are going to Syria because they can. There is little to suggest that Syria generated a uniquely great supply of militants; it merely tapped into a supply of inclined activists that existed before the war in Islamist communities around the world. In fact, a case could be made that the global Sunni outrage, and hence the latent supply of foreign fighters, was greater during the U.S.

invasion of Iraq in 2003 than it was over the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011. The difference is that Iraq was hard to reach because the United States and its allies treated prospective foreign fighters as terrorists. It is true that Syria at the time allowed many foreign fighters into Iraq (oh the irony), but Syria was a less hospitable and accessible transit country than Turkey is today.

In the two years that have passed since 2011, the foreign fighter movement to Syria has gained critical mass, and the bandwagon effect has ensured a rapid increase in the flow of volunteers. The number of Europeans in Syria, for example, has roughly doubled in the past six months. This is not to say that the increase will continue indefinitely, for the pool of individuals willing to risk their lives for someone else's war is probably limited, especially in the West. However, where that limit is, is unknown.

The policy implication of all this is quite simple, at least in principle: If governments want to stem the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, they must raise the constraints on participation. Exactly how this should be done is a much more complex matter. Aggressive prosecution of all foreign fighters is probably not the way to go, for it is impractical, politically difficult, and potentially counterproductive. There are, however, many other things states can do. Transit countries such as Turkey should of course do their best to police the border, and they should share intelligence on suspected foreign fighters with supplier countries. Departure countries, on their end, should consider a range of preventive, obstructive, and selective penal measures.

Preventive measures may include information campaigns aimed at families of at-risk youth, targeted outreach to prospective recruits, and the blocking of particularly obvious "travel advice" websites. Obstructive measures may include requiring parental consent for foreign travel for people under a certain age, or the confiscation of passports of people returning from Syria with documented links to the most radical groups. Penal measures may include the withholding of social security benefits for people known to have gone to Syria, the prosecution of recruiters and facilitators within supplier countries, and

the prosecution of people who return from Syria having committed unlawful acts of violence. These are but some suggestions; there may be many other possible measures. Anything that makes it more difficult for prospective recruits to reach Syria — short of general criminalization — should be considered.

The massive accumulation of foreign fighters in Syria is not a good thing by any stretch of the imagination. Leaving aside its consequences for the future of international terrorism, it is bad for the future of Syria. Even if one believes (as I personally happen to do) that the Syrian rebel cause is just and that some of the foreign fighters leave

with noble intentions, it is in nobody's interest to have an international army of private war volunteers in Syria. The only actors who will benefit are the extremist Islamist groups, who hardly represent the Syrian people, and who may have sinister things in store for Syria, the region, and the West.

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IV. THE REGIME

Syria's Adaptive Authoritarianism

By Steven Heydemann, United States Institute of Peace

*Excerpted from Journal of Democracy, with the gracious permission of Johns Hopkins University Press

The democratic aspirations of the protesters who filled streets and public squares across Syria in early 2011 were among the conflict's first casualties. If democracy as an outcome of the uprising was always uncertain, its prospects have been severely crippled by the devastation of civil war and the deepening fragmentation of Syrian society.

Democratic prospects appear bleak for reasons that extend beyond the destructive effects of civil war. Conflict has not only eroded possibilities for democratic reform, it has provided the impetus for a process of authoritarian restructuring that has increased the Assad regime's ability to survive mass protests, repress an armed uprising, and resist international sanctions. Even as state institutions have all but collapsed under the weight of armed conflict, war making has compelled the Assad regime to reconfigure its social base, tighten its dependency on global authoritarian networks, adapt its modes of economic governance, and restructure its military and security apparatus in response to wartime exigencies. While the outcome of the current conflict cannot be predicted, these adaptations are likely to influence how Syria is governed once fighting ends. Should they become consolidated, they will vastly diminish prospects for a post-conflict democratic transition, especially if Syria ends up either formally or informally partitioned.

Syria's experience highlights the possibility that an authoritarian regime might adapt to the demands of an insurgency, increasing the likelihood of regime survival and affecting both the outcome of a conflict and whether a postwar political settlement will be democratic. Syria's civil war is far from over. It is possible that the authoritarian system of rule initiated by the Baath Party in the early 1960s and later captured by the Assad family and its clients will yet be "annihilated" as a result of protracted civil war.

Such an outcome would broaden the range of potential post-conflict settlements to include a transition to democracy. From the vantage point of late 2013, however, the process of authoritarian restructuring that the regime has undergone during two years of armed insurgency makes such an outcome far less likely. What seems more plausible is that the repressive and corrupt authoritarian regime that entered civil war in 2011 will emerge from it as an even more brutal, narrowly sectarian, and militarized version of its former self.

While Syria may be an extreme case, it is not an outlier in the violence that has marked the Assad regime's response to the rise of mass politics. The brutality of the regime's tactics fall at the far end of a spectrum of reactions to anti-regime protests. These tactics reflect Syria's distinctive social composition, institutional make-up, and political orientation as a lead member of the "resistance front" facing Israel. In their details, therefore, the adaptations that are reshaping authoritarianism in Syria may not be generalizable to regimes that govern differently configured societies and polities. Yet milder versions of the Assad regime's coercive tactics may be seen on the streets of both Bahrain and Egypt, underscoring the insights that can be gleaned from the Syrian case into how Arab autocrats will react as the dynamics of mass politics continue to unfold in today's Middle East.

The adaptations of the Assad regime can be traced to the earliest months of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, if not earlier. Syrian scholar Hassan Abbas says that in February 2011, Assad "formed a special committee" which concluded that the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes had failed because they did not crush the protests instantly.[15] Thus, almost as soon as the first major protest broke out in the southern city of Deraa on March 18, 2011, the Assad regime started shooting (Leenders and Heydemann 2012). As more protesters took up arms to defend themselves, the regime escalated its violence to the level of large-scale

military offensives involving armored units and heavy artillery against major urban centers. It also moved to brand a peaceful and cross-sectarian protest movement as a terrorist campaign led by Islamist extremists. Peaceful protests continued across much of the country into 2012, but the uprising gradually transformed into a full-fledged and increasingly sectarian civil war.

The regime's responses to these developments included a set of internal institutional adaptations and policy shifts. They also included modifications to its management of regional and international relations in the face of deepening international isolation and the imposition of a dense web of economic and diplomatic sanctions. Domestically, the Assad regime has promoted exclusionary sectarian mobilization to reinforce defensive solidarity among the regime's core social base in the Alawite community and non-Muslim minorities — benefiting from but also contributing to broader trends toward regional sectarian polarization. It has reconfigured the security sector, including the armed forces, paramilitary criminal networks, and the intelligence and security apparatus to confront forms of resistance — in particular the decentralized guerrilla tactics of armed insurgents — for which they were unprepared and poorly trained.

Regime officials have reasserted the role of the state as an agent of redistribution and provider of economic security — despite the utter destruction of the country's economy and infrastructure. Officials now blame the limited economic reforms championed by economist and former Deputy Prime Minister Abdallah Dardari as the cause of grievances that moved citizens to rebel. The regime has also continued to make use of state-controlled Internet and telecommunications infrastructure to disrupt communications among regime opponents, identify and target opposition supporters, and disseminate pro-regime narratives. At the regional and international levels, the Assad regime has exploited its strategic alliance with Iran and Hezbollah both for direct military and financial assistance but also as sources of expertise and training in specific modes of repression, including urban warfare and cyber warfare, in which its own security sector lacked experience.

The regime has similarly exploited its strategic and diplomatic relationships with Russia, China, and other authoritarian counterparts. These give as the regime sources of direct military and financial support as well as a set of advocates who act on its behalf within international institutions — a role that neither Iran nor Hezbollah is able to play. One of the effects is to insulate the Assad regime from the force of UN-backed sanctions that might impede the ability of its key authoritarian allies to provide it with essential assistance.

These relationships, especially the regime's ties to Iran and Hezbollah, have implications not only for the survival of the Assad regime but also for the shape of an eventual post-conflict settlement. First, Iran, with Russian support, seeks a role for itself in the event that negotiations to end Syria's civil war take place. While the United States and its European allies currently oppose such a role, they recognize that for a negotiated settlement to be stable it will need to take Iran's interests into account, decreasing prospects for an eventual transition to democracy. Second, and perhaps more important, as the Assad regime deepens its dependence on authoritarian allies and is increasingly isolated from both Western democracies and international organizations populated by democracies, it becomes further embedded in relationships that diminish opportunities to moderate its authoritarian practices through either of the modes identified by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way ("linkage" and "leverage") or through other forms of conditionality (Levitsky and Way).

These adaptations can be seen as extensions of earlier strategies of authoritarian upgrading, but with a more compact, militarized, sectarian, exclusionary, and repressive core (Heydemann 2007). That the Assad regime could accomplish these shifts was by no means certain. For many years, regime critics have described it as little more than an inept mafia, sometimes likening Assad to the fictional Fredo Corleone. As recently as mid-2012, the regime's survival seemed very much in doubt. Opposition forces had seized much ground, including most of the Damascus suburbs, and many observers were predicting the regime's imminent collapse.

Mafias, however, do not have sovereignty. They do not control armed forces. They do not have vast state institutions and state resources at their disposal. While its supporters fretted, the Assad regime recalibrated its military tactics and reconfigured its security apparatus. With a capacity for learning that has surprised its detractors, the regime integrated loyalist *shabiha* militias (the word means "ghost" or "thug") — including a wide array of armed criminal and informal elements — into a formal paramilitary, the National Defense Forces (NDF), under direct regime control. Since mid-2012, hundreds (perhaps thousands) of NDF members have gone through combat training in Iran, a direct form of authoritarian knowledge transfer. Following defections among lower-ranking Sunni conscripts and officers, new methods of monitoring and controlling soldiers' movements were adopted. Iranian and Hezbollah advisors arrived to teach local commanders the fine points of crowd control, urban warfare, and insurgent tactics. The regime expanded its dependence on battle-hardened Hezbollah combat units, enabling it to regain control of strategic sites. Exploiting its monopoly of air power, the regime has sown chaos and instability in opposition-held areas, driving millions of Syrians out of their homes, eroding popular morale and support for the opposition, and preventing stabilization or reconstruction in opposition-controlled areas. Official media routinely highlight the prominent role of militant Islamists associated with al Qaeda in opposition ranks to reinforce the uprising-as-Sunni-terrorism narrative, and tout the regime's commitment to minority protection and secularism (its reliance on Iran and Hezbollah notwithstanding) to rally its base. The regime has also restructured key institutions, including the Baath Party, to enhance cohesion and ensure the fealty of senior officials to Assad and his immediate family.

By mid-2013, this amalgam of ad hoc adaptations permitted the regime to reclaim authority over most of the country's urban "spine" from Homs in the north to Damascus in the south. The adaptations solidified support among the regime's social base, prevented the fracturing of its inner circle, and disrupted attempts to return life to normal in areas outside regime control. The regime now dominates the strategically important Mediterranean coast and every major city except Aleppo. Most Alawites and Christians live in regime-held areas. It has secure access to Hezbollah-controlled parts of Lebanon and to the sea. With the partial exception of central Damascus, this zone has suffered massive destruction, economic paralysis, and large-scale population movements. Accurate statistics are not available, but it is safe to say that Homs now has many fewer Sunnis, while Damascus, Tartus, Latakia, Hama, and other areas under regime control have seen large inflows of internally displaced persons — perhaps numbering in the millions — including Christians, Alawites, and Sunnis fleeing the instability and violence of insurgent-held territories.

In the decades before the war, Syria's population of 22 million — which is 65 to 70 percent Sunni Arab, 10 to 12 percent Sunni Kurdish, 10 to12 percent Alawite, and 10 to 12 percent from Druze, Christian, and other non-Sunni minorities — had become increasingly dispersed across the country, shrinking the areas inhabited almost exclusively by one community or another. Urban centers had become increasingly cosmopolitan, benefiting from the inflow of Alawites and Kurds and from processes of urban migration as Syria's economy modernized. The vast population displacement caused by the war is producing fundamental shifts in these trends. It has increased sectarian segregation within cities even as they become more diverse in the aggregate due to internal displacement and flight from insecure rural zones. It has also led to partial sectarian cleansing in rural areas, destroying longstanding patterns of inter-sectarian tolerance between Sunni and minority villages in conflict-affected areas.

What is taking shape in areas under regime control is thus a variant of the authoritarian system of rule that the Assads built over four decades, modified by the demands of civil war. The insurgency has spurred the emergence of an even more tightly controlled, militarized, sectarian, and predatory regime than was evident in the past, governed by an increasingly narrow circle dominated by Assad and his family. It is more isolated internationally, more heavily reliant on a clutch of authoritarian allies, and focused mainly on survival at any cost.

Whether the regime's changes will be enough to ensure that survival is uncertain. Also uncertain is whether adaptations made to defeat a popular insurrection will last once conflict ends. There is no reason to imagine that the regime will not evolve further as its environment changes. Contrary to notions that civil war wipes the political slate clean, the available evidence suggests that Assad and his regime are determined to remain central to any postwar political order, whether it comes via the military defeat of its adversaries or through internationally supervised negotiations.

Patterns of elite recruitment have strengthened the cohesion of formal institutions, notably the extent to which the regime has populated senior positions in the armed forces and the security apparatus with Alawite loyalists. For Eva Bellin (2012), this makes Syria the example *par excellence* of a coercive apparatus organized along patrimonial lines, with more at risk from reform than its less patrimonial counterparts, and more willing to use coercive means to repress reformers. Patrimonialism, however, cannot by itself explain the cohesion of the Syrian officer corps and its continued loyalty to the regime. Contra Bellin's prediction, even large-scale and persistent social mobilization has not eroded the regime's will to repress. Escalating violence did produce cracks in the military. Tens of thousands of rank-and-file conscripts, together with more than 50 non-Alawite generals and other senior officers, defected rather than shoot fellow citizens.

Yet the center held. It did so because patterns of recruitment into the upper ranks of the military and its elite units were not simply patrimonial, but also sectarian and exclusionary in character. Identity-based recruitment was explicitly designed to strengthen bonds between the regime and senior officers, to raise the cost of defection, and to make defending the regime the military's top priority. The result is an almost entirely Alawite officer corps that is stubbornly loyal to the Assads, willing to use every weapon it can (from cluster bombs and ballistic missiles to helicopter gunships and, reportedly, chemical

munitions), and annealed against repeated attempts to persuade key figures to defect. Specific patterns of patrimonialism thus produce distinctive forms of cohesion and provide regimes with widely varying organizational, coercive, and adaptive capacities.

At the same time, even if the defection of the military may be fatal for an authoritarian incumbent its cohesion is no guarantee of survival, especially once regime violence propels social mobilization beyond protest to the point of armed insurgency. Throughout 2012, with defections sweeping the rank and file, opposition forces seizing territory, and key units pushed to the point of exhaustion, it was far from clear that the cohesion of the officer corps and security elites would prevent the overthrow of the regime. A second resource played a critical role in stemming opposition advances and stabilizing the regime: informal networks of non-state actors, organized on the basis of familial ties, sectarian affinity, or simple mercenary arrangements, and cultivated by regime elites over the years to provide a range of (often illegal) functions that could be conducted without any formal scrutiny or accountability.

Prior to the uprising, members of these networks, typically described as shabiha, engaged in officially sanctioned criminal activities, served as regime enforcers, and used violence to protect the privileges and status of regime elites. When protests began in March 2011, the regime recruited these loose networks to brutalize demonstrators. As the opposition militarized these criminal networks were gradually transformed, first into informal and decentralized paramilitary groups and later into more formally structured armed units that have been integrated into the regime's security apparatus. Almost exclusively Alawite in composition, shabiha forces are responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the civil war. They serve as shock troops, defend Alawite and minority communities against opposition attacks, terrorize and brutalize Sunni communities, assist the regime in controlling army units to prevent desertions and defections, and fight alongside the armed forces in offensives against opposition-held areas.

They provide levels of cohesion and loyalty that sustain the regime's capacity to repress far more effectively than it could with ordinary conscripts. Had it not been possible for the regime to draw on and professionalize these informal sectarian-criminal networks, its prospects for survival would be much more precarious.

A third critical resource grows out of the Assad regime's alliances with Hezbollah and Iran, and the additional military capacity that both have provided. Hezbollah has dispatched thousands of fighters to assist the regime in a major offensive against opposition-held positions in western Syria along the border with Lebanon, in Homs, and in the suburbs ringing Damascus. Iran is alleged to have dispatched its own combat forces as well, and has sent military and security advisors who have produced tangible improvements in regime units' combat effectiveness. Perhaps most important, however, has been an explicit effort to model the newly established NDF after the Iranian Basij, a "volunteer people's militia" created at the urging of Ayatollah Khomeini during the 1980 to 1988 Iran-Iraq War that subsequently became a central component of Iran's internal security apparatus and played a major role in the suppression of the "Green Movement" protests following Iran's 2009 presidential election.

Authoritarian learning and knowledge transfer have thus produced significant adaptations in the scale and organization of the Assad regime's coercive apparatus, enhancing its capacity to fight a popular armed insurgency. They have also amplified that regime's existing tendencies, boosting sectarian hard-liners and institutionalizing repressive exclusionary practices within what is left of the Syrian state. To be sure, the regime has leveraged its strategic relationships with Iran, Hezbollah, and other authoritarian actors for purposes that go well beyond the upgrading of its coercive apparatus. Iran has provided the regime with billions of dollars in the form of loans and contracts. Russia has provided arms, money, and diplomatic cover, several times voting to prevent the imposition of U.N. Security Council sanctions. China has followed Russia within the United Nations, though it has

otherwise played a negligible role with respect to Syria thus far. Nonetheless, the reconfiguration of the Assad regime's coercive apparatus, and the consolidation of power within institutions organized along exclusionary sectarian lines, are most consequential for the kind of postwar political arrangements that will emerge, and least conducive to the prospects for an eventual transition to democracy.

The transformations undertaken by the Assad regime are not occurring in a vacuum. Nor is the gradual, bloody reconsolidation of the regime entirely a product of its own actions. It has benefited from an opposition that is divided along many different lines yet increasingly dominated by Islamist extremists. Yet the course that the opposition has taken is not entirely a product of its own intentions or design. The Assad regime itself has helped to mold that course, by resorting immediately and disproportionately to violence when protests first broke out in March 2011, by relentlessly demonizing protesters, by sowing fear among the populace whom it still controls, and by creating disorder in the areas that it has lost to the opposition. In this sense, there are clear and significant interaction effects between how the regime has adapted to the challenges of mass politics — driving peaceful protests toward an armed insurgency — and the transformations experienced within the opposition. Extremism, polarization, and fragmentation are much easier targets for the regime than peaceful protesters seeking constitutional and economic reforms. Its cynical manipulation of the opposition succeeded, but at a terrible price.

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The Challenges of Nation-Building in the Syrian Arab Republic

By Harris Mylonas, George Washington University

Syria's ongoing existential conflict is arguably related to its nation-building trajectory starting in the beginning of the twentieth century. What can theories of nation-building and state formation tell us about the origins of conflict as well as future of the Syrian state? In *The Politics of Nation-Building,* I identify the conditions under which the ruling political elites of a state target ethnic groups with assimilationist policies instead of granting them minority rights or excluding them from the state. I develop a theory that focuses on geostrategic considerations arguing that a state's nation-building policies toward non-core groups — any aggregation of individuals perceived as an unassimilated ethnic group by the ruling elite of a state — are influenced by both its foreign policy goals and its relations with the external patrons of these groups. I posit that external involvement, whether clandestine, covert, or overt, drives not only the mobilization and politicization of the non-core group' s identity, but also the host state' s perception of the non-core group and the state' s nation-building policies toward the group.

Through a detailed study of the interwar Balkans, I conclude that the way a nation-state treats a non-core group within its own borders is determined largely by whether the state's foreign policy is revisionist or cleaves to the international status quo, and whether it is allied or in rivalry with that group's external patrons. However, as I admit in the book, my argument does not travel to all states at all times. In particular, it should apply to countries that 1) are driven from a homogenizing imperative, 2) have non-assimilated segments of the population and no caste system in place, 3) have the capacity to directly rule the population, and 4) have a ruling political elite representing a core group with a clear "national type." In what follows, I explore how my work illuminates some of the challenges of nation-building in the Syrian case.

In *The Politics of Nation-Building* I argue that the main reason that leaders adopt the "nation-building option" is

the reality, or anticipation, of other powers manipulating non-core groups in their state to undermine their stability or annex parts of their territory. This process is particularly conspicuous in situations where the ruling elites perceive their borders to be challenged. While this process worked in Tilly's (1975, 1990) account of Europe and fits the pattern I narrate in the interwar Balkans, it does not seem to fit so much the story in Syria. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the territories of contemporary Syria were divided up by decree through a series of treaties. Syria was under the French Mandate since 1920 and after a tumultuous history gained independence in 1946. As it is often the case, colonial powers had to rely on local elites coming from specific groups for political and economic control. Syria was no exception and the role of the Alawites and Christian minorities was vital for the French from the beginning of their Mandate.

As a result of this legacy, as well as the geopolitical situation in the region, this system of choosing a loyal local ethnic group and ruling the rest of the population through it—that has its roots to the French colonial period—was perpetuated. The various military coups following independence until Hafez al-Assad consolidated his rule on the country in 1970 solidified this outcome. The legitimating principle of the Assad regime has not been state-level nationalism. In fact, repression and a carefully constructed network of informants were the basis for legitimacy in Syria for the past four decades — if not longer. To complement this apparatus Lisa Wedeen revealed a cult that the Assad regime — father and son — designed which operated as a disciplinary device. [16] For decades citizens acted *as if* they revered their leader. "The cult works to enforce obedience, induce complicity, isolate Syrians from one another, and set guidelines for public speech and behavior" (Wedeen 1999).

Another set of conditions for my argument to be applicable is that part of the population has not yet been successfully

assimilated and there is no "caste structure" in place since in caste systems assimilation is by definition impossible.[17] Syria is definitely a heterogeneous society, but the heterogeneity is more pronounced depending on which cleavage dimension is salient at each historical moment. In terms of ethnicity, about 90 percent of the population was Arab before the civil war — including about 500,000 Palestinians and up to 1.3 million Iraqi refugees — while there were about 9 percent Kurds and smaller groups of Armenians, Circassians, and Turkomans. In terms of religion, based on 2005 estimates 74 percent of the population were Sunni Muslims, Alawites were about 12 percent, Druze 3 percent, while there are also some small numbers of other Muslim sects, Christians 10 percent, about 200 Jews, and Yazidis.[18] Finally, in terms of mother tongue we find the vast majority speaking Arabic, and then Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, and Circassian being used by the respective non-core groups. Moreover, although this was not a caste system the mode of rule was definitely blocking social mobility and especially political clout for non-Alawites and their close allies and informants. The rule of the Alawi controlled Baath party coupled with the state of emergency that had been in force since 1963 had decisively alienated the Arab Sunni majority. But following the Arab Spring and coupled with past violence, inequalities, and repression that many reportedly felt in Syria, resistance against the regime grew and by now it has turned into a multiparty civil war. The opposition is fragmented but defections from the Assad side have also been plentiful. The lack of any national cohesion is apparent.

Nation-building cannot be pursued by a failed state that cannot directly rule its population. Assad's regime clearly did not suffer from this problem. Syria was far from a failed state. In fact, it is a state with high literacy rates — 88 percent for males and 74 percent for females. But even if Syrian ruling elites faced the pressures I described above and had the capacity to do so, they would have had a hard time to nation-build. For nation-building to occur, the ruling political elites of the state must represent a core group that is well defined and has a clear criterion of inclusion — a " national type" in what Eric Hobsbawm

called the age of nationalism. In Syria, the closest thing we can find to a constitutive story in Assad's Syria has to do with a Pan-Arab identity. Particularly, a version of Baathist ideology that combines a supranational form of nationalism that calls for the unity of Arabs with anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism and secular socialism.[19] Arab nationalism was vital in the struggle for independence — a by-product of British machinations against the Ottoman Empire — as well as the decolonization movement against the French. Thus, the state-level type of nationalism that dominated Europe, did not manage to emerge in much of the Arab Middle East, since such unification was opposed by multiple great and regional powers. The short experiment of the United Arab Republic that brought Egypt and Syria together in a union between 1958 and 1961 was stillborn but characteristic of the supranational character of the constitutive story that motivated Syrian leadership. Given this configuration, it is really hard to identify a Syrian constitutive story and this is reflected in the school curriculum that primarily emphasizes anti-Zionist ideas, Pan-Arab ideas, and ironically, Sunni Islam (Landis 1999). Thus, while linguistically and ethnically there could be an overwhelming majority constructed — that of Arabs and Arabic — if one had to decide what constitutes the core group in Assad's Syria, they would most likely suggest that it is the Alawites — together with other minorities — in the exclusion of the Sunni Arab majority.

Despite the well-known arguments that territory is becoming increasingly less important in our globalized world, myriad of territorial disputes, dozens of border changes and the long list of "nations without a state," or "stateless nations," point to a more sobering picture. For the past couple of years, several external state and non-state actors are aligning themselves with internal factions or non-core groups in Syria. However, the most powerful regional states Turkey, Iran, and Israel — all non-Arab — are unable to dominate Syria through these local alliances. The USA can be an arbiter of the conflict by intervening with Sunni, which would please Turkey and the Gulf states along with Sunni populations in Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt — each for different reasons. Alternatively, if

Iran prevails, Alawites in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite minorities in the Gulf States, and the Shiite majority of Iraq would rejoice. But a more cynical point of view, one perhaps best summarized by Ed Luttwak,[20] suggests that the United States — and even Israel — should allow this war to go on since it is in their strategic benefit for the factions to fight each other thus preventing the emergence of a strong and unified Arab state, or a victorious Iran. A note of caution flows from my work in the Balkans. Shifting alliances in the context of the current multiparty civil war with ample external backing, coupled with the rapid changes in control over territory already have lead

and will continue to lead to repeated instances of violent exclusionary policies, since non-core groups that are perceived as enemy-backed, or collaborating with the enemy, are going to be targeted by the respective sides of the conflict.

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Why Regime Change is a Bad Idea in Syria

By Alexander B. Downes, George Washington University

Shortly after the onset of the Syrian uprising, U.S. President Barack Obama called for the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In language highly reminiscent of his statements a few months earlier about Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi, Obama said on August 18, 2011, that the "future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way… . For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."[21] Obama went on to note that, "[T]he United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria," a pledge that he has largely kept: the United States has for the most part resisted calls to intervene directly in the conflict with military force. The near exception to this policy — the administration's threat to launch missile strikes in response to the Syrian government's chemical weapons attack two months ago — was not carried out, and in any event was not intended to be a decisive intervention in the war. The only U.S. intervention in the Syrian conflict to this point has been indirect: a CIA-run program to train fighters associated

with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) as well as the recent provision of non-lethal aid and light weapons to the FSA.[22]

Setting aside the oddity of making demands without any intention of following through on them — or giving others the means to follow through on them — what are the effects of demanding regime change as a condition for ending a civil war like the one in Syria? I argue that there are three effects, all of them bad. Demanding regime change effectively shuts down negotiations and prolongs the war, both by encouraging the rebels and asking the regime to commit suicide. It also puts Assad in an untenable situation: if he agrees to negotiate his way into exile, given the universal jurisdiction inherent in international criminal law, there is no guarantee that he won't be prosecuted later for crimes he committed during the war. Finally, rhetorical policies of regime change have a tendency to escalate to actual policies of regime change. Increased direct or indirect U.S. involvement in the current Syrian civil war, however, could lead to new atrocities and

another civil war. Should the United States help the rebels win the war with military aid or airpower, the likely result is first a bloodletting against the defeated Alawites and second another civil war between the "moderate" rebels backed by the West and the more "radical" Islamists, some of whom are affiliated with al Qaeda. Should the United States intervene and overthrow Assad with its own forces, it will likely face armed opposition from the radical rebel factions and possibly even spoilers among the less radical factions. Neither option is appealing.

Sabotaging Negotiations

By declaring that Assad has no future as president of Syria, the United States has effectively torpedoed meaningful negotiations to end the war short of decisive victory for one side or the other. The reasons are twofold. First, in calling for Assad's overthrow, the United States has essentially endorsed the rebels' principal war aim. The knowledge that the world's only superpower supports their primary political objective has unsurprisingly made the rebels more intransigent. It should come as no surprise, for example, that the Geneva negotiations have failed to get off the ground in part because the rebels refuse to negotiate with the Assad regime. In rejecting participation in the Geneva II talks slated to open on November 23, for example, a group of nineteen Islamist rebel groups said that negotiating with Assad's government would be an act of "treason."[23] Similarly, Ahmed Jarba, the president of the more moderate Syrian National Council, declared that "The Sultan must leave….Geneva cannot succeed and we cannot take part if it allows Assad to gain more time to spill the blood of our people while the world looks on."[24] Thus, Syrian rebel groups across the ideological spectrum refuse to deal with Assad, demanding his ouster as a precondition for talks.

Second, Assad has no incentive to negotiate, either, because he is being asked to agree to his own demise and exclusion from power. The Communique of the London 11, issued on October 22, explicitly states, "When the TGB [Transitional Governing Body] is established, Assad and his close associates with blood on their hands will have no

role in Syria."[25] Assad, however, has shown no willingness to leave power, and recently declared that he saw no obstacle to running for another term in office.[26]

In short, in the language of bargaining theory, there is no bargaining space where the two sides' positions overlap: the rebels demand that Assad must leave, and Assad refuses. The United States, by endorsing the rebels' position, contributes to this deadlock.

Exile is Not an Option

The second problem with demanding that Assad leave power is figuring out where he would go. In the old days, as Daniel Krcmaric points out, leaders who had committed atrocities against their own people — such as Idi Amin — could always flee into a cozy exile abroad if they faced a powerful rebellion.[27] Contemporary international criminal law (ICL), however, rests on the twin pillars of individual responsibility and universal jurisdiction, meaning that mass killers are responsible for their actions as individuals and may be apprehended and prosecuted anywhere. Although these facets of ICL were established by the Nuremberg and Tokyo Criminal Tribunals after World War II, Cold War dynamics generally discouraged prosecution. Nowadays, however, leaders who commit atrocities are more vulnerable, especially if they flee abroad. It is obviously difficult to apprehend sitting heads of state — just look at Sudanese President Omar Bashir, who remains free even though the ICC indicted him in 2009. But leaders who travel abroad (like former Chilean dictator Gen. Augusto Pinochet) or go into exile (former Liberian leader Charles Taylor) are easier to nab because (1) they can be prosecuted anywhere (Pinochet was detained in Britain on a Spanish arrest warrant), and (2) states that host former dictators have few incentives to protect them and thus may be persuaded to give them up. States may promise to host Assad now and shield him from prosecution, but these promises lack credibility should the host be subjected to sanctions or shaming in the future. In other words, Assad has nowhere to go where he can safely avoid prosecution, which gives him clear incentives to try to remain in power in Syria by winning the war.

The Civil War after the Civil War

A final problem with a declaratory policy of regime change is that it has a tendency to escalate from words to deeds. The longer the civil war in Syria goes on and the longer Assad remains in power, and the more the bodies pile up, the greater the pressure to "do something" becomes. Obama will be open to charges of hypocrisy: how can he stand by and do nothing while innocent women and children are being killed by a criminal regime he has declared must be deposed? In Libya, the road to escalation was remarkably short: Obama first declared that Qaddafi should step down on March 3, 2011; by the end of the month, NATO was bombing.[28] In Syria, the president has resisted escalation longer, but has begun to take steps that could lead to greater U.S. involvement in the conflict.

The problem with mission creep in Syria is that the greater that U.S. involvement becomes, the more responsible it will be for the aftermath, which is likely to be unpleasant. In one scenario, the United States limits its intervention to arming and training the moderate rebels. Should the rebels succeed in overthrowing Assad, they are likely to take retribution against the Alawite population, which could be bloody and create a new refugee disaster. The second thing that is likely to happen is a new civil war among rebel factions, probably pitting the more extreme Islamist factions against the U.S.-backed moderates. U.S. policy would thus have traded one civil war for a different civil war, and find itself back at square one.

In a second scenario, the United States (and its allies) intervenes directly, using military force to bring down the Assad regime. This, too, is likely to have unhappy results, with the added complication that the United States will be even more involved. If a "hammer and anvil" strategy — U.S./NATO airpower plus rebel ground power — succeeds in toppling Assad, the United States can stand down, but will not be able to prevent the retribution against Alawites

and potential civil war among rebel factions outlined above. If the United States chooses to send ground troops, it may be able to prevent a slaughter of Alawites, but is likely to face a violent response from the more radical Islamist and al Qaeda-affiliated factions. Given the highly factionalized nature of the rebellion, any number of factions could play the role of spoiler if they do not get their way. Even the current chaos of Libya is probably out of reach, since there are many groups hostile to the United States among the rebels, there are large minority populations that will need protection, and a possible separatist group (the Kurds) in the northeast. It is more likely that the United States will face at least one, and possibly multiple insurgences in Syria, an outcome much like it faced in Afghanistan and Iraq.

What is to be Done?

If the United States truly wishes to foster a negotiated end to the Syrian conflict, it needs to drop its insistence that Assad leave power and pressure Syrian rebel groups to negotiate with him. If the United States truly thinks Assad must go, then it should stop insisting on negotiations and do what it takes to help the rebels win. In the latter case, however, the Obama administration should think long and hard about what rebel victory in Syria means. It may find that the more it thinks about it, the less attractive it becomes. Dropping regime change and encouraging negotiations — or staying out of it entirely — may be a wiser policy.

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POSTSCRIPT
Theory and Policy

First-Rate Intelligence:
U.S. Government Understanding of the Syrian Civil War

By Jeremy Shapiro, Brookings Institution and Miriam R. Estrin, Yale Law School

* A version of this piece was previously published on the Middle East Channel on ForeignPolicy.com.

The Syrian Coalition's recent decision to participate in the Geneva II conference on January 22, 2014 was welcome news to the U.S. government, which has promoted the negotiations as "the best opportunity" to end the violence in Syria. So surely U.S. policy would want to take into account the reflected wisdom of academics and policy thinkers who have studied how successful political settlements take hold. Academics rarely agree on anything, so it is notable when a consensus position emerges, as it largely has with the academic literature on civil war termination. Even more notable, perhaps, is that this position has almost no influence on government policy.

The academic literature on civil war termination holds that civil wars like the one in Syria usually last a long time and end only in victory by one side or another. The few that do end through a negotiated settlement usually require an agreement that permits a division of political control that roughly corresponds to the division of power on the ground, a parallel agreement among all of the external supporters of the various sides, and external military assistance to monitor and enforce the agreement.

Yet U.S. policy in Syria seems to take none of this into account. The United States seeks a negotiated settlement, but specifically rejects the idea that the Assad regime might maintain some degree of control; specifically (for now) excludes Iran, a key external supporter, from the negotiations; and rejects the idea of contributing to monitoring or enforcing the agreement despite the evident lack of alternatives. This is in part because these are difficult future questions that need not be posed until the negotiations actually begin — which might actually be never. It is also because the idea of power-sharing conflicts with the idea that war is about getting rid of Assad, while the idea of inviting Iran conflicts with the higher priority U.S. interest in reducing Iranian regional influence.

But a broader reason is that the U.S. government is systemically unable to incorporate these ideas into its policy. We often talk about the government as if it were a human being. It "thinks," it "believes," and sometimes it even "knows" — or "*should* know." Critics frequently demand that the government should understand and learn certain key facts or lessons of history. But of course the government is not an individual. It is rather a vast constellation of people and institutions, and as such it learns information and processes knowledge quite differently than individuals do. *Most importantly, government "knowledge" about foreign policy issues is not learned or deduced. Rather, it is formed through a process of bureaucratic or political compromise between often conflicting theories or goals.*

The result is that the government does not think and learn in clear and consistent ways. *First, the government often lacks logical consistency.* As a collection of people and institutions, the government is much more capable of holding deeply inconsistent beliefs than individuals are. If, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "[T]he test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function," then the government is a genius. The U.S. government can "know," for example, that it is simultaneously both the leading global advocate for Internet freedom and the leading violator of privacy on the Internet.

Second, the government often relies on old information or disproven ideas. Changes in conditions on the ground or new academic insights are less likely to affect government thinking than personnel changes or domestic political developments. The U.S. government can therefore

continue to know that nuclear weapons threaten to spread like a virus even if it has continually over-predicted the spread of such weapons.

Third, the government often lacks forward thinking. An important rule of governance holds that once agreement is reached on step one of the policy process, stop arguing over future questions until they are posed. This means even deep divisions over next moves are papered over until they become immediately relevant, often causing inconsistent behavior or long delays to work through internal disputes. Accordingly, the U.S. government can decide to invade Iraq without really discussing whether the goal is democratization or simple regime change.

Fourth, the government often fails to understand that competing interests (foreign or domestic) shape foreign policies on specific issues. Government leaders don't like to spell out priorities among foreign policy interests, acknowledge trade-offs between interests, or admit that foreign policies are shaped by domestic politics. Yet these unacknowledged considerations still manage to creep into decision-making and render policies incoherent. For example, U.S. leaders who promote democracy in the Middle East have usually failed to acknowledge that the United States will likely prioritize national security interests over democracy, rendering the policy maddeningly inconsistent.

Overall, this implies that government knowledge defies easy description. What the government "thinks," "knows," or "understands" will need to be gleaned from multiple sources — well beyond the words of the president — and described with due attention to the preceding observations.

What the Government Knows about Syria

Within these rather severe limits, what can be said about the state of U.S. government knowledge on the Syrian civil war? Several ideas about the nature and dynamics of the civil war drive the views of government officials. These views tend to have been formed by the process of political

and bureaucratic compromise, and they have roots that pre-date the Syrian crisis. *They are thus quite resistant to new evidence or alternatives, even though they are at times inconsistent or simply false, and even though many individuals within the government do not accept them.* We have singled out some of the most notable (and arguably most problematic) of those beliefs.

First, the U.S. government overestimates the power of momentum in the Syrian civil war. The U.S. government believes that trends in the civil war will continue and indeed get stronger, absent dramatic action from some outside actor. The "power of momentum" heuristic is the source of the beliefs that (a) in 2011and 2012, the Assad regime would certainly fall, (b) in 2013, the Assad regime would certainly triumph, and (c) that throughout, the war will inevitably spread to neighboring states and foster extremism. This is in essence a variant of the domino theory.

Second, the U.S. government fetishizes the importance of Assad. To the United States government, Assad as an individual is the most important issue in the civil war. His future in power therefore largely defines the future of Syria and the prospects for peace. This means that the United States cannot accept any negotiation that allows Assad to remain in power.

Third, the U.S. government often reverts to a simple categorization of the civil war as a two-sided conflict. The U.S. government essentially sees the civil war as two-sided — the government against the opposition — and the United States supports the opposition. The discord within the opposition is therefore a problem of unifying moderates and isolating extremists, and can be fixed through political compromise and effectively weighted representation of interests. Many U.S. allies (e.g., Jordan) do not hold this view, but the U.S. government has remained very impervious to the notion that there are many sides in the war.

Fourth, the U.S. government believes it is an exogenous actor in the Syrian civil war. Stemming from a fervent belief in U.S. exceptionalism, this view holds that by virtue of its power, its history, and its placement in the

international order, the United States has a unique role to play in resolving the conflict. The United States can be the convener, the mediator, and even conceivably the enforcer of a peace conference. This notion sits uneasily with U.S. support for the opposition, but there is little ability or desire to confront the contradiction.

Finally, the U.S. government believes in the superior competence of extremists. Under this view, extremists in the opposition have inherent advantages in organizing, governing, and fighting that stem from their capacity for ideological motivation, their incorruptibility and their committed external supporters. This implies that moderates cannot compete unless they get support from the United States and its allies — and even then, they will be harder to organize and motivate.

How to Teach the Government

Many have lamented the "policy gap" that separates scholars and policymakers and prevents them from having meaningful exchanges of ideas. Much of the commentary has focused, on the one hand, on the cultural and hiring trends within academia that reward lengthy, equation-ridden papers as opposed to clear writing, and, on the other, the lack of interest and utility of this kind of scholarship inside the government. But this understates the problem. Even when scholars publish "policy relevant" and well-written pieces, there is a very limited ability for outsiders to teach the government new knowledge.

There are many reasons for this limited ability to teach the government new knowledge. It is difficult for outsiders to influence the state of government knowledge because they themselves usually disagree, as is to be expected on any complex subject. Policymakers can usually cite "experts" to bolster all sides of an argument. And even when outside experts largely agree, academic theories that present

challenges to preexisting ideas have greater difficulty making headway inside the government.

For these reasons, outsiders need to find a way to connect their knowledge to an existing policy process. This means they have to move beyond the simple truth or falsity, and present their knowledge in ways that reflect an understanding of the political and bureaucratic incentives and the policymaking process. For any given debate, an outsider needs to ask which specific policymaker can benefit from this new knowledge by using the outside authority as a weapon in the inevitable internal struggles over government policy. For example, a Department of Defense policymaker armed in August 2011 with the literature of civil war termination might have been able to more effectively resist the decision to make a public statements calling for Assad to go. He would been able to use the outside empirical evidence that a political settlement that included Assad might eventually be the best route to ending the violence as a weapon in that policy struggle.

It is not a simple task, but the academic outsider who can map the institutional terrain of a current policy debate and find the appropriate insider to champion his ideas can inject new knowledge into the policy process — and enable a more intelligent government to make better policy judgments.

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(Endnotes)

1   There are few cases whose technology of rebellion changes over time, but here we use the coding in the last year of the war.

2   Using the rough death estimates in an updated version of the civil war list of Fearon and Laitin (2003). By "intense" I mean deaths per year. Syria is in the top 30 or so for deaths per year per capita, and the top 30 or so for total deaths, using these estimates.

3   In many cases that the civil war literature refers to as "power-sharing," one side has in fact basically defeated and disarmed the other, but for some small residual capacity for terrorism or low level insurgency. In these cases you sometimes see deals where the government makes some small concessions to buy the formal assent of those who remain on the other side, with these concessions sometimes supported by international monitoring or an international peacekeeping operation. Guatemala in the mid 1990s is an example.

4   Or, perhaps, a de facto partition of the country solidifies.

5   To be clear, there is one scenario consistent with the above analysis in which a balanced power-sharing agreement could end the conflict: The international players all get on the same page, push for, and credibly commit to helping to enforce a political deal. This would probably require a peacekeeping operation of some sort. I'm presuming that this is not very likely. I suppose there is some small chance of a "diplomatic revolution" in the region, but I'm not seeing it at this point.

6   Fearon (2004) spells out this argument about both the onset and continuation of civil wars in greater detail. Powell (2004) gives a more general treatment of the strategic logic, which arguably is a source of inefficient conflict across a broad range of political settings.

7   Note that at that point, the offer is credible in that acceptance by the rebels would not reveal weakness.

8   Another step involves gaining a comprehension of how the strategies of insurgents and counterinsurgents work in combination to set those processes in motion. Space considerations do not allow consideration of that step here.

9   See Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, Studies in Rationality and Social Change, 2001); Roger Petersen with Vanda Felbab-Brown, "United States Social Science and Counter-Insurgency Policy in Colombia," In Freddy Cante and Luisa Ortiz, eds., *Nonviolent Political Action in Colombia* (Bogota: Universidad del Rosario, 2005); Roger Petersen with Jon Lindsay, "Varieties of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2003-2009," case study prepared for the Naval War College Center for Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups (November 2011).

10   The mechanism approach can be clearly contrasted with common alternatives. Variable-based treatments usually aim to estimate causal influence through statistical association. In this method, prediction becomes the primary goal. In opposition, a mechanism approach aims for explanation over prediction. For a discussion of the use of a mechanisms approach, see Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedborg, eds. *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Also, see Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), especially the first chapter, "A Plea for Mechanisms." Also see Roger Petersen, Structures and Mechanisms in Comparison," in Roger Petersen and John Bowen, eds., *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture*, (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

11   C.J. Chivers, "Life with Syria's Rebels in a Cold and Cunning War," *New York Times*, August 20, 2012.

12   Paul Staniland, "The State and the Monopoly of Violence," University of Chicago working paper, 2013.

13   See *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 53, No. 4 (August 2009); *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (February 2012).

14   David Schiller, "A Battlegroup Divided: The Palestinian Fedayeen," in *Inside Terrorist Organizations*, ed. David C. Rapoport (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 92.

15   Hassan Abbas, "The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria," *Arab Reform Brief* 5 (October 2011).

16   Whitman, Elizabeth. "Stalemate in Syria," *The Nation*, April 23, 2012.

17   They involve an "ideology of inferiority for the subordinate groups" and thus an almost fixed ethnic structure that is perceived as natural. For more on hierarchical systems, see Horowitz 1985, pp. 21–32.

18   http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/syria/85051.htm

19   It is characteristic that both in 1982 when the regime violently crushed the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in Hama and in mid-March 2011 following the brutal response of the regime to the protests in Daraa, the conflict was attributed to Zionists and Americans intervening in Syrian internal affairs using fifth columns as agents of Western imperialism. See Wedeen 1999 and Seale, Patrick. "The Syrian Time Bomb Forget Libya", *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2011.

20   Luttwak, Edward. "In Syria, America Loses if Either Side Wins," *The New York Times*, August 24, 2013.

21   "President Obama: 'The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way,'" http://www.whitehouse.gov/

blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad. For an example of Obama's earlier statements about Qaddafi, see Barack Obama, David Cameron, and Nicolas Sarkozy, "Libya's Pathway to Peace," *New York Times*, April 14, 2011.

22   Paul Richter, "Senator Criticizes CIA Training of Syrian Rebels as 'Incredibly Slow,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 2013; and Ernesto Londono and Greg Miller, "U.S. Weapons Reaching Syrian Rebels," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2013.

23   Aljazeera, "Syrian Rebels Reject Geneva Peace Talks," October 27, 2013.

24   Ian Black, "Syrian Rebels Urged to Take Part in Geneva II Peace Conference," *The Guardian*, October 22, 2013.

25   Communique of the London 11, October 22, 2013, http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/10/215729.htm.

26   "Assad Sees No Date for Syria Talks, Mulls Re-election," *Reuters*, October 21, 2013.

27   Daniel Krcmaric, "The Justice Dilemma: International Criminal Law, Mass Atrocities, and the Dynamics of Civil War," Ph.D. dissertation in progress, Department of Political Science, Duke University. This paragraph is based on Krcmaric's work.

28   Mark Landler, "Obama Tells Qaddafi to Quit and Authorizes Refugee Airlifts," *New York Times*, March 3, 2011.