

Syria

Playing into their hands



Regime and international roles in fuelling
violence and fundamentalism in the Syrian war

DAVID KEEN

SAFERWORLD
PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT. BUILDING SAFER LIVES

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Abbreviations

AOG	armed opposition groups	MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq	NDF	National Defence Forces
CoH	Cessation of Hostilities	NGO	non-governmental organisations
CTL	counterterrorism legislation	NORIA	Network of Researchers in International Affairs
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office	NPR	National Public Radio
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia	NSAG	Non-state armed groups
FSA	Free Syrian Army	OCHA	(United Nations) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group	ODI	Overseas Development Institute
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (an amalgam of JFS and several other groups)	PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
ICG	International Crisis Group	PYD	(Kurdish) Democratic Union Party
IDP	internally displaced persons	SAA	Syrian Army
IHL	international humanitarian law	SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
INGO	international non-governmental organisations	SILF	Syrian Islamic Liberation Front
ISG	Inter-sector group	SMC	Supreme Military Council
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant	SRF	Syrian Revolutionaries Front
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria	TOW	tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided (missile)
ISSG	International Syria Support Group	UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
JFS	Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Jabhat al-Nusra before July 2016)	UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
JIC	Joint Implementation Center	WoS	Whole of Syria
JIG	Joint Implementation Group	YPG	People's Protection Units (the military wing of the PYD)
JTIC	Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre		
LSE	London School of Economics		
MDG	Millennium Development Goals		

Executive Summary

The complexity of Syria's conflict has made the war especially difficult to resolve. This study highlights important neglected aspects of the war and their implications for international interventions. It provides an explanation for the longevity of the Assad regime, as well as for the significant gains made by HTS/Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS (recently reversed in the case of ISIS).

The war as a system of power, profit and protection

This war is not simply a contest between two or more sides, but an evolving *system* of profit, power and protection in which 'winning' is one among many goals. The political manipulation of disorder has been a key part of this, and the Assad regime has endured not simply *despite* the war but also, to a significant extent, *because* of it. Viewing the war as a system reveals significant failings in international engagement. Many of these stem from an attempt to see – and tackle – the war through the lens of a '*global war on terror*'.

Regime and rebel actors have reaped significant economic benefits from the war. This war economy has flourished both within government- and rebel-held areas, has involved significant exploitation, and has created important economic incentives for continuing the war. As the war economy became more voracious, civilians increasingly looked for some kind of remedy – and opportunities for violent jihadist groups to offer their own versions of 'protection' also increased.

The trajectory of the war has been significantly shaped by the fragmentation and weakness of the rebellion. One cause of this fragmentation was that, for many rebels, war became a business.

A second has been divergence in the agendas of the rebels' external supporters. While opposing Assad, countries supporting the rebels have had their own distinct strategic interests in Syria. Support from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey for a variety of groups undermined opposition coherence, and Western governments, for the most part, chose not to give large-scale support to the Free Syrian Army. Meanwhile, more fundamentalist groups – especially al-Nusra – grew stronger militarily, drawing on substantial external funding and supply lines from Iraq, as well as on the lucrative war economy. Al-Nusra and especially ISIS alienated many Syrians with cruel behaviour and rigid ideologies. However, while 'brainwashing' and intimidation played a significant role (most notably for ISIS), these militant groups were also able to *attract* followers – for example, by providing goods, services, salaries, a form of governance, and varying degrees of 'protection' from violence – not just their own but also that of the regime.

The regime's role in nurturing violence and fundamentalism

"Assad used to say, 'If I go, then sectarianism will take over.' He used this to stay in power. There's a degree of truth in this [claim] now."

Kurdish activist

One might expect an incumbent regime to try to prevent an armed rebellion, keep it small, defeat it quickly and oppose any extreme elements with particular vigour. But the Syrian regime's actions departed from these assumptions, boosting armed rebellion and/or violent fundamentalist elements in at least nine ways:

1. Before the war, the regime facilitated a flow of *jihadis* from Syria into Iraq, in part as an attempt to increase leverage over the US government; this process drew on – and helped to strengthen – links between the Assad regime and fundamentalist elements within Syria, and these links were again to become significant in the Syrian war.
2. During the war, regime attacks on civilians – and widespread abuse such as torture and arbitrary imprisonment – helped both to provoke and to expand the armed rebellion.
3. The regime stirred sectarian sentiment through selective attacks and use of divisive language.
4. The regime selectively released violent fundamentalists from Syrian prisons.

5. The regime actively colluded with terror attacks, making the threat of terrorism seem greater than it initially was.
6. At times, the regime cooperated economically with rebel groups.
7. Regime actors engaged in a range of predatory behaviours that predictably lost 'hearts and minds', sometimes to the advantage of rebel groups.
8. The regime promoted scarcity in rebel areas – not least through blocking international relief operations – radicalising public opinion and strengthening anti-Western groups at the expense of less militant elements.
9. The regime offered partial immunity from its own attacks to ISIS in particular, while concentrating much of its violence on alternative, non-fundamentalist governance structures.

By actively encouraging fundamentalist elements, the regime was able to present itself (internationally and domestically) as a 'lesser evil' – and the 'global war on terror' provided incentives for pursuing this strategy. The Assad regime partially succeeded in delegitimising a rebellion originally founded on genuine political grievances, and in so doing, carved out significant impunity – both nationally and internationally – for its own horrific abuses. When Western military intervention (from July 2014) targeted ISIS rather than Assad, this was a major success for Assad.

International impacts on the Syrian war

While reducing the suffering arising from Syria's war has been an extremely difficult and complex task, international interventions have fed into the conflict in important ways. The Syrian war has been seen and presented internationally within a framework that tends to identify violent jihadist groups as 'public enemy number one' and to prioritise their military elimination. Syria's uprising began in March 2011, but Western military intervention began in mid-2014. It did not target the perpetrator of the great majority of killings and other abuses (the Assad regime) but rather a group that is normally (if somewhat misleadingly) seen as one of the regime's many opponents (ISIS). It had a number of negative impacts – not least in setting a precedent for Russian intervention.

Russia's military intervention (from September 2015), billed as part of a 'global war on terror', in fact aimed to preserve the Assad regime – and in many ways

helped ISIS to persist. Iran too has extended its influence in Syria citing the need to combat ‘terrorists.’ Meanwhile, Washington’s preoccupation with combating al-Nusra and willingness to consider Russia as a viable counter-terrorism partner led to a joint US-Russian plan to attack al-Nusra and ISIS within Syria. This undermined Washington’s ability to check abuses by Russia, Iran and the regime, especially in Aleppo. Meanwhile, the US alliance with Kurdish militias has had several destabilising impacts.

Beyond precipitating the rise of al-Nusra and ISIS in the wake of the disastrous Iraq intervention from 2003, a ‘war on terror’ in Syria has:

1. Provided important cover and a veneer of legitimacy for abuses by the Assad regime;
2. Created a strong incentive for the Assad regime to nurture violent jihadist groups;
3. Provided cover and a veneer of legitimacy for abuses by Russia and Iran;
4. Led the US to support the Kurds as the ‘best hope’ against ISIS, thus destabilising the peace process within Turkey, pushing Turkey closer to Russia, and encouraging multiple Turkish military incursions into Syria;
5. Increased disunity within the armed opposition and destabilised fragile moves towards peace (notably by pushing the distinction between al-Nusra and other opposition groups in a context where this line was hard to draw);
6. Directly killed large numbers of civilians and caused other kinds of suffering among civilians, including injury, mass displacement and a deepening of humanitarian crisis, and risked prompting additional support for violent jihadist groups among civilians;
7. Served as a distraction from addressing the varied causes of the war, factors that will continue to fuel violence even if ISIS is militarily defeated;
8. Contributed to resource shortages (stemming, for example, from aid scarcity and banking sanctions) that have not only had very adverse humanitarian effects but have also fed strongly into the war.

Syrians have repeatedly emphasised the very *negative* effects on the country exerted by prolonged and relatively generalised sanctions. The role of aid has also been highly problematic. Fears about its diversion by fundamentalist groups have overridden other important concerns, with damaging consequences. Resource scarcity – a significant driver of conflict – has been strongly fuelled by international sanctions and by lack of international aid

(with regime – and to a lesser extent – rebel manipulation of aid depriving besieged and hard-to-reach areas). As the war has continued, resource scarcity has fed the conflict in at least eleven ways:

1. It has played into the Syrian regime's strategy of imposing starvation and offering resources (and 'protection') as an alternative.
2. It has been an incentive to join armed groups, whether in regime or rebel areas.
3. It has created an appetite for services – including humanitarian aid – that have been provided by militant fundamentalist groups.
4. It has encouraged crime and economically-motivated violence.
5. It has encouraged people to tolerate abusive armed groups that promise to rein in criminality.
6. It has contributed powerfully to a sense of anger at the West, fuelling the emotional attraction of violent jihadist groups.
7. It has created additional incentives for keeping the war going by contributing to windfall profits for warlords, militias, government officials and associated businessmen who have been able to breach sanctions or sieges.
8. Actors linked to the regime have been able to make 'political capital' out of international sanctions.
9. By fuelling criminality and fundamentalist groups, scarcity helped to reduce the perceived legitimacy of rebellion, particularly in international eyes, which (in a vicious circle) further undermined relief to opposition areas.
10. Scarcity has encouraged a focus of international effort and energy on emergency humanitarian assistance, sometimes taking focus away from addressing the underlying protection crisis whilst also increasing UN dependence on Damascus's cooperation.
11. Among Syrian refugees who lack education and other opportunities in neighbouring countries, scarcity has in some cases encouraged recruitment into Syrian armed groups.

The behaviour of international actors (the West, Gulf States, Turkey, Iran, Russia, etc.) has powerfully shaped Syria's evolving wartime political economy. Working towards a relatively just peace in Syria requires critical reflection on the impacts of international engagement, and the development of a new vision to address the motives, incentives and behaviours driving the war. Policymakers must look beyond a military focus on ISIS and HTS/al-Nusra

in Syria and consider why these groups have emerged. Considering the interests of each actor, it is important to identify what pressures and positive incentives can be created to shift their behaviour towards something more compatible with the interests of the Syrian people. To inform this challenging process, this study offers **four key recommendations**:

1. Western governments need to reject the ‘war on terror’ framework.

If military options continue to take centre stage, it is hard to envisage a future that moves beyond the fractured, authoritarian state that spawned and nourished the civil war and that stimulated the growth of violent fundamentalist factions as part of a strategic manipulation of disorder.

- Given the adverse impacts of treating Syria as a battleground in the ‘war on terror’, shift the focus of strategy away from defeating groups like ISIS or HTS/al-Nusra and towards finding a solution to the wider conflict. Apply appropriate pressures on all relevant parties, inside and outside the country.
- Put the protection of civilians and the careful construction of just and lasting peace at the core of all actions in Syria, and seek to undo the widespread perception that the international community has colluded in the abuse of civilians by Russia, Iran and the Assad regime.
- Military options for engaging with ISIS and HTS/al-Nusra may be meaningless in the absence of strategies for negotiating peace, for reversing state fragmentation, and for working towards a reformed model of governance in Syria and Iraq.
- The strategic manipulation of disorder by the Syrian government must be countered by operating in a similarly strategic – but much more principled – way. Given the extremity of the regime’s violent and abusive conduct and given that the regime has frequently nurtured militant jihadist elements, any sustainable peace effort (and any workable counter-terror strategy) must include a credible vision for transforming the regime.
- Recognise the various counterproductive effects of violence – notably in feeding cycles of revenge – and fully explore alternatives to the use of force.
- Recognise the pull of the goods, services and even (to a degree) protection offered by ISIS and HTS/al-Nusra, and do more to ensure there are alternative survival strategies and income available to those who do not wish to join militant groups.

2. Address resource scarcity by revisiting the role of aid and sanctions.

Fears about aid to vulnerable Syrians being diverted into the hands of fundamentalist groups have overridden other important concerns, with damaging consequences. To address the impact that scarcity has had on conflict dynamics, the quantity, type and method for administration of relief and development support, as well as the scope and targeting of sanctions, should be reconsidered.

- Prevent further deterioration of development levels in Syria both by stepping up humanitarian and development assistance and by making every possible effort to ensure it reaches rebel and besieged areas. International actors need to ensure that people in these and other areas can exercise their legal right to food, shelter and medical care. Delivering more aid will require overcoming obstacles such as legal restrictions, pervasive insecurity and the risks posed by theft; and, as with all aid in conflict contexts, it will be important to monitor and mitigate the potential negative impacts of injecting resources on local power dynamics. But the consequences of scarcity require that these obstacles be overcome.
- To uphold the commitment to ‘do no harm’, the UN Security Council, donors and humanitarian agencies need to redouble their efforts to counter and circumvent the manipulation of relief by the regime. The full extent of obstruction of humanitarian aid to besieged areas and hard-to-reach areas needs to be clearly and publicly highlighted, and this obstruction should be clearly labelled and dealt with as a war crime.
- Development interventions offer one means of providing economic alternatives to joining military factions. Syria needs development interventions such as livelihoods and education just as much as emergency food aid, and it is important to take up opportunities for developmental/reconstruction work in any relatively secure areas. Livelihoods programmes would need to be cognisant of the lessons of similar efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and be complemented by other types of programmes and actions.
- Step up large-scale delivery of fuel – especially diesel – to support local livelihoods (including agriculture). This will also reduce the leverage that ISIS has exerted when controlling fuel supplies to other rebel groups. Fuel delivery would carry risks of diversion by armed actors, but if these could be mitigated it would have clear benefits.

- To address a strong sense of neglect and betrayal, Syrian refugees need both a much more generous reception in Western countries, *and* greater support in regional host countries. In particular, Syrian refugees need improved access to education.
- Development assistance needs to offer redoubled support for the emergence of institutions (such as local councils) that offer alternative sources of governance to those offered by the regime and by abusive military factions. Although regime and jihadist violence greatly reduced the space for non-abusive alternative governance as the war unfolded, the need for good governance remains intense. Yet relatively un-abusive groups have found it difficult to retain local control without appropriate resources. A peace process could rapidly reopen space for local governance and civic action: appropriate international support will be vital in re-energising the initiative that Syrians have already shown in providing their own services.
- Noting how regime insiders are currently *benefiting* from sanctions (both by deflecting blame and by profiting from scarcity), replace generalised sanctions on Syria with targeted sanctions that are both extensive and well-enforced. Where there are political obstacles to revising targeted international sanctions, work to establish alternatives, such as financial controls on relevant businesses and individuals within the jurisdiction of the US and supporting countries.
- ISIS's governance project depends on resources. More effective efforts are needed to restrict key resource flows such as private funding from Gulf States, revenues from oil and looted antiquities and military supplies, as well as new recruits.

3. Redouble the search for a diplomatic solution. Even in terms of defeating 'terrorism', a peace settlement and a shift towards more inclusive government are much more likely to be effective than a policy of waging war on 'spoilers'. To ensure a viable and sustainable peace process in Syria, many competing interests will have to be balanced and worked out. Influencing the situation positively requires a clear view of the motives and grievances of actors who are shaping the war system at local, national, regional and international levels; it also requires a proper understanding of relations *between* these groups (which are sometimes collusive as well as competitive). This kind of 'mapping' exercise can help to inform attempts to influence these various actors in a more strategic way.

- Apply strong diplomatic pressure on all of those fuelling conflict from outside. Offer incentives to generate new momentum for a negotiated settlement. Focus diplomatic pressure on protecting civilians, ending the suffering of Syrians, and improving regime behaviour.
- Western governments need to work with Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to develop a vision for a political transition that will be acceptable for all relevant parties. While a well-functioning democracy seems very unlikely in the short or even medium term, even a distasteful peace – given sustained outside and domestic pressures over time – could provide the basis for something better.
- The regime's heavy dependence on foreign backers could provide a way to pressure it to embark on some form of transition. The US and EU governments need to use all available diplomatic means to persuade Russia and Iran to stop their support for a profoundly vicious regime, and refocus on the common interests that international actors have in Syria's stability and in limiting, through a return to peace, the rise of violent fundamentalist groups.
- As part of this, the US and the EU need to give Syria a higher priority in relations with Russia. Increased pressure on Russia should include a strengthening of targeted sanctions – including restricting access to US and European markets for Russian banks that support Assad. Given Russia's fears around Western-imposed regime change and 'encirclement', such economic pressures have a better chance of success if coupled with a clear indication of what Russia can gain, looking forward, by working with other governments towards a political transition in Syria. One such incentive could be a major Western contribution towards the cost of reconstructing Syria, a cost that Russia may be anxious to avoid.
- Iran has played a hugely destructive role in Syria. Stopping this requires speaking clearly and strongly about Iran's continuing abuses in Syria. It also requires explicit conditionality to check these abuses – for example sanctions on airlines that supply weapons and troops to Damascus.
- Changing Russian and Iranian behaviour is likely to be greatly assisted if Russian and Iranian security fears are taken seriously (for example, fears about being 'ganged up on' by the international community). In particular, the idea that the West or NATO has a right to depose any government it does not like (often as part of a 'war on terror') has done a great deal to fuel Russian and Iranian insecurities, feeding into the Syrian war in damaging ways.

- Western governments should also encourage constructive behavioral change by allies such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia regarding their role in fuelling the violence within Syria. Exerting strong pressure on Iran could be ineffective and even destabilising without concomitant pressure on Iran's chief rival in the region, Saudi Arabia. Pressure should target both its support for fundamentalist proxies within Syria and its destabilising role elsewhere, most notably in Yemen.
- Europe retains bargaining power with Turkey, but President Erdogan's hand has been strengthened by his rapprochement with Moscow and by Western desire for his cooperation over Syrian refugees and in the war against ISIS. Yet such goals must not eclipse the importance of peace and human rights in Turkey and Syria. Western governments must strongly support the Turkish Kurds and Turkish civil society, while discouraging Turkey from fuelling the conflict in Syria. A Turkish ceasefire with the PKK is an essential part of this.
- At the same time, conditions must be set on external support to Kurdish groups, while non-YPG and non-Kurdish elements should be given greater support. This is important both in itself and to reduce Turkish anxieties.

4. Support the emergence of new governance arrangements to address conflict drivers and enable reconciliation. Waging war on rogue factions without addressing the grievances that nurture them is a policy practice with a poor record of success. Without a wider strategy, any reconstructed Syrian state could continue to nourish dangerous groups. The original rebellion was propelled by genuine political grievances, and ISIS gained influence in part through attempts to fill the governance void and reverse the process of state collapse within Syria. It follows that moving toward a future free of militant groups requires effective and inclusive governance structures. Newly-empowered groups and regions will not easily cede what they have gained in wartime, while many influential interests can be expected to oppose the re-establishment of state authority.

Any peace agreement will be only the beginning of a long struggle for more accountability that will require vigorous external involvement and generous external resources, particularly since more oppressive versions of peace-as-surrender are already being pushed by Damascus and its allies. The peace process should also be informed by the war economy: even collusive and corrupt economic relationships in wartime can sometimes create a basis for more peaceful cooperation.

- Provide major and prompt assistance to Syrians in building an inclusive state that can provide services, protection, dignity and representation to the Syrian people.
- Look beyond the reconstruction of a unitary and centralised nation state, and empower Syrians to consider all the various options openly. The best option will likely involve some degree of decentralisation and regional autonomy. Whatever the future model, it will be important to ensure better representation at all levels, to take pains to address the complex grievances on all sides that led to the war (as well as grievances *resulting from* it), and to work carefully to foster reconciliation and cooperation. Decentralisation may offer a way to accommodate the interests of different factions and to ‘knit together’ zones of relative peace (policed perhaps by international actors) alongside a regime in Damascus that may well bear at least some resemblance (at least in the short term) to the present regime. It may be possible to build on elements of autonomy that have already evolved. Decentralisation may also offer a way to reduce resource and income disparities between regions.
- At the same time, decentralisation and other models will likely prove contentious – not least because of the implications for minority rights and regional stability of creating zones dominated by particular groups (including the Kurds). International actors should do everything in their power to mitigate such risks with long-term support to a process led by Syrians. Decentralisation should not be treated as an excuse for outside governments permanently to insert themselves into the Syrian polity.
- Civil society groups representing diverse stakeholders – including those led by, or representing, women and youth – must be substantially included in peace talks and peace processes. Where armed actors are given an excessive or exclusive stake, their vested interest in war can be a powerful obstacle to peace. Without genuine involvement of civil society, any move towards peace would almost certainly enable impunity and the war economy to continue into peacetime, including through a continued manipulation of shortages and use of violence to enhance profits during reconstruction.
- Envisaging a justice and reconciliation process for Syria is no easy task: it requires a long term, inter-generational process. If abusers face immediate justice, they may have little or no reason to back a peace settlement; yet without a genuine justice process, it is hard to imagine any peace worthy of the name. The seeds for a measured and far-reaching justice process must be sown immediately, through support for international transitional justice mechanisms that are impartial and accepted as such. A key priority must be reducing

impunity and delivering some sense of redress for injustices suffered during the conflict. To work towards this, UN Member States should continue to support both the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, and the UN General Assembly's initiative to investigate and prosecute crimes during Syria's war.

- It will be important to maintain public economic enterprise and service provision, and ensure checks on actors who may seek to make windfall profits in the post-war phase without advancing the public interest.
- Simply dismantling state institutions is likely to be counter-productive (as has been seen in Iraq). Support for livelihoods – and for economic alternatives to enlisting with the various militias – will be vital. This may include jobs within a reformed Syrian military.

Foreword

While it is understandable that Western governments should want to respond in some way to vicious terrorist attacks within Western countries, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that violence rarely solves the problem of violence, that violence leads to new forms of violence (often after a delay or in a new location), and that terrorist groups are rarely brought to an end through military means. In general, waging war on rogue factions without addressing the grievances that nurture them is a policy practice with a poor record of success. While the idea that one can create peace by physically eliminating all the ‘evil’ people retains a strong hold on the imagination of many policymakers and other citizens in the West, this approach dangerously disregards the processes by which people become violent.

We also know from many crises around the world that when actors present themselves as combating some kind of ‘evil’, there tends to be a great deal of impunity for those claiming to sign up to this fight. Once powerful actors on the ground realise which kinds of ‘evil’ Western governments are currently combating, these local actors have frequently constructed their strategies accordingly – even to the extent of nurturing the enemy that is being so loudly and widely denounced. These are not new lessons; they can be gleaned from Vietnam and Guatemala, as well as (more recently) Sudan, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Yemen and many countries around the world. We are learning them again – or perhaps not learning them – in relation to Syria.

Despite (and arguably *because of*) the huge and ongoing ‘war on terror’ since September 2001, according to the Global Terrorism Index the number of terror attacks in the world has risen very sharply – from 3,329 in 2000 to 29,376 in 2015.¹ A large proportion of these attacks have been within Iraq and

¹ Global Terrorism Index 2015 (2016).

Afghanistan, where much of the ‘war on terror’ has been concentrated. Meanwhile, the number of fighters in Islamist-inspired terrorist organisations more than tripled between 2000 and 2013 (from 32,200 to in excess of 110,000).² In many ways, it is precisely the ongoing failure of the ‘war on terror’ that has created pressures for its continuation: the intensifying ‘security threat’ is held to demand ‘more of the same’.

Meanwhile, the ongoing ‘war on terror’ has come at a huge financial cost. In fact, in large part because of a felt need to wage war on terrorism, global military spending remains very close to its all-time peak despite the end of the Cold War. The opportunity costs of this spending – for example, the forgone opportunities to promote development – are enormous.

Today the idea that violence will solve the problem of violence retains considerable popular appeal. However, by the time we wake up to all the violence we have nurtured and encouraged in the name of eliminating evil, it is often – as the citizens of Aleppo could testify – too late.

In the 2015 discussion paper, *Dilemmas of counter-terrorism, stabilisation and statebuilding* published by Saferworld, I provided a review of global evidence on the impacts of existing approaches, and suggested a number of constructive directions for improved policy, including:

- avoiding defining conflicts narrowly as problems of ‘terror’, ‘extremism’ or ‘radicalisation’, and instead adopting a more impartial, holistic and sustainable approach to resolving them
- changing international and national policies and approaches that fuel grievances and undermine human rights
- redoubling efforts for diplomacy, lobbying, advocacy and local-level dialogue to make the case for peace and adherence to international law by conflict actors
- looking for opportunities to negotiate peace – balancing pragmatic considerations with a determined focus to achieve inclusive and just political settlements in any given context
- considering the careful use of legal and judicial responses and targeted sanctions as alternatives to the use of force
- taking greater care when choosing and reviewing relationships with supposed ‘allies’

² Goepner (2016), p 113, citing annual reports from the Department of State and data from Stanford’s Mapping Militant Organizations Project.

- supporting transformative reform efforts to improve governance and state-society relations and uphold human rights
- choosing not to engage if harm cannot be effectively mitigated and no clear solution is evident

Saferworld has since published case studies exploring these themes in relation to Afghanistan, Egypt, Kenya, Somalia, Tunisia and Yemen. This discussion paper aims to stimulate further debate and reflection on these themes by examining the roles of different actors in the Syrian war system. It situates the international ‘war on terror’ within the context of the war system being played out in Syria, and describes how the incentives of different actors involved in the Syrian civil war have led them to perpetrate and support extreme violence. Based on this, it draws lessons that could assist those who are engaging in the hope that they can respond in a more holistic and constructive way.

David Keen

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Introduction

A fairly standard – and apparently uncontroversial – portrayal of the war in Syria might be expressed as follows:

An oppressive Syrian regime, threatened by an armed rebellion, attempted ruthlessly to defeat it, causing massive civilian casualties. Driven by genuine grievances, Syria's rebels fought against the Assad regime, but the rebellion was increasingly weakened by fanatics and terrorists, with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (now Hayat Tahrir al-Sham [HTS]) gaining in strength. While the Western 'war on terror' led to military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the West has tended to be a bystander in Syria, focusing primarily on the provision of humanitarian aid when and where the security situation allowed it. Eventually the West intervened militarily against the terrorists. The Russians also intervened in the war, killing large numbers of civilians, notably in Aleppo.

While this basic narrative contains significant elements of truth, it is also a very partial – and in many ways misleading – account. It misses the complexity of the various fault-lines in Syria's war and the diversity of Syria's warring actors; it misses the elements of cooperation as well as conflict; and it misses the usefulness of certain enemies and the usefulness of war itself. As with many other conflicts, Syria's war is not simply about *winning*: it is a complex system that cannot be reduced to a contest between two (or more) sides.

Nor does this basic narrative tell us much about why President Bashar al-Assad has survived for so long or why fundamentalist groups like al-Nusra and ISIS were able to make so many gains. These factions have often been dismissed as 'fanatical' and 'evil'; and for those adhering to a 'hard security' framework or subscribing to the notion of a 'global war on terror', the important thing is not so much to *understand* terrorism or extremism as to *eliminate* it. But in practice solving a problem without understanding it is always going to be difficult if not outright impossible.

In July 2016 **Jabhat al-Nusra** changed its name to Jabhat Fateh al-Sham – as part of an attempt to dissociate itself from al-Qaeda – and was then renamed Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) after subsuming several other groups in January 2017. This report uses the term al-Nusra for the period to July 2016, Nusra/JFS for the period to January 2017, and HTS for the subsequent period.

A full analysis of the war and a full explanation for ISIS and al-Nusra/HTS will probably only be possible once the war has ended. But this paper seeks to highlight some neglected aspects of the war in Syria and to tease out some of the implications for international interventions. Through examining Syria's *war system*, it points to some significant drawbacks in Western governments' tendency to see – and handle – the war first of all through the lens of a *contest* and, second, through the lens of a '*global war on terror*'.

In Saferworld's 2015 paper on stabilisation and counter-terrorism, Larry Attree and I highlighted some dangers in the more belligerent contemporary approaches to counterterrorism as well as some dangers in a statebuilding model that seeks to separate the 'moderates' (included in the peace settlement) from the 'extremists' (excluded and often marked for elimination). The Syrian case – not least the destruction of Aleppo – highlights these various dangers rather starkly. It highlights, for example, the difficulty when a faction like al-Nusra/HTS is labelled from the outside as 'extremist', 'terrorist' and a 'peace spoiler' but has actually enjoyed a degree of legitimacy and support on the ground as a result of standing up to Assad and providing some (flawed) protection.

Alongside the political benefits of military rebellion (and nurturing fundamentalist elements within it), regime and rebel actors have reaped significant economic benefits from the war. A significant war economy has flourished within both government-held areas and rebel-held areas, and this emerging system has created important economic incentives for continuing the war. Rather than simply being a contest between two or more sides (or, at the other extreme, a manifestation of economic and political *breakdown*), Syria's vicious conflict is better conceptualised as an evolving *system* of profit, power and protection in which 'winning' is one among many goals, while violence and armed conflict are carefully calibrated in order to achieve a variety of (sometimes 'non-obvious') goals.³

Section 2 focuses on the rebellion, looking first (in section 2.1) at some of the grievances that informed and energised the initial uprising. Section 2.2 looks

³ Cf. Mitton; Keen (1998); Keen (2005); Keen (2008); Keen (2012); Kaldor.

at the fragmentation and weakening of the rebellion, looking in particular at the rise of predatory behaviour among the rebels and at the various sources of disunity. Section 2.3 focuses on the growing influence of fundamentalist groups, showing how ISIS and al-Nusra grew in influence not only because of the threats they made but also because of their ability to pay fighters and to make plausible promises of services and security amid widespread looting and extortion and amid a general collapse of state protection and services.

Section 3 shifts the focus to the Syrian regime (including militias with ties to it and to Iran). It shows how the regime took advantage of the international 'war on terror' by actively encouraging fundamentalist elements and by positioning itself – both internationally and domestically – as a relatively 'palatable' alternative. It is argued that the framework of a 'global war on terror' created important – and perverse – incentives for Assad's destructive strategy of nurturing some of the most ruthless and violent groups. When Western military intervention eventually occurred (beginning in July 2014) and was targeted at ISIS rather than Assad, this represented a major success for Assad.

One might imagine that an incumbent regime would do all it could to prevent an armed rebellion, to keep a rebellion small, to defeat it militarily, and to suppress the most violent and ruthless elements with particular vigour. Yet the Assad regime's behaviour does not support these assumptions. Not only did the regime effectively precipitate and then swell the armed rebellion; it also *actively nurtured some of the most ruthless, violent and fundamentalist* elements within this rebellion. Section 3 shows that the regime has not simply concentrated on defeating rebellion, but on the *strategic manipulation of disorder* for both political and economic purposes. Section 3.1 looks at nine behaviours that, paradoxically, boosted armed and fundamentalist groups within the rebellion. Section 3.2 offers an explanation for the paradoxical regime behaviour considered in the previous section, focusing in particular on the regime's strategy of political survival through delegitimising and dividing the opposition.

Section 4 looks in detail at international interventions in the Syrian war, again highlighting the damaging role that has been played by the 'global war on terror'. Section 4.1 focuses on the uncertain and often negative impact within Syria of the Western 'anti-terrorist' military intervention from July 2014. Section 4.2 considers the Russian military intervention (beginning in September 2015), an intervention that was also billed as part of a 'global war on terror' but that actually revealed a set of priorities centring on the preservation of the Assad regime (and quite consistent with the *persistence* of ISIS). Meanwhile, Iran extended its own influence, also citing the need to combat 'terrorists'.

Section 4.3 suggests that a narrow focus by the US and others on securing the military defeat of ISIS (and using Kurdish militias to do so) has left crucial causes of violence unaddressed while also creating additional problems (not least in relation to neighbouring Turkey). Section 4.4 looks at the way violence in Syria has been fuelled by resource scarcity, a scarcity that reflects not only the impact of the war itself but also grave deficiencies in aid provision (to which the global ‘war on terror’ framework has contributed significantly). It is argued that international sanctions have also contributed to scarcity and conflict.

Section 5 summarises the argument and looks at some alternatives to the approaches that have been pursued by Western actors. In particular, it highlights the need to get away from a preoccupation with waging a ‘war on terror’ and the need for a more holistic approach that tackles the many causes of violence, that addresses the chronic scarcity of resources and protection, and that puts strong diplomatic pressures on those fuelling conflict from outside.

This paper draws on interviews with people displaced from Syria into the border region of south-eastern Turkey. Our four-person research team travelled mostly together but occasionally split up for logistical reasons and to maximise the number of people we were able to consult. We conducted interviews in Gaziantep, Kilis and Antakya, all towns very close to the Syrian border. We visited the refugee camp at Kilis. We were able to interview a wide range of displaced Syrians, including former government soldiers and pilots, rebel fighters, engineers, artists, administrators, aid workers and human rights workers. Our interviews included a number of long interviews with Kurdish human rights workers and activists. We benefited from a number of group discussions as well as from individual interviews. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the summer of 2013, and this proved to be an important moment in the rise of fundamentalist groups within opposition areas – not least because of the regime’s August 2013 chemical attacks on Damascus. The report also draws on a large number of subsequent conversations in the period 2013–2017, including interviews with displaced or *émigré* Syrians and with a variety of academics, foreign diplomats and aid workers in Geneva, Basel, London and Oxford, as well as interviews conducted in 2016 in the informal camp at Calais, France, where many Syrians who had fled the war were waiting for a chance to enter the UK. The analysis also draws on a wide range of reports from aid agencies, the UN, think tanks and journalists, as well as many academic studies.

2

A fractured rebellion: the war system and its functions for non-regime groups

2.1 Underlying grievances

Pre-war Syria was brimming over with grievances of various kinds but lacked the mechanisms – like political parties or a thriving civil society – for expressing them effectively. Corruption was a key grievance, and was often perceived not only as unjust but as a source of humiliation.⁴ As one lawyer commented to us: “On a personal level, I haven’t perceived myself as a human. Humans have dignity. Even though I am a lawyer, the judiciary is corrupted in every way.” Although the material causes of rebellion were often significant, several of our interviewees stressed that the uprising was propelled, in large part, by a concern with dignity. One man, a teacher, observed, “It is not a matter of hunger at all. The Syrian revolution was a revolution of dignity and fighting corruption.” Other writers have discerned a similar preoccupation with dignity elsewhere in the Arab Spring.⁵

Historically, Bashar al-Assad’s regime and that of his father Hafez al-Assad were founded on an alliance between the rural peasantry, the security establishment and allied businesses. However, the early 2000s saw Bashar responding to economic crisis by pushing through a process of market liberalisation that

⁴ See e.g. Bassam Haddad (2012), ‘Syria, the Arab uprisings, and the political economy of authoritarian resilience’, *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 4 (1), pp 113–130, May. See also Samer, pp 41–46.

⁵ Dalacoura.

significantly eroded the regime's support-base among the rural population, undermining livelihoods and failing to generate sufficient employment to take up the slack.

As in a number of other contexts,⁶ the social pressures generated by liberalisation in the short term produced a degree of discontent and disorder that precluded the possibility of long-term benefits. Unemployment and rural poverty rose significantly, with important price subsidies (including fuel and fertiliser subsidies for farmers) being phased out.⁷ Rising population, wasting water, and a drive for increased wheat production encouraged a significant fall in groundwater levels, prompting outmigration long before the drought. Youth unemployment was a particular problem, reflecting in part a demographic 'youth bulge'.⁸ Economic liberalisation tended to go against the Baathist tradition of channelling benefits to the peasantry and giving rural people opportunities in the state bureaucracy.⁹

In practice, moreover, liberalisation nurtured a kind of crony capitalism, benefiting a relatively narrow range of business and military interests close to the president (for example, in oil, telecoms, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, electronics, agribusiness and tourism). Not only were many business interests shut out of this charmed circle of 'oligarchs'; they were also actively threatened by the influx of cheap foreign goods that accompanied liberalisation (something that affected many established traders and industrialists in Aleppo and Damascus, for example).¹⁰ There was a widening gap between a minority of private entrepreneurs with good political connections and the rest of the population.¹¹

In rural areas, declining support for agriculture and pastoralism was made worse by severe drought and by the weak response on the part of the Syrian government and the international community, a response that is hardly ever mentioned in accounts of the causes of Syria's war. Yet towards the end of February 2010, only 19 per cent of funding requested by the UN the previous August had actually been provided; the UN noted "a dramatic decrease in communities' resilience and coping capacity" while there had been "a drastic increase in nutrition-related diseases between 2006 and 2009" as well as significant outmigration from drought-hit rural areas.¹² Drought was to prove a significant factor behind rebellion in the east and the north-east (Syria's

6 Venugopal; Kaldor; Keen (2005).

7 Lyme; Hinnebusch.

8 On youth unemployment, see Kabbani and Kamel.

9 Droz-Vincent, p 36.

10 Lyme.

11 E.g. Droz-Vincent, pp 35–36.

12 United Nations (2010), p 1, p 5, p 7.

poorest region) – not least when it uprooted large numbers of people into urban slums where services were gravely inadequate and where many rebel groups were to find a following.¹³ A leaked November 2008 memo from the US embassy in Damascus noted that the Food and Agriculture Organization’s representative in Syria, Abdullah bin Yehia, was predicting that if the drought remained unrelieved by donors, it could undermine stability in Syria – including through mass migration.¹⁴

Alongside growing discontent in the country at large there was also discontent in the military. While high spending on a bloated army had long taken resources away from economic development, relatively recent reductions in the military budget were creating loyalty problems among soldiers themselves.¹⁵ Many recruits were angered by corruption, which had often been actively encouraged by the regime as a way to control people. A captain in the Syrian Air Force told us:

Military corruption is one of the most important things that caused the revolution, because people know the military is not there to fight the enemy. It’s all about corruption, and you can pay not to do service. The regime was very aware and would know each general who took a bribe. They create this environment and pretend they’re not seeing it and if you don’t want a person, you can pick their fault and get rid of them...

Especially in elite units and near big cities,¹⁶ senior positions within the military were increasingly reserved – even before the war – for Alawites (broadly, a Shi’ite minority, often persecuted in the past, whose members achieved significant power under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad (themselves Alawites)). Military defections by Sunnis – particularly in the early stages of the uprising – exacerbated the already-disproportionate representation of Alawites.¹⁷

Corruption within the military was part of a wider system of corruption that alienated a great many Syrians. A system of military decentralisation had been implemented in 1984. Called the *quta’a* (sector) system, it assigned each combat division a specific geographical region, granting wide powers to the commanding officer so that these sectors became fiefdoms for senior officers.¹⁸ This foreshadowed the extensive disintegration of the Syrian military *during* the war (including widespread criminal activity), a breakdown that was to encourage increasing reliance on foreign powers, notably Iran and Russia.¹⁹

¹³ See also Zisser; UNDP (2010); cf. NPR.

¹⁴ US embassy cable, Damascus (2008) “2008 UN Drought Appeal for Syria”, 26 November.

¹⁵ E.g. Syrian Center for Strategic and Political Studies/Syrian Expert House; Hinnebusch.

¹⁶ Droz-Vincent, p 39; Syrian Center for Strategic and Political Studies/Syrian Expert House, p 176.

¹⁷ Lyme.

¹⁸ Kozak (2017).

¹⁹ Kozak (2017).

2.2 The fragmentation and weakening of the rebellion

In theory, armed rebel groups came under the leadership of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which aimed to be the military wing of the opposition and coordinated with the Syrian National Council (the main opposition group in exile).²⁰ But in practice it proved difficult – and increasingly so – to forge a unified command with an agreed ideology or an agreed programme of reform. In his authoritative account of the war, Samer Abboud stressed the fragmentation of the FSA: “Inter-rebel relations were defined by both cooperation and conflict... What was consistent, however, was that the relations between rebel groups were quickly unraveling and that they failed to cohere.”²¹ Fighting *among* the rebels became routine,²² with ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra inflicting major losses on FSA brigades in the north and north-west so that by 2015 the FSA had mostly retreated to the south of the country.²³

Even as the rebellion fragmented, significant links between rival groups remained. For example, Abboud noted in late 2015 that in Aleppo, where the FSA Command generally remained strong, the FSA shared control of non-regime areas with the SILF (Syrian Islamic Liberation Front), the SRF (Syrian Revolutionaries Front), the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) and Jabhat al-Nusra, all major coalitions with affiliated brigades in the city and surrounding countryside.²⁴ Commenting on Syria as a whole, Abboud observed:

*The four major networks of violence – JAN [Jabhat al-Nusra], ISIS, FSA and YPG [the military wing of the PYD] – are in regular conflict with one another. However, the FSA has, depending on geographic area, entered into associations with both JAN and the YPG.*²⁵

There were three main reasons for the fragmentation and weakness of the FSA (and more broadly of the rebellion itself). The first was *economic*. As the rebellion evolved, money-making activities among the rebels became so widespread and so varied that it is hard to escape the conclusion that, for a great many rebels, war had become a business. Many rebels began to look more like warlords than revolutionaries, and fighters routinely extracted ‘protection money’ from families and businesses, sometimes engaging in kidnapping and

²⁰ Lister (2016).

²¹ Abboud (2015a), p 92; see also Lister (2014).

²² Abboud (2015a).

²³ Abboud (2015a), p 96.

²⁴ Abboud (2015a).

²⁵ Abboud (2015a), p 98.

then demanding ransoms. Rebels also became involved in stripping and selling assets from industrial plants, in stealing aid, looting banks, people-smuggling, stealing ancient artefacts, and extracting oil.²⁶ These various predations were accompanied by multiple abuses, and Amnesty International noted,

Residents in Aleppo and Idlib governorates at first celebrated the effective end of Syrian government rule hoping that the armed opposition groups would implement the rule of law. However, the hopes of many have faded away as armed opposition groups have resorted to the rule of the gun to impose their own version of order.²⁷

Al-Nusra was one of five groups that Amnesty found to be carrying out abductions and other abuses.²⁸ Many rebel groups also put a good deal of effort into raising donations abroad, sometimes using videos to show foreign donors that they were actively fighting. Some of our sources alleged that rebels would even delay victory in a high-profile campaign if the campaign was bringing in good donations.²⁹

Economic motivations combined with a simple survival instinct to encourage a variety of military ‘stand-offs’, accommodations that sometimes facilitated accumulation and the exploitation of civilians by ostensible opponents while limiting the risk of dying in battle. One of our interviewees noted back in 2013: “Parts of Aleppo are surrounded by the FSA, and the regime is paying the FSA not to attack.” One young man from Aleppo said, “If there’s an area the regime wants, this leader will give it back to the regime, in return for a large sum of money.” Both rebel and regime actors have profited from a variety of sieges (and, more specifically, from the organised breaching of these sieges).³⁰ This profiteering has helped to produce an interest in continued war, sometimes contributing to the breakdown of ceasefire processes that have threatened the income of relevant militias.³¹

The *reasons* for rebels’ increasingly acquisitive behaviour are complex. One factor was the need to acquire resources in order to wage war.³² The longer the war continued, the more pressure there was to find some kind of income for the fighters, and even something as basic as the lack of healthcare for fighters tended to fuel the rebels’ demand for money. Increasingly, fighters also pursued resources for their own sake – whether out of greed or to meet their immediate survival needs. Many people also joined armed groups as a way to make a

26 All of these were discussed by our interviewees.

27 Amnesty International (2016), p 4.

28 Amnesty International (2016).

29 This is also mentioned in Yazigi (2014), p 5.

30 Turkmani et al. (2014); Turkmani et al. (2015).

31 Turkmani et al. (2014); Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015).

32 Cf. Berdal.

living in the context of a collapsing economy.³³ As one International Crisis Group (ICG) report noted,

*Cousins from a single extended family in different parts of Aleppo joined various groups for the simple reason that they all needed income and gravitated toward whatever they could find.*³⁴

Social tensions also contributed to predation: for example, poorer farmers sometimes resented the wealth in cities like Aleppo and some were tempted to take their 'share' when they came to town as rebel fighters.³⁵

As in many wars,³⁶ another major incentive for joining an armed group was the widespread violence and exploitation directed at those who chose to remain *outside* the various militias. In other words, a situation in which armed groups were exploiting unarmed groups created few incentives (for those with a choice) to remain in the unarmed category. A further factor encouraging acquisitive behaviour among the rebels was the culture of corruption within the official Syrian military, a military that many rebels had recently deserted. One man from Aleppo said: "The FSA has lots of things that the regime army had – corruption and theft. The regime shaped the ideas of the Syrian people, and the FSA is no exception."

Naturally, criminality among rebels tended to lose 'hearts and minds' when it came to civilians. A former regime soldier, who had spent time in a government jail and certainly held no brief for the regime, commented: "After a while, the robbers made a distortion in the FSA so some people thought *the regime* is better. The rebels will steal, kill, and cover the woman." Again mirroring many other conflicts,³⁷ the war saw a widening gulf between civilians and predatory factions whose claim to be providing protection rang increasingly hollow. In these circumstances, survival often meant some kind of partial accommodation with the regime. One knowledgeable aid worker told us:

Many believe in jihad, but also the regime has things over them. There are some connections there... Everyone deals with the regime. There's a dialogue to keep electricity going, water, and [rebels'] selling of grain and oil. People negotiate over kidnapping.

Apart from economic motivations, a second major factor encouraging fragmentation and weakness in the FSA were the different agendas of diverse external supporters. Weapons and funding coming in from Qatar, Saudi Arabia

³³ E.g. International Crisis Group (2013b).

³⁴ International Crisis Group (2013b), p 8.

³⁵ Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith (2012), 'Syrian rebels sidetracked by scramble for spoils of war', *Guardian*, 27 December.

³⁶ See e.g. Keen (2005), (2012).

³⁷ Keen (2012); Preston.

and Turkey went to a variety of different rebel groups, and the diversity of donors worked strongly against opposition coherence, undermining the idea of a Supreme Military Command.³⁸ Meanwhile, governments in the US and Europe chose not to give large-scale support to the FSA, while more fundamentalist groups – especially al-Nusra – were getting stronger militarily.³⁹ While united in denouncing Assad, those countries supporting the rebels have also had their own distinct strategic interests in relation to Syria.⁴⁰ For example, Qatar has an interest in constructing an oil pipeline through Syria to meet the European market, a project blocked by Assad in 2009, apparently mindful that it would compete with Russia's own oil exports to Europe.⁴¹ Foreign donors have exhibited different degrees of tolerance for Salafist factions, with the Saudis particularly fearful of 'blowback' into Saudi Arabia itself.⁴² As Abboud noted in late 2015:

Saudi Arabia had eschewed support of many Islamist, especially Salafist, brigades and had thrown most of their support behind FSA-affiliated groups. Qatar, on the other hand, had no reservations about supporting Islamist groups... many of the more hardline groups have received their support from private donors...⁴³

When different factions have bid for money from external donors, this has also incentivised corruption and has ultimately encouraged defection to fundamentalist groups. One Syrian expat, a restaurant owner in the Qatari capital of Doha, told *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2014 that he had had 13,000 men under his command in Deir al-Zour governorate, thanks to funding from Qatar. He stressed that many middlemen among the rebels had begun to exaggerate capabilities and needs when appealing to donors in Doha:

Often, groups would submit maybe 3,000 names, but in reality there would be only 300 or 400 people. The extra money goes in the wrong way. They would do the same thing with operations. If the actual needs were \$1 million, maybe they say \$5 million. Then the other \$4 million disappears.⁴⁴

In her *Foreign Policy* investigation, Elizabeth Dickinson commented, "The disarray helped push fighters increasingly toward some of the groups that seemed to have a stronger command of their funding and their goals – groups

38 Abboud (2015a); Abboud (2015b); see also Hokayem (2014).

39 Lister (2016).

40 For example, Qatar has an interest in constructing an oil pipeline through Syria to meet the European market, a project blocked by Assad in 2009, apparently mindful that it would compete with Russia's own oil exports to Europe (e.g. Nafeez Ahmed (2013), 'Syria intervention plan fueled by oil interests, not chemical weapon concern', *Guardian*, 30 August).

41 E.g. Nafeez Ahmed (2013), 'Syria intervention plan fueled by oil interests, not chemical weapon concern', *Guardian*, 30 August.

42 E.g. Hokayem (2014).

43 Abboud (2015a, p 142); see also Yazigi (2014).

44 Dickinson.

such as al-Nusra Front and eventually the Islamic State...⁴⁵ Significantly, those defecting from the FSA tended to take their foreign-supplied funds and weaponry with them.⁴⁶

A third major factor tending to fragment and weaken the FSA and the rebellion more generally was the appeal of militant fundamentalist groups. Many of the complex and ambiguous attractions of militant groups show the limits of the common Western stereotype that their members are 'brainwashed' into 'religious extremism' which then directly motivates violence and acts of terror.⁴⁷ Al-Nusra in particular presented itself as an effective counter to Assad, and both al-Nusra and ISIS gained support from a growing disillusionment with the role of the West in the Syrian war.⁴⁸ In fact, negative perceptions around international aid, sanctions and military action/inaction helped to fuel a pervasive disillusionment with the West that extended well beyond these militant groups. This disillusionment occurred not only despite but also, to some extent, *because of* the very considerable attraction of values – like democracy, freedom and human rights – that the West has espoused.

Early in the Syrian war, the US adopted the position that 'Assad must go' without being willing to ensure that he *did* go. Many Syrians have condemned not only the unwillingness to depose Assad through the use of force but also the unwillingness to take less drastic measures like imposing a 'no-fly zone' on the lines of those that gave a degree of protection to Iraq's Kurds and Shi'ites between the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion.⁴⁹ Beyond this, many Syrians have argued strongly that Western judgement has been distorted by the determination to pursue a 'war on terror'. As with aid and sanctions, there has been a tendency to look at the Western military interventions and non-interventions and to ask whether they serve the interests of Syrians or of Westerners.

Labelling Jabhat al-Nusra as terrorist went down badly with many Syrians. Al-Nusra was designated by the US as a foreign terrorist organisation in December 2012, making it illegal to provide material support to, or engage in transactions with, the group; al-Nusra has also been identified by the UN Security Council as a terrorist group that the international community is committed to eliminating. In the eyes of most people in the West, al-Nusra's links to al-Qaeda would probably be enough to justify its pariah status. But the December 2012 US initiative in particular was strongly condemned by the

⁴⁵ Dickinson.

⁴⁶ Dickinson.

⁴⁷ On 'religious' motivations and what lies behind them, see particularly Aubrey et al.

⁴⁸ See, notably, Lister (2016).

⁴⁹ Many local people have advocated for a no-fly zone e.g. Khalaf (2015), Keen (1993).

main Syrian opposition groups, including the National Coalition, by the FSA umbrella and by popular protests inside Syria.⁵⁰ Following the designation of al-Nusra as terrorist, opposition civilians marched with the slogans ‘We are all Jabhat al-Nusra’ and ‘There is no terrorism in Syria except that of Assad’.⁵¹

It is important to note that many civil society actors did develop a strong *antipathy* towards al-Nusra – not least because of unease with its ideological position, anger at its habit of declaring civil society organisations to be illegal, and revulsion at its propensity for killing activists.⁵² Even so, many Syrians’ perceptions about ‘terrorism’ – and the rights and wrongs of international interventions – have been strongly shaped by the fact that the Assad regime posed by far the greatest danger while al-Nusra was actually standing up to Assad.

Quite apart from the goods, salaries and services that militant groups could often provide (see section 2.3), the religious ideology of fundamentalist groups – including al-Nusra – sometimes proved appealing in situations of extreme danger and scarcity. Fundamentalist religious ideologies, having generally been unappealing for most Syrians (especially at the outset of the war), nevertheless acquired a degree of appeal for some people. The chaos and hopelessness induced by war and unemployment sometimes produced a degree of attraction to jihadist groups offering structure, a sense of purpose and of being useful, and a sense – or even a possibility – that they were actually ‘winning’.⁵³ On a very immediate level, the effectiveness of al-Nusra meant that if a fighter’s FSA faction ran out of bullets, joining al-Nusra could mean a better chance of survival.⁵⁴

In May 2016, International Alert published some research based on interviews in Syria, Turkey and Lebanon with over 300 young Syrians and their families and community members. One interviewee told International Alert, “Because of the ongoing shelling, youth become more religious for fear of sudden death.” International Alert observed that many young Syrian men saw their role as protecting the honour of women, children and the land: one interviewee commented, “Islam tells us that whoever defends his honour, his land and dies, dies a martyr. We are proud to all die martyrs in defence of our honour and our land.”⁵⁵ Several other interviewees described the importance of anger

50 Anzalone.

51 France24/AFP (2012), ‘Syrians march in support of Jabhat al-Nusra militants’, 16 December (www.france24.com/en/20121216-syria-march-support-jabhat-nusra-militants-us-terrorist).

52 Rana Khalaf, personal communication.

53 See, in particular, Aubrey et al.

54 Aubrey et al.

55 Aubrey et al., p.12.

and the desire for revenge against the regime as important motives for joining al-Nusra or ISIS.⁵⁶ International Alert concluded: “For Syrians, belief in extreme ideologies appears to be – at most – a secondary factor in the decision to join an extremist group. Religion is providing a moral medium for coping and justification for fighting...”⁵⁷

This chimes with our own information. For example, an interviewee in Kilis said, “Many members of these groups [when the rebellion began] gained the strength to fight from their religious faith. In Islam, it is their religious duty to protect their brothers. It is called defensive jihad.”⁵⁸ Thoughts of the afterlife could give courage, while the idea of surrendering to God’s will proved attractive for some of those who found otherwise that they had little or no control over their own lives – and little hope for the future.⁵⁹ A loss of faith in the West could feed into an increased faith in God. Speaking on the day after the regime’s August 2013 chemical attacks in Damascus, one interviewee told us:

All Syrian people are full of rage with the Western governments like USA, Russia and all the world. They didn’t do anything to stop this massacre... Syrians understand the political game of the Western world. They have no trust in them and have surrendered to God’s will.

Again, this is not the same as saying that violent jihadist groups ‘brainwashed’ their new recruits, though it is clear that ISIS propaganda and training has involved significant degrees of ‘brainwashing’ (both within Syria and abroad).⁶⁰ We also need to be extremely wary of suggestions that ‘Islam’ is somehow driving terrorism. Indeed, International Alert’s interviewees and our own frequently cited religious teachings as reasons *not* to become involved in violence.⁶¹

Some recruits have seen themselves as standing up not simply to Assad but also to Western indifference or hostility towards Muslims in general in the context of a war on terror. Several people reported being treated by the international community as ‘less than human’ (a description that echoed accounts of the regime behaviour that had caused the war in the first place). The views

56 Another interviewee in Turkey said “Many Syrians want to get revenge against the regime for destroying their families, houses, lives and everything else. Jabhat al-Nusra actually fights the regime and now offers the best chance to get that revenge.” A peace educator in Beirut underlined the motive of revenge: “In Syria, children who aren’t engaged in [psychosocial support] like this are so vulnerable to recruitment, they could be directly recruited by Da’esh or Al-Nusra... We give them tools to express themselves in the community, rather than using weapons to express anger at their losses.” Aubrey et al., pp 11, 23.

57 Aubrey et al., p 4.

58 This positive gloss on religious motivations for violence contrasts with many perceptions in the West.

59 Our interviews.

60 On ISIS ideology and behaviour in Raqqa, see e.g. Samer.

61 Aubrey et al.

of an engineering student, expressed in the summer of 2013, have a prophetic ring today:

The civilian community in Europe is powerful, not like the civilian community here. But they did nothing for us. I expected millions in the streets saying this is a crime against humanity. Where are the millions of humanity lovers? We don't see anything. We are human too. This is why people are supporting Nusra. I am a college student. I hate the regime. I'm not religious. People like Western civilisation. But we have a situation of people getting tortured and killed in front of the whole world... YouTube has millions of videos explaining the regime crimes. All the people that want to know could know. So I was wrong [in liking Western civilisation]. I should go to my religion and have more faith in my religion. So I can say, 'We will make an Islamic army and kill these people.' There is a transformation from a civilian thinking to a religious thinking, with people saying 'I like to work with other Muslims because the other one didn't help me, so I have to find another mentality to help.' What kind of Islam will be adhered to? That depends on the kind of people that help me. If this is a foreign fighter, I'll be in another mentality, a bad mentality.

Some very similar points emerged from our meeting in Kilis: “The people who are thinking, they get killed. The people with the gun say ‘The West didn’t help you. You liked the Western civilisation but they didn’t help me or you.’” Another of our interviewees said:

When it comes to the lives of Syrian people, they [the Western countries] don't even care... 1500 people or more were killed by chemical weapons, most of them were children and women. And they still have doubts about it! They claimed that there is terrorism in our regions, or what is so-called terrorism, to have an excuse not to interfere. Do you think people living under these circumstances will not perceive the West and the USA as enemies? Do you think that all people can control their feelings and be rational like others might do? No! Especially the Arab people! They are emotional and they react quickly. So do you blame people who use weapons? Do you blame people who explode themselves? [...] Even if the West perceives them as terrorists, they are terrorists in the West's eyes not in our eyes.

Raised expectations exacerbated this disillusionment. When US military assets were put on immediate alert after the eastern Ghouta chemical attacks in August 2013, pro-regime circles began to panic and there was a rapid mobilisation of forces within the largely FSA-aligned opposition.⁶² Charles Lister noted, “There can be no underestimating the catastrophic impact that the U.S. threat reversal had upon the FSA brand and on the SMC [Supreme Military Council] in particular.”⁶³ By the end of 2013, the FSA lost the allegiance of its three most powerful armed groups.⁶⁴ All of these groups

⁶² Lister (2016).

⁶³ Lister (2016), p 11.

⁶⁴ I.e. Jaish al-Islam (in Damascus, Idlib and Aleppo), Suqor al-Sham (in Idlib) and Liaw al-Tawhid (in Aleppo).

joined the new Islamic Front, with encouragement from Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.⁶⁵ Although the FSA was not finished and the CIA continued to coordinate support with regional states, most of the opposition was now looking to al-Nusra for military assistance against Assad.⁶⁶

In their book *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, Weiss and Hassan spelled out how the chemical weapons attacks changed the mindset of many rebels:

When the United States failed to respond militarily, according to Obama's own 'red line', many had had their fill of empty or broken promises. Not long after Obama inked a deal with Vladimir Putin to decommission Syria's chemical weapons program, scores of Western-backed rebels either quit the field, mutinied, or invited ISIS to raid their Syrian warehouses filled with US-sent aid and supplies.⁶⁷

In 2014, tensions between what remained of the FSA and al-Nusra were escalating and Lister notes, "October 2014 marked a turning point when, for example, Jabhat al-Nusra began meting out harsh punishments, such as stoning men and women to death for adultery and prosecuting people for 'witchcraft'."⁶⁸ Open conflict ensued between al-Nusra on the one hand and the FSA's Syria Revolutionaries Front and Harakat Hazm on the other, with al-Nusra victorious and the FSA factions largely unprotected by their international backers.⁶⁹

While weakened by the growing strength of al-Nusra and ISIS, the FSA remained a significant force and was eventually to enjoy something of a resurgence. In particular, Russia's military intervention in September 2015 led to increased supplies of US-made TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles to 'vetted' FSA factions, helping them to stem the advance of regime forces through the end of 2015 and giving the FSA renewed credibility as a military force.⁷⁰ Significantly, in key areas of al-Nusra influence (including Idlib and Aleppo), "al-Nusra became dependent on the FSA to sustain tactical and strategic interests, rather than vice-versa," Lister notes.⁷¹ Meanwhile, powerful groups like Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham reverted to identifying with the FSA.⁷² The destruction of eastern Aleppo was to play a significant part in a second resurgence of fundamentalist groups outside the FSA umbrella, as we shall see.

⁶⁵ Lister (2016).

⁶⁶ Lister (2016).

⁶⁷ Weiss and Hassan, p 144.

⁶⁸ Lister (2016), p 16.

⁶⁹ Lister (2016).

⁷⁰ Lister (2016).

⁷¹ Lister (2016), p 20.

⁷² Lister (2016).

2.3 ISIS, al-Nusra and the promise of ‘protection’

After Syria’s war broke out, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, sent Abu Mohammed al-Julani to Syria to organise jihadist cells there,⁷³ and this led to the formation of the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate. It appears that al-Qaeda boss Ayman al-Zawahiri wanted to revive his organisation’s reputation (which had been damaged by atrocities in Iraq), and he thought he could do this via an al-Nusra movement in Syria that was more tolerant of minorities and that was focused on overthrowing Assad.⁷⁴

However, in April 2013 Baghdadi announced that he wanted to merge AQI and al-Nusra under the new name of Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIS or ISIL). Al-Nusra leader al-Julani rejected the merger and al-Qaeda’s overall leader Ayman al-Zawahiri backed this rejection, leaving al-Nusra as his affiliate in Syria.⁷⁵ What followed – from early 2014 – was a bitter war between ISIS and al-Nusra in Syria, a conflict that effectively pitted Baghdadi against his former mentor Zawahiri.⁷⁶ This fighting was especially severe in Raqqa, in Aleppo and in Idlib, and ISIS suffered significant reverses. The Nusra-ISIS conflict was also intense in oil-rich Deir al-Zour, from which ISIS managed to eject al-Nusra. ISIS established bureaucratic control in Deir al-Zour and Raqqa along with the provision of some social services and harsh Islamist punishments.⁷⁷ Al-Nusra has had a predominantly Syrian composition,⁷⁸ while ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi gathered together radicals from a wide range of countries including Syria and his native Iraq but also a range of other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Chechnya and Uzbekistan as well as many countries in Europe. While al-Nusra was determined to overthrow Assad, ISIS has been more concerned to set up a caliphate.

Syrians have routinely condemned ISIS in the strongest terms and many have also strongly criticised al-Nusra. For example, one Syrian activist, whom we met at Kilis on the Turkish-Syrian border, commented:

ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra came from outside and they came with money and dollars... But Islam is a religion of peace. It is not about butchering people. They are accusing people of being secular and punishing people for kissing and other simple things.

⁷³ Abboud (2015a); Anzalone.

⁷⁴ Atrocities in Iraq included the targeting of non-Sunni religious groups like Shias, Yazidis and Christians. Weiss and Hassan; see also Birke (2013), and Birke (2015).

⁷⁵ Gerges (2015).

⁷⁶ Gerges (2015).

⁷⁷ Anzalone.

⁷⁸ Abboud (2015a).

There is evidence that al-Nusra's justice systems have sometimes alienated civilians, particularly when perceived as corrupt and based on patronage systems.⁷⁹ As far as ISIS is concerned, there have been many reports of young people who journey to Syria to join the organisation but then find they have made a terrible mistake, are horrified by ISIS brutality, and are unable to leave (perhaps because their commanders threaten to kill them if they try to escape, or because their countries of origin would arrest them on return).⁸⁰ Many of those fleeing ISIS areas have expressed extreme horror at ISIS atrocities, sometimes noting that even some members of ISIS are repulsed by its extreme violence.⁸¹

ISIS's vicious methods and its routine use of extreme intimidation have been documented, for example, in *The Raqqa Diaries*.⁸² ISIS's hostility to civil society prompted a popular backlash in western Aleppo after the organisation had gained ground there.⁸³ ISIS has used coercion to get and keep recruits and has run protection rackets. ISIS's atrocities against the Yazidis in Iraq included selling women into slavery and prompted US air strikes in support of the Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar.⁸⁴ ISIS's beheadings of Western hostages have also received widespread media coverage – not least because ISIS has made horrific videos to dramatise its own power and brutality.

At the same time, it is also important to understand that both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra managed to gain influence within Syria in part by promising (and sometimes even delivering) a degree of protection and material support. The 'protection' has been routinely ambiguous and often brutal. In many ways it resembles the protection – mixed in with a heavy threat of violence – that is provided by mafia organisations (the proverbial 'offer you can't refuse'). In fact, ISIS and al-Nusra can be said to have 'offered' four main kinds of protection: protection from their own violence; protection from criminal groups and other rebels; protection from the regime; and protection from the chronic – and often extreme – scarcity of goods and services within Syria.

If intimidation implied the first kind of 'protection' (that is, protection from a faction's own violence for those who were compliant), the second type of protection offered has been protection against violence by criminals, warlords and other rebel groups. As the war economy became more rapacious, civilians

79 Khalaf (2015).

80 Atwan, p 145.

81 Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt and Anne Barnard (2015), 'Battered but unbowed, ISIS is still on offensive', *New York Times*, 13 March. Rukmini Callimachi (2017) "Freed from ISIS, but in shock", *New York Times*, 27 July.

82 Samer.

83 Khalaf (2015).

84 E.g. Barkey.

increasingly sought some kind of antidote – and the opportunities for offering even perverse kinds of ‘law and order’ correspondingly increased.⁸⁵ Referring to a range of the more radical jihadist organisations, Abboud observed:

*The private financing of these jihadist groups gave them superior military resources and allowed them to make significant battlefield gains at the expense of FSA brigades. Moreover, the flow of private donations allowed the jihadist groups to avoid the criminality and illegality that was rampant in FSA brigades, who were increasingly infiltrated by opportunists and criminals hoping to gain economically from violence.*⁸⁶

Some of our sources also suggested that the relatively good access to foreign funding enjoyed by al-Nusra and ISIS had made them *less acquisitive* than other rebel factions, less dependent on stealing and extortion to fund their violence. An ICG report noted in 2013 that al-Nusra “seemingly imposes more discipline on members, cultivating a contrasting profile to some rivals’ corrupt, criminal behaviour”⁸⁷ ISIS confronted parasitic gangs in western Aleppo, and provided important services there.⁸⁸ Both al-Nusra and ISIS were also said to have benefited from the experience of practical governance that fighters had originally acquired as part of AQI.⁸⁹ Al-Nusra also extended its influence through non-regime areas by entering into the kinds of cooperative relations with other armed groups that were noted earlier.

As far as the FSA was concerned, a lack of coherence and discipline within the loose collection of FSA groups was important in creating opportunities for al-Nusra and ISIS. As Abboud noted in late 2015:

*Had the FSA been successful in consolidating its control of non-regime areas, the conditions that allowed for the entry of other groups would not have existed. Moreover, as the FSA brigades began to lose legitimacy among Syrians, who were increasingly weary of the FSA’s own brutality and criminality, many groups were able to step in and fill a void. In addition, the arrival of newly formed armed groups who were often better equipped and more disciplined than the FSA led to migration of fighters to these groups.*⁹⁰

While al-Nusra was no less brutal than many FSA factions and there were some reports of nepotism,⁹¹ it did offer a challenge to the FSA’s corruption. ISIS too offered a degree of protection against criminal activities (other than

⁸⁵ Compare also Afghanistan and Somalia, e.g. Keen (2012).

⁸⁶ Abboud (2015a), p 143.

⁸⁷ International Crisis Group (2013b), p 8.

⁸⁸ Khalaf (2015).

⁸⁹ Rana Khalaf, personal communication.

⁹⁰ Abboud (2015a), p 96; see also Lister (2014).

⁹¹ Aubrey et al.

its own).⁹² After talking with Syrians who had experienced ISIS rule, Lina Khatib noted in a March 2015 report for the Carnegie Middle East Center:

Despite its brutality, ISIS imposed a sense of order in areas under its control that appealed to those who had been living either in the chaos of war or under the authoritarianism of a regime that was unpredictable in the way it handled citizens' property. In the heyday of Assad rule, if someone's car was stolen, they may or may not have gotten it back depending on whether they had connections with the regime, and on whether the victim of the crime was well connected or not. Under the rule of the Islamic State, if the same problem were encountered, people could rely on the ISIS sharia courts to secure their property rights without the need for 'wasta' (personal connections). No matter that ISIS suppresses people's freedom of speech and that its courts are far from equitable on most matters, the organization has used property rights to build up a reputation of 'fairness.' In doing so, it has capitalized on how both war and authoritarianism reduce people's concerns from high-level values like freedom and democracy to basic needs, so that justice comes to be associated with material goods not with human dignity.⁹³

The third type of protection offered by rebel groups (discussed in more detail in section 3) has been protection against *regime* violence. Importantly, a key impetus for the initial formation of armed groups was the need to protect protesters against the regime's vicious retaliation. As the war evolved, some groups (most notably ISIS but also the PYD Kurdish faction) were able to achieve some kind of 'understanding' with regime actors that had the effect of limiting armed confrontations and regime attacks (discussed further in section 3.1). Al-Nusra also promised a form of protection against regime violence, but most of this related to al-Nusra's ability and willingness to confront regime forces militarily. Interviewees stressed that al-Nusra got a good deal of its support through standing up to Assad's forces more effectively than many other groups. In this, it was helped by foreign funding and by the resources and weaponry that it was able to obtain from insurgents in western Iraq.

The fourth type of protection offered by al-Nusra and ISIS has been protection from conditions of scarcity. ISIS and al-Nusra have provided a range of goods and services.⁹⁴ These services included education – a significant attraction in a context where the existing state education system has been devastated by the war.⁹⁵ The lure of protection, goods and services proved considerable in a context where no-one else – not the state, not the FSA, not even the international community – was offering very much. For all its viciousness, it would

⁹² E.g. Hallaj; see also Turkmani (2015).

⁹³ Khatib.

⁹⁴ Atwan; Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015); Turkmani (2015); Hallaj; Abboud; Lister (2014).

⁹⁵ Aubrey et al. ISIS has also offered stipends for students (*ibid.*).

be a mistake to see ISIS as no more than an atrocity-producing machine. Like al-Nusra, ISIS is a symptom of wider problems of state breakdown that need to be understood and addressed.

While it is tempting to dismiss the idea that ISIS actually offered something to local people, this phenomenon has been well documented. For example, Rim Turkmani, a Syrian researcher at the LSE, noted:

The most important thing Syrians lost because of the conflict is simply their state, which is exactly what ISIL is attempting to provide by reversing the process of state collapse. The key to its success is that it plans and acts like a state... Its reputation for governance is one of its key recruiting tools for both civilians and fighters.⁹⁶

A July 2014 report for the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War noted similarly: “ISIS has built a holistic system of governance that includes religious, educational, judicial, security, humanitarian, and infrastructure projects...⁹⁷ ISIS is also reported to have curried favour with relatively low taxes, though reports from Raqqa say taxes on businesses have sometimes been crippling.⁹⁸ As Lister observed in an assessment for the UK’s International Institute of Strategic Studies:

ISIS... spends considerable financial resources on the provision of social services to civilian populations under its control. It is common, for example, for ISIS to finance the subsidizing of staple-food costs and to help fund the supply of food and money to the poor and elderly; to cap rent prices and provide free bus transport, children’s education, healthcare and vaccinations; and to undertake the general maintenance of local infrastructure. Amid a wider context of spiraling violence and instability, such services are a key facet of ISIS’s attempt to present itself as offering a sustainable and workable alternative to the existing state-based system offered by the Syrian and Iraqi governments.⁹⁹

The appeal of fundamentalist groups also had an important social – or class – dimension. One ICG report noted that jihadist groups have often been strongest in city suburbs where rural migrants are congregated.¹⁰⁰ This underlines the importance of grievances in shaping not just the occurrence of Syria’s war but the evolution of it. It also underlines the potential for expanding one’s influence by offering services to those who are chronically lacking them (as well as offering, perhaps, a sense of certainty to those who have been uprooted).

⁹⁶ Turkmani (2015), p 4.

⁹⁷ Caris and Reynolds, p 4.

⁹⁸ Hallaj; Khatib; Samer.

⁹⁹ Lister (2014), p 79; on price regulation, see also Birke (2015).

¹⁰⁰ International Crisis Group (2013b).

Notwithstanding the importance of anti-Western ideologies in ISIS and al-Nusra, the success of these groups has been due, in some sense, to market forces: specifically, they have been able to offer higher salaries in comparison to other armed groups or other potential employers.¹⁰¹ One of our interviewees, from Aleppo, noted:

Rebels find people and give them money and with this they can get a large number of Syrian people. My family has three guys working with al-Nusra. My family does not believe in the ideology of al-Nusra, but were forced to, for the money, for the salary.

One investigation put Nusra salaries at US\$300–400 per month, compared to FSA salaries (often paid late) of around US\$100 per month; this disparity reflected the relative abundance of foreign funding for al-Nusra.¹⁰² Al-Nusra's resources from foreign donors and from insurgents in western Iraq also helped its attempts to provide services and a degree of 'law and order'.¹⁰³ ISIS salaries seem to have been particularly high,¹⁰⁴ and its sources of income have been diverse. A detailed investigation in German magazine *Der Spiegel* noted:

The air strikes flown by the US-led coalition [from 2014] may have destroyed the oil wells and refineries. But nobody is preventing the Caliphate's financial authorities from wringing money out of the millions of people who live in the regions under IS [ISIS] control – in the form of new taxes and fees, or simply by confiscating property. IS, after all, knows everything from its spies and from the data it plundered from banks, land-registry offices and money-changing offices. It knows who owns which homes and which fields; it knows who owns many sheep or has lots of money.¹⁰⁵

This account should further caution us against portraying ISIS as a source of good governance or even as a consistent protector of private property. But ISIS's income-stream did give it governance options. Like al-Nusra, ISIS benefited from relatively secure supply routes from insurgents in western Iraq. Both al-Nusra and ISIS also benefited, at various points, from the oil in north-east Syria. One estimate in October 2014 was that ISIS was making a million dollars a day from its oil smuggling operations.¹⁰⁶ Another estimate was that ISIS oil revenues in Syria amounted to US\$3–5 million per day.¹⁰⁷ ISIS's looting of Mosul Central Bank helped fund military advances in Syria, including the

¹⁰¹ Aubrey et al. stressed high mobility between armed groups depending to a large extent on salaries.

¹⁰² Aubrey et al.

¹⁰³ Abboud (2015a); Anzalone; Khalaf (2015).

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Hallaj; Khatib.

¹⁰⁵ Reuter.

¹⁰⁶ Spencer Ackerman (2014), 'Foreign jihadists flocking to Iraq and Syria on 'unprecedented scale' – UN', *Guardian*, 30 October.

¹⁰⁷ Atwan, p 147, citing www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29370484. Also Atwan p 147, citing www.cnn.com/id/102115652#, 'Remarkably, the Assad regime in Syria buys oil from Islamic State in Iraq because, since the US and European Union banned Syrian oil exports in 2011, official production virtually came to a halt'.

takeover of Deir al-Zour from al-Nusra.¹⁰⁸ ISIS defeated al-Nusra in eastern Syria.¹⁰⁹ Military success attracted further support. As Fawaz Gerges noted, “As long as IS [ISIS] is on a winning streak, it can get away with its poverty of ideas and widespread opposition from Muslim opinion: it promises utopia and delivers by winning.”¹¹⁰

The appeal of ISIS among Syrians should not be exaggerated, and as soon as ISIS stopped ‘winning’, it rapidly lost support. As International Alert noted, “Research respondents often (although not exclusively) said that ISIS is a foreign force that lacks legitimacy and local support. The majority... consider ISIS to be brutal and illegitimate – as something to be feared rather than something to aspire to... [Jabhat al-Nusra] has been much more successful in establishing itself as a quasi-legitimate, community-based organisation providing relative security, protection, education and structure on a daily basis.”¹¹¹

From the evidence presented in section 2, it is apparent that the growing influence of al-Nusra and ISIS reflected not only their use of coercion and fear (though this was considerable) but also their ability to offer – and sometimes deliver – a degree of protection and a modicum of services in a context of acute scarcity, crime and danger from the Assad regime. Meanwhile, the external funding base and the spoils of a lucrative war economy shaped the fortunes of a variety of rebel groups. To achieve sustained peace in Syria, it will be important to consider how these aspects of the war system – and the needs they reflect – can be addressed.

¹⁰⁸ Richani.

¹⁰⁹ Lister (2016).

¹¹⁰ Gerges (2015); see also Lister (2014), p 79.

¹¹¹ Aubrey et al.

3

Regime survival: the war system and its functions for regime actors

3.1 Behaviours that boosted armed rebellion – and fundamentalist elements within it

While one might expect that an incumbent regime would try to prevent an armed rebellion, to keep it small, to defeat it quickly and to oppose any extreme elements with particular vigour, we have noted that the Syrian regime's behaviour departed significantly and repeatedly from these 'common sense' assumptions. In particular, the regime took nine kinds of action that boosted armed rebellion and/or violent fundamentalist elements within it:

1. In relation to Iraq (before the Syrian war broke out in 2011), the Assad regime facilitated a flow of *jihadis* from Syria to help resist the US-led occupation of Iraq. This helped to forge links between Assad and fundamentalist elements that were to be influential in the Syrian war itself.
2. When Syria's war broke out, regime attacks on civilians – and widespread abuse such as torture and arbitrary imprisonment – helped to provoke and expand the armed rebellion.
3. The regime stirred sectarian sentiment through selective attacks and use of divisive language.
4. The regime selectively released violent fundamentalists from Syrian prisons.

5. The regime actively colluded with terror attacks, making the threat of terrorism seem greater than it initially was.
6. At times, the regime cooperated economically with rebel groups.
7. Regime actors engaged in a range of predatory behaviours that predictably lost 'hearts and minds' to the rebels.
8. The regime promoted scarcity in rebel areas – not least through blocking international relief operations. While this in many ways helped to weaken the armed opposition (especially the less fundamentalist elements), it also tended to radicalise public opinion and attract support for anti-Western groups.
9. The regime offered partial immunity from its own attacks to ISIS in particular, while concentrating much of its violence on alternative, non-fundamentalist governance structures.

In her insightful 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt highlighted totalitarian regimes' use of what she called 'action as propaganda'. In particular, she pointed to "the advantages of a propaganda that constantly 'adds the power of organization' to the feeble and unreliable voice of argument, and thereby realises, so to speak, on the spur of the moment, whatever it says."¹¹² President Bashar al-Assad proved something of a master at 'action as propaganda'. His regime claimed from the outset that the uprising was the work of criminals, sectarians and terrorists, and the regime also fairly consistently acted in ways that made this claim considerably more plausible (both domestically and internationally) as time went by. Highlighting criminal and fundamentalist elements offered the prospect of deflecting attention from the grievances fuelling rebellion.¹¹³ Even more importantly, the stronger the more abusive and fundamentalist elements in the rebellion became, the greater the tendency in the international community to see Assad not just as a 'lesser evil' but even as some kind of 'necessary evil'.

Of course, it is never easy to establish *intention* with absolute certainty. We are not privy to the private plans of Assad and his inner circle; and in any war there will always be a significant element of unintended consequences. Nevertheless, the effects of regime behaviour (in boosting rebellion and/or fundamentalist elements) were in many ways quite predictable – and the 'pay offs' have also been considerable. Significantly, even when it became clear that the regime's tactics were reproducing the enemy (and reinforcing

¹¹² Arendt, p 363.

¹¹³ Cf. Attree (2017).

fundamentalist elements within it), Assad's government did not change tack. We now consider these nine behaviours in turn.

Supporting insurgency in Iraq

The first type of Syrian regime behaviour that fed fundamentalist elements actually preceded the Syrian war. It was Bashar al-Assad's support for AQI and the insurgency against the US-led occupation from 2003. This involved facilitating the flow of jihadists from Syria to join AQI. When *Der Spiegel* acquired the private papers of Samir al-Khifawi (known as 'Haji Bakr', a former Iraqi officer who appears to have played a key role in planning ISIS's operations in Syria), the magazine noted Haji Bakr's "decade of contacts to Assad's intelligence services", adding:

*In 2003, the Damascus regime was panicked that then-US President George W. Bush, after his victory over Saddam Hussein, would have his troops continue into Syria to topple Assad as well. Thus, in the ensuing years, Syrian intelligence officials organized the transfer of thousands of radicals from Libya, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia to al-Qaida in Iraq. Ninety percent of the suicide attackers entered Iraq via the Syrian route. A strange relationship developed between Syrian generals, international jihadists and former Iraqi officers who had been loyal to Saddam – a joint venture of deadly enemies, who met repeatedly to the west of Damascus.*¹¹⁴

This was a gamble. After all, it might have served as an additional reason for the US to topple Assad. But according to Weiss and Hassan in their book *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, Assad wanted to use his control over the flow of jihadists – his ability to 'turn the tap on or off' – to make the case to the Americans that they needed his cooperation and they needed him as President of Syria. In any event, support from Damascus for jihadists in Iraq continued, and Lister notes:

*In mid-2009, the Syrian government's military intelligence service convened a meeting in the Syrian mountain town of Zabadi, in which Assad regime officials sat alongside leaders from the Islamic State and from Iraq's deposed Baath Party and planned a series of debilitating bombings aimed at crippling Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's standing in Baghdad. We know about this meeting only because Iraqi intelligence had a mole in the room, wearing a wire. Those attacks took place in August 2009 and left over 700 killed and wounded.*¹¹⁵

There were consequences for Syria. As Assad's ties with fundamentalists were nurtured, the US-led occupation and then the Shia-dominated Iraqi

¹¹⁴ Reuter.

¹¹⁵ Lister (2017b). Even before the war, Lister notes, "... the U.S. government and its intelligence apparatuses were wholly aware of the Assad regime's deep history of facilitating the growth of jihadist militancy and manipulating it for Damascus' own domestic and foreign policy agendas." (Lister, 2016, p 26).

government largely failed to tackle the grievances among Sunnis in particular that were fuelling the long insurgency.¹¹⁶ A fortified AQI went on to provide many of the personnel for ISIS and al-Nusra in Syria.¹¹⁷ Fighters returning from Iraq proved to be a significant source of instability within Syria: attempting to explain the appeal of fundamentalist groups among the Syrian rebels, one ICG investigation noted in 2013, "... a genuine jihadi culture has taken root in several communities, notably parts of Idlib and Aleppo governorates where, in the not-so-distant past, young men had volunteered to fight the U.S. occupation in Iraq."¹¹⁸

Attacking and abusing civilians

When mass protests broke out in Syria in 2011, the regime helped to precipitate (and swell) armed rebellion through a second set of behaviours: attacking and abusing civilians. Through its provocative and often indiscriminate attacks on Syrian civilians, the regime ended up turning a peaceful protest movement into an armed rebellion. Meanwhile, regime attacks on civilians also played a major role in turning the armed rebellion into something deeply infused with militant fundamentalist elements.

Violence against civilians does occasionally 'succeed' in suppressing a rebellion (even if the resultant grievances prove ultimately destabilising). Within Syria itself, the government's mass killings in Hama in 1982 helped to suppress revolt at that time; and after mass protests erupted in 2011, some state actors appear to have hoped that a vicious crackdown would similarly crush the uprising while deterring support for the regime's opponents.¹¹⁹ After arresting more than 200 students at university dorms in one day, one defector from an elite regime unit in Aleppo commented, "We wanted to scare them and other students to prevent them from protesting again."¹²⁰ Another aim when attacking

116 Wasser and Dodge; Gerges (2016). Maliki's Iraqi Government justified its repressive policies as part of its own 'war on terror' (Mathews, Gerges, 2016). The 'war on terror' framework has also had some damaging (and often ignored) effects on the Iraqi state. One important reason why underlying Sunni grievances in Iraq have not been effectively tackled has been the Iraqi Government's instrumentalisation of this framework. Jessica Mathews noted in August 2014 that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki "has justified everything from denial of government resources to arbitrary arrest and torture on the grounds that he is fighting a war against terror. But he has pointedly failed to classify Shia violence – including, for example, dozens of killings by Aisaib, a Shia militia in Basra – as terror... There is no military solution to this state of affairs. The solution must be political...".

117 On the Iraqi army background of most of the ISIS leadership and ISIS's 'almost bureaucratic' management style, see also Lister (2014), pp 75–6. Revealingly, Bakr's meticulous plan for gaining power in Syria involved a number of techniques that were staples of Saddam's Ba'athist regime, including systematic use of informants to discover any illegal or embarrassing activities that could be used to blackmail powerful figures such as the leaders of rebel brigades (Reuter; on the use of these tactics by Saddam, see Makiya).

118 International Crisis Group (2013b), p 8.

119 E.g. Hinnebusch.

120 Human Rights Watch (2011b).

civilians *en masse* may have been to avoid military casualties – particularly when the regime shelled civilians from afar without an accompanying ground operation.¹²¹

That said, the regime's violence from 2011 was routinely so overwhelming, so indiscriminate and so cruel that it predictably had extremely counterproductive effects (even from a purely *military* point of view). Most importantly, it propelled large numbers of civilians *into* armed rebellion (a process that seems to have been assisted by a ready supply of weapons to rebel groups from foreign backers such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey).¹²² As Stathis Kalyvas has shown in a more general discussion, where people have an option of defecting from a government to a rebellion, indiscriminate violence will tend to *create* rebels – first, by making people angry and, second, by removing or reducing the incentive that civilians would otherwise have for distancing themselves from rebels.¹²³ In Syria, that option of joining a rebel group was an increasingly feasible one, and many of those joining were themselves government soldiers who were personally repulsed by the atrocities they had seen or been ordered to carry out – something that underlines the counterproductive effects of the atrocities themselves.

In his well-researched book *Syria*, Samer Abboud stresses that initial protests were strongly committed to non-violence but that this commitment came under strain. In addition to support for armed rebellion from some external backers (including Qatar), there were important internal considerations pushing in this direction. In particular, as Abboud notes, “the sustained and brutal violence inflicted on protesters by the regime and its armed proxies... encouraged Syrians to take up arms... As [regime] violence increased, protests expanded.”¹²⁴

The regime's policy of crushing demonstrations and killing or imprisoning protesters also had the effect of squeezing moderates out of the opposition while the most radical anti-Assad elements sometimes had a better chance to survive.¹²⁵

Our interviewees gave some horrific examples of vicious attacks on civilians.

121 See e.g. International Crisis Group (2013b).

122 See e.g. Hersh (2016).

123 Kalyvas.

124 Abboud (2015a), p 87; International Crisis Group observes the same thing: “By seeking to force entire communities into submission, [the security services] pushed them towards armed resistance; the protest movement's militarization was a local by-product of heightened repression (p 4) ... where repression was particularly ruthless, armed opposition groups emerged, for the most part as self-defence forces (p 10).” (International Crisis Group, 2012a). See also Lister (2016), p 4.

125 Wege.

At a meeting with local aid workers in Kilis on the Turkish-Syrian border, we were told:

There's an airstrike and then people gather round to pull people out [of the rubble] and then there's another attack. Radical groups are also the result of attacks on civilians. There's a deliberate tactic to attack civilians when there are protests against the regime. They used snipers and fired at people at funerals, they would shoot them also at cemeteries.

Naturally, these actions encouraged many people to take up arms, if only to defend themselves. A language teacher remembered the March 2011 protests in Deir al-Zour, which began peacefully: “In the beginning, nobody had even a stick in their hands... For five months, the protests were peaceful... However, when the regime started to kill and abduct individuals, people were forced to be armed.” One man we spoke to in Kilis said: “Many people’s houses were destroyed, many family members died. There are two options: to run away or to become a brutal fighter to defend the family, land and country.”

Prison itself turned many ordinary Muslims into Salafist militants¹²⁶ – not least because torture was routinely inflicted there.¹²⁷ As part of a detailed *al Jazeera* investigation in al-Bab (a large town 30 kilometres north-east of Aleppo), Anita McNaught quoted one local resident, “Some people were tortured too much... If they came home, they sold everything they had to fight the regime.”¹²⁸ The systematic use of torture and starvation, as well as mass executions, at the regime’s notorious Saydnaya prison has been documented by Amnesty International.¹²⁹

Fomenting sectarianism

A third type of regime behaviour that in many ways nurtured rebellion (and fundamentalist elements within it) was *stirring up sectarian sentiments*. By mobilising various communities against the threat of ‘Sunni extremists’, the regime stirred up ethnic and religious differences. This appears to have reinforced the very ‘Sunni extremism’ that the regime claimed to oppose, while encouraging some members of other groups – notably the Alawites – into atrocities that themselves fuelled rebellion. The regime’s use of language was instrumental in stirring up sectarian sentiments, and official statements routinely involved a threat from ‘Sunni extremists’.¹³⁰ The regime also

¹²⁶ E.g. Weiss and Hassan.

¹²⁷ Human Rights Watch (2011a).

¹²⁸ Anita McNaught (2012), ‘The business of detention in Syria’, *al Jazeera*, 2 August.

¹²⁹ Amnesty International (2017a).

¹³⁰ E.g. International Crisis Group (2012b).

consistently portrayed the armed opposition as terrorists who were backed by foreign, ‘Sunni’ interests in the form, principally, of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.¹³¹ One interviewee noted:

The regime was painting the opposition as sectarian before it was. It’s true that protests were centred on mosques, but that was where you could get together with a group and organise! When I was studying in Damascus, if there was a group of five or more, security will come and say you need to separate.

Violence was also used strategically to heighten sectarian tensions. According to a detailed study by Weiss and Hassan, “The most notorious regime massacres typically occurred in areas where Alawite, Sunni and Ismaili (another Shia offshoot) villages and hamlets adjoined one another, the better to encourage sectarian reprisal bloodlettings.”¹³² Assad’s forces also deliberately mocked core elements of Sunni belief.¹³³ One source reported that some of the ‘Sunni militiamen’ attacking predominantly Alawite neighbourhoods in major cities turned out to be ‘card-carrying’ members of the Security Forces.

Another interviewee in Kilis noted in August 2013:

In order to stay in power, the government changed the conflict into a sectarian one. They wanted to establish the extremist image. Peaceful protesters have been bombed and shelled by rockets and missiles. Why do they attack civilians? Armed groups’ locations are well known by the regime – why do they target the civilians? In the Ghouta area [near Damascus] where the chemical weapons attack took place, FSA bases are obvious. Why target civilians?

As far as the average Sunni citizen was concerned, regime violence tended to be quite indiscriminate (as noted), and even those unconnected to rebel groups often found themselves attacked.¹³⁴ At the same time, regime violence could quite cunningly *discriminate* between different ethnic and religious groups. Many minorities were spared the worst of the violence inflicted by the regime – not just the Alawites but also the Druze, the Kurds and others – as part of the regime’s strategy of ‘divide and rule’, while the regime simultaneously stoked minorities’ fears about Salafist groups in particular. This fear-mongering was also practised among Christian groups.

The regime also tended to spare wealthy members of the urban Sunni bourgeoisie, a key constituency that it was courting.¹³⁵ On top of all this, ISIS-controlled areas were also frequently spared regime violence.

¹³¹ Merz. He also sometimes highlighted the ‘criminal’ elements in the armed opposition; Droz-Vincent.

¹³² Weiss and Hassan, pp 167–8; see also Darwisheh.

¹³³ Weiss and Hassan.

¹³⁴ E.g. Human Rights Watch (2011a, 2011b).

¹³⁵ Rana Khalaf, personal communication; Hamidi.

The *shabiha* militias that were used against rebels and suspected rebel supporters often drew heavily on the Alawite ethnic group that the regime saw as one of its key supporters, and the threat of Sunni extremism was frequently invoked to induce loyalty from the Alawites as well as other minorities such as Christians.¹³⁶ Within the Syrian military, recruits – a great many of them Alawite – were sometimes told they were fighting for Shi’ite Islam and that, if they died, they would be martyrs of the highest rank.¹³⁷

Naturally, when Sunnis saw Alawites playing such a prominent role in the repression, their own sectarian sentiments were also frequently reinforced. Thus, the regime’s behaviour fed into the *production* of militant fundamentalist groups even as the regime avowed that these were the main threat to Syrian society.

Strategic release of prisoners

A fourth major way in which regime behaviour nurtured militant fundamentalist elements was through the *strategic release of prisoners*. It is hard to imagine that the boost this predictably gave to militant elements was anything other than deliberate. On 31 May 2011, Assad issued an amnesty for ‘political prisoners’. While this looked in many ways like an attempt to placate the protest movement, there was rather more to it. Weiss and Hassan noted in 2015:

... it was applied selectively – plenty of protestors and activists were kept in jail, while an untold number of Salafist-Jihadists were let out. Of these, many had not long ago been on rat lines to [join the insurgency in] Iraq, only to return to Syria and be collared and locked up by the very Mukhabarat [military intelligence] that had sent them there in the first place. Among those who took up arms were Zahran Alloush, Hassan Abboud and Ahmed Issa al-Sheikh, the current or former Salafist leaders of the best organized rebel brigades in Syria. There’s a famous photograph of them standing in a row, all smiles, not long after being decreed free men by al-Assad... Future ISIS members were also amnestied, including Awwad al-Mahklaf, who is now a local emir in Raqqa, and Abu al-Ahir al-Absi, who served time in Sednaya prison in 2007 for membership in al-Qaeda [and seems subsequently to have become ISIS provincial leader for Homs].¹³⁸

Tarek Alghorani, a Syrian who was imprisoned from 2006 to 2011 for subversive blogging, was later interviewed in Tunis:

¹³⁶ International Crisis Group (2013b).

¹³⁷ Weiss and Hassan.

¹³⁸ Sands, Vela and Maayeh. Weiss and Hassan noted, “Prisons in Syria are bywords for Islamization – terrorist universities in the heart of the Middle East...” (p 145).

From the first days of the revolution (in March 2011), Assad denounced the organization [ISIS] as being the work of radical Salafists, so he released the Salafists he had created in his prisons to justify the claim... If you do not have an enemy, you create an enemy.¹³⁹

In all, two of al-Nusra's founding members and three of ISIS's most important leaders in Syria were released.¹⁴⁰ *The National* featured an interview with a 12-year veteran of Syria's Military Intelligence Directorate, an Alawite who defected from his unit in northern Syria in summer of 2011. He commented:

The regime did not just open the door to the prisons and let these extremists out, it facilitated them in their work, in their creation of armed brigades. This is not something I heard rumours about, I actually heard the order, I have seen it happening. These orders came down from [Military Intelligence] headquarters [in] Damascus.¹⁴¹

The officer added that the regime made an abundance of weapons available to these actors in Idlib and also in Daraa, where the uprising began.¹⁴²

Regime involvement in terror attacks

A fifth action that boosted fundamentalist elements – helping them to project an image of power and helping further to inflame sectarian sentiments – seems to have been *regime involvement in terror-style bomb attacks*, attacks that were then blamed on 'terrorists'. Of course, this involvement is difficult to prove and the intention behind any such involvement cannot be known for sure. But in the course of our interviews, there were many people who wanted to draw attention to official complicity in terror bomb attacks. One interviewee commented:

In my village of Haritan [10 kilometres from Aleppo], I didn't know or hear of anyone who had extremist tendencies, to commit terrorist acts. All of a sudden, they seemed to be present! In Aleppo, a day or two before the international monitors turned up,¹⁴³ there were a series of bomb explosions in government security centres like the secret police and at police stations. They are sensitive locations and full of security! It is very difficult for an ordinary person to enter. So how come they become extremely

¹³⁹ Cordall.

¹⁴⁰ Lister (2017b).

¹⁴¹ Sands, Vela and Maayeh; Weiss and Hassan, pp 147–8; see also Lister (2014), pp 71–2, on the release of jihadists helping Jabhat al-Nusra and a number of other Salafist groups, including Ahrar al-Sham.

¹⁴² Sands, Vela and Maayeh.

¹⁴³ The *Guardian* reported in April 2014 that rebels attacked a police station near Aleppo and the army repeatedly shelled Homs at the time UN observers were arriving in Syria (Beaumont). There was an explosion at an air force intelligence building in Damascus in March 2012 (Gerges, 2016). There were several other suicide attacks involving al-Nusra, many of them in Damascus (Sherlock, 2012b). The regime's intelligence centre in Aleppo was to be attacked repeatedly, with tunnel explosions being a common tactic (Mroue; Gebelly). A former military intelligence officer reported that security agencies would sometimes encourage rebel attacks on other security branches (Sands, Vela and Maayeh).

vulnerable to a series of terrorist bombings? In the video footage, you could see dead bodies, but no sign of blood. It looks like they brought bodies from elsewhere and put them around to make it look as if they have been killed by the explosion.

While there is clearly some conjecture and interpretation here, such accounts are in line with the views of Nawaz Farez, a former Syrian ambassador to Iraq who defected in July 2012. After recounting the history of Assad's support for AQI, Farez said all the large-scale terrorist attacks in Syria, beginning in late 2011 were "perpetrated by al-Qaeda through cooperation with the security forces", including a devastating attack on a military intelligence building in a Damascus suburb in May 2012.¹⁴⁴ One of our interviewees, commenting in 2013, downplayed the al-Qaeda presence but underlined the regime tactic of blaming terrorists:

The regime might kill ten people or have a bomb explosion somewhere and say al-Qaeda was responsible... There was an explosion at the Ministry of Defence and you could see intelligence police trying to create a fake scene [on Syrian state TV]... The regime is killing people and accusing al-Qaeda in order to project the narrative that the regime is fighting al-Qaeda.

As in any war, the line between collaboration and infiltration has often been difficult to draw. But it appears that regime militiamen and secret security personnel would sometimes impersonate rebels (whether in pursuit of intelligence, as part of a strategy of targeting rebels, or as part of an attempt to make rebels look more extreme than they were at the outset).¹⁴⁵ One source, a former regime pilot-turned-soldier, recalled being captured by al-Nusra in early 2013 before encountering a former military colleague working inside al-Nusra, who arranged his release. The source commented, "Jabhat al-Nusra is full of spies and agents working for the regime."

One of our interviewees in Kilis suggested that al-Nusra had been created by the regime and that "The aim is to transform the Syrian revolution from a popular to an extremist revolution that needs to be destroyed." Again, such views need to be approached with caution: Nusra has a strong record of *opposing* Assad, and even the presence of government spies might simply imply a desire to monitor or subvert the enemy. Peter Neumann has stressed that there is no solid evidence that the jihadists as a whole are controlled by the regime, but he also notes that Damascus has a long history of embedding agents and turning suspects into collaborators, a history that goes back to operations against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Weiss and Hassan, p 148.

¹⁴⁵ Impersonation of rebels has been noted in other conflicts (Schomerus, Keen).

¹⁴⁶ Peter Neumann (2014), 'Suspects into collaborators', *London Review of Books* 36 (7), 3 April, www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n07/peter-neumann/suspects-into-collaborators

Intelligence documents do seem to suggest that the Assad regime has had agents inside ISIS, including in important positions.¹⁴⁷

Cooperating economically with rebels

A sixth way the regime nurtured armed rebellion (and fundamentalism) was economic cooperation with rebel groups. Cooperation has included the sale of weapons and ammunition, the sale of information, the receipt of payment for not attacking particular areas, profiteering from supply of goods into besieged areas, and agreements surrounding the extraction of oil. The motives for such cooperation are complex (and are discussed further in section 3.2). But such behaviour suggests, at minimum, that weakening the rebels was frequently not an overriding priority for regime actors. Insofar as ‘greed’ and exploiting civilians was the motivation, such cooperation tended predictably to ‘lose hearts and minds’ as civilians recoiled.

Some idea of the systems of cooperation that evolved is conveyed by practices in eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, where there was a significant rebel presence. From October 2013, this area was placed under siege by the regime. But the main rebel group, Jaysh al-Islam (or the Islam Army), was able to hold a military parade showcasing tanks and trained fighters, apparently without fear of regime attack. How was this possible so close to the heart of regime power in Damascus? Meanwhile, one interviewee asked Turkmani et al. “How can there be a siege when the head of Islam Army can go in and out of Ghouta several times this year and appear in Turkey and Saudi Arabia...?”¹⁴⁸ A pernicious economic system grew up in the context of the siege and the accompanying acute shortage of international aid. International aid to the besieged area was very scarce, and trade passing through a key checkpoint and an underground tunnel became a major source of income for armed groups in the besieged area (who took turns to control the tunnel) as well as for government forces and officials on the other side. Sugar inside the besieged area was sold for 24 times the price just outside.¹⁴⁹

While ‘across the lines’ cooperation on arms is naturally difficult to prove, it was a common subject of discussion. One of our interviewees, a Kurdish aid worker, said: “The general rule is al-Qaida and regime cooperation. The regime supplied arms to protesters hoping to portray them as cruel, as rebels, as terrorists. Islamists have apparently been cooperating with the regime

¹⁴⁷ al-Wasl.

¹⁴⁸ Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015), p 36.

¹⁴⁹ Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015).

in abducting opposition figures.”¹⁵⁰ Another interviewee suggested in 2013: “Nusra is controlled by Assad and the security police... They sold the weapons to the revolution.”

As in other conflicts,¹⁵¹ cooperation ‘across the lines’ could – on occasion – reflect bonds of sympathy. After Hezbollah fighters were used to shore up struggling Syrian army units, one Hezbollah fighter commented: “There are some soldiers in the Syrian army who are sympathetic to the opposition, and others who would sell information to anyone who pays for it. We got to a point where we, in Hezbollah, could no longer go to sleep altogether. One or two people would stay up to ensure that we wouldn’t be betrayed.”¹⁵² Since grievances were widespread in the military and defecting from the military was a fairly dangerous step, it seems reasonable to surmise that even some of those choosing to remain will have had some degree of sympathy with the uprising.

‘Across the lines’ cooperation over oil was also a notable phenomenon, and the main beneficiaries among the rebels were al-Nusra and ISIS. Nusra controlled oil fields in Hasakah and Deir al-Zour in 2013 and early 2014.¹⁵³ We spoke to one member of the Deir al-Zour local council, who commented on the rebels who were controlling oil wells in the area:

*They are threatened [by the regime]. Either the regime destroys the oil wells or the rebels keep it pumping. They open holes to take some of the oil for themselves, and the rest goes to the regime. The oil pipes reach Homs [and a government refinery there] and regime storages. It is normal. Gas is the same.*¹⁵⁴

One May 2013 report in the *Guardian* noted, “In some areas, al-Nusra has struck deals with government forces to allow the transfer of crude across the front lines to the Mediterranean coast.”¹⁵⁵ The resources helped al-Nusra to expand its influence. Abu Saif, a fighter with the Ahrar Brigade, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, said:

The Syrian regime itself is paying more than 150m Syrian lire (£1.4m) monthly to Jabhat al-Nusra to guarantee oil is kept pumping through two major oil pipelines in Baniyas and Latakia. Middlemen trusted by both sides are to facilitate the deal and transfer money to the organisation...

¹⁵⁰ See also Syrian Center for Strategic and Political Studies/Syrian Expert House, p 178).

¹⁵¹ See e.g. Keen (2005).

¹⁵² Naame Shaam, p 30. Hezbollah fighters added that if Hezbollah is involved in a battle, one Hezbollah soldier has to be on every Syrian army tank – to insure against ‘betrayal’.

¹⁵³ Lister (2014), p 85.

¹⁵⁴ One man controlling a local gas plant said he had to keep supplying both rebels and the regime, since both would attack if they did not receive supplies (Ghaith).

¹⁵⁵ Borger, Julian and Mona Mahmood (2013), ‘EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions boosts jihadist groups’, *Guardian*, 19 May.

A former Syrian oil executive in the rebel-held areas said in May 2013 that al-Nusra and other jihadist groups were using much of the money to win hearts and minds in areas they have captured, such as Raqqa city, which the regime lost to rebels in March 2013.¹⁵⁶

ISIS, having been on the defensive in the face of an onslaught from rebel groups linked to the FSA in early 2014, took control of most of the eastern governorate of Deir al-Zour in August 2014 before taking control of most of Raqqa governorate in the same month.¹⁵⁷ In this, ISIS was assisted by its capture of Mosul in Iraq (including the looting of the Mosul Central Bank).¹⁵⁸ By September 2014, ISIS was earning perhaps US\$2 million per day through the sale of oil in Syria and Iraq,¹⁵⁹ and many of ISIS's oil sales involved a significant degree of cooperation with the Syrian regime. Since ISIS did not have refining capacity (other than very basic improvised devices), it tended to trade crude oil. In an investigation published in September 2014, oil traders reported that ISIS had been guarding oil pipelines transporting crude oil from Kurdish oilfields in northeast Syria to a government-run refinery in Homs. ISIS oil was also finding its way into Turkey and into rebel- and government-held areas via a network of traders, some of them close to the Assad regime. Meanwhile, the regime was continuing to supply ISIS areas with some basic services like water, gas and electricity.¹⁶⁰

An April 2014 report quoted one FSA commander saying that ISIS was selling grain to the regime: "As the fighting between the Free Army and Daesh (ISIS) intensified, the latter struck a deal with the regime to sell it the two-year grain stocks they had put their hands on and had hidden away in Deir al-Zor."¹⁶¹ The FSA commander said ISIS had sold the grain very cheaply, adding: "About eight months ago [around August 2013], they [ISIS] completely stopped all fighting with the regime." One YPG commander reported, "When Daesh came into Hasakah [in June 2015], many regime units switched to Daesh's side. There are also many Daesh spies within the regime."¹⁶² As ISIS fighters marched towards Aleppo in that same month, Syrian opposition leaders said

¹⁵⁶ Borger, Julian and Mona Mahmood (2013), 'EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions boosts jihadist groups', *Guardian*, 19 May.

¹⁵⁷ Lister (2014).

¹⁵⁸ One estimate is that by June 2014 ISIS was earning in excess of \$12 million per month from activities in Mosul alone (Lister (2014), citing Amanda Macias and Jeremy Bender (2014), 'Here's how the world's richest terrorist group makes millions every day', *Business Insider*, 27 August).

¹⁵⁹ Lister (2014), citing Indira Lakshmanan and Anthony DiPaola (2014), 'Islamic State: oil magnates of terror', *Businessweek*, 4 September.

¹⁶⁰ World Bulletin/News Desk (2014); Abboud (2015b), 'Syria: an interview with Samer Abboud', *Jadaliyya*, 30 December. See also Turkmani.

¹⁶¹ Naame Shaam, p 48.

¹⁶² Jonathan Steele (2015) 'The Syrian Kurds Are Winning!', *New York Review of Books*, 3 December.

the regime was leaving ISIS unmolested while striking rival insurgents.¹⁶³ Meanwhile, the Twitter account of the (closed) US embassy in Syria noted, “Reports indicate that the regime is making airstrikes in support of ISIS’s [ISIS’s] advance on Aleppo, aiding extremists against Syrian population.”¹⁶⁴

Again, not all this behaviour implies a coherent plot to nurture rebels and extremists. But it underlines that cooperative motivations extended well beyond winning, and it shows that, for the regime, assisting one’s ‘enemy’ – and not least the most fundamentalist elements – was far from being anathema.

Predatory behaviour

A seventh way in which regime behaviour boosted some rebels was through predatory activity. Such behaviour predictably lost ‘hearts and minds’ to the rebels. For example, the August 2012 *al Jazeera* investigation of al-Bab noted: “Many people in al-Bab – and apparently across Syria – were arrested just to extort money from the detainee’s families... Locals told us that the sheer scale of the security services’ corruption and sadism in the end proved their undoing.” Predatory behaviour by regime actors also contributed to a war economy in which ISIS and al-Nusra were able to propose themselves as a source of ‘law and order’ (though it would presumably have been difficult for the regime to foresee this effect).

Among the most significant aspects of the war economy in regime-controlled areas have been: looting and extortion by government soldiers and *shabiha* militias; stealing aid; using force to manipulate markets (‘forced markets’);¹⁶⁵ manipulating the sanctions regime (for example, by profiting from smuggling);¹⁶⁶ manipulating the exchange rate and the currency reserves;¹⁶⁷ and confiscating businesses and other assets of those considered ‘disloyal’. Many elements of the elite have adapted successfully to the war that the regime has been fuelling as well as to the international sanctions to which regime abuses predictably gave rise. But these elite strategies have also tended to deepen the poverty of the broad mass of Syrians.

While the Syrian regime’s use of *shabiha* militias was undoubtedly intimidating and will have deterred some potential rebels, it also came at a cost in terms of military efficiency – not least because the predatory activities of the *shabiha*

¹⁶³ Barnard (2015b).

¹⁶⁴ Barnard (2015b).

¹⁶⁵ Keen (1994).

¹⁶⁶ E.g. Yazigi (2014).

¹⁶⁷ E.g. Yazigi (2014).

tended to alienate ordinary people from the regime. Making money also became – for many militiamen – a significant distraction from ‘winning’ or confronting rebels. One former regime soldier, who had spent time in a regime jail, said of the *shabiha*: “Lots are thieves, robbers and when the revolution began, they thought they will take money and stand with the government.”¹⁶⁸

In 2013, an attempt was made to regulate the *shabiha* and incorporate them formally into the National Defence Forces (NDF) under Iranian supervision (which numbered 80–100,000 fighters at the peak). But even after this initiative, the leaders of the NDF were sometimes seen as warlords who had a significant material stake in continued conflict and a set of interests that frequently diverged from those of the regime.¹⁶⁹ A March 2017 report for the Institute for the Study of War noted that “Over the past year, the NDF reportedly fragmented and reverted to local groups outside the formal command structure as economic turmoil hampered the regime’s ability to match the salaries offered by foreign or private actors.”¹⁷⁰

Promoting scarcity in areas of rebel strength

An eighth way in which regime behaviour boosted fundamentalist elements was through *promoting scarcity in areas of rebel strength* – in particular by undermining international relief efforts. The primary motive here was probably to put military pressure on the rebels: the regime has systematically used shortages and sieges to pressure rebels and civilians into local truces, which then allow the regime to concentrate its limited military resources on offensives in other areas.¹⁷¹ Scarcity has also been routinely manipulated by the regime so as to promote large-scale outmigration from rebel areas, attempting to undermine the rebels’ population base.¹⁷² At the same time, the boost to militant jihadist elements was, to a degree, predictable.

In effect, the regime’s policy of starvation tended to propel those people living in rebel areas into one of three paths: surrendering; moving to regime areas; or embracing fundamentalist alternatives. Faced with deepening shortages, many people turned angrily against a West that was seen as deserting them and some sought solace – and practical help – from factions with fundamentalist ideologies.

¹⁶⁸ See also Hallaj; International Crisis Group (2013b).

¹⁶⁹ Abboud (2015b); see also Turkmani et al. (2014).

¹⁷⁰ Kozak (2017), p 2.

¹⁷¹ See, notably, Bonsey (2017a).

¹⁷² This is not uncommon in counterinsurgencies, e.g. Keen (2012).

Providing some immunity from regime attacks

A ninth way in which the regime helped at least some rebel groups – and fundamentalist elements in particular – was through *granting significant immunity from regime military attacks*.

Consider western Aleppo. In a 2015 paper, Rana Khalaf notes that ISIS had made significant inroads, getting credit for pushing out a number of parasitic gangs as well as for providing important services.¹⁷³ Khalaf added, “This, coupled with the fact that the regime hardly shelled ISIS bases, enabled ISIS to reconstitute partial security that helped locals live and resume their work. This issue served to improve the legitimacy of ISIS.”¹⁷⁴ When ISIS lost control of the areas, the regime’s behaviour was equally revealing. Khalaf noted:

...ISIS’s brutality and hostility to civil society and armed groups triggered a strong resistance against it. Armed resistance, under the leadership of the Jaish al-Mujahadeen local branch soon managed to expel ISIS from Aleppo. This raised expectations of improved civil life in the city. However, directly after the ousting of ISIS, the regime started its random bombing of civilian areas and institutions like the Local Council, field hospitals etc., but not the Sharia Court. This resulted in massive migration out of the non-government-controlled part of Aleppo city...¹⁷⁵

The spared Sharia Court was run by powerful Islamist groups on the ground, including al-Nusra.¹⁷⁶ After ISIS took full control of Raqqa in January 2014, ISIS’s Sharia Court in Raqqa was rarely attacked.¹⁷⁷ In general, the Assad regime preferred to target non-fundamentalist parts of the opposition – including local councils, schools and hospitals in Aleppo and Deir al-Zour.¹⁷⁸ After extensive fieldwork (mostly in Gaziantep, Turkey), Agnes Favier noted that the regime had often bombed or besieged cities in which local councils were considered most successful (including Aleppo city and also Daraya, Douma, and Maarat al Nouman).¹⁷⁹ Thus, through a variety of mechanisms, governance in opposition areas was actively pushed towards the models established by fundamentalist groups. The presence of non-fundamentalist rebels could easily bring a regime attack, while the presence of ISIS frequently provided a degree of protection against these attacks. Of course, local people were aware of these differences, and this was a powerful incentive for at least tolerating ISIS.

¹⁷³ Rana Khalaf (2015).

¹⁷⁴ Rana Khalaf (2015), p 60.

¹⁷⁵ Rana Khalaf (2015), pp 60–61.

¹⁷⁶ Rana Khalaf (2015), p 61.

¹⁷⁷ Rana Khalaf, personal communication.

¹⁷⁸ Rana Khalaf, personal communication.

¹⁷⁹ Favier.

As for al-Nusra, the position is much less clear. Wege suggests that al-Nusra may at times have received a degree of respite from Assad's determination to attack the moderate opposition.¹⁸⁰ Several accusations of collusion with the regime have been mentioned. But most of our interviewees stressed that support for al-Nusra stemmed, in large part, from its reputation for *standing up* to the Assad regime on the battlefield.¹⁸¹ What seems very clear is that the regime's provision of selective immunity applied much more strongly to ISIS. Again, the difference with al-Nusra was not lost on local people. For example, shortly before ISIS took over from al-Nusra in Deir al-Zour in 2014, one activist said, "I am not afraid. What we have now 'al-Nusra' is like having ISIS except ISIS is less corrupt and at least we will not be shelled by the regime."¹⁸² In her more general interviews with Syrian civil activists, Rana Khalaf noted that when ISIS controlled a particular area, this was "seen as a security measure [protecting] from the random barrels of the regime."¹⁸³

A December 2014 *NBC* report analysed ISIS and regime violence, finding that both parties tended to avoid each other:

Around 64 percent of verifiable ISIS attacks in Syria this year targeted other non-state groups, an analysis of the IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center's (JTIC) database showed. Just 13 percent of the militants' attacks during the same period – the year through Nov. 21 [2014] – targeted Syrian security forces. That's a stark contrast to the Sunni extremist group's operations in Iraq, where more than half of ISIS attacks (54 percent) were aimed at security forces...

At the same time, the JTIC data showed that Assad's own operations (more than two thirds of which were airstrikes) overwhelmingly targeted rebel groups other than ISIS: of 982 listed regime operations for the year up to 21 November 2014, just 6 per cent directly targeted ISIS.¹⁸⁴ The *NBC* report noted:

*For now, ISIS appears focused on emerging as the dominant Islamist, non-state actor and operating in areas where Assad's troops have largely withdrawn. Assad is focused on destroying opposition to his rule from the same groups ISIS wants to dominate – and engaging more in recent months with ISIS as that comes to pass.*¹⁸⁵

The *NBC* report also analysed data on Aleppo, finding that of 238 regime operations for the year up to 21 November 2014, only 15 targeted ISIS. This in

¹⁸⁰ E.g. Wege.

¹⁸¹ See e.g. International Crisis Group (2012), 'Tentative Jihad: Syria's fundamentalist opposition', *Middle East Report* 131, 12 October.

¹⁸² Rana Khalaf, personal communication.

¹⁸³ Khalaf, p 62.

¹⁸⁴ These operations were labelled 'counterterrorism operations' but were directed against a variety of rebels.

¹⁸⁵ Vinograd and Omar. Abu Hafis, a local ISIS leader from Aleppo, said taking over rebel areas was a necessary step towards fighting the Assad regime (Vinograd and Omar).

itself is not surprising, since ISIS was only a relatively minor presence. But even in the militants' stronghold of Raqqa, just half of the listed 22 operations targeted ISIS; and 22 was in any case a small total for the 'HQ' of such a vehemently denounced 'enemy'. The December 2014 NBC report went on:

*Some rebels suspect coordination between the Syrian regime and ISIS. Yusuf Abu Abdulla, one of the leaders of the Al-Mujaheddin Army in Aleppo, said when his fighters have attacked regime bases, they have come under separate attacks from ISIS. That's forced them to withdraw and battle the other militants instead of Assad's forces. 'Most of the front lines between ISIS and the regime are very quiet – you wouldn't even hear the sound of firing,' he said. 'The exact opposite is on our frontlines, which are very dangerous and where the fights don't stop for 24 hours. If ISIS was interested in fighting the regime, he said, they would have gone to Aleppo – a city besieged by Assad's forces. Instead, they chose to fight for Kobani where there is no Syrian army presence.'*¹⁸⁶

In February 2014, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces circulated a detailed memo entitled 'ISIS and the Assad Regime: From Marriage of Convenience to Partnership.'¹⁸⁷ The memo presented 'significant evidence... about the links between the regime and ISIS', including a range of 'testimony from FSA fighters that describe events on the ground where regime forces have been protecting and assisting this group'. For example, it notes that:

The ISIS headquarters in Raqqa are distinctive and famous buildings (the government building and Armenian Catholic Church). When the regime shells the city, the aircraft fly down very low to target FSA-held areas, however they never bomb the ISIS HQ or target areas under its control.¹⁸⁸ This is also the case for ISIS HQ in Jarablus on the Syrian-Turkish borders and the HQ in Al-Danna (Idlib). In turn, ISIS has never attacked Jisr Al-Shughour, a regime-controlled area of strategic value in Idlib or the regime-controlled areas of Deir Ezzor [Deir al-Zour] or Aleppo City.¹⁸⁹

We should note that ISIS did go on to take control of Deir al-Zour in August 2014, so the picture is complicated. One cannot rule out the possibility that both ISIS and the regime have been biding their time and waiting for the opportunity to defeat the other. Even so, the elements of regime-ISIS cooperation have been a crucial part of the war.

Perhaps significantly, when Raqqa was originally lost by the regime to a range of rebel groups in March 2013, press reports noted a sudden and 'mysterious'

¹⁸⁶ Vinograd and Omar.

¹⁸⁷ National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces memo (2014), 'ISIS and the Assad regime: from marriage of convenience to partnership', 10 February, www.etilaf.us/isis_assad, p 1.

¹⁸⁸ National Coalition memo, p 1.

¹⁸⁹ National Coalition memo p 1.

capitulation by government forces, with many government soldiers apparently removing their equipment from Raqqa to the HQ of the army's 17th Division outside the town without harassment from opposition fighters.¹⁹⁰ Raqqa also had little tradition of radicalism or Islamist activism,¹⁹¹ adding to the mystery of the rebels' takeover.

When the army's 17th Division suffered a major attack from al-Nusra rebels near Raqqa in November 2013, the presence of ISIS fighters inside Raqqa helped the regime. An Institute for the Study of War report noted, "Four days into the offensive, amid fierce clashes with regime forces, JN [Jabhat al-Nusra] was forced to send fighters away from the front lines in order to reinforce its headquarters building... against ISIS fighters who were massing in the vicinity."¹⁹²

By January 2014, ISIS was able to take control of Raqqa, helped by reinforcements from Iraq¹⁹³ as well as by a perception among some local people that ISIS could bring a degree of protection amid the general chaos, looting and extortion.¹⁹⁴

Underscoring the impression of a rather limited regime-ISIS antipathy has been the regime's practice of continuing to pay many people's salaries in Raqqa even after ISIS had gained control.¹⁹⁵ The February 2014 National Coalition memo gave further examples of ISIS/regime collaboration in Homs and in the areas between Raqqa and Aleppo. These include battlefield reports of how regime forces avoided targeting ISIS while heavily shelling the FSA in Homs, and the protection by Syrian warplanes of the convoy of a senior ISIS commander.¹⁹⁶ The same document also observes how a certain continuity in personnel appears to have underpinned regime-ISIS cooperation, giving examples of ISIS emirs who were formerly serving officers with the Syrian regime.¹⁹⁷ It further alleges that ammunition may

190 al-Hakkar; Khalaf (2015); see also Birke (2015) on the regime tendency to focus on retaining power in the west rather than the east.

191 Birke (2015); see also Turkmani.

192 Caris and Reynolds, p 11.

193 Caris and Reynolds, p 12.

194 Khalaf (2015); see also Birke (2015).

195 Payment of state salaries was common in areas controlled by many types of rebels.

196 During the battle between ISIS and FSA in the northern suburbs of Homs (10 January 2014), regime aircraft were heavily shelling the FSA, avoiding ISIS, which assisted them to move forward in battle. During the last battle between the Islamic Front and ISIS, when ISIS was defeated in Aleppo, two days prior to this a convoy led by an ISIS military leader, Emir Omar Shishani, drove from Raqqa to Aleppo; there are many eyewitness accounts saying this convoy was protected by regime warplanes. In contrast, the next day, another convoy from Liwa Al Tawhid drove a similar route north and was heavily bombarded by regime planes. National Coalition memo, p 1.

197 National Coalition memo, p 1: "Current emirs in ISIS were serving officers with the regime, e.g. Muhana Junedi was serving with the regime in Dier Ezzor during the Iraq war where he was responsible for the section following and investigating those who went to fight in Iraq and returned... He was responsible for security issues inside ISIS in this area before FSA defeated ISIS and drove them out of Idlib." (9 January 2014).

also have found its way to ISIS from the regime.¹⁹⁸

Drawing on the secret papers of a senior ISIS official and former Iraqi officer, *Der Spiegel's* investigation tends to corroborate the views of the National Coalition:

*IS [ISIS] leaders had no problem receiving assistance from Assad's air force, despite all of the group's pledges to annihilate the apostate Shiites... In battles between IS and rebels in January 2014, Assad's jets regularly bombed only rebel positions, while the Islamic State emir ordered his fighters to refrain from shooting at the army. It was an arrangement that left many of the foreign fighters deeply disillusioned; they had imaged jihad differently. IS threw its entire arsenal at the rebels, sending more suicide bombers into their ranks in just a few weeks than it deployed during the entire previous year against the Syrian army. Thanks in part to additional air strikes, IS was able to reconquer territory that it had briefly lost. Nothing symbolizes the tactical shifting of alliances more than the fate of the Syrian army's Division 17. The isolated base near Raqqa had been under rebel siege for more than a year. But then, IS units defeated the rebels there and Assad's air force was once again able to use the base for supply flights without fear of attack.*¹⁹⁹

It is important to note that the alliance between the regime and ISIS has tended to be a fragile one; at times, it has broken down completely. As *Der Spiegel's* investigation noted,

*... after IS conquered Mosul [in June 2014] and took control of a gigantic weapons depot there, the jihadists felt powerful enough to attack their erstwhile helpers in Syria]. IS fighters overran Division 17 [near Raqqa] and slaughtered the soldiers, whom they had only recently protected.*²⁰⁰

But elements of collusion also continued. After regime forces took over the historic city of Palmyra in March 2016, *Sky News* (which obtained leaked ISIS documents) revealed a degree of communication and coordination between the retreating ISIS forces and the Syrian regime – including an arrangement for ISIS to evacuate some areas *before* the Syria army attacked.²⁰¹ In his account of life in Raqqa, published in March 2017, Samer observed:

I find it really telling how Daesh [ISIS] responds to territorial advances by their enemies. For example, when the regime took Tadmur [Palmyra] from them, it was more of a handover than a takeover. Daesh had already pulled out and moved its entire forces to Raqqa and other areas still under its control. It seems to me that there's

¹⁹⁸ National Coalition memo, p 1: "During military clashes between FSA and ISIS, ISIS ammunition cases have been recovered by the FSA. Empty cartridges are labeled as having been manufactured in the Institute of Defence Factories, the regime Ministry of Defence factory or from Russia."

¹⁹⁹ Reuter.

²⁰⁰ Reuter.

²⁰¹ Ramsay.

*some sort of special understanding between the regime and Daesh, like that between father and son.*²⁰²

3.2 The functions of regime support to armed rebellion and fundamentalism

If many regime actions had the paradoxical effect of boosting armed rebellion and boosting fundamentalist elements within it, it is possible that these were *mistakes* or simply unintended consequences.²⁰³ But such was the range and persistence of behaviours that nurtured many of those the regime proclaimed to be its enemies that it is only reasonable to ask what the *functions* of this enduring and apparently counterproductive behaviour might be.

When it came to regime actors' predatory behaviour and the many instances of economic cooperation between rebels and government forces, an obvious function was economic – making money. Indeed, it is not hard to detect the emergence of a profitable *war system* in Syria, a system in which 'opposing sides' often collaborated – usually at the expense of civilians. There were also elements of economic cooperation that seem to have been aimed at 'winning hearts and minds'. This included the practice of paying state salaries to officials in rebel areas (not only in ISIS areas),²⁰⁴ something that has given the regime an important and lasting way to pressure people into supporting it. It is quite possible also (as noted) that some soldiers harboured a degree of *sympathy* with the rebellion, perhaps contributing to the 'leakage' of arms to rebel groups.

However, what is most striking – and something repeatedly emphasised by the Syrians we talked with – are the *political* functions of behaviour that nurtured rebels and fundamentalists in particular.

Many interviewees argued that this behaviour reflected the fact that armed rebellion – especially rebellion riven by divisions and tainted by sectarianism, criminality and terror attacks – was in crucial respects less threatening to the regime than peaceful protests. Particularly in the context of the Arab Spring that saw regimes ousted in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen,²⁰⁵ peaceful

²⁰² Samer, p 86.

²⁰³ Cf. Kalyvas for a more general analysis.

²⁰⁴ E.g. Richani; Khalaf (2015); Favier.

²⁰⁵ Yemen's case was complex as President Ali Abdullah Saleh handed power to his vice-president after mass protests.

protesters – and even pro-democracy rebels – were actually less easy to dismiss or stigmatise than ‘Islamic terrorists’. One careful 2013 analysis by Housam Darwishah noted that when the regime was faced with the (paradoxical) threat of a non-violent protest movement:

*The security forces lost their patience with a non-violent protest movement that delegitimized the use of force against the people... the regime militarized the uprising by using excessive violence in order to justify large-scale military operations and discourage the opposition from joining the protest movement. By doing so, the regime was able to push part of the protest into the field most familiar to the regime: military confrontation.*²⁰⁶

This process also had an important international dimension, and the priority attached to combating ‘terrorism’ by the international community gave Assad the perfect opportunity to play the game of *delegitimising domestic dissent* with both cunning and skill. For Assad, indeed, ‘extremists’ among the rebels became the ultimate in ‘useful enemies’, sowing damaging seeds of doubt not only in the minds of many Syrians who feared ‘Salafist extremism’ but also in the minds of Western policymakers. This tended further to undermine the prospects of international assistance and protection.

It is striking that, even as the Syrian state has ‘failed’ and large areas of the country have fallen outside regime control, Assad proved notably successful in the art of survival. At the start of the rebellion, Western officials regularly measured his time left in office as a matter of weeks or months.²⁰⁷ Yet he endured. Paradoxically, Assad may have survived as president not so much *despite* the war as *because* of it. Like President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, Assad has given a masterclass in the macabre art of nurturing disorder and turning it to his advantage.²⁰⁸

Some sources perceived that fostering sectarianism was designed to discredit protest and rebellion in *international* eyes, particularly in relation to Western governments. One interviewee commented in 2013:

The regime has turned the struggle into a sectarian conflict. The Syrian land – which is the cradle of all civilisations, beliefs and religions – became a land of sectarian struggle. We ended up having all sorts of radical groups. We have extremist groups, they want to create an Islamic state. Also, there is another type of so-called Islamist groups created by the regime to make the revolution collapse. They are using the name

²⁰⁶ Darwishah. On provoking war and on the fear of non-violent opposition, see also Droz-Vincent. See also Naame Shaam, p 43.

²⁰⁷ Hokayem (2013), p 157.

²⁰⁸ Stressing the Syrian regime’s cultivation of ‘terrorist’ entities, George Ahmad also notes that “Syria has been in an emergency-justifying state of war with Israel for over four decades, a rationalization for the iron grip of the Assad dynasty and the Baath party”. (p 50.)

of Islam but have nothing to do with Islam. And they don't represent the Syrian people... The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria for instance have nothing to do with Islam. It was the creation of the Syrian government in order to destroy the Syrian revolution's image among the international community... The aim is to create fear and make the international community believe that the Syrian revolution has been taken over by al-Qaeda.

After highlighting Syrian regime involvement in a number of terror bomb explosions, one of our interviewees at Kilis made a similar argument: “The regime wants to fool the international community, to say this is not a popular Syrian revolution, that these are terrorists and it is al-Qaeda who wants to take over Syria.” In playing up the threat of fundamentalist groups while often actively stimulating their growth, the Assad regime courted political support (or at least tolerance) from both domestic and international audiences. The strategy was to prove at least somewhat successful.

The release of violent fundamentalists from Syrian government prisons has also plausibly been interpreted as a calculated move to discredit protest and rebellion. According to Major General Fayez Dwairi, a former Jordanian military intelligence officer and a Syria specialist:

Many of the people who established Jabhat Al-Nusra were captured by the regime in 2008 and were in prison. When the revolution started they were released on the advice of Syrian intelligence officers, who told Assad ‘They will do a good job for us. There are many disadvantages to letting them out, but there are more advantages because we will convince the world that we are facing Islamic terrorism.’²⁰⁹

Similarly, the former military intelligence officer interviewed in *The National* said Assad’s general amnesty in 2011 was designed to sow terrorism in Syria for propaganda value.²¹⁰

Meanwhile, the scarcity of regime attacks on ISIS (and *vice versa*) seems to have been part of Assad’s attempt to nurture fundamentalists so as to buy time and tolerance for his regime as ‘the lesser of two evils’. The opportunity for a policy of ‘live and let live’ was created in part by ISIS’s explicit objective of setting up an Islamic state, and in part by Assad’s willingness to settle for a truncated state that embraced Syria’s most populated and urban areas, particularly in the west of the country.²¹¹ In a July 2015 speech, President Assad – rather than expressing determination to win back control of the whole country – stated, “We must define the important regions for the armed forces to hold onto, so it doesn’t allow the collapse of the rest of the areas

²⁰⁹ Sands, Vela and Maayeh.

²¹⁰ Sands, Vela and Maayeh; see also Weiss and Hassan.

²¹¹ On this willingness, see Abboud (2015a).

[that is, those not yet controlled by rebels]. The army is capable and we have everything we need. It's just manpower that's lacking."²¹² Both ISIS and the Assad regime seem to have regarded their own control as compatible – at least in the short and medium term – with the survival of the other.

In nurturing fundamentalist elements while trumpeting the threat from them, the regime seems to have had several audiences in mind. Domestically, the Syrian regime persistently presented its violence as a 'war on terror'. As in many countries (for example, Sri Lanka), this discourse of a 'war on terror' served as cover for diverse forms of political repression and intimidation. Faced with the protests in Daraa at the very beginning of the Syrian rebellion, the Syrian authorities blamed the violence on 'terrorist groups' and 'foreign elements'.²¹³ Even as Assad stirred up sectarian and ethnic tensions, he was able to suggest – in the tradition of other ruthless autocrats such as Mobutu in the DRC, Doe in Liberia, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq – that unless he remained in power, these conflicts would take over the country. As one Kurdish activist put it, "Assad used to say, 'If I go, then sectarianism will take over.' He used this to stay in power. There's a degree of truth in this [claim] now."

A former regime soldier highlighted popular fears when he told us: "The regime is very weak and very powerful at the same time. People are convinced that people with big beards will come and force us to cover up the women, and so they rally round the regime."

A particular focus for the regime was punishing alternative forms of governance. This seemed to apply especially to secular governance and to governance that was working relatively well – the 'threat' of a good example. The regime's strategy has not only involved a variety of strategic accommodations but also a consistent – and very often successful – attempt to push politics in a direction that emphasises what divides people rather than what unites them. Even in relation to the Kurds, the regime encouraged Kurdish 'ethnic' demands to a degree (notably the demand for autonomy) while being much more punitive towards Kurds who framed their grievances within a more 'national' framework.²¹⁴

Boosting, and then playing up the threat from, 'extremists' was also designed to appeal to the Syrian military and security apparatus, and the idea of a 'war

²¹² BBC World Service, Newshour, 26 July 2015 (speech on 25 July 2015). This policy of 'triage' also seems to have been applied within particular cities. As one knowledgeable UN worker put it to us, "If an area is critical for regime survival, the regime will control it... Class is [also] a big factor – wherever you have a bourgeois area, the regime controls it...."

²¹³ Human Rights Watch (2011a).

²¹⁴ Ali; also International Crisis Group (2012a, 2013a).

on terror' was used by the Syrian regime to motivate state security personnel when they were being prepared to use major force against protesters.²¹⁵ Human Rights Watch talked with 12 defectors from Syria's security services, all of whom reported that their superiors had told them they were fighting infiltrators, Salafists, and terrorists with foreign backers.²¹⁶

We have noted that playing up the threat from Salafists and 'Sunni extremists' also helped to shore up support from the Alawites, who were not only one of the regime's key constituencies but also provided a large number of militiamen as well as occupying senior positions in the military. Fear of recriminations was part of this process. Referring to the importance of the Alawites in the military, one Syrian aid worker said, "Regime soldiers see it as a sectarian struggle and believe they will all be murdered if they don't defeat the rebels – or they will be executed by the regime."

Another interviewee commented: "He [Assad] has involved his sect in this crisis, saying, 'I am your protector. If I go away, they will kill you and take revenge.'" A former regime soldier stressed that war had brought ethnic fault-lines to the fore: "Sectarian rhetoric has driven many people to support the regime, many Alawites who would otherwise be against the regime." Meanwhile, playing up and nurturing the threat of Sunni extremists also helped to shore up a degree of support from the various non-Alawite minorities, including the Druze, the Christians and, most significantly, the Kurds.

The regime will also have been aware of the military advantages of sowing divisions among the rebels and of avoiding the scenario in which all parts of 'the enemy' attack at once. Importantly, ISIS and the regime have had a common hostility to the more moderate elements in the opposition, and the rise of ISIS forced the mainstream Syrian opposition to fight on two fronts.²¹⁷ ISIS and the regime also had, from 2014, a common hostility to al-Nusra.

Kurdish grievances have been a significant threat to the regime and the threat of Kurdish unrest in the north-east is of long standing. Damascus's well-established policy of 'divide and rule' was manifest in government schemes that encouraged Arab groups to settle in some of the most fertile land there. Kurdish discontent was dealt with in part by official encouragement for fundamentalist elements among the Arabs, even though these were linked to the rebellion. Again, this paradoxical strategy helped Bashar al-Assad to present himself as a more palatable alternative. As one Kurdish activist put it, "Lots of Kurds are saying we are right not to rebel because we look at the

²¹⁵ Human Rights Watch (2011b).

²¹⁶ Human Rights Watch (2011b).

²¹⁷ Birke (2013).

alternative and it's these corrupt Islamist groups.”

Meanwhile, the armed opposition was accused of taking insufficient steps to reassure minorities, including the Kurds.²¹⁸ In fact, some jihadist rebel groups ended up attacking Kurds in the north-east and sending tens of thousands of people into Iraq.²¹⁹ The regime made some attempts to woo the Kurds by making concessions on citizenship, by withdrawing most of its combat troops from Kurdish areas, by exempting predominantly Kurdish areas from much of the regime's direct violence,²²⁰ and even by channelling assistance to armed Kurdish elements (alongside its support for rival Arab groups). However, support for Kurdish armed groups has in many ways disempowered civil society, as local people find themselves caught in a struggle between unrepresentative armed groups who often care more for their own interests than the civilians they claim to represent.

Assad always needed significant Sunni support as well as support from minorities if he was to survive, and wealthier Sunnis were another key constituency. One Syrian human rights worker remembered:

The Syrian elite has some intermarriage, for example, the President's wife is Sunni [Assad himself has an Alawite background]. It's to solidify the elite and for business purposes, but they encourage sectarianism in the general population – to divide the opposition and maintain their privileges...

As people dared to protest in 2011, there was at least the possibility of a less ethnically divisive politics. While ethnic and religious tensions were not easily swept aside (and many minorities remained aloof from the uprising from the outset), the same human rights worker noted the beginnings of a new spirit:

In the early days of the revolution, Syrians came together. There was a great openness. People were discovering that people they'd been encouraged to hate or distrust actually had a great deal in common with them. People were discovering, for instance, that the Alawi [Alawites] were not all privileged and many were actually living in villages without electricity...

Yet armed conflict tended quickly to reverse this process: “War has reignited differences and fears of the other. It's renewed comforting conspiracies and separate world-views.” As in many other wars, sectarian sentiments were as much a *product* of conflict as a cause.²²¹

Even as he tried to shore up domestic support with the Salafist ‘bogeyman’,

218 Interviews with Kurdish human rights workers.

219 See e.g. Chulov (2013).

220 See, e.g., Jonathan Steele (2015) ‘The Syrian Kurds Are Winning!’, *New York Review of Books*, 3 December.

221 Cf. Turton.

Assad was also courting an *international* audience. This helped him secure material support from Russia and Iran as well as staving off the threat of Western military intervention.

By highlighting the threat of ‘Sunni extremism’ (and the threats to the Shi’ite Alawites in particular), the Syrian regime successfully appealed to the Iranian government and Hezbollah, with Iran being consistently determined to promote its influence in Syria, to counter the influence of Saudi Arabia, and to preserve supply routes through Syria for Iranian arms destined for Hezbollah.²²²

For Assad, support from Iran has been a lifeline in a context where the Syrian regime has not been able to rely on its own army. Weiss and Hassan noted in 2015 that Iranian-backed militias “have taken on more and more military responsibility as al-Assad’s conventional forces have deteriorated, died, or fled.”²²³ Drawing on information from Russians closely acquainted with regime strategies, Lister noted in April 2017:

*... the [Syrian] national army retains no more than 20,000 personnel who it believes to be sufficiently trained, offensively deployable and loyal for use in key operations. Iran on the other hand has key hands in Syrian paramilitary and foreign Shia militia forces that may now number 150,000 men at arms. Some of those groups are designated terrorist organizations, legally no different from al-Qaeda or ISIS...*²²⁴

Even where Sunni troops remained within the Syrian military, their loyalty has often been doubted, and this underlines the importance of the militias. Significantly, Tehran presented its interference in Syria (and Iraq) as part of its own ‘war on terror’,²²⁵ while many Iranian fighters were sent to Syria with the ostensible purpose of protecting Shia shrines against the threat of ‘Sunni extremists’.²²⁶ There have also been various Iraqi militias in Syria on the regime’s side, funded, armed and directed by the Iranian regime, again ostensibly protecting Shia holy shrines against ‘Sunni extremists’.²²⁷

Russian support for Assad was vital in shoring up his regime in 2015 (as we shall see). When highlighting and nurturing the threat from ‘terrorists’ and ‘fundamentalists’, the regime was also courting political favour in Moscow. Even before the Syrian war, Russia – a key ally for Assad – had for many years framed its counter-insurgency as counterterrorism, and particularly after 9/11 Moscow exaggerated the links between Chechen rebels and al-Qaeda, for

²²² See e.g. Lister (2017b).

²²³ Weiss and Hassan, p 139.

²²⁴ Lister (2017b.)

²²⁵ PressTV.

²²⁶ Naame Shaam.

²²⁷ Naame Shaam, p 34.

²²⁸ Mann (2003).

example.²²⁸ Yet Russia never prioritised the assault on ISIS (as we shall see).

Assad also had Western audiences in mind. Preventing Western military intervention against his regime was naturally a major priority – particularly in the light of Western interventions in Iraq and Libya, for example. And just as Assad had tried to position himself as someone who could help the US in Iraq (by controlling the flow of jihadists from Syria), he also tried to position himself as someone who could help the US in Syria. The regime’s international discourse was illustrated in October 2013 when Syria’s Deputy Prime Minister Walid al-Moualem told the UN General Assembly that the conflict ravaging Syria was not a civil war but a war on terror.²²⁹ In line with Assad’s strategy, some influential Western actors bought into the regime’s ‘anti-terrorism’ narrative. In a 2015 article, Peter Seeberg noted “changes in the prevalent narrative of the EU from an ‘Arab Spring narrative’ to focusing on security or even counter-terrorism”.²³⁰ In December 2015, a *Telegraph* article was boldly entitled “Let’s do a deal: Why we should work with Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad in Syria”. The article supported the military advances being made by Assad, proposing that the Syrian President was the best hope against ISIS’s “evil death cult”. Boris Johnson, the author of the article, became UK Foreign Secretary in July 2016.

Following the intensified assault on eastern Aleppo in 2016, which Johnson rightly if rather incongruously condemned, Peter Ford (who was British ambassador in Damascus from 2003 to 2006) said Assad’s government should be given “a little credit” for the “relatively peaceful” end to the siege in Aleppo. He said there was a Christmas tree in Aleppo’s central square, which would not be there “if the other side had won.” Assad was the lesser of two evils in relation to the *jihadi* opposition, he added.²³¹

Syrian fears around violent jihadist groups are indeed not to be underestimated, and Assad has been strikingly successful in using the threat of violent jihadism to underpin his system of political repression and economic exploitation. As we shall see in section 4, these tactics have been greatly facilitated by the West’s ‘war on terror’ framework, which also powerfully shaped external military interventions as well as international aid.

229 *Asia News Monitor* (2013), ‘Syria: Conflict in Syria ‘a war on terror’, Deputy Prime Minister tells UN General Assembly’, 7 October.

230 Seeberg, p 31.

231 Wintour (2016c). See also remarks by Baroness Cox, House of Lords Debate, 4 July 2017. Middle East (IRC Report) – Motion to Take Note, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, <https://www.hart-uk.org/news/house-lords-debate-4th-july-2017-middle-east-irc-report-motion-take-note/>.

4

International interventions and the war system

Much existing criticism has focused on Western governments' choice – at least until US President Donald Trump's attack on a Syrian airbase in April 2017 – not to intervene militarily against the Assad regime. Such intervention was eschewed even after the regime crossed what had appeared to be a 'red line' and used chemical weapons in 2013. The chronic lack of protection for Assad's victims in the course of Syria's war is well known, as are the many problems and unanticipated side-effects of military interventions that did take place elsewhere (for example, in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya). In contrast to the usual emphasis on *sins of omission*, the discussion in this section focuses primarily on international interventions that *did* take place. Of course, we should acknowledge at the outset that reducing the suffering arising from Syria's war has been an extremely difficult and complex task. That said, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the pattern and nature of international interventions has actually fed into the conflict in important ways. An increasingly narrow focus on counter-terrorism proved especially counterproductive, particularly in the context of local disillusionment at the lack of military intervention against Assad.

4.1 Western military intervention against ISIS

The overwhelming majority of civilian casualties in Syria have been caused by Assad's forces and Assad's allies.²³² A January 2016 *Foreign Policy* assessment,

²³² Lynch.

while stressing the difficulty of knowing casualty levels (and the variety of estimates), cited a Syrian Network for Human Rights estimate that the Assad regime had killed 180,000 of its own people while ISIS had killed 1,712; meanwhile, the Violations Documentation Centre within Syria was giving a significantly higher figure of 4,406 for those killed by ISIS.²³³

In any case, the imbalance is clear, and it has not been reflected in patterns of military interaction. It is striking that although Syria's uprising began in March 2011, Western military intervention in the Syrian war did not occur until the summer of 2014; and when it did occur, it did not target the perpetrator of the great majority of killings and other abuses (the Assad regime) but rather a group that is normally (if somewhat misleadingly) seen as one of the regime's many opponents (ISIS). In many ways, this represented a stunning success for the Assad regime's ongoing project of delegitimising rebellion. The growing Western focus on ISIS meant that, for many, Assad was no longer 'public enemy number one'; it certainly seems to have taken some of the diplomatic pressure off the Assad regime. The Western-led 'war on terror' not only chimed dangerously with Assad's continuing insistence that he too was waging a 'war on terror'; it also encouraged Russia's destructive military intervention (consistently labelled by Moscow as a 'war on terror').

Western military intervention in Syria seems to reflect a long-standing belief – going back to the Vietnam war and beyond – that one can solve the problem of mass violence by eliminating a particular group of 'evil' people. Yet the evidence that 'terrorism' can be physically eliminated by military means is remarkably thin,²³⁴ and military interventions have very frequently caused more problems than they have solved.²³⁵ Nevertheless, terror attacks in the West have created strong political pressure to respond militarily and to 'show strength'. Most media accounts and analyses accept ISIS atrocities as a 'given' and endorse the need to eliminate this 'evil'. Considering the nature of ISIS atrocities, this is hardly surprising. But it is also important to consider what *generates* atrocities, factors that may include past and present military interventions.

Following the attacks of September 11 2001, Washington made an explicit commitment to a 'war on terror' and this framework has remained extremely influential. It is true that Barack Obama explicitly rejected the 'war on terror' label when he took over the presidency from George W. Bush in 2008. Nevertheless, Obama made it clear that the US *was* at war with specific 'terrorist'

233 Lynch.

234 See e.g. Jones and Libicki.

235 See e.g. Keen (2012), Gordon.

organisations, namely the Taliban and with al-Qaeda and its affiliates, while there was also a significant escalation in US drone attacks on ‘terrorist’ targets under Obama. In addition, 2011 saw NATO forces – in alliance with local rebels – overthrowing the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi, with one important rationale being Gaddafi’s history of support for international terrorism.

The political stakes in the continuing military struggle against terrorism are certainly high. In September 2015, according to the *Daily Beast*, 50 intelligence analysts working out of the US military’s Central Command formally complained that their reports on ISIS and al-Nusra were being inappropriately altered by senior officials to exaggerate the efficacy of attempts to weaken them militarily.²³⁶ Despite the huge resources devoted since 2001 to what in practice has been a continuing series of wars with the explicit aim of eliminating terrorists, there has been little agreement on how to measure the success of military operations against ‘terrorists’, and evaluation has often been weak and sometimes non-existent.²³⁷

In August 2014, the US began bombing ISIS in Iraq and at the end of September 2014 the UK began its own airstrikes on ISIS in Iraq. In July 2014, the US bombed an ISIS base in Syria, and then intensive airstrikes on ISIS in Syria were carried out by the US and its regional allies from September 2014. In November 2015, 130 people were killed in terror attacks in Paris, with ISIS claiming responsibility. French President Francois Hollande immediately declared the attacks to be an act of war by ISIS and launched retaliatory strikes on ISIS in Raqqa. In December 2015, the British Parliament authorised British airstrikes against ISIS in Syria.

The level of civilian casualties from these various military operations is highly contested. Commenting on the US’s Operation Inherent Resolve (which targets ISIS in both Iraq and Syria), spokesman Col. Steve Warren said in April 2016:

*... after 20 months and 40,000 weapons releases, we’re certain. We’ve completed investigations that lead us to believe that the preponderance of evidence indicates that there have been 26 civilian casualties. And that – that’s, I mean, remarkable by anyone’s standard. And so I think that level of – that remarkable level of precision will continue.*²³⁸

However, much higher estimates have been made by Airwars, a UK-based, journalist-led monitoring NGO, and by the UK-based Syrian Observatory

²³⁶ Harris and Youssef.

²³⁷ Johnson and Tierney.

²³⁸ U.S. Department of Defense (2016b), ‘Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Warren via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq’, 20 April, Colonel Steve Warren, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman.

for Human Rights, both of which compile and assess reports of casualties. Up to 23 August 2017, Airwars estimated a minimum of 5,117 civilians had been killed in airstrikes by the US-led Coalition in Syria and Iraq.²³⁹ In August 2016, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights noted 6,004 deaths in coalition airstrikes in Syria since September 2014, including 599 civilians of whom 163 were children.²⁴⁰ While attacks on oil infrastructure and bridges over the Euphrates help in weakening ISIS, they also present huge challenges when it comes to quickly reviving the economy and preventing economic crisis from continuing to encourage recruitment into militant groups.

The choice of targets by violent groups may change over time, partly reflecting the nature and source of interventions against it. Insofar as al-Nusra has resorted to terror attacks, these have been largely aimed at Syrian targets (especially the regime). When al-Nusra leader al-Jolani was asked in May 2015 how al-Nusra might react if the US and its Western allies continued to target the group in Syria, he said al-Nusra had received guidelines from al-Qaeda to refrain from attacking the West and America, adding, “but if this situation continues like this I believe that there will be outcomes which will not... benefit ... the West and... America.”²⁴¹

Airstrikes could also provoke certain kinds of violence *against Syrians*. In *The Raqqa Diaries*, Samer observed of ISIS in the city: “Every time they feel threatened, they lash out at us, rather than at their actual enemies flying above us.”²⁴² In February 2015, Sarah Birke reported:

The people from Raqqa told me that in the days after the first American air strikes [which escalated in December 2014] ISIS fighters melted back into the population, making them harder to target, but relieving some of the repressive apparatus, such as checkpoints, in the city. Only in the evenings did the group come back out, to tell residents that America’s campaign was a war against Islam. Some Raqqa residents said that until the US-led air strikes, you were safe if you followed the rules, however perverse... But the air strikes have made ISIS more paranoid and prone to kidnapping people randomly...

A key problem with seeking a military solution to the problem of ISIS has been ISIS’s ability to replace many of the fighters who have been killed. A March 2015 report in the *New York Times* observed, for example, that even as US strikes were killing ISIS members, the flow of foreign fighters into ISIS

239 Airwars.org (the website gives updated running totals).

240 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2016), “About 600 civilian casualties between 6000 killed by coalition airstrikes in 23 months”, 24 August.

241 Gerges (2016), p 188.

242 Samer, p 82.

remained robust,²⁴³ while Rim Turkmani suggested – also in 2015 – that Western airstrikes against ISIS had actually helped it to recruit more supporters amid frustration that the West had not intervened against Assad.²⁴⁴ ISIS also benefited, as noted, from its ability to pay recruits well. By April 2016, the US military said flows of foreign fighters to ISIS had fallen by around 90 per cent from the previous April (from around 2,000 a month to around 200 a month). An economic squeeze on ISIS (including trade restrictions and physical destruction of cash reserves) had meant that salaries had been halved or sometimes not paid at all.²⁴⁵ But the ability of ISIS (or any successor groups) to find new recruits in a landscape of devastation should still not be dismissed. The same goes for al-Nusra and other militant fundamentalist groups.

Even if we assume that ISIS can be pushed out of its territory in Syria, the effects on security in Western countries are uncertain. In December 2016, a Europol report warned that more foreign fighters would return to the EU as ISIS lost ground in Syria and Iraq. It also noted that the terror threat to the UK remained severe, and highlighted the return of around half of the 850 Britons who had travelled to Syria and Iraq.²⁴⁶ Experience from other conflicts (such as the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s) suggests that the subsequent dispersal of ex-combatants around the world can feed into disparate and lasting terror campaigns.²⁴⁷

Another difficulty in Syria arises from the existence of not one but two ‘rogue’ entities. Since ISIS and al-Nusra have tended to be bitter rivals on the battlefield, military strikes on ISIS have risked boosting al-Nusra, while military strikes on al-Nusra have risked boosting ISIS. A May 2015 Middle East Security Report noted:

*Particularly if Jabhat al-Nusra succeeds at its aim to capture the Syria revolution, and particularly if Iraq and Syria do not recover as states, al-Qaeda will position itself to gain from ISIS’s losses. The U.S. could inadvertently degrade ISIS and incidentally empower al-Qaeda at the same time with the surgical anti-ISIS approach it has been pursuing since August 2014.*²⁴⁸

Perhaps in part to guard against such dangers, Washington sought to combat al-Nusra as well as ISIS, even entering into a 2016 (aborted) agreement with Russia jointly to target al-Nusra.

²⁴³ Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt and Anne Barnard (2015), ‘Battered but unbowed, ISIS is still on offensive’, *New York Times*, 13 March. See also Ackerman.

²⁴⁴ Turkmani, p 24.

²⁴⁵ Stuster. The US military said airstrikes had taken out huge stockpiles of cash.

²⁴⁶ Fiona Hamilton (2016), ‘Europol warning over Isis threat to Britain’, *The Times*, 3 December.

²⁴⁷ E.g. Kepel on Afghanistan.

²⁴⁸ McFate, p 33.

Over a period of years, al-Qaeda affiliated groups have been able to position themselves domestically – with considerable success – as a more ‘reasonable’ alternative to ISIS.²⁴⁹ A March 2017 Institute for the Study of War report noted, “Al-Qaeda has defeated the acceptable opposition in northern Syria and is prepared to re-establish itself rapidly in areas from which ISIS withdraws.”²⁵⁰

With the advent of the Trump Presidency, 2017 saw an intensified military push against ISIS, and a major US-backed offensive aiming to push ISIS out of its Syrian headquarters at Raqqa. On the ground, the attack on Raqqa has been carried out by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in which the YPG has been dominant, with some Syrian Arab militias also involved. The SDF has been receiving arms, training and air support from the US and its anti-ISIS international coalition.²⁵¹ Even setting aside the possible advantages for al-Nusra (now subsumed in HTS), this renewed military push may not bring lasting defeat for ISIS (or its possible successors). Moreover, the intensified US-led military campaign has already had a number of damaging effects on security in Syria and the wider region.

One key consideration is that weakening ISIS in urban areas does not tackle its strength in rural areas. Experience in both Iraq and Syria has underlined the benefits for ISIS of strategic retreat to relatively remote areas.²⁵² In September 2014, the Institute for the Study of War argued that ISIS must be pushed out of its urban bases as a priority: “Driving ISIS from major urban centers in Iraq and Syria is essential.... Current U.S. strategy, by contrast, is operating almost exclusively outside of urban centers and offers no obvious path to retake the cities.”²⁵³ However, by March 2017 the Washington-based think tank was urging a military focus on *rural* areas controlled by ISIS, proposing “an operation in southeastern Syria – instead of Raqqa”.²⁵⁴ At this point, the focus on Raqqa was seen as unsustainable because of a reliance on Kurdish forces who were not indigenous to the city and because the operation was driving a wedge between the US and Turkey. On the other hand, the proposed intervention in south-eastern Syria was presented as a way of boosting US influence in neighbouring Iraq in a context of rising Iranian influence there.²⁵⁵

249 Cafarella et al. (2017).

250 Cafarella et al. (2017), p 11.

251 E.g. Barnard (2017).

252 Cafarella et al. (2017).

253 Kagan et al. (2014), p 22.

254 Cafarella et al. (2017), p 9.

255 Cafarella et al. (2017). The March 2017 Institute for the Study of War report also noted “Iran and Iraqis aligned with Tehran are preparing to use the 2018 elections to replace Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider al Abadi with a pro-Iranian candidate, who will likely order US and coalition forces out of Iraq or curtail their actions below levels required to destroy ISIS and other jihadists.” (Cafarella et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, the US-led military assault on Raqqa in particular risks stimulating extra support for abusive jihadist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliated factions. Yet while Washington noted such effects during the Russian-Iranian-Assad regime assault on Aleppo in late 2016 (saying it was forcing opposition moderates into the hands of extremists),²⁵⁶ US government officials have been much more reluctant to acknowledge the same risk in relation to *US-led* attacks.

While the great majority of people in Raqqa would be immensely relieved to see ISIS depart, the degree to which they suffer and die in the process will naturally affect allegiances. But already the US-led attack on Raqqa has led to significant civilian casualties. On 14 June 2017, UN war crimes investigators denounced “a staggering loss of civilian life” caused by the US-backed campaign, saying increased airstrikes had led to the deaths of at least 300 civilians in the city.²⁵⁷ On 22 August 2017, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that 167 civilians (including 59 children) had been killed by coalition airstrikes on Raqqa over the previous eight days.²⁵⁸ In relation to civilian casualties, the US government has stated that it has “post-strike methodologies that have been refined and honed over the years”; but in June 2017 US General Paul Bontrager admitted it was rare for the US to have anyone talking to people on the ground after an airstrike in Syria.²⁵⁹ In 2017 (up until the beginning of June), Airwars casualty estimates were around eight times as high as US government estimates.²⁶⁰

A graph compiled by Airwars compares reported casualties in Syria inflicted by Russian forces with reported casualties in Syria and Iraq inflicted by US-led coalition forces. It shows that in every month of 2017, reported casualties from US-led coalition strikes *exceeded* those from Russian strikes, while in every month before that (going back to October 2015) casualties from Russian strikes exceeded those from US-led coalition strikes.²⁶¹ Trump’s inauguration in January 2017 marks the switch.

A variety of regime chemical attacks – including but not restricted to the attack on Khan Sheikhoun on 4 April 2017²⁶² – show that the August 2013 Russian-facilitated deal did not actually dismantle the regime’s chemical weapons

256 E.g. BBC News (2016b) ‘Syria conflict: US says Russia driving rebels into extremists’ camp’, October 2016. www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-37525655.

257 Shaheen (2017).

258 Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2017).

259 Solvang (2017).

260 Human Rights Watch (2017b).

261 Airwars (2017), accessed 17 August 2017 (airwars.org).

262 Human Rights Watch (2017a).

capability.²⁶³ While the retaliatory US Tomahawk strikes on the regime's al-Shayrat airbase were widely publicised, there has been less attention to a dramatic increase in civilian casualties caused by US-led coalition airstrikes.

The attack on Raqqa has involved the use of white phosphorous chemicals, something that sits uneasily with Western governments' denunciation of Assad's appalling use of chemical weapons. The *New York Times* noted on 10 June 2017 that:

*Images and reports from witnesses in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa suggest that the United States-led coalition battling the Islamic State there has used munitions loaded with white phosphorus, the use of which in populated areas is prohibited under international law.*²⁶⁴

After examining video evidence, Amnesty International noted "The US-led coalition's use of white phosphorous munitions on the outskirts of al-Raqqa, Syria, is unlawful and may amount to a war crime."²⁶⁵ White phosphorous is a lethal chemical that burns through human flesh. It is also used to create smoke-screens and hide troop movements. In Afghanistan, the US military accused militants of using white phosphorous munitions in attacks on American forces and in civilian areas, describing this usage as "reprehensible."²⁶⁶

By end-July 2017, the attacks in Raqqa governorate had displaced some 200,000 people,²⁶⁷ while those displaced were facing restrictions (for 'security reasons') on moving to other urban areas.²⁶⁸ An estimated 20–50,000 people remained trapped in Raqqa, the UN said.²⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch noted in June 2017 that "Anti-ISIS forces should... take into account the increasing use of civilians as human shields by ISIS."²⁷⁰

The coalition attack on Raqqa has also been accompanied by inadequate humanitarian and reconstruction aid, which will also affect the way the attack is viewed on the ground. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) noted that residents were drinking water (trucked from the Euphrates river) that was unfit for human consumption. Young adult males were noticeably underrepresented in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps amid reports of extended screening procedures and a large conscription

263 Lister (2017b).

264 Barnard (2017).

265 Amnesty (2017b).

266 Associated Press (2009).

267 OCHA (2017b).

268 Human Rights Watch (2017b).

269 OCHA (2017b).

270 Human Rights Watch (2017b); see also OCHA (2017a).

campaign by the Kurdish administration in SDF-held areas.²⁷¹ Abuses against ‘suspected’ ISIS collaborators have been well documented in neighbouring Iraq.²⁷²

A final problem with the assault on Raqqa is the way it has exacerbated tensions between the Kurds and the Turkish government (dynamics discussed in more detail in section 4.3).

4.2 Russia’s intervention and the escalating assault on Aleppo: a permissive environment

In 2016, the Obama administration pinned a lot of its hopes for progress in Syria on a strategy of increased cooperation with Russia. Given the need to find leverage on Assad, the reluctance to pursue ‘regime change’ through military means, the apparent cooperation over removing Assad’s chemical weapons and the obvious dangers in antagonising a nuclear superpower, the attempt was in some ways understandable. It seemed to offer the prospect of stopping regime air attacks, freezing the frontlines – and even the possibility of peace. However, the idea that peace could be built on some kind of ‘common hostility’ towards terrorism proved unworkable; indeed it actively fed into violence through several important mechanisms. In fact, the Western-led ‘war on terror’ framework helped to create a *permissive environment* for both Russia’s military intervention in September 2015 and the devastating attacks on Aleppo in 2016.

It is important to understand the growing pressures on the Assad regime by 2015. Some idea of these pressures is conveyed in Abboud’s November 2015 study:

During the conflict, more than 40,000 SAA [Syrian army] fighters are believed to have lost their lives and many regime loyalists from across Syria’s sectarian mosaic have begun to openly question and challenge the utility of sending soldiers to their deaths... The combination of low military morale, rampant defections, loyalist discord about rising deaths, disintegration within its ranks, and mistrust among SAA soldiers have all forced the regime to turn to civilian or non-Syrian violent actors.²⁷³

²⁷¹ OCHA (2017a); O’Brien (2017). Child conscription has also been reported (UN WebTV). Kevin Kennedy, Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis, OCHA, on the humanitarian situation in Syria (press conference 29 June 2017). See also Shaheen (2017).

²⁷² See e.g. Channel 4 (2017), ‘ISIS and the battle for Iraq’, Dispatches, 6 April.

²⁷³ Abboud (2015a), p 116.

Even among the Alawites, loyalties were already strained as early as 2013. As one Syrian government official said,

*Alawites are paying a very heavy price, so much so that it has become difficult for the regime to draw on them too much. I think that is why we are turning to other reservoirs such as Hezbollah and Iraqi militias.*²⁷⁴

In these circumstances, foreign backers became increasingly essential for the Assad regime. A former regime soldier told us in 2013:

*The Syrian army is very weak. How did it stay in power? It had very big help from the Russian generals, advisers, on tactics – and Iran, and Hezbollah have provided soldiers. The Syrian army has no real tactics, no academic knowledge, it's just a bunch of stupid people going for the money! But the real force is the Iranian and Hezbollah soldiers, they are trained very well.*²⁷⁵

While that view would seem to underestimate the strategising within the regime military, the latter's weaknesses were certainly striking – and indeed helped precipitate the war in the first place when soldiers defected.

In a war that often appears completely intractable, there has always been the hope that if the regime feels sufficiently vulnerable, concerted international pressure could induce some kind of negotiated settlement based on a measured transition away from Assad's autocratic rule. In May 2015, the northern towns of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughour fell to rebel groups (including al-Nusra), apparently without much government resistance, and this sounded major alarm bells in Moscow as well as Damascus.²⁷⁶ The *Guardian* was suggesting that the Syrian regime was on the brink of collapse.²⁷⁷ It is hard to know how close to collapse it actually was (and observers have frequently underestimated its resilience), but the weakness of the regime was certainly striking in several crucial respects. Even though senior Syrian military figures spoke of 130,000 soldiers being at their disposal in late 2015, the number of combat-ready troops in the war-fatigued army was, according to a Russian Ministry of Defence official quoted by Souleimanov, around 25,000.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁴ International Crisis Group (2013b), p 23; see also Hamidi; Hezbollah fighters stressed their experience in urban warfare compared to the Syrian army (Naame Shaam). Kozak notes, "The SAA intensified an indiscriminate conscription campaign in late 2014 amidst reports that the conflict had killed as many as one-third of fighting-age males among Syrian Alawites. Activists reported the conscription of underage children and prisoners into units that received less than one week of training before battlefield deployment." (Kozak (2017), p 1).

²⁷⁵ See also Abboud (2013); Abboud (2015a); Naame.

²⁷⁶ Black.

²⁷⁷ Martin Chulov (2015), 'Amid the ruins of Syria, is Bashar al-Assad now finally facing the end', *Guardian*, 24 May.

²⁷⁸ Souleimanov.

The weakness of Assad's position was underlined by the uncertainty of support from Iran at this point, with Iran's Revolutionary Guards reportedly reluctant to fight in Syria and their numbers having been reduced from 2,000 to 700 in late 2015. It is true that Iran was providing Shi'ite volunteers and mercenaries from Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, and that Hezbollah militias were relatively combat-ready. But even Hezbollah fighters' morale had been hit by high casualty rates.²⁷⁹

However, just at the point when Assad seemed to be struggling, Russia entered the fray in September 2015 with its own proclaimed 'war on terror'. Significantly, Russia cited Western military intervention in Syria as a precedent for its own military intervention.²⁸⁰ As noted, the US and other Western governments had already been attacking ISIS in Iraq in 2014, and the US had also begun military operations against ISIS in Syria in 2014; these earlier interventions created a context in which Russia could claim that its own military intervention was part of a pre-existing international military effort to combat terrorism directed at ISIS in particular, a claim that promised at least a veneer of international legitimacy. In many ways, the incentive and cover that the 'war on terror' framework provided for Russian attacks mirrored the incentive and cover that this framework provided for Assad's diverse violence against rebels and civilians.

In any event, the possibility that the weakness of the Assad regime might have allowed some kind of negotiated solution rapidly disappeared. The Russian focus on saving the Assad regime (instead of fighting a common jihadist foe) was illustrated by three things: the commencement of Russian airstrikes as rebel forces got within eight kilometres of the presidential palace; the concentration on western Syria; and the targeting of moderate FSA militias and affiliated secular or moderate Islamist groups.²⁸¹ It is worth noting that descriptions of rebels "8 kilometres from Damascus" may obscure the patchwork nature of rebel control (with some suburbs of Damascus having been under rebel control for a considerable period). But Russia's intervention certainly put a struggling Assad regime back on the offensive. Moscow's intervention also seems to have spurred a resurgence in support for Assad from Iran, which supplied militias for the escalating assault on Aleppo in 2016 as well as allowing Russia to use Iran as a base from which to launch air strikes from August 2016.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ Souleimanov; see also Black.

²⁸⁰ Russia's UK ambassador Alexander Yakovenko said, "We entered the conflict on 30 September 2015. The western coalition had already been active there for years, dropping bombs and missiles, and supporting the highly-praised 'moderate opposition' against the radicals – as they say."

²⁸¹ Souleimanov, p 109.

²⁸² MacFarquhar and Sanger.

The US State Department said in October 2015 that more than 90 per cent of Russian airstrikes until then had not been against ISIS or al-Qaeda affiliated fighters, with the Russians instead targeting opposition groups that were trying to depose Assad.²⁸³ Not only did Russian airstrikes hit mostly non-ISIS targets but they killed large numbers of civilians in the process.²⁸⁴ Even before the escalating assault on eastern Aleppo in 2016, Russian airstrikes often deliberately targeted schools, markets, hospitals and other civilian facilities.²⁸⁵ In this, the attacks paralleled the regime strategy of demolishing governance structures that offered an alternative to its own and those of ISIS.²⁸⁶ Meanwhile, Russia's overwhelming focus on non-ISIS targets actively *helped* ISIS – by weakening some of ISIS's rivals among the rebels.²⁸⁷ Souleimanov notes that by 2016, “against the background of the critically weakened and fragmented moderate rebel groups, [ISIS had] turned into one of the two major remaining military forces in Syria, alongside the Assad troops.”²⁸⁸

Moscow had several compelling reasons for backing Assad. First, Moscow was alarmed at Western-induced regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and thus keen to prop up the incumbent government in Syria.²⁸⁹ These concerns underline that a wider Western ‘war on terror’ provided motivation – as well as cover and legitimacy – for Moscow's military intervention in Syria. Second, Russian military intervention in Syria held out the prospect of reducing Moscow's diplomatic isolation and exerting increased diplomatic leverage – not least in relation to Ukraine, which remains a key priority for Russia.²⁹⁰ In this sense, Russia may – like Assad – be less interested in *winning* than in *instrumentalising violence* for political purposes. Third, Russia's base at Tartus – its only Mediterranean base – is a significant consideration, whose importance “has increased dramatically in the context of Moscow's deteriorating relations with the West over the Ukraine crisis, as Russia has sought to increase its naval presence in the Mediterranean.”²⁹¹

283 *Guardian*/AFP. 2015. “‘More than 90%’ of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted Isis, US says”, (7 October). A year later US State Department official Brett McGurk said 70% of Russian airstrikes are against the opposition, many of whom are fighting ISIS (Andrew Dunn (2016), ‘Obama envoy: 70 percent of Russian strikes don't hit ISIS’, *The Hill*, 2 October).

284 www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russian-jets-pound-syrian-provinces-in-fresh-wave-of-attacks-says-watchdog. Souleimanov (p 110) notes, “... according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, within less than half a year, Russian warplanes in Syria caused the deaths of more civilians than the Islamic State during several years of brutality.”

285 E.g. Souleimanov, p 110.

286 Rana Khalaf, personal communication.

287 Shaheen (2015), www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/10/russian-airstrikes-help-isis-gain-ground-in-aleppo.

288 Souleimanov, p 112.

289 E.g. Charap; Allison.

290 Souleimanov.

291 Souleimanov and Petrylova, p 71.

Sometimes the entities that are most loudly condemned are also the most useful. And ISIS has proved useful to Russia not only within Syria, but also as a way to extend its *regional* influence. First, Russia has been able to strengthen its ties with Iran via cooperation over military interventions in Syria.²⁹² Second, ISIS has offered Russia chances to increase its influence in Iraq, where Moscow has been selling weapons and increasing its involvement in oil extraction;²⁹³ some weapons have been supplied to Iraq specifically to halt the jihadists' advances.²⁹⁴ Third, by providing limited (if negotiable) support to the Kurds against ISIS in Syria, Russia has been able to exert pressure on Turkey (a key NATO ally), helping to spur a diplomatic rapprochement between the two countries (discussed further in section 4.3). Fourth, Russia has used the ISIS threat to extend its influence in Egypt, for example via Russian advisers.²⁹⁵ Fifth, as Souleimanov and Petrylova observe, "Moscow has tended to over-emphasize the threat of the Islamic State in order to reassert its grip over Central Asian states, the elites of which have grown increasingly suspicious of Moscow."²⁹⁶

Another reason why Russia may have more tolerance for ISIS than it claims is that ISIS may actually be absorbing Russian 'troublemakers'. Souleimanov and Petrylova investigated this issue and observed:

*According to some local sources, the flow of North Caucasians from Russia to volunteer in the Syrian civil war has, for the first time since the early 2000s, virtually stopped the inflow of new recruits into locally operated jihadist units. This may at least partially explain the somewhat relaxed stance of Russian authorities toward the recruitment of jihadists from within Russia.*²⁹⁷

A final point is that enemies can be helpful for the weapons trade. In November 2015, Anatoly Isaikin, the head of Russia's state-owned arms trading company Rosoboroneexport indicated that Russia's military involvement in Syria was "good testimony for Russian armaments".²⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch noted

292 Chulov. Iran apparently looking to secure a land corridor stretching from Iran across Arab Iraq through the Kurdish north of Iraq and on to Kurdish north-eastern Syria, the battlefields of Aleppo, down to the outskirts of Homs and on through the Alawite heartlands to the Mediterranean.

293 Souleimanov and Petrylova.

294 Souleimanov and Petrylova, p 66.

295 Souleimanov and Petrylova.

296 Souleimanov and Petrylova, p 74–75: "... Moscow has referred to the common threat of Islamic State extremism to pressure Kyrgyz authorities to agree to the establishment of a new Russian military base in the city of Osh. The Russian military base on the border of Tajikistan and Afghanistan is also being reinforced, with Russia having promised Dushanbe supplies of weapons worth billions of dollars. Such a move would further increase this poor Central Asian country's dependence on Moscow. According to local sources, Uzbekistan and formally neutral Turkmenistan have also been pressured by Moscow to collaborate more closely to deter the threat of the Islamic State."

297 Souleimanov and Petrylova, p 70. Interestingly, Turkish officials accused *European* governments of attempting to export jihadists to Syria, documenting several foreign fighters leaving Europe on passports registered on Interpol watchlists (Shaheen, 2016).

298 Human Rights Watch (2016b).

that Russian airstrikes in Syria appear to have contributed to buyer interest in Rosoboronexport weaponry and could result in billions of dollars in new contracts.²⁹⁹

Although Russia had uses for ISIS, it also had some very significant concerns. In October 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility after a Russian passenger plane exploded over Egypt. While this disaster took place *after* the Russian military intervention in Syria, it did illustrate the seriousness of the threat from ISIS. As noted, some recruits to ISIS (and al-Nusra) have come from Russia's predominantly Muslim areas (to which they might be expected to return).³⁰⁰

Russia's strong preference for attacking Assad's enemies rather than ISIS should not have been a surprise for Washington, given that Russia is closely allied with Assad, whose forces have themselves focused primarily on non-ISIS rebels. Inattention to the collusion between ISIS and Assad may have helped to create the blind-spot in relation to Russia's actions and intentions.

Despite Russia's clear preference for attacking non-ISIS targets, many American officials seem to have *wanted to believe* that Russia shared an anti-ISIS agenda – or at least that Russian priorities were moving in this direction. Some seven months after the US State Department acknowledged that around 90 per cent of Russian attacks were against non-ISIS targets, a May 2016 article in *Foreign Policy* quoted a senior US official as saying, "A lot of what we're trying to do is de-escalation and refocus on positive counter-ISIL actions the Russians could be taking."³⁰¹ Given fears about ISIS and al-Nusra, the weakness of Assad's position in 2015 became a concern for some officials in Washington as well as Moscow.³⁰² Samer Abboud even discerned in the West a very gradual attempt to recapture Assad as an ally – a shift that may have been driven, in part, by consistent Russian pressure.³⁰³ Asked in April 2016 about Russia's choice of targets, the US's Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman, Colonel Steve Warren, said:

Well, you know, when the Russians first came in, they claimed that they wanted to fight ISIS, and in reality, only a small fraction of their strikes were against ISIL. About 80 percent of their strikes were against the opposition. Since the cessation of hostilities was declared [in February 2016], we have seen that shift. At one point, the Russians

299 Human Rights Watch (2016b).

300 Souleimanov.

301 Roy Gutman (2016b). See also Barnard, Pecanha and Watkins.

302 The May 2016 article in *Foreign Policy* quoted an anonymous senior US Government official as saying there was a real concern in Russia "about a potential catastrophic success" by rebel forces in mid-2015, "where Assad collapses, but so do all the Syrian state institutions, and you have even more of a failed state. What Russia has done is return it to the stalemate". (Gutman, 2016b).

303 Abboud (2015b).

*really have – they primarily had been striking ISIL. At one point, I think in the last, I don't know, week or so, the Russians we estimated – really more than 70 percent of their strikes were against ISIL.*³⁰⁴

It is true that Assad's forces recaptured the historic city of Palmyra in late March 2016, with Russian backing. But this victory – trumpeted by both Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin as a victory over terrorism³⁰⁵ – was the exception rather than the rule. Souleimanov's assessment is that the retaking of Palmyra was among the “episodic exceptions” to the general pattern of Russia targeting non-ISIS rebels.³⁰⁶ Moreover, the ‘capture’ of Palmyra involved significant ISIS-regime collaboration, as noted.

Drawing on IHS Conflict Monitor data and maps, the *New York Times* reported in March 2016, first, that Russian airstrikes since September 2015 had been concentrated in areas held by rebels who were not affiliated with ISIS and who often clashed with it, and, second, that when Russia *did* strike ISIS targets it was mostly in areas where ISIS had threatened the regime (notably Palmyra, Deir al-Zour and an airbase near Aleppo).³⁰⁷ Here again, the underlying motivation seems to have been protecting Assad.

In any case, the escalating assault on Aleppo in 2016, with gains at the expense of ISIS being only marginal east of Aleppo,³⁰⁸ suggests strongly that any Russian focus on ISIS was short-lived. Significantly, Palmyra was retaken by ISIS in December 2016, a success that Russian bombing of ISIS forces was unable to prevent.³⁰⁹ Russia withdrew soldiers from its small military base in Palmyra shortly before this second ISIS takeover.³¹⁰ Palmyra was recaptured in March 2017 by regime forces with backing from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah.³¹¹

The February 2016 Syrian ceasefire agreement – in which Russia and the US were key players – specifically exempted al-Nusra and ISIS from the ceasefire itself. The agreement gave the impression that Moscow and Washington were teaming up to confront terrorism. But this was very misleading. At the time, Kagan and Kagan saw the ceasefire as “a big win for the Russians and the Syrian regime”.³¹² First, it allowed them “to consolidate and prepare for further

304 U.S. Department of Defense (2016), ‘Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Warren via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq’, 20 April, Colonel Steve Warren, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman.

305 E.g. World Bulletin/News Desk. 2016; see also Baczko et al. on the Assad regime wanting to *appear* to combat ISIS.

306 Souleimanov.

307 Barnard, Pecanha and Watkins.

308 Czuperski et al.

309 Robert Fisk (2016), ‘There is more than one truth in the heartbreaking story of Aleppo’, *Independent*, 13 December.

310 Anne Barnard (2016), ‘ISIS close to recapturing Palmyra from Syria forces’, *New York Times*, 10 December.

311 Kozak (2017).

312 Kagan and Kagan (2016).

advances while preventing the opposition that the US ostensibly supports from attempting to undo any of their gains.”³¹³ Second, it did not require Assad’s forces to allow humanitarian access to the hundreds of thousands of people trapped in and around Aleppo and other besieged areas.³¹⁴ For the Russians it would therefore be a licence to “continue their encirclement, siege and targeting” of Aleppo, and therefore “continue to weaken the non-Jabhat al-Nusra, non-ISIS opposition now concentrated in Aleppo and likely strengthen the hands of the terrorist organizations they purport to be attacking.”³¹⁵

On similar lines, Cafarella and Casagrande observed in February 2016:

*Despite Russian claims that pro-regime operations in Aleppo harm Jabhat al-Nusra, the group provides only a fraction of the opposition’s combat power in the city and thus stands to lose little. Continued regime operations in Aleppo will likely accelerate radicalisation and strengthen Jabhat al-Nusra’s leadership over a hardened core of committed fighters. Jabhat al-Nusra will likely emerge from the Aleppo fight with considerable credit for its role supporting the opposition in Aleppo’s defense regardless of the outcome.*³¹⁶

The February 2016 ceasefire was negotiated by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), mostly FSA members with some representation from Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham. The ceasefire largely held for several weeks with popular protests resuming under the FSA flag, and protesters in Idlib governorate coming under attack from al-Nusra in March.³¹⁷ The next few weeks, showed, in microcosm, how peace tends to favour the more moderate factions in Syria, while war tends to favour more hardline jihadist elements. Charles Lister noted “the socially grounded popularity of the FSA”³¹⁸ and commented:

*absent horrific levels of violence, many people turned to the FSA and not the militarily powerful Jabhat al-Nusra. The sustainability of that dynamic reversal, however, depended on three things: the CoH [Cessation of Hostilities] remaining in place, the fulfillment of humanitarian conditions set out in the ISSG-backed UN Security Council Resolution 2254, and the political track demonstrating real progress towards a political transition in Damascus.*³¹⁹

With many armed opposition groups feeling exasperated at what they saw as blatant regime violations of the Cessation of Hostilities, al-Nusra was able to

313 Kagan and Kagan (2016).

314 Kagan and Kagan (2016).

315 Kagan and Kagan, p 1.

316 Cafarella and Casagrande, p 3.

317 Lister (2016).

318 Lister (2016), p 21.

319 Lister (2016), p 21.

persuade many of these groups to return to war.³²⁰ Meanwhile, offensives by Nusra (from July 2016 re-branded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham [JFS]) were used as justifications for attacks by the regime and its allies; in turn, these ceasefire violations by the regime repeatedly helped Nusra/JFS to persuade fellow rebels to resume attacks, which then encouraged further regime attacks.³²¹ Meanwhile, in the south – where the FSA's Southern Front had declared in April 2015 that it would stop cooperating with al-Nusra³²² – the Southern Front held to the ceasefire (under pressure from Jordan, which controlled its funding).³²³

Predictions of further regime/Russian attacks on non-Nusra opposition in Aleppo proved accurate, as did the prediction that al-Nusra (or rather a twice-renamed version) would gain credibility from the assault on Aleppo. Moreover, in the context of a joint and escalating assault on Aleppo by Russia and the Assad regime, al-Nusra/JFS does indeed seem to have commanded significant support from non-Nusra groups who were told to separate from al-Nusra/JFS.

Another factor that seems to have cleared the way for the escalating assault on Aleppo was Washington's tendency at times to exaggerate al-Nusra's strength in Aleppo and to imply that this justified attacks. As an article in *Foreign Policy* in May 2016 noted:

In a series of inaccurate or loosely worded statements, [US] officials have implied Nusra Front has a major presence in Aleppo – assertions that the Russian and Syrian governments could interpret, or exploit, as an invitation to carry on with the bombardment. The tally of missile, bomb and artillery attacks on the city suggests that the primary target is civilians, not moderate rebel forces supported by the United States, and certainly not Nusra Front, whose presence in the city by most estimates is modest.

After referring to an 'uptick' in Syrian regime violence, the US's Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman Colonel Steve Warren said in April 2016:

... we have seen, you know, regime forces with some Russian support as well begin to mass and concentrate combat power around Aleppo. So this is something we're concerned about and something we'll keep an eye on. That said, it's primarily al-Nusra who holds Aleppo, and of course al-Nusra is not part of the cessation of hostilities... our focus remains ISIL [ISIS].³²⁴

If Washington's aim was to signal to Russia and the regime that attacks on Aleppo should stop, this statement was particularly unhelpful; it even seemed

³²⁰ Lister, 2016.

³²¹ Bonsey (2017a).

³²² Lister (2016).

³²³ Lister (2016).[0]

³²⁴ U.S. Department of Defense (2016), 'Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Warren via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq', 20 April, Colonel Steve Warren, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman.

to have elements of *an invitation*. In its May 2016 article, *Foreign Policy* quoted a top official from an international group sending relief to northern Syria: “I can find no-one who thinks that Nusra is in control, aside from the US spokesperson. Totally inaccurate. They’re the faction with the least presence.” Similarly, Osama Taljo of the Aleppo City Council commented: “Nusra has no weight in Aleppo. To say that Nusra exists in Aleppo is only a pretext to bomb civilians. Nusra is there in the form of small groups, not even military groups, rather they are elements of Nusra who fight in the south of Aleppo and live in Aleppo.”³²⁵ Asked to check the validity of his April 2016 statement, Colonel Warren said “I was incorrect when I said Nusra holds Aleppo. Turns out that our current read is that Nusra controls the northwest suburbs” and other groups control the centre. But Colonel Warren’s remarks had already spread around the world, including BBC, Fox News and Iran’s Press TV.³²⁶ According to a December 2016 article in the UK’s *Independent* after the devastation of Aleppo, “The UK Foreign Office view is that only 200 or 300 of the fighters in Aleppo were loyal to al-Nusra, the al-Qaida franchise in Syria.”³²⁷

The issue of al-Nusra’s strength or weakness in Aleppo is very sensitive and remains controversial. Another source reported that by early 2016 al-Nusra did have a sizeable presence in Aleppo city, particularly in the north and west, while also overseeing most of the electricity and water supplies to eastern Aleppo. This source noted that few people had wanted openly to discuss Nusra’s presence at the time, but stressed that recognising Nusra’s presence in some areas was still no justification for the attacks by the regime and its allies. Whatever the exact extent of al-Nusra’s influence in Aleppo, it was dangerous to exaggerate it (as Warren did).

Another problem was Washington’s reticence on regime and Russian abuses. In May 2016, Roy Gutman noted in *Foreign Policy*:

*The Obama administration has chosen not to spotlight what by most definitions are widespread and systematic war crimes [in Aleppo]. On occasion, it blames the Syrian Air Force for bombing hospitals and other civilian targets but rarely discusses Russian violations. It doesn’t even share with the public the rampant infractions of the cease-fire it is overseeing. That’s all classified.*³²⁸

Christopher Kozak of the Institute for the Study of War commented in a May 2016 article: “It feels very much as if we’ve pinned a lot of hopes on a great power political settlement of the conflict in which we are willing to believe the

325 Gutman (2016b).

326 Gutman (2016b).

327 Wintour (2016c).

328 Gutman (2016b).

lies the Russians tell us to our faces in order to make it easier to believe in a settlement.”³²⁹ By September 2016, *Foreign Policy* was reporting that:

... senior officials at the Pentagon and other top brass privately say the Russians and their allies in Damascus exploited the previous cease-fire in February to regroup and hammer opposition forces – particularly in Aleppo – the symbolic epicentre of the five-year civil war.³³⁰

Russia repeatedly complained that the US had promised to separate the al-Nusra/JFS terrorists in Aleppo from the moderates, and that this did not happen.³³¹ Russia’s UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin suggested at a press conference on 17 September 2016 that Russia had been told in February by high-level US officials that it would take just two to three weeks to separate so-called moderate opposition from al-Nusra/JFS. As a justification for massive Russian attacks on civilians and non-Nusra/JFS opposition fighters in Aleppo, the Russian complaints were entirely irrelevant. What is true, however, is that despite repeatedly urging such a separation, the Americans could not actually achieve it. This was another convenient excuse for Russian aggression when separation was not achieved.

The September 2016 ceasefire arrangement announced by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov promised separation from al-Nusra/JFS even more explicitly than the February 2016 ceasefire. But as David Morrison comments in *openDemocracy*, “Having failed to separate the so-called ‘moderate’ opposition from al-Nusra in the aftermath of the February ceasefire, it’s puzzling that the US made this promise again – and went on to agree to co-ordinate military action with Russia against al-Nusra.”³³²

Such a separation was always going to be extremely difficult in the face of the continuing violence meted out to a wide range of rebels by the Assad regime. Because the physical threat from the Assad regime has been so severe, it has made sense for a variety of rebel groups to band together, even when there has been significant tension between them (sometimes including major ideological differences). This is not a new phenomenon, but a long-standing feature of the war. Again, a fundamental truth in the Syrian conflict – as in many other conflicts – is that people have gravitated towards military formations that promise and deliver some degree of protection. In Syria, the ideological *affinities* between al-Nusra/JFS and many non-Nusra groups were also an

³²⁹ Gutman (2016b).

³³⁰ De Luce, McLeary and Hudson, no page numbers.

³³¹ Yakovenko (2016).

³³² David Morrison. 2016. “Who broke the Syria ceasefire?” *openDemocracy*, 17 October.

obstacle to separation. In October 2016 Patrick Wintour noted in the *Guardian*, “The west, Russia and Syria agree that al-Nusra is a terrorist organization, but the group is fighting alongside moderate forces in Aleppo backed by the west and the moderate forces, many with similar ideological affinities, are unwilling to abandon them.”³³³

Those with a detailed knowledge of Syria have generally stressed the extreme difficulty in drawing a rigid line between those groups designated as ‘terrorist’ and other so-called ‘moderate’ groups in Syria. This applies especially to al-Nusra/JFS. Abboud noted in November 2015:

*Beyond the JAN and ISIS networks of violence... lies a complex, interconnected web of violent networks whose ideological affinities, allegiances, and military commitments are consistently shifting, rendering the attempt to classify groups into ‘moderates’ and ‘extremists’ an exercise in futility.*³³⁴

Not only was the US unable to separate the non-Nusra/JFS rebels from the Nusra/JFS rebels; it also seems to have had great difficulty getting many key non-Nusra/JFS rebels to sign the ceasefires of February and September 2016.³³⁵ Referring to the process of persuading the ‘moderate’ opposition formally to accept the terms of the September 2016 ceasefire, Morrison wrote in *openDemocracy*:

The indications are that the US failed to persuade several important groups to do so – representing perhaps as many as 70% of the total of ‘moderate’ fighters. This would not be surprising given that the terms of the ceasefire required support for the ‘full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254’, which, inter alia, calls upon UN member states to ‘eradicate’ al-Nusra’s ‘safe haven’ in Syria. So, by accepting the terms of the ceasefire, opposition groups were acquiescing in the destruction by the US and Russia of al-Nusra, an important player in the armed opposition with whom many of them co-operate and whose absence from the battlefield would greatly strengthen the government’s military position.

Given its ties to non-Nusra/JFS groups, the US was effectively in charge of compiling the list of groups signing up to the ceasefire, but the US government remained cagey on who had and had not signed. Some key facts did nevertheless emerge. Morrison notes that:

... on 11 September 2016, one of the largest groups, Ahrar Al-Sham [which has important support from Turkey], rejected the ceasefire proposal on the grounds that it would benefit the Syrian government and that it excludes certain opposition groups, for instance, al-Nusra, with which Ahrar al-Sham co-operates closely. And the next

333 Wintour (2016b).

334 Abboud (2015a), p 142.

335 David Morrison (2016), ‘Who broke the Syria ceasefire?’, *openDemocracy*, 17 October.

*day 20 other groups issued a statement rejecting the ceasefire on similar grounds. Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin told a press conference on 17 September 2016 that these 20 groups 'in our assessment comprise 70% of the so-called moderate fighters'... [on 14 September 2016] two days after the ceasefire began the US was still trying to persuade 'moderate' groups to formally sign up to it and was urging Turkey and Saudi Arabia to persuade their client groups in Syria to do likewise.*³³⁶

In June 2016, US Secretary of State John Kerry dubbed Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham as “subgroups underneath ISIS and Nusra”.³³⁷ The *Washington Post* noted that, “some Syrian groups saw his comments as an example of how the Obama administration has slowly but steadily moved toward the Russian view of Syria, which includes painting all opposition groups as terrorist.”³³⁸ While the Trump administration's approach to Moscow is naturally a focus of a great deal of media coverage, the extent of rapprochement with Russia over Syria *under Obama* is worth stressing (even if tensions later escalated when the full extent of Aleppo's devastation – and Russia's part in it – unfolded and when Russian links to Trump received more attention). Under Obama, US-Russian rapprochement included the plan to exchange intelligence with Russia as well as the plan to work together to defeat al-Nusra and ISIS militarily – steps that were very controversial in the eyes of some senior US military officers and some administration officials.³³⁹

The idea was to have an expanding ceasefire, increased access for humanitarian aid and a joint targeting of the spoilers ISIS and al-Nusra.³⁴⁰ For Washington at least, the cooperation with Russia was a peace plan and not simply a war plan. But the plan fell apart in September 2016 when a US/Coalition airstrike killed regime soldiers and the US blamed Russia for the bombing of a UN aid convoy.³⁴¹

In a 13 July 2016 article in the *Washington Post*, Josh Rogin noted that proposed US-Russian military cooperation would direct more American military power against al-Nusra. Rogin suggested that this would:

*expand the U.S. counterterrorism mission in Syria, ... be a boon for the Assad regime, ... spur terrorist recruiting, increase civilian casualties and put the United States firmly on the wrong side of the revolution in the eyes of the Syrian people.*³⁴²

³³⁶ See also Churkin, 17 September 2016 press conference.

³³⁷ Rogin (2016a).

³³⁸ Rogin (2016a).

³³⁹ Stewart and Ali.

³⁴⁰ E.g. *Economist* (2016), ‘The ceasefire unravels; Syria's widening war’, 24 September.

³⁴¹ *Economist* (2016), ‘The ceasefire unravels; Syria's widening war’, 24 September.

³⁴² Rogin (2016b).

Significantly, US aircraft, as well as Russian aircraft, were slated to attack al-Nusra/JFS. A US State Department document dated 15 July 2016 entitled “Approach for Practical Russian-American Efforts against Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra and Strengthening the Cessation of Hostilities” noted:

The process of target development through the JIC [Joint Implementation Center to be set up by the US and Russia in Jordan] and airstrikes against Nusra targets by Russian Aerospace Forces and U.S. air forces will be ongoing and continuous. [my emphasis]³⁴³

US criticisms of Russian violence might have been more effective had the US not been pursuing its own attacks against al-Nusra, albeit in locations less disastrous than Aleppo city. The US had already bombed an al-Nusra camp near the Turkish border in 2014, according to a report in the Washington Post.³⁴⁴ Such attacks risked losing ‘hearts and minds’, and Charles Lister noted later:

The U.S.’ September [2014] airstrikes targeting not just ISIS but also a shadowy wing of Jabhat al-Nusra labeled the ‘Khorasan Group’ placed additional pressure on FSA AOGs [armed opposition groups] in the North... All those FSA groups in northern Syria receiving assistance... saw their relationship with the West and the U.S. in particular become a public relations liability. In response, most AOGs issued statements of condemnation, renouncing U.S. action against Jabhat al-Nusra as counter-revolutionary, despite many such groups’ private concerns about Jabhat al-Nusra’s objectives in Syria... The FSA in particular dared not say anything else.³⁴⁵

A June 2015 article by Ahmed Rashid in the *New York Review of Books* mentioned that the US had been bombing al-Nusra alongside ISIS,³⁴⁶ and in August 2015 US forces attacked al-Nusra in support of opposition forces.³⁴⁷ On 24 August 2016, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that “136 fighters at least from Jabhat al-Nusra... were killed in the bombing by the [US-led] International Coalition’s warplanes on headquarters of Jabhat al-Nusra in the western countryside of Aleppo and the northern countryside of Idlib...”³⁴⁸

³⁴³ U.S. State Department (2016), ‘Approach for practical Russian-American efforts against Daesh and Jabhat al Nusra and strengthening the cessation of hostilities’, 15 July, p 2 [my emphasis], accessed December 2016, available from the author. See also *Washington Post* (2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2016/07/13/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/terms_of_reference_for_the_Joint_Implementation_Group.pdf, for a slightly different version, leaked to the Washington Post. This leaked document (p 2) says, “The process of target development through the JIG and airstrikes against Nusra targets by Russian Aerospace forces and/or US military forces will be ongoing and continuous.” See also Andrew Tabler (2016), ‘Closing loopholes in the proposed U.S.-Russian agreement on Syria’, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 14 July.

³⁴⁴ David Ignatius (2016), ‘Why America was bound to fail in Syria’, *Washington Post*, 15 December.

³⁴⁵ Lister (2016), p 15.

³⁴⁶ Ahmed Rashid (2015), ‘Why We Need al-Qaeda’, *New York Review of Books*, 15 June, NYRB blog.

³⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Defense (2016a).

³⁴⁸ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

One of the problems with a ‘war on terror’ is that the idea of a war suggests some degree of civilian casualties is both inevitable and acceptable. While international humanitarian law protects civilians in a number of important ways, it also has certain *permissive* aspects – notably when it outlaws incidental loss of civilian life “which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated.”³⁴⁹ When the US and Russia spelled out their joint approach on 15 July 2016 (in the document leaked to the *Washington Post*),³⁵⁰ they set out a definition of ‘designated areas’ (in which military action against al-Nusra/JFS would be pursued) that was quite wide-ranging and in many ways *permissive* of large-scale violence. Thus, they stated that the Joint Implementation Group [JIG, also referred to elsewhere as JIC] would:

*Designate a set of targets for airstrikes by the Russian Aerospace Forces and/or U.S. military forces related to Jabhat al-Nusra operations in designated areas. Designated areas include areas of most concentrated Nusrah³⁵¹ Front presence, areas of significant Nusrah Front presence and areas where the opposition is dominant, with some possible Nusrah Front presence. [my emphasis]*³⁵²

This formulation is very significant since it suggests that the US government was planning attacks (by its own forces and/or Russian forces) even in areas where the more moderate opposition was dominant and where there was no clear proof of al-Nusra/JFS presence. The *permissive* aspect of the 15 July 2016 plan was underlined when the plan stated that the first task of the Joint Implementation Group (JIG) would be to “[c]omplete, to the extent possible, no later than five days after the formation of the JIG, a common map of territories with high concentrations of Nusrah formations, to include areas where Nusrah formations are in close proximity to opposition formations, for precise target development.”³⁵³

The same joint plan stated that when Russian and/or US strikes began, regime combat air activities would be halted.³⁵⁴ Yet Andrew Tabler of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy noted that:

³⁴⁹ Additional Protocol I, Article 57, in ICRC (n.d.).

³⁵⁰ Andrew Tabler (2016), ‘Closing loopholes in the proposed U.S.-Russian agreement on Syria’, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 14 July.

³⁵¹ The spelling varies in this manner.

³⁵² *Washington Post* (2016), ‘Approach for practical...’, p 2 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2016/07/13/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/terms_of_reference_for_the_Joint_Implementation_Group.pdf).

³⁵³ *Washington Post* (2016), ‘Approach for practical...’, p 1.

³⁵⁴ U.S. State Department (2016), ‘Approach for practical Russian-American efforts against Daesh and Jabhat al Nusra and strengthening the cessation of hostilities’, 15 July, version subsequently available on U.S. State Department website. *Washington Post* (2016), (https://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2016/07/13/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/terms_of_reference_for_the_Joint_Implementation_Group.pdf).

*The most destructive operations that the regime, its Shiite militia allies, and Russian forces have launched against the opposition are artillery strikes. Such attacks are not included...., however, allowing regime and allied ground operations to continue unabated.*³⁵⁵

Again, the US-Russian plan was, in effect, *permissive* of a great deal of violence. Perhaps revealingly, the joint US-Russian plan of 15 July 2016 contained a reference to protecting non-combatants that was more than a little convoluted: “The participants are to conduct all efforts consistent with the intent to take all reasonable measures to eliminate non-combatant casualties.”³⁵⁶ There was no clear statement that civilians would be spared the escalating, jointly endorsed, assault.

Significantly, the Russians were giving the impression that the Americans were on the point of fighting alongside them inside Aleppo city itself. Thus, in a 16 August 2016 Reuters article headed “Aleppo: Russia ready to ‘fight together’ with US in shattered Syrian city”, Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu was quoted as saying:

*We are now in a very active phase of negotiations with our American colleagues. We are moving step by step closer to a plan – and I’m only talking about Aleppo here – that would really allow us to start fighting together to bring peace so that people can return to their homes in this troubled land.*³⁵⁷

Asked about these remarks, US State Department spokeswoman Elizabeth Trudeau did not issue a denial. “We have seen the reports,” she said, “and have nothing to announce... We remain in close contact [with Russian officials].”³⁵⁸

Meanwhile, much of the American public may also have been confused by Washington’s ‘joint plan’ with Moscow. After noting that Russia said it was close to joining the US in a military operation to attack Aleppo, Next News Network’s Gary Franchi signed off: “So there you have it, the United States, leaves a shimmer of hope there, working and coordinating with the Russians to free Aleppo from the scourge of ISIS.”³⁵⁹

Permissive signals from Washington went further. Persistently unable to separate al-Nusra/JFS from non-Nusra/JFS groups (including in Aleppo city),

³⁵⁵ Andrew Tabler (2016), ‘Closing loopholes in the proposed U.S.-Russian agreement on Syria’, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 14 July.

³⁵⁶ *Washington Post* (2016), ‘Terms of Reference for the Joint Implementation Group’, p 1 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/tr/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2016/07/13/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/terms_of_reference_for_the_Joint_Implementation_Group.pdf).

³⁵⁷ *Guardian*/Reuters in Moscow (2016).

³⁵⁸ *Guardian*/Reuters in Moscow (2016).

³⁵⁹ Gary Franchi, NextNews Network, ‘Russia says it’s close to join military operation with U.S. in Aleppo’, 15 August 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYhITqt4LdY>.

the US government ended up making direct and explicit threats even to non-Nusra/JFS groups, apparently in the hope of achieving a last-minute separation. In a letter to opposition groups on 10 September 2016, US Special Envoy for Syria Michael Ratney warned: “We urge the rebels to distance themselves and cut all ties with Fateh [JFS]... , formerly Nusra Front, or there will be severe consequences.”³⁶⁰ Morrison notes:

*... at a briefing on 15 September 2016, State Department spokesman Mark Toner agreed under questioning from journalists that opposition groups would be ‘targeted’ if they failed to physically separate themselves from al-Nusra by the time the US and Russia had established the Joint Implementation Center and were ready to strike al-Nusra targets.*³⁶¹

This represents a significant widening of the enemy and reveals the flawed logic in the idea that a ‘war on terror’ will simply target ‘the bad guys.’ *It was precisely because such targeting was extremely unrealistic that the definition of the enemy was widening.* In a desperate attempt to achieve a separation that the realities of the Syrian war were consistently preventing, the US made explicit threats against non-Nusra/JFS opposition groups. The fact that the US was itself threatening to ‘target’ non-Nusra/JFS groups (and acknowledging they had not separated from al-Nusra) will also have made it more difficult to criticise Russia for attacking non-Nusra/JFS groups.

If we go back a few years, the origins of the 2016 US–Russian cooperation over Syria seem to lie – in part at least – in the agreement to dismantle Assad’s chemical weapons. After the August 2013 Syrian regime chemical attacks, Putin’s apparent ability to persuade Assad to comply allowed Obama to avoid military intervention despite Assad’s forces crossing the ‘red line’ of chemical weapons use, even if subsequent use of chemical weapons by the regime suggests compliance was more limited than it appeared.

In the south, there had been a degree of success in marginalising al-Nusra, and the FSA Southern Front’s financial reliance on Jordan had helped adherence to a cessation of hostilities agreed with Russia, notably in early 2016.³⁶² But separating ‘good guys’ from ‘bad guys’ in Aleppo proved to be an impossible undertaking. The contradictions in the American stance were underlined by Washington’s support for ostensibly ‘moderate’ rebels who were closely linked to al-Nusra/JFS elements (a support that sat oddly with subsequent

³⁶⁰ David Morrison (2016), ‘Who broke the Syria ceasefire?’, openDemocracy, 17 October, citing Gareth Porter, ‘Al Qaeda’s ties to US-backed Syrian rebels’, *Consortium News*, 13 September. Kerry again urged non-Nusra groups to separate from Nusra and framed it as a ‘warning’ (Morrison).

³⁶¹ David Morrison (2016), ‘Who broke the Syria ceasefire?’, openDemocracy, 17 October.

³⁶² Lister (2016).

threats of military strikes on non-Nusra elements if they did not separate from al-Nusra). Supporting ‘moderate rebels’ has been a staple of Western policy, sometimes mostly at the level of rhetoric, but many of these groups have increasingly benefited from CIA military support. A detailed investigation, published in January 2016 in the *Daily Beast*, noted:

*Analysis of the geography of ‘moderate’ rebels’ gains... and reports from the battlefield demonstrate that CIA-backed groups collaborated with Jaysh al-Fateh, an Islamist coalition in which Jabhat al-Nusra – al Qaida’s official Syrian affiliate – is a leading player... CIA-backed groups in northwestern Syria publicly acknowledge their relationship with the al Qaida affiliate. A commander of Fursan ul-Haq, a rebel group that received TOW missiles through CIA channels, explained that ‘there is something misunderstood by world powers: We have to work with Nusra Front and other groups to fight’ both Assad’s regime and the Islamic State.*³⁶³

The article went on to note, “When fighting a regime as brutal as Assad’s, it is natural to look for allies wherever they can be found.”³⁶⁴ Al-Nusra’s joint offensives with other Islamist rebel groups included an offensive in northern Aleppo governorate against ISIS and one in southern Aleppo against the Syrian regime and its Shi’ite militia and Iranian allies.³⁶⁵ The investigation of CIA links continued:

*... at this point it is impossible to argue that U.S. officials involved in the CIA’s program cannot discern that Nusra and other extremists have benefited [from American help]. And despite this, the CIA decided to drastically increase lethal support to vetted rebel factions following the Russian intervention into Syria in late September [2015]. Rebels who previously complained about the CIA’s tight-fistedness suddenly found the floodgates open, particularly with respect to TOW missiles.*³⁶⁶

In circumstances where Nusra got a lot of credit locally for standing up to Assad, US attacks on Nusra could undermine the groups the CIA was backing. David Ignatius noted in the *Washington Post*, “In 2014, I visited the leaders of one of the [CIA]-vetted groups, known as Harakat al-Hazm, at a safe house along the Syrian-Turkish border. The fighters were despondent. The United States had just bombed a Jabhat al-Nusra camp nearby, seeking to kill militants from its so-called Khorasan Group. The CIA-backed fighters said this action had destroyed their credibility. They were right. Jabhat al-Nusra soon chased them from their headquarters.”³⁶⁷

³⁶³ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr (2016), ‘The CIA’s Syria program and the perils of proxies’, *The Daily Beast*, 19 January; see also David Ignatius (2016), ‘Why America was bound to fail in Syria’, *Washington Post*, 15 December.

³⁶⁴ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr.

³⁶⁵ Anzalone.

³⁶⁶ Gartenstein-Ross and Barr.

³⁶⁷ David Ignatius (2016), ‘Why America was bound to fail in Syria’, *Washington Post*, 15 December.

A further contradiction is that even when the US has militarily confronted al-Nusra, its key regional allies have often been pushing in the opposite direction. In June 2015, Ahmed Rashid noted in the *New York Review of Books*: “In Syria, the United States has been bombing Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s local affiliate, alongside ISIS. But members of the US-led coalition against ISIS, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, are actively supporting al-Nusra with arms and money.”³⁶⁸ Turkey has distanced itself from Nusra/JFS/HTS, but tensions with the US remain: a March 2017 Institute for the Study of War report noted “Turkey supports the al-Qaida penetrated Ahrar al-Sham.”³⁶⁹

If Washington’s support for groups with links to al-Nusra/JFS sat oddly with attacks on al-Nusra/JFS (both planned and actual), the contradiction was not lost on the Russians – and it seems to have fuelled Moscow’s sense of righteous indignation in relation to Washington. In a 17 September 2016 press conference, a visibly furious Vitaly Churkin, Russia’s ambassador to the United Nations, noted that non-Nusra rebels had not been separated from Nusra/JFS rebels and that 70 per cent of the moderate fighters had said they would not comply with the renewed cessation of hostilities. By “arming, preparing, training various armed opposition groups, ignoring the fact that they had been working with Jabhat al-Nusra and other terrorist groups, ignoring the fact that many of those groups which they regarded as moderate opposition were resorting to terrorist tactics”, the US had “really allowed the genie to get out of the bottle.”³⁷⁰

Trump’s election victory on 8 November 2016 does not seem to have helped the situation. In fact, a relative lull in attacks on eastern Aleppo from 18 October 2016 ended in mid-November when Russian and pro-Assad forces launched attacks on eastern Aleppo – a day after Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin spoke on the phone, reportedly emphasising the need to combat “international terrorism and extremism.”³⁷¹

Even after the fall of Aleppo, the combined exclusion and targeting of al-Nusra/JFS continued to pave the way for regime attacks, notably near Damascus. As the ICG’s Noah Bonsey noted in January 2017:

The exclusion of Fath al-Sham [JFS] [from the Russian-Turkish-Iranian-brokered December 2016 ceasefire] provides a gigantic loophole for the regime and its allies to continue attacks, using the presence of Fath al-Sham fighters, real or imagined, as a pretext. This occurred during the early 2016 Cessation of Hostilities, and is currently happening in Wadi al-Barada, north-west of Damascus, which the regime has

³⁶⁸ Ahmed Rashid (2015), ‘Why we need al-Qaeda’, *New York Review of Books*, 15 June, NYRB blog).

³⁶⁹ Cafarella et al. (2017), p 8.

³⁷⁰ Churkin.

³⁷¹ Graham-Harrison (2016b). The account of the conversation came from Putin’s office.

*continued to attack throughout the ceasefire. (The regime cites the alleged presence of Fath al-Sham in justifying its Wadi al-Barada offensive; the group's presence is disputed, but it appears to compose at most a small minority of rebel fighters there.)*³⁷²

Lister refers to a 'great sorting out' of opposition factions in 2016–17. The two factions emerging as dominant were HTS (formerly Nusra/JFS) and Ahrar al-Sham (a militant Salafist group with Turkish backing that felt HTS had not dissociated itself sufficiently from al-Qaeda); FSA formed a third group. Significantly, HTS had benefited from presenting itself as the only credible hope against Assad in the context of apparently falling Western enthusiasm for supporting the opposition. HTS also found a receptive audience for its narratives that America had betrayed the revolution and that the Sunnis had to defend themselves against Shia.³⁷³

Alarming, the Western focus on combating ISIS and al-Nusra appears to have combined with protection failures – not least in relation to Aleppo – to produce a growing perception among Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq that the West has been allied – in practice if not in theory – with a set of actors (including Russia and Iran) who have been able to kill civilians with impunity. A March 2017 Institute for the Study of War report commented that:

*The moderate opposition was destroyed when Aleppo fell, apart from a limited set of groups in southernmost Syria... The population critical to defeating Salafi-jihadis decisively – the Sunni Arab community – now perceives the United States as complicit in a Russo-Iranian campaign to destroy it.*³⁷⁴

This in turn feeds into a degree of sympathy with violent jihadist groups who offer protection to this Sunni community.³⁷⁵ In Idlib, to which large numbers have retreated from Aleppo, the moderate armed opposition is fragmented while the dominant groups are Ahrar al-Sham and HTS.³⁷⁶ The US has conducted an increasing number of airstrikes in Idlib, reportedly leading to significant civilian casualties, reflecting in part the ability of al-Qaeda fighters to integrate into local Syrian communities.³⁷⁷

Meanwhile, as Kahl et al. noted in June 2017,

The Astana 'de-escalation zones' deal [arising from Russian-Iranian-Turkish peace talks] requires Assad's forces to refrain from flying over the designated areas, but

³⁷² Bonsey (2017a).

³⁷³ Lister (2017a).

³⁷⁴ Cafarella et al. (2017), pp 15, 13.

³⁷⁵ Cafarella et al. (2017).

³⁷⁶ Kahl et al. (2017).

³⁷⁷ Kahl et al. (2017).

provides a loophole for continued operations against 'terrorists' (which the regime has historically defined as the entire opposition).³⁷⁸

The obvious danger is that the 'war on terror' will continue to be a stalking horse for much wider violence as well as provocation for more militancy.

We can see, then, that Russia's posture of attacking terrorism had provided Moscow with a degree of impunity and political cover for backing the Assad regime, reversing the trend in a war that had been going badly for Assad in the months preceding the Russian intervention. The result was a huge toll in civilian suffering, most notably in Aleppo. The US government was distracted by the Russian pretext of a 'war on terror' with which it hoped to find common cause (and somehow a basis for peace), while the existence of a joint US-Russian plan to target al-Nusra/JFS (as well as actual attacks on al-Nusra by the US-led coalition) helped to create a permissive environment for Russian attacks on Aleppo in particular. US policy was severely hampered by the perceived imperative to make war on 'terrorism' in a Syrian context where al-Nusra/JFS was not only able to intimidate and hide among both civilians and non-Nusra/JFS factions but also to attract considerable support from civilians and non-Nusra factions because of its record of standing up to Assad.

Trying to fit a 'war on terror' template onto this complex reality proved a recipe for disaster. Most importantly, it allowed the relentless and ruthless hijacking of the 'war on terror' by Moscow (as well as by Tehran and Damascus) in circumstances where Moscow had very little interest in confronting ISIS. The destruction also ended up fuelling violent jihadist groups, feeding into the militants' narrative that the West had betrayed Syrians in general and the Sunnis in particular. Yet the boost to militant groups (including Nusra/JFS/HTS) was predictable – and indeed was foreseen by several analysts in early 2016.

4.3 The Kurds and Turkey

While politicians in many countries have stressed a degree of international 'consensus' around destroying terrorism, the experience of many countries around the world shows, first, that the agendas of local 'allies' may differ significantly from the agendas of those who are driving or encouraging the enterprise from afar and, second, that the aims of these local 'allies' may themselves fuel violence in various ways.³⁷⁹ When it comes to Syria, the most

³⁷⁸ Kahl et al. (2017).

³⁷⁹ Keen (2012); Keen with Attree.

obviously unreliable ‘ally’ in the ‘war on terror’ (if we do not count the Assad regime itself) has been an *international government* – in the form of Russia. But the disadvantages of working with ‘allies’ who do not fully share your agenda have also extended to non-governmental groups inside Syria – and in particular to the Kurdish militias fighting ISIS.

In general, Washington has been keen to weaken ISIS with a minimal commitment of US forces on the ground and has seen supporting the Kurds and allied Arab groups (including with air cover and embedded special operations forces)³⁸⁰ against ISIS as the best option. In January 2015, the Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units, the military wing of the PYD) reversed – with US backing – ISIS’s earlier capture of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane, and US air support subsequently helped YPG to make significant military gains.³⁸¹ But while any weakening of ISIS has been widely welcomed, a heavy reliance on Kurdish militias has also had a number of *damaging* effects on security – in both Syria and in the wider region – that are generally little considered given the overwhelming international focus on weakening ISIS.

One major problem is that the YPG has not only been combating ISIS but a variety of rebel groups in northern Syria. This had the unanticipated effect of assisting the Assad-Russia-Iran alliance with their joint assault on rebel positions in Aleppo. Sadly, this represents another way in which Washington contributed to a permissive environment for the intensified assault on Aleppo.

Moscow itself channelled material assistance to the Kurdish YPG as well as support via aerial bombing. In February 2016, Philip Hammond (the then British Foreign Secretary) said there was “disturbing evidence” that the YPG was coordinating with both the Syrian regime and the Russian air force,³⁸² while an article in the UK’s *Telegraph* noted drily that with the YPG making gains at the expense of US-backed rebels, Washington was effectively “in a proxy war with itself”³⁸³

Certainly, the YPG’s gains in 2015 and 2016 caused a great deal of anxiety among opposition forces. A February 2016 report for the Institute for the Study of War noted:

380 Rampton.

381 International Crisis Group (2016), ‘Steps toward stabilising Syria’s northern border’, Briefing no. 49, Middle East and North Africa, 8 April; Louisa Loveluck (2016), ‘Hammond: ‘Disturbing evidence’ that Kurds are coordinating with Syrian regime and Russia’, *Telegraph*, 23 February.

382 Louisa Loveluck (2016), ‘Hammond: ‘Disturbing evidence’ that Kurds are coordinating with Syrian regime and Russia’, *Telegraph*, 23 February.

383 Louisa Loveluck (2016), ‘Hammond: ‘Disturbing evidence’ that Kurds are coordinating with Syrian regime and Russia’, *Telegraph*, 23 February.

*The majority of the opposition in Aleppo is deeply opposed to Kurdish expansion in the province. As such, the U.S. risks reigniting the conflict between the bulk of the Aleppo-based opposition and U.S.-allied Kurdish forces in Aleppo by empowering the YPG and allied opposition factions.*³⁸⁴

This seems to have been what happened. A July 2016 report by Fabrice Balanche noted how US-backed YPG units supported the Syrian army to cut off a road linking East Aleppo with areas outside the city, illustrating the “overall strategy of cooperating with Russia in order to connect the Kurdish enclaves of Afrin [Ifirin] and Kobane”.³⁸⁵

This pattern of YPG behaviour seems to have continued, moreover. At the end of November 2016, a *Middle East Eye* report by Arwa Ibrahim cited a number of local journalists from inside Aleppo who gave details of how rebels there had suffered from the twin advances of Kurdish and regime forces (with civilians often choosing to flee to Kurdish-controlled areas in preference to regime areas).³⁸⁶ The Syrian opposition accused the Kurds of cooperating with the Syrian Government via its ally Russia.³⁸⁷

A further major problem with American support for Syrian Kurdish militias against ISIS has been the damage inflicted on US-Turkey relations, relations already strained by Turkey’s tolerance for jihadists moving into Syria from Turkey and by numerous reports of Turkey’s support for al-Nusra.³⁸⁸

Strictly speaking, the US has been providing support not directly to the YPG but to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition consisting of the Syrian Kurdish YPG (the dominant group) and allied opposition groups. A key motive for the creation of the SDF in October 2015 seems to have been the possibility of deflecting Turkish accusations that the US is supporting a PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) affiliate in the form of the YPG/PYD. The PKK – branded a terrorist group by Turkey, the US and the EU – was itself nurtured by Turkey’s own version of the ‘war on terror’ when the Turkish military destroyed and evacuated thousands of Kurdish villages in the mid-1990s.³⁸⁹

The YPG retains overwhelming influence over the SDF,³⁹⁰ and the SDF’s advance predictably upset Turkey, which tends to oppose anything it sees as

384 Cafarella, p 4.

385 Balanche (2016b); on YPG-regime cooperation, see also Balanche (2016a).

386 Arwa Ibrahim (2016), ‘The Kurdish ‘frenemies’ aiding Assad in Aleppo’, *Middle East Eye*, 30 November.

387 Arwa Ibrahim (2016), ‘The Kurdish ‘frenemies’ aiding Assad in Aleppo’, *Middle East Eye*, 30 November; see also Louisa Loveluck.

388 Barkey, p 101; see also Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015), p 61; also interviews.

389 See, e.g., Robert Worth (2016), ‘Behind the barricades of Turkey’s hidden war’, *New York Times Magazine*, 24 May; Bacik and Balamir Coskun (2011).

390 Lister (2017b).

strengthening groups that are linked to Turkey's PKK (or anything that might promote Kurdish separatism more generally). ICG describes the Syrian Kurdish armed group the YPG as a "PKK affiliate",³⁹¹ and a May 2016 New York Times investigation noted that Ankara has tended to treat not just the YPG but anyone working with it (including Arabs) as terrorists.³⁹²

Turkey fears YPG successes in Syria will embolden the PKK as well as allowing increased YPG logistical support for the PKK across the border. Turkey strongly objected to the plan to make YPG territory in Syria contiguous by seizing the land between two of its enclaves (Afrin, north-west of Aleppo, and its holdings east of the Euphrates).³⁹³ In August 2016 Turkey sent troops into Syria, vowing to cleanse the border of ISIS but at the same time seeking to contain the territorial ambitions of the Syrian Kurds.³⁹⁴ Turkey's military incursion into Syria effectively halted the YPG's expansion west of the Euphrates, and by February 2017 the YPG was significantly weakened and dependent on Damascus for trade and for movement between majority Kurdish districts.³⁹⁵ Even as early as 2013, some of our sources were suggesting that Turkey was keener to limit Kurdish power than to limit jihadist groups like ISIS. Tellingly, in late 2014, as ISIS was capturing the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane, Turkey denied Washington permission to fly offensive operations out of the US Air Force base at Incirlik, southern Turkey.³⁹⁶

In general, Turkey's fears that Kurdish ambitions are not limited to the defeat of ISIS would appear to be well-founded. In June 2016 Kozak noted how, beneath the ostensible shared goal of defeating ISIS, actors were campaigning in northern Syria to their own ends: "The Syrian Kurds harbor ambitions to unite their disparate cantons and construct a contiguous autonomous zone upon terrain formerly held by ISIS along the Syrian-Turkish border..."³⁹⁷

ICG research among senior officials in the YPG and its various political fronts suggested that the PKK and YPG have seen an historic opportunity to advance Kurdish interests.³⁹⁸ According to ICG, this is a risky strategy: "the public U.S. denial of [YPG-PKK] links, despite overwhelming evidence, coupled with

391 International Crisis Group (2016), 'Steps toward stabilising Syria's northern border', Briefing no. 49, Middle East and North Africa, 8 April; see also International Crisis Group (2013a) and International Crisis Group (2014).

392 Worth (2016).

393 International Crisis Group (2016), 'Steps toward stabilising Syria's northern border', Briefing no. 49, Middle East and North Africa, 8 April.

394 See e.g. Gonul Tol (2016), 'Is Turkey a U.S. Ally Against ISIS?', *New York Times*, 26 August.

395 ICG (2017c).

396 Barkey.

397 Kozak, p 1.

398 International Crisis Group (2016), 'Steps toward stabilising Syria's northern border', Briefing no. 49, Middle East and North Africa, 8 April, p 3.

deepening military support, has heightened Ankara's mistrust of Washington and raised the ceiling of YPG aspirations."³⁹⁹

Significantly, when Russia and Iran joined forces with Assad to take back eastern Aleppo in 2016, their aggressive intervention was not matched by the rebels' various external backers, including Turkey. The *Independent's* Patrick Cockburn made the point that external intervention (and non-intervention) has usually been crucial in shaping (or preventing) any major shift in the balance of power between rebels and regime forces in Syria, adding that the fall of eastern Aleppo was no exception.⁴⁰⁰ Cockburn also noted that Turkey "has been largely mute about the fate of east Aleppo"⁴⁰¹ while Lister noted that Turkey had "in effect, sold Aleppo to Russia."⁴⁰² Cockburn further noted, "what is truly important about what we have just seen in Aleppo is that the outside allies of the armed opposition to Assad – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and, in a somewhat different category, the US – have not come to the rescue of the rebels whom they have previously supported." If Turkey's rapprochement with Russia helped seal the fate of Aleppo, US backing of Syrian Kurds against ISIS had done a great deal to prompt this rapprochement.

Significantly, Turkish forces appear to have been able to enter Syria in August 2016 without fear of Russian or regime airstrikes.⁴⁰³ Turkey and Russia went on to broker a new ceasefire agreement in December 2016, and were soon joined by Iran for tripartite discussions over Syria, with the US reduced to observer status. Turkey remains wary over US support for the Kurds and seems to feel that moving closer to Russia might give it more leverage over the Kurdish problem.⁴⁰⁴ Turkey has established a kind of security zone – apparently with Russian cooperation – in northern Syria as a check on Syrian Kurds' ambition for an expanded autonomous region.⁴⁰⁵ Coming right after the Russians' vicious assault on Aleppo, the rapprochement with Russia was a major turnaround for Turkey after relations had been soured in November 2015 when a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian warplane that was infringing on Turkish airspace.⁴⁰⁶ In moving towards Russia, Turkey seemed

³⁹⁹ International Crisis Group (2016), 'Steps toward stabilising Syria's northern border', Briefing no. 49, Middle East and North Africa, 8 April, p 7.

⁴⁰⁰ Cockburn (2016b), 'If Assad takes eastern Aleppo he'll think he's won the war', *Independent*, 12 December.

⁴⁰¹ Cockburn (2016b), 'If Assad takes eastern Aleppo he'll think he's won the war', *Independent*, 12 December.

⁴⁰² Lister (2017).

⁴⁰³ ICG (2017c).

⁴⁰⁴ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt (2017), 'Airstrikes by Russia buttress Turkey in battle v. ISIS', *New York Times*, 8 January; ICG (2017c).

⁴⁰⁵ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt (2017), 'Airstrikes by Russia buttress Turkey in battle v. ISIS', *New York Times*, 8 January.

⁴⁰⁶ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt (2017), 'Airstrikes by Russia buttress Turkey in battle v. ISIS', *New York Times*, 8 January.

to be easing off its efforts to unseat Assad,⁴⁰⁷ and the extent of Turkey-Russia cooperation was underlined when they carried out joint airstrikes against ISIS in January 2017.⁴⁰⁸

Meanwhile, Russia's support for the YPG seemed to be weakening in the context of Moscow's rapprochement with Turkey.⁴⁰⁹ The complexity of all these relationships was underlined when Russia actually offered a protective umbrella to the Kurds in Afrin (in the northwest of the Kurdish area) in early 2017, sending a signal that the partnership with Turkey had its limits.⁴¹⁰ These limits were also illustrated when Turkish President Recep Erdogan said he wanted Turkey to replace the SDF as Washington's main ally in capturing Raqqa, an offer that appears to have been rebuffed.⁴¹¹ Notwithstanding these complexities, the damage to US-Turkish relations arising from US support for the SDF/YPG is very clear.

A further problem with backing the Kurds against ISIS is that the Kurdish resurgence appears to have helped to erode the fragile Kurdish peace process within Turkey itself, an unravelling that threatens to escalate violence within Syria. For complex reasons, Turkey's 2013 ceasefire and a tentative peace process in relation to the Kurds effectively broke down in 2015. One important factor has been that support for the Kurds in Syria (and Iraq) has fed into a dangerous optimism within the PKK (apparently matched by a dangerous optimism among Turkish officials about the prospect of defeating the PKK). ICG noted in April 2016: "Nine months into a round of violence between Turkish security forces and the PKK that has killed at least 1,200 and displaced up to 400,000, both sides appear to view the war as heading in their favour."⁴¹²

Another growing source of instability inside Turkey has been ISIS itself. While the causes of ISIS terrorist attacks within Turkey are clearly complex, Turkey's increasingly active role in the 'war on terror' against ISIS in Syria does not appear to be helping. Security analyst Murat Yesiltas commented in *The New Turkey*:

Intensive large-scale raids by Turkish security forces against ISIS cells in Turkey, the opening of the critical Incirlik Air Base to International Coalition jets and the steady

⁴⁰⁷ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt (2017), 'Airstrikes by Russia buttress Turkey in battle v. ISIS', *New York Times*, 8 January.

⁴⁰⁸ Michael Gordon and Eric Schmitt (2017), 'Russians and Turks conduct joint strikes on ISIS in Syria', *New York Times*, 18 January.

⁴⁰⁹ ICG (2017c).

⁴¹⁰ Cengiz Candar (2017), 'Operation Euphrates Shield: A postmortem'. Al-Monitor/Reuters, 5 April.

⁴¹¹ Candar.

⁴¹² International Crisis Group (2016), 'Steps toward stabilising Syria's northern border', Briefing no. 49, Middle East and North Africa, 8 April, p. 2.

*bombardment of ISIS-controlled areas in Northern Syria by Turkish Armed Forces at the Syrian border are thought to be the major factors influencing ISIS to target Turkey increasingly.*⁴¹³

ISIS's interest in destabilising Turkey seems to have been boosted by the YPG's military drive against ISIS – if only so that ISIS can distract two of its main opponents by stoking hostility between them.⁴¹⁴ The growing terrorist threat within Turkey (whether from ISIS or the PKK) has adverse political as well as security consequences, with the Turkish Government justifying its increasingly authoritarian style as a legitimate response.

A further set of problems relating to external support for the Kurds against ISIS (whether US or Russian support) are problems of governance within Syria. Strengthening military groups among the Kurds tends to increase their power in relation to civilians, many of whom are already wary of these armed groups, and this wariness extends beyond non-Kurdish groups to many Kurdish civilians.

While many Kurds have given credit to the PYD and the YPG for protecting them against jihadist groups,⁴¹⁵ even in 2013 some Syrian Kurds were suggesting to us that the PYD often neglected the protection of Kurdish civilians and seemed to prefer boasting about its military victories. Civilians' concerns about the PYD have not gone away. Revealingly, the PYD has tended to have less civilian support in areas away from the front line of combat with ISIS and in Arab-majority areas.⁴¹⁶ In May 2014 ICG noted that the PYD "is often accused of human rights violations, targeting political foes and arresting as well as imprisoning civilians without evidence of wrongdoing."⁴¹⁷ After visits to Kurdish-administered areas in Hasakah and Raqqa governorates in July–August 2015, Amnesty International presented evidence of forced displacements and the razing of entire villages by the PYD, noting that these were "often in retaliation for residents' perceived sympathies with, or ties to, members of IS [ISIS] or other armed groups."⁴¹⁸

⁴¹³ Yesiltas.

⁴¹⁴ International Crisis Group (2016), 'Steps toward stabilising Syria's northern border', Briefing no. 49, Middle East and North Africa, 8 April, p 5: "IS has a clear stake in worsening conflict between Turkey (on one hand) and the PKK and YPG (on the other) and in instability in the region more generally. It moreover has demonstrated the capacity to exacerbate both, by provoking escalation between the PKK and Ankara and carrying out significant attacks in Turkey... The group has multiple interests in doing so. The YPG and Turkey are active participants in the fight against it (the former directly on the battlefield, the latter via artillery fire in support of allied rebel groups and enabling U.S. airstrikes from Turkish territory). Insofar as they focus on each other, they divert resources that might be deployed against IS and forego collaboration (if only indirectly) against it... The IS bombing in Suruc last year already provoked fighting between the PKK and Turkey, though whether by design is unclear..."

⁴¹⁵ International Crisis Group (2014), p 16.

⁴¹⁶ Khalaf (2016).

⁴¹⁷ International Crisis Group (2014), p 14; see also Ali; Human Rights Watch (2014).

⁴¹⁸ Amnesty International (2015a); see also Amnesty International (2015b).

In a July 2015 analysis, Ali Ali noted Assad's strategy of selling himself as a source of protection against 'extremist Islamists', and added, "PYD leader Saleh Muslim has parroted this narrative... , attempting to portray the PYD as protectors of moderates and minorities, and [to portray] the opposition as 'extremist Salafis.'" ⁴¹⁹ Opponents have also been accused of 'supporting terrorism', and at times the YPG seems to have provoked Islamist groups into attacking Kurdish areas by launching offensives against them alongside pro-regime militias. ⁴²⁰ One can see here how the discourse of a 'war on terror' and a 'war on extremists' – and the temptation to stir up extremists – reproduces itself not just from international to national level but also from national to sub-national level.

Kurdish civilians have also expressed suspicion surrounding the PKK's role in Syria as well as concern that the Syrian regime is too close to the PYD. ⁴²¹ Significantly, the PYD – and the Syrian Kurds' 'Rojava' self-governance project – emerged from the retreat of the Syrian regime (on which the Kurdish administration retained a dependence for resources and services) as well as from the need for protection from jihadist groups. ⁴²² As ICG noted in May 2014:

The PYD did not liberate Kurdish areas of Syria: it moved in where the regime receded; most often, it took over the latter's governance structures and simply relabelled them, rather than generating its own unique model as it claims... Rojava is thus more shell than rising sun, an instrument that enables the regime to control Kurdish areas... More than three years after the Syrian uprising erupted, the movement's popular legitimacy still seems largely a function of the threat that gave rise to it. ⁴²³

Suspicion and antipathy towards the YPG among non-Kurdish groups is a further concern. With the YPG apparently closing in on Raqqa, ICG's Noah Bonsey noted in December 2016:

... due to the YPG's approach to governance – delegating minimal responsibility to local bodies while clearly retaining more meaningful authorities in the hands of Kurdish YPG cadres – it is difficult to imagine the organisation achieving credible, sustainable governance in an overwhelmingly Arab city of Raqqa's size. ⁴²⁴

Turkish hostility towards the Kurds has also translated into gains for the Assad regime. Turkish President Erdogan vowed to move his troops and Turkish-

419 Ali.

420 Ali.

421 International Crisis Group (2014), p. 16.

422 International Crisis Group (2014), p. 16; Ali.

423 International Crisis Group (2014), p. 23.

424 Noah Bonsey (2016), 'What comes after the bloody battle for Aleppo?', International Crisis Group, Commentary, 15 December.

allied Syrian rebel forces toward Raqqa as a counterweight to the YPG. A March 2017 report in the *Washington Post* also described how Turkish-backed forces acquiesced in the handover of several villages near Manjib to the Assad regime after advancing into the area: “U.S. officials believe [Turkey] would far rather have the Syrian government in charge of Manbij than the Kurds”⁴²⁵

Similarly, Lister noted in March 2017 that a YPG-led victory in Raqqa would almost certainly lead to a further ‘hand-over’ to the Assad regime, and that this could “embolden ISIS and Al-Qaeda in a very big way...”⁴²⁶ The fall of ISIS in Raqqa is one thing; the question of what replaces ISIS is quite another.

In short, an increasing Western determination to wage war a ‘war on terror’ in the form of a military campaign against ISIS has led – given the extreme scarcity of Western ground troops – to a heavy dependency on Kurdish allies which itself has a number of dangerous implications. It has helped to undermine the Kurdish peace process within Turkey. It has prompted a Turkish military intervention in Syria (and Iraq). It has helped to push Turkey closer to Russia (with damaging effects on Aleppo). It also tightened the noose on Aleppo by giving a free hand to YPG fighters closing in on the city in 2016. It has led indirectly to the reacquisition of certain areas by the Assad regime. It has greatly exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in and around Raqqa. And it has fed into the impunity of the YPG in relation to Kurdish and Arab populations in areas it controls. An overriding preoccupation with combating ISIS tends to push these issues to the margins, but they are extremely important.

4.4 Resource scarcity: aid, sanctions and the ‘war on terror’

For the Assad regime, withholding aid to opposition areas has been a key part of its political and military strategy,⁴²⁷ and opposition areas in particular have seen levels of humanitarian assistance that have been extremely low in relation to very severe needs.⁴²⁸ Especially with the siege and fall of eastern Aleppo and then the significant gains made by the regime in the first part of 2017, the regime’s tactics seem to be proving successful. For its part, the international community – despite the heroic efforts of many individuals and organisations – has not mounted a sustained or effective challenge to the regime’s systematic

⁴²⁵ Karen de Young and Liz Sly (2017) ‘Pentagon plan to seize Raqqa calls for significant increase in U.S. participation’, *Washington Post*, 4 March; see also BBC (2017), ‘Syria conflict: Manbij militia to hand villages to army’, 2 March, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39140880.

⁴²⁶ Lister (2017b).

⁴²⁷ Meininghaus.

⁴²⁸ Meininghaus; Martinez and Eng.

manipulation of humanitarian aid. In particular, cross-border relief has been relatively neglected within the UN system while the Syrian regime has generally been able to control the timing and contents of cross-line relief convoys leaving from (and in practice authorised by) Damascus. At an early stage in the war, moreover, the chance to support local councils as an alternative form of governance to those ‘offered’ by armed groups, while explored to a degree, was on the whole damagingly neglected.

The Syrian Government’s determination to control and manipulate relief operations is essentially an extension of its peacetime patronage system.⁴²⁹ Feeding into this patronage system, the UN has awarded aid contracts worth tens of millions of dollars to people closely associated with Assad, including businessmen whose companies have been under US and EU sanctions.⁴³⁰ Meanwhile, restrictions on relief have been one major factor forcibly displacing people from opposition-held to government-held areas and coercing besieged areas and non-state armed groups into a variety of local truces (often amounting to surrender) that hold out the promise of relieving the siege and bringing governmental and international assistance to desperate people.⁴³¹

In its report on the period February to April 2017, Siege Watch (a joint project of The Syria Institute and PAX) called for international monitors in communities that have been forced to surrender, noting also “the increased pace of forced surrender agreements” as “the government grew increasingly emboldened by the success of its ‘surrender or die’ strategy.”⁴³² While violence has naturally been a major ‘push factor’ for internal migration (with 6.3 million people internally displaced at end-December 2016, for example),⁴³³ the presence or absence of services such as health and education – along with food and employment opportunities – have also been important influences on internal migration.⁴³⁴

A number of factors explain the absence of an effective international challenge to the regime’s manipulation. The sheer difficulty and danger of operating in Syria – and the extreme challenge of dealing with a highly abusive regime – should not be underestimated. But there have also been other factors that have been more within the control of the international community. For one thing, there has been a degree of deference to the Assad regime within the UN system, in many ways mirroring the deference to national governments in many other

429 Martinez and Eng.

430 Hopkins and Beals.

431 Martinez and Eng.

432 Siege Watch (2017), p 9.

433 OCHA (2016).

434 Meininghaus, citing UNOCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs); Favier.

humanitarian emergencies. This has been manifest particularly in the neglect of cross-border relief but also, very often, in a lack of clarity and openness about the regime's starvation tactics. In a detailed investigation published in *International Affairs* in 2016, Martinez and Eng observed that the instrumentalisation of aid distributions by the Syrian Government had gone virtually unremarked within a humanitarian system that tended to advertise its own neutrality without necessarily practising it.⁴³⁵

Also significantly impeding effective relief in Syria – as in many other countries – have been concerns related to the ‘war on terror’ – in particular, donors’ concerns that relief to opposition areas might find its way into the hands of terrorists.⁴³⁶ Another significant impediment to effective relief in Syria (as elsewhere) has been a shortage of funding. Finally, the US-led coalition’s own attacks (again shaped by the ‘war on terror’) have significantly fuelled the humanitarian crisis (while also producing a dangerous dependence on Assad for relief operations to Raqqa and surrounding regions).

The wartime scarcity of resources in Syria has been exacerbated not only by shortcomings in international relief but also by international sanctions (discussed later in this section). This scarcity, in turn, has fed into the war itself – partly through assisting the government’s policy of surrender-through-starvation, and partly through a range of other mechanisms.

The general resource scarcity has been damaging to local people’s health and nutritional status. Aid agencies delivering food and medicine to Damascus suburbs in early 2016 said at least 32 people had died because of malnutrition,⁴³⁷ while a Whole of Syria nutritional bulletin on the first half of 2016 noted that about 86,000 girls and boys aged 6–59 months were acutely malnourished.⁴³⁸ Resource scarcity has also strongly fuelled the conflict itself.

Resource scarcity has fed the conflict through eleven main mechanisms:

1. Scarcity has played into the Syrian regime’s strategy of imposing starvation and offering resources (and ‘protection’) as an alternative.
2. Scarcity has been an incentive to join armed groups, whether in regime or rebel areas, with these groups offering the chance of a salary and/or the opportunity to engage in predatory activities. We have seen that ISIS and al-Nusra have tended to pay particularly well.

⁴³⁵ Martinez and Eng; see also Butter.

⁴³⁶ On this continuity, see in particular Martinez and Eng.

⁴³⁷ Somini Sengupta (2016), ‘Starvation in Syria Galvanizes U.N., but Accountability Seems Distant as Ever’, *New York Times*, 15 January.

⁴³⁸ Whole of Syria [WoS] Nutritional Sector Bulletin.

3. Scarcity has created an appetite for services – including humanitarian aid and education – that have been provided by violent fundamentalist groups.
4. Scarcity has encouraged crime and economically motivated violence.
5. Scarcity has encouraged people to tolerate abusive armed groups that promise to rein in criminality (since criminal behaviour in the form of looting and extortion is itself a major contributor to scarcity).
6. Scarcity has contributed powerfully to a sense of anger – and a loss of faith – in relation to the West and the ‘human rights’ discourse that the West has tended to promote; this in turn has fuelled the emotional attraction of fundamentalist groups.
7. Scarcity has created additional incentives for keeping the war going by contributing to windfall profits for warlords, militias and associated businessmen who have been able to make arrangements that breach sanctions or sieges.
8. Scarcity has helped actors linked to the regime to make ‘political capital’ out of the crisis, notably by pointing to international sanctions.
9. By fuelling criminality and fundamentalist groups, scarcity helped to reduce the perceived legitimacy of rebellion, particularly in international eyes, which in turn further undermined relief to opposition areas in a vicious circle.
10. Scarcity encouraged a focus of international effort and energy on emergency humanitarian assistance, to a degree taking focus from the underlying protection crisis while also making the UN solicitous of Damascus’s cooperation with a view to improving relief delivery.
11. Among Syrian refugees suffering from lack of educational and other opportunities in neighbouring countries, scarcity has in some cases encouraged recruitment into Syrian armed groups.

Aid and conflict

One way of examining the impact of scarcity is to look at the struggle over *governance*. In Syria, civil institutions like local councils have tended to compete for allegiance with various rebel factions (whether fundamentalist or not).⁴³⁹ State withdrawal early in the uprising led to people turning to local councils in search of vital services, and many people shifted from their activities as activists to work as administrators, hospital workers, teachers or even judges.

⁴³⁹ Sources also reported local councils tended to lack legitimacy when they were seen as shaped by foreign backers rather than local elections.

Some significant international aid was channelled to local councils, including through NGOs and private companies (such as Adam Smith International, Integrity and Aktis),⁴⁴⁰ with the German, UK and US Governments among the important donors.⁴⁴¹ But local councils have persistently faced severe resource shortfalls.

Based primarily on her fieldwork in Turkey's Gaziantep, Agnes Favier noted that direct foreign aid to local councils was already falling by the beginning of 2013. Favier also noted that "with the surge of IS [ISIS] since mid-2014, the local councils have suffered from the new emerging priorities adopted by their main donor countries, which shifted to focusing on fighting terrorism rather than maintaining strong support for the local opposition actors."⁴⁴² It is true that donors did not give up. For example, the Tamkeen project, funded by the EU and the UK's Department for International Development, explicitly aimed to promote good governance in opposition areas – by funding service delivery through 'Tamkeen committees', which have generally run in parallel to local councils.⁴⁴³ But given the political and security obstacles to helping rebel areas and the progress made by some of the more fundamentalist factions, this proved very much an uphill battle.

Crucially, with Western assistance falling far short of needs, many Syrians have felt deserted – and many have turned to militias (including jihadist groups) that have sometimes offered them a measure of relief – and hope.⁴⁴⁴ Even abusive militias have sometimes been able to create some degree of local legitimacy, as we have seen, if they can help relieve the general scarcity of resources and security. In turn, the rise of ISIS and al-Nusra went on greatly to exacerbate access problems for international aid operations. We should note that scarcity encouraged recruitment into *government* militias as well as rebel militias, for these government militias also fed on poverty.⁴⁴⁵

440 Khalaf (2015).

441 Some local council staff got small payments from the opposition's Syria Coalition. The Tamkeen project, funded by the EU and the UK's Department for International Development, explicitly aimed to promote good governance in opposition areas – by funding service delivery through 'Tamkeen committees', which have generally run in parallel to local councils. They often coordinate with local councils, and the intention was to work increasingly with these councils. Even in the midst of war, there is still the possibility of civilian control over service delivery, and in 2016 Tamkeen evaluator Jon Bennett reported that over the previous two years military groups had ceded considerable control of service delivery to civilian groups, mostly glad to be rid of the responsibility but still retaining some influence (ODI public event).

442 Favier, pp 8–9.

443 ODI public event.

444 See e.g. International Crisis Group (2012b). See also Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015), p 85; Khalaf, p 64.

445 International Crisis Group (2012a), p 21: "[T]he rank and file of the apparatus of repression – military, security but also shabiha – shared virtually all the socio-economic characteristics of those they were seeking to suppress."

Many of our interviewees suggested that the scarcity of resources for local councils contributed to the rise of armed groups, including ISIS and al-Nusra.⁴⁴⁶ One interviewee in Kilis told us in 2013:

The number of moderate organizations working in Syria is much bigger than the extremist groups. In every town and village there is a local council or civil society organization. There are councils in the city of Aleppo and councils in the countryside. They don't have a lot of influence due to the lack of financial support. They are volunteers working for free inside Syria but they don't have support. Some of them managed to fix water and electricity networks and they organize schools. All that effort was done independently with no support. If these civil society groups were supported, things will improve significantly inside Syria.

Another interviewee, a Kurdish activist, said:

Supporting local councils and allowing them to provide goods and services will help their authority and to resist extreme Islamist groups. It can counteract the sense of desertion. People come to Kilis and say 'don't blame us for supporting the Islamists, they were the only ones providing and no-one else was there.'

Back in 2013, we heard this kind of analysis a lot. A former regime soldier commented, "If the situation goes on, people will become terrorists and go to the West and blow themselves up." A researcher recently returned to Turkey from northern Syria said: "The shortage of humanitarian aid and other assistance creates opportunities for Islamists to go and say, 'Look, we can provide!'" One man from Aleppo commented:

The West is seen as saying 'We cannot help you and no-one else is allowed to help you either'. The Islamists? Syrians don't like extreme Islamist ideology, but Nusra, Daesh [ISIS] provide water, protection, food. They provide services for people, put up a local regime in the area they control.

Sarah Birke noted in February 2015 following a May 2013 visit to Raqqa and further research in Turkey:

... competition between armed groups and lack of consistent funding to the council (which came in spurts from foreign countries including France and Qatar) prevented a full-fledged local government from taking shape. This gave ISIS an opportunity to capture a major city [fully taking Raqqa in January 2014] and started it on the road to creating a so-called Islamic state.⁴⁴⁷

Significantly, ISIS's own forms of humanitarian aid have been an 'advance arm' of the organisation's governance project and the reach of ISIS's aid has been significant. In July 2014, an Institute for the Study of War report noted:

⁴⁴⁶ Abboud (2015b).

⁴⁴⁷ Birke (2015).

*ISIS's service-oriented offices manage humanitarian aid, bakeries, and key infrastructure such as water and electricity lines... ISIS was able to provide aid across Syria during the latter half of 2013, in Latakia, Damascus, Deir ez-Zour, and Idlib, in addition to core provinces Aleppo and Raqqa... Humanitarian aid is normally the first exposure a local population has to ISIS's Muslim Services division... If ISIS is able to provide assistance to those who would not get assistance otherwise, or even if it is able to provide below-market rates to civilians who are suffering financially, ISIS can gradually establish a monopoly over critical services.*⁴⁴⁸

While the causes of aid shortfalls are complex, one significant factor has been donors' fear that relief will fall into the hands of terrorists. This often involves fear of *media coverage* of such an eventuality, and in the UK this has been known – among many government officials and academics – as ‘The Daily Mail factor’, a reference to officials’ fear of that particular newspaper’s zealous pursuit of stories that imply taxpayers’ money is being wasted on fruitless or counterproductive aid spending.⁴⁴⁹

Western donors’ concern to ‘Do No Harm’ (a motto inspired in large part by humanitarian crises in Ethiopia, Sudan and Central Africa) has tended to translate into extreme caution around the possibility that aid will fall (and will be reported in the media to have fallen) into the hands of terrorists. Unfortunately, this has contributed to the replication in Syria of a phenomenon evident in the very emergencies (in Ethiopia and Sudan in the 1980s) that helped spawn the ‘Do No Harm’ framework: namely, the withholding of relief from rebel-held areas. Paradoxically, the ‘Do No Harm’ framework was originally a response, in large part, to *governments’* manipulation of relief – a phenomenon of extreme importance in the case of Syria too, but one that has been insufficiently addressed.

Donors’ statements highlight the fear that their aid will ‘do harm’ (principally by falling into the hands of terrorists). In a September 2012 UN report, a senior European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) official commented on aid to Syria:

*The underlying principle for all of us is the humanitarian imperative, but what we need is reasonable assurance that the goods go where they need to go because otherwise you could be doing harm. When we don't get it, we don't finance.*⁴⁵⁰

Juliano Fiori, humanitarian adviser with Save the Children, commented on the Syrian emergency:

⁴⁴⁸ Caris and Reynolds, p 4, pp 20–21; on ISIS price controls, see also Birke. On the damage these controls inflicted on traders, see Samer, pp 66, 86.

⁴⁴⁹ This line can also be found in the *Daily Express* and the *Sun*.

⁴⁵⁰ IRIN (2012).

It's true that donors seem to be increasingly risk-averse: They may feel that if there is no progress on the political side and they also unintentionally aggravate the conflict through supporting the humanitarian response in the wrong way, then they're really in the firing line.⁴⁵¹

In July 2014, Baroness Valerie Amos, the head of the UN's OCHA, observed that aid agencies' fear of prosecution was preventing life-saving aid:

A couple of the charities that are able to operate in those areas [of ISIS strength] are now extremely fearful that the fact that they are having to engage with ISIS will have an impact on their funding, not just for Syria but for other places as well.⁴⁵²

The task of supporting services and local governance was made much more difficult by anti-terrorist legislation. In a phone interview, one aid coordinator commented in late 2013:

MEPI [Middle East Partnership Initiative, part of the US State Department] only provide salaries to those who pass US vetting. But if you want to build a school, you have to vet 500 to 1,000 people. That's just not realistic. Also, Western donors won't support projects that are income-generating because that's a new source of liquidity they don't control – it might end up in the wrong hands. They'll support a bakery as long as the bread is free but not if you start charging for it. So you completely undercut the sustainability of everything. It's frustrating! [...] There's a fear of resources falling into the hands of ISIS and other groups, and the armed groups are infiltrated by these extremist groups. But the fear is a bit misplaced because these extreme groups already have a lot of money, and the fear of them getting resources ends up restricting you on other things. No-one wants to provide salaries because it's cash, and you can't always control the cash once it's given. But salaries are 100 dollars or 200 dollars a month. If the extremists get hold of some salaries, it won't make a big difference.⁴⁵³

Fears around aid fuelling terrorism have been pervasive, but fundamentalist rebels in Syria have generally had a *great many* sources of funding and generally do not need to rely on aid. These sources include oil, looting, selling ancient artefacts, protection money, taxation, ransoms, raiding banks (including Mosul Central Bank), and donations from abroad.⁴⁵⁴ As in many other contexts, aid is only a small part of rebel funding and withholding aid is an implausible route to peace.

In a detailed paper for the Humanitarian Effectiveness Project (based on research in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey in April–May 2015), Jessica Field noted that aid within Syria had been significantly affected by:

451 IRIN (2012).

452 Whewell.

453 Phone interview, November 2013.

454 E.g. Atwan; Financial Action Task Force/OECD.

the growing hold of the terrorism narrative on perceptions of this humanitarian crisis... the possibility alone of contravening CTL [counter-terrorism legislation] is enough for INGOs [international non-governmental organisations] to self-police and to reduce operations to conservative, piecemeal and short-term assistance – or even to cut assistance altogether.

Field also noted that the thin or zero humanitarian presence in many rebel areas has tended to restrict ‘needs assessment’ to immediate humanitarian needs and to limit the information that flows out about the plight of civilians, sometimes adding to the impunity of the Assad regime.⁴⁵⁵

One estimate put unemployment as high as 90 per cent in some areas,⁴⁵⁶ and many Syrians repeatedly stressed the importance of jobs if militias were not to gain total control of the war economy.⁴⁵⁷ But based on examining Food and Agriculture Organisation reports, Turkmani et al. suggested in July 2015 that only 3 per cent of international aid had gone to livelihoods support.⁴⁵⁸

Social engineering via the delivery of aid is always going to be difficult. In 2013, a knowledgeable source within the UN told us, “If you try to empower many local authorities and channel aid through them, it can be disastrous”, while a local aid worker emphasised, “Some local councils are not very independent of the rebel factions, who are working inside them.” Interviewees stressed that supporting local councils and local civil society tended to work best in areas lacking a strong presence from fundamentalist groups such as ISIS and al-Nusra.

That said, the importance of supporting accountable governance structures remains, and sources stressed that the success of any peace process and associated reconstruction will hinge on adequate support for accountable local authorities; this would mean making such support conditional on local accountability if necessary, while giving encouragement to the kind of civil society that can put constructive pressure on the relevant authorities. As we have seen, it is precisely the *collapse* of the Syrian state that fundamentalist groups have exploited with provision of their own services and (often brutal) ‘protection’.⁴⁵⁹

Another area of criticism has been the heavy use of private firms, with high overheads reported to be producing a big difference between disbursements and the help that is actually received. Rana Khalaf has stressed that there have

455 Field.

456 Aubrey et al.

457 See also Aubrey et al.

458 Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015), p 65.

459 E.g. Turkmani.

been very few Syrians in decision-making positions within these private companies.⁴⁶⁰ Khalaf has also argued that, despite a rhetorical emphasis on promoting ‘good governance’ in opposition areas, any accountability has usually been to donors rather than to Syrians on the ground.⁴⁶¹ A related problem has been that when local social movements register as NGOs to get funding, this process has sometimes undermined their activism and led to accusations of co-option.⁴⁶² In a context where the West’s adherence to its own expressed values is under close scrutiny, perceptions around aid are one of the significant factors shaping local allegiances.

As assistance to local governance became more and more difficult and restricted, the focus of international efforts centred increasingly on the UN inter-agency convoys along with some degree of NGO cross-border relief. Yet aid agencies have always faced extreme difficulty in securing permission from Damascus for distributions to rebel-held areas, as well as encountering numerous government roadblocks along the way and a threat of retaliation for cross-border operations.⁴⁶³ While the Syrian Government’s effective veto on deliveries to rebel areas was countered to a degree by NGO cross-border operations, UN cross-border relief only began in the summer of 2014 (more than three years into the war), and even after this the quantities delivered on UN/inter-agency convoys – whether cross-line via Damascus or cross-border – have been low in relation to the intense needs.⁴⁶⁴ Meanwhile, civil society calls for airdrops to rebel areas were repeatedly rejected by the international community, even though the Syrian regime and Russia have both operated airdrops to besieged *regime-held* areas.⁴⁶⁵ The first UN airdrops did not take place until February 2016, and these targeted a *government-held* area (part of Deir al-Zour, in response to the ISIS siege of that city).⁴⁶⁶

460 ODI public event.

461 ODI public event, 15 March 2016, ‘Five Years On, What Next for Syria?’.

462 Khalaf (2015).

463 Tamara Alrifai, Human Rights Watch (2013), ‘Syria’s humanitarian blackmail is a war crime’, 22 July, www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/22/syria-s-humanitarian-blackmail-war-crime; also David Kirkpatrick (2013), ‘In parts of Syria, lack of assistance “Is a catastrophe”’, *New York Times*, 8 March; also IRIN (2013), ‘Analysis: Syrian government increases restrictions on medical aid’, 7 August, www.irinnews.org/report/98537/analysis-syrian-government-increases-restrictions-on-medical-aid.

464 Meininghaus. UN Security Council resolution 2139 (passed February 2014) demanded free and safe passage of humanitarian convoys and workers. UN Security Council resolution 2165 (passed July 2014) “Decides that the United Nations humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners are authorized to use routes across conflict lines and the border crossings of Bab al-Salam, Bab al-Hawa, Al Yarubihah and Al-Ramtha, in addition to those already in use, in order to ensure that humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, reaches people in need throughout Syria through the most direct routes, with notification to the Syrian authorities...” (UNSCR (2014), resolution 2165 ([/en/resolutions/doc/2165](http://en/resolutions/doc/2165)), 14 July).

465 Goldman.

466 BBC News (2016a), ‘Syrian Conflict: UN first air drop delivery aid to Deir al-Zour’, February 24, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35654483.

Even back in 2013, there were signs at checkpoints in suburbs of Damascus reading “Kneel or starve”.⁴⁶⁷ In that year there were 43 UN/inter-agency cross-line convoys (for besieged and ‘hard-to-reach’ locations), which reached some 2.9 million people.⁴⁶⁸ In 2014, the number of UN/inter-agency cross-line convoys rose slightly to 50, but the number of people reached fell drastically to 1.12 million people.⁴⁶⁹ This shows the tightening squeeze by the regime. In 2015, as the regime squeeze on opposition areas tightened further and needs intensified, the number of UN/inter-agency cross-line convoys plummeted to 13 (after 113 requests), and the number of people reached also dropped sharply (falling to 620,500).⁴⁷⁰

UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O’Brien commented, “In 2015, the UN only delivered humanitarian assistance to less than 10 per cent of people in hard-to-reach areas and only around one per cent in besieged areas.”⁴⁷¹

From the summer of 2014, improved cross-border relief from Turkey and Jordan did help reduce scarcities in some opposition-held areas.⁴⁷² But grave shortages remained. UN agencies have continued to be wary of cross-border activities, not least because they fear losing access to civilians in government-held areas.⁴⁷³ Many aid workers have criticised what they see as the UN’s preference for cross-line convoys from Damascus: the convoy hit by an airstrike in rural Aleppo in September 2016 (killing six aid workers) had travelled from Damascus through 23 checkpoints and across frontlines to reach an area 22 miles from the Turkish border.⁴⁷⁴ Of the people reached with aid in June 2017, the UN regular programme (assistance to government areas) accounted for fully 41.5 per cent of people reached, while UN cross-line operations accounted for 21.5 per cent and UN cross-border operations for only 6.5 per cent; NGO cross-border operations accounted for 26 per cent.⁴⁷⁵

Noting the extreme shortages in rural parts of opposition-held territory, Esther Meininghaus observed in 2016, “Among NGO staff this [imbalance] is attributed to pressure on INGOs and NGOs to demonstrate effective aid

⁴⁶⁷ Barnard (2013), citing Syrian Arab Red Crescent workers and residents.

⁴⁶⁸ OCHA (2015).

⁴⁶⁹ OCHA (2015). This was in response to 115 requests.

⁴⁷⁰ Physicians for Human Rights.

⁴⁷¹ O’Brien (2016).

⁴⁷² Meininghaus.

⁴⁷³ Martinez and Eng.

⁴⁷⁴ Emma Beals and Nick Hopkins (2016), ‘Guardian briefing: the key questions around aid and Syria’, *Guardian*, 28 October.

⁴⁷⁵ OCHA (2017c).

delivery to donors, which is more quickly achieved in urban settings.”⁴⁷⁶

The involvement of private companies in relief was also creating some perverse incentives. As one aid worker helping to coordinate international efforts explained in late 2013, “The way incentives work is often quite similar in terms of profit or non-profit – the goal is usually to complete as quickly as possible rather than efficiently. A lot of the aid gets dumped right across the border, especially in Aleppo and Raqqa.”

Humanitarian crises often have a turning point, a point of intense media coverage where (as Peter Cutler noted in relation to famine in Ethiopia in 1983–85) the institutional risks of inaction begin to exceed the institutional risks of action.⁴⁷⁷ In January 2016, starvation in the besieged town of Madaya – about an hour’s drive from food warehouses in Damascus – prompted world leaders, international organisations and media outlets to condemn the Syrian regime’s siege tactics. In an open letter, Syrian humanitarian workers from besieged areas referred to two UN Security Council resolutions demanding that humanitarian assistance flow freely to Syrians in need and accused the UN of “chasing [regime] permission you do not even need”.⁴⁷⁸ (Under resolution 2165 (passed in July 2014), the UN was required to notify the regime of deliveries but it did not require permission from the regime.) Leenders reported that when a few UN aid workers did refuse to comply with illegal restrictions on humanitarian access, they were kicked out of the country “and received no support from their headquarters.”⁴⁷⁹

Under growing pressure in January 2016, the regime and the UN Secretariat agreed to a new ‘two-step’ approval process for relief convoys (instead of the previous ‘eight-step’ process), and the number of cross-line UN inter-agency aid deliveries duly increased (from just 13 in 2015 to 131 in 2016, reaching some 1,287,750 people).⁴⁸⁰

Yet this apparent improvement was in many ways deceptive, masking a great deal of suffering and a great deal of continuing regime manipulation. A Physicians for Human Rights report notes that “From May through December 2016, UN interagency convoys provided aid to only 24 percent of the besieged and hard-to-reach populations they had requested access to under the two-step approval process – already a subset of the larger besieged and hard-to-reach

⁴⁷⁶ A preference for more accessible areas – whether within private companies or aid organisations – was also noted by an interviewee liaising with major donors.

⁴⁷⁷ Cutler.

⁴⁷⁸ Gutman (2016a).

⁴⁷⁹ Reinoud Leenders (2016), ‘UN’s \$4bn aid effort in Syria is morally bankrupt’, *Guardian*, 29 August.

⁴⁸⁰ OCHA (2017e). The figure for numbers reached is as of 14 December 2016.

population.”⁴⁸¹ Many requests were refused, and even those approved were often blocked. In fact, an increasing rate of approvals (which made the regime at least *appear* cooperative to a degree) actually masked a fall throughout 2016 in the number of people reached. Quantities were severely restricted, and deliveries had all but stopped by the end of 2016.⁴⁸² In one conversation, a senior UN aid worker noted that the two-step process was never properly operational and that an ‘11-step’ process has been operating in 2017.

Removal of items from convoys by government officials, especially medical supplies, continued to be routine.⁴⁸³ And once convoys did arrive, the very limited time allowed for unloading or remaining in the area meant that the UN was often leaving supplies in the hands of a variety of groups, so that it was hard or impossible to monitor who was receiving the aid.⁴⁸⁴ Meanwhile, in October 2016, the *Guardian* said UN reports indicated as many as 3 million of the 4.3 million reached with aid supplies were in government areas.⁴⁸⁵

Oddly, while regular OCHA updates mention the number of inter-agency convoys and the total number of people reached (some of them “more than once”), these updates do not specify the tonnage of food that arrived or how long this tonnage could actually sustain the estimated population within besieged and ‘hard-to-reach’ areas. This type of information was also meagre within – or altogether absent from – UN Security Council overviews.⁴⁸⁶

Yet such an exercise would seem to be fundamental to assessing the adequacy of delivery. Such information as *is* available on tonnages and needs is not encouraging. Physicians for Human Rights reports that when a convoy arrived in the besieged town of Douma in eastern Ghouta in June 2016 (the first of two in the whole year), “the one-month supply of food it carried was sufficient for only 17 per cent of the population.”⁴⁸⁷ If we assume that the whole population was fed, supplies would have lasted *less than a week*. A second convoy did not arrive until October 2016, bringing a one-month supply of aid for just 24 per cent of the population⁴⁸⁸ (enough for one week if distributed to everyone in the besieged town).

481 Physicians for Human Rights, p 6.

482 Physicians for Human Rights.

483 Emma Beals and Nick Hopkins (2016), ‘Guardian briefing: the key questions around aid and Syria’, *Guardian*, 28 October.

484 Emma Beals and Nick Hopkins (2016), ‘Guardian briefing: the key questions around aid and Syria’, *Guardian*, 28 October. This also mirrors patterns during the peak of the war in Sri Lanka, for example Keen (2013).

485 Emma Beals and Nick Hopkins (2016), ‘Guardian briefing: the key questions around aid and Syria’, *Guardian*, 28 October.

486 See e.g. UN Security Council (2016).

487 Physicians for Human Rights.

488 Physicians for Human Rights.

A further problem is that UN estimates of the numbers of people in besieged and ‘hard-to-reach’ areas are considerably lower than other estimates. Reinoud Leenders observed that OCHA “routinely understated the number of areas – and people – besieged by regime forces.”⁴⁸⁹ The number of areas classified as besieged by the UN has certainly been much lower than the number classified as besieged by Siege Watch – for example, 17 versus 39 in October 2016 – with *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) figures for populations under siege also being significantly higher than UN figures.⁴⁹⁰

A Siege Watch report covering February to April 2017 noted, “An estimated 879,320 people remained trapped in at least 35 besieged communities across the country and more than 1.3 million additional Syrians live in ‘watch list’ areas, under threat of intensified siege and abuse.”⁴⁹¹ In the first half of 2017, the numbers living in UN-declared besieged areas fell significantly (from approx. 970,000 in December 2016 to approx. 540,000 in June 2017, the great majority of these in eastern Ghouta and Deir al-Zour city). The numbers fell in part because of local agreements, often amounting to surrender as noted, resulting in forced displacement from formerly besieged areas such as eastern Aleppo. Meanwhile, the needs of many in the areas remaining under siege have intensified.⁴⁹² The Syrian Government is responsible for the great majority of sieges, though ISIS has been applying a major siege to Deir al-Zour, trapping some 200,000 people there.⁴⁹³

The regime squeeze tightened again in 2017: as of 16 August 2017, there had been only 31 UN/inter-agency cross-line convoys. In general (and reflecting patterns in Sudan’s Darfur emergency from 2003, the 2008–9 emergency in Sri Lanka, and elsewhere), pushing for Damascus’s cooperation on relief absorbed a great deal of time and energy within the aid system and within the UN in particular, with aid officials constantly worried that any hint of criticism of the regime would limit access (including access to government-held areas).

As UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O’Brien said in May 2017, “The bottom line is that we have been wasting too much of our time literally begging for facilitation letters; too much time arguing at roadblocks, pleading that trucks can pass without the sniper taking the shot and medical items not be removed.”⁴⁹⁴

489 See also Gutman (2016a).

490 Emma Beals and Nick Hopkins (2016), ‘Guardian briefing: the key questions around aid and Syria’, *Guardian*, 28 October.

491 Siege Watch (2017), p 8.

492 Whole of Syria ISG (inter-sector group) (2017).

493 See e.g. Siege Watch; Somini Sengupta (2016), ‘Starvation in Syria Galvanizes U.N., but Accountability Seems Distant as Ever’, *New York Times*, 15 January.

494 O’Brien (2017).

Meanwhile, operational agencies were generally reticent on regime abuses. When it came to humanitarian access, the regime's ability to 'turn the tap on or off' seems to have provided valuable leverage over the international community (and the regime's instinct for using this weapon in some ways mirrored its 'mafia-style' promises and threats when it came to 'turning the tap on or off' in relation to jihadists in Iraq and Syria and in relation to regime violence more generally).

Apart from regime obstruction, other impediments were also growing. The Whole of Syria inter-sector group's report on the first half of 2017 noted:

*... cross-border partners face an increasingly restrictive environment, with NSAGs [non-state armed groups] – including those proscribed as terrorists groups by the UN Security Council – putting more restrictions on NGOs, particularly in northern parts of Syria.*⁴⁹⁵

The Whole of Syria group noted, "In addition cross-border partners faced access restrictions imposed by the Government of Turkey..., including through the closure of key border crossings."⁴⁹⁶

A problem throughout the Syria war (and in the run-up to war) has been a shortfall in funding. Combined Syria crisis appeals [including Syrian refugees] were only 71 per cent funded in 2013 and the figure fell to 57 per cent in 2014.⁴⁹⁷ In August 2017, the Whole of Syria group noted, "Funding shortages have... been a key limiting factor in the first six months of 2017. Overall the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan appeal was just 33.4 per cent funded as of August 2017."⁴⁹⁸ As in some other emergencies,⁴⁹⁹ constraints on relief (in this case, systematic governmental restrictions on relief and fears about 'fuelling terrorism') may have formed some kind of 'symbiosis' with the systematic underfunding of humanitarian aid: without these constraints (and distractions), the inadequacy of donations might have been even more starkly exposed.

In a June 2017 *Guardian* article on the US-led attacks on Raqqa in 2017, Kareem Shaheen noted:

Those who do survive or flee also face uncertain prospects of survival, owing to limited access to the area for humanitarian organisations. Turkey to the north has refused to allow much aid to flow across the border and into areas controlled by the Kurdish People's Protection Units militia, which is part of the SDF, because Ankara considers it a terrorist group affiliated with its own Kurdish insurgency. The UN has also had

⁴⁹⁵ Whole of Syria ISG [inter-sector group] (2017), p 1.

⁴⁹⁶ Whole of Syria ISG [inter-sector group] (2017), p 1.

⁴⁹⁷ Hartberg (2015), p 5.

⁴⁹⁸ Whole of Syria ISG [inter-sector group] (2017), p 6.

⁴⁹⁹ E.g. Sudan (Keen, 1994).

*limited access to the area owing to restrictions on their movement. By contrast, before the campaign to reclaim Mosul, aid organisations were able to set up camps to house tens of thousands of displaced people.*⁵⁰⁰

The UN organised an airlift of humanitarian supplies, but was shifting to ground deliveries based on a deal with the Assad regime. Asked about the humanitarian situation in Raqqa, OCHA's Kevin Kennedy said:

The real break has come – and I have to acknowledge the help of the government of Syria in this case – we are now able to move supplies from our warehouses in Aleppo city... northeast through Manbij onwards to Raqqa and Hasakah governorates... Having this access has enabled us to stop the airlift as of a couple of days back, which was an expensive proposition – 45,000 dollars a flight for months on end.

While any cooperation on humanitarian aid from the Assad government is to be welcomed, it is worth noting that today the intensified humanitarian crisis following the US-led assault on Raqqa has created an *additional* element of dependency on the Assad regime given the additional need for aid deliveries (and the cost constraints); this in turn gives Damascus additional leverage over the international community (though we can only guess how this leverage will be used). In his more general discussion, Fabrice Weissman has noted that local manipulation of humanitarian aid is not simply an obstacle to humanitarian operations but a *condition for their existence*.⁵⁰¹ Seen in this light, the increased dependence on Assad for relief deliveries represents an additional downside of the deepening humanitarian crisis in and around Raqqa.

The difficulty – and political sensitivity – of channelling aid into Syria (combined with fears around major influxes of refugees into Europe) has encouraged an emphasis on providing aid in neighbouring countries. The British Government has often pointed to the large sums it has given (and plans to give) for refugees within the region, and the figures have been emphasised by government officials justifying the country's restrictive asylum policies. Yet in combination with the much weaker aid effort to Syria's opposition areas in particular, this pattern of aid provision risks locking people out of Syria itself while scarcities within Syria continue to fuel the conflict. Aid to Syrian refugees in the region has also been inadequate in many important respects, while millions of refugees have put a severe strain on countries in the region.⁵⁰²

⁵⁰⁰ Shaheen (2017).

⁵⁰¹ Weissman (2013); see also Magone, Neuman and Weissman (eds.).

⁵⁰² E.g. Barnard, Anne (2015a), 'As refugee tide swells, Lebanon plans a visa requirement for Syrians', *New York Times*, 2 January; Sweis, Rana (2013), 'Syrian refugees strain resources in Jordan', *New York Times*, 2 January.

One key shortcoming in assistance for Syrian refugees has been the scarcity of educational opportunities. A 2016 International Alert investigation noted that in Lebanon, 90 per cent of young Syrian refugees were not enrolled in any form of education, while 400,000 out of an estimated 700,000 Syrian children in Turkey were not in school.⁵⁰³ International Alert said of the young refugees it consulted:

*They feel that they do not have control over their lives and what happens to them. Many refugees are experiencing disempowerment and discrimination from host communities. In some cases, this is motivating individuals to return to Syria and join armed groups.*⁵⁰⁴

Lack of educational opportunities has been a key part of this,⁵⁰⁵ and the problem has been especially severe in Lebanon. One Syrian teacher working in Lebanon said:

*Without education, without attending school on a daily basis, what is this child supposed to do but take to the streets, beg, work, and be exposed to all the dangers that life on the streets offers, be it radical thoughts, drugs, or simply an unhealthy lifestyle.*⁵⁰⁶

Even in France, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, Syrian refugees have been living in overcrowded and insanitary conditions unassisted by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or most major NGOs and constantly intimidated by French police.⁵⁰⁷ In the context of growing antipathy to refugees among some parts of the French population, Syrian refugees in Calais stressed – during conversations in Calais in the summer of 2016 – that not only do they reject terrorism, they are *victims* of terrorism (mostly state terrorism). Their anger at how they have been treated after leaving Syria was palpable.

Sanctions and the war system

Even as the international community has attempted to channel aid to Syria, the international community has also been effectively *undermining* the resource base in Syria through sanctions. War brought a severe downturn in foreign investment, foreign trade and domestic production, and the impact of war has been significantly compounded by international sanctions. Some

⁵⁰³ Aubrey et al., p 17.

⁵⁰⁴ Aubrey et al., p 14.

⁵⁰⁵ Aubrey et al.

⁵⁰⁶ Aubrey et al., p 17.

⁵⁰⁷ Author's research in Calais, France, summer 2016.

of these international sanctions actually preceded the war, but the combined impact of sanctions deepened considerably once war broke out.

In November 2011, the League of Arab States suspended Syria's membership, imposing tough economic sanctions that contributed to the slow collapse of the Syrian economy. Abboud comments, "The majority of Syria's non-oil trade was with Gulf countries and the closure of these markets would have a destructive effect on Syrian enterprises that were reliant on Gulf markets."⁵⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the loss of Gulf funding hit public and private investment.⁵⁰⁹

EU sanctions also helped to undermine the Syrian economy. EU sanctions on crude oil exports hit the government's fiscal income particularly hard.⁵¹⁰ Meanwhile, EU sanctions on Syria strongly increased the price of imports into Syria as transport costs rose alongside rising oil prices.⁵¹¹ In her 2014 study of EU sanctions, Moret noted, "selective trade bans and oil embargoes are now so broad that they can be considered *de facto* comprehensive sanctions, widely associated in the past with negative humanitarian consequences."⁵¹² The EU sanctions regime for Syria marked a departure from the carefully targeted sanctions policies previously favoured by many governments – and especially the EU.⁵¹³ Sharp devaluation also boosted import prices and hit the value of salaries very hard.⁵¹⁴ Severely strapped for revenue, the Syrian regime further reduced subsidies, which deepened hardship.⁵¹⁵ Other sanctions were imposed by the US, Turkey, Switzerland, Canada, Australia, Norway and Japan.⁵¹⁶ US banks became scared of doing business in Syria lest they fall foul of sanctions regulations and anti-terrorism legislation.⁵¹⁷ There was a blanket ban on US exports to Syria, with humanitarian goods theoretically excepted but in practice usually caught up in a complex network of regulations and restrictions.⁵¹⁸ The difficulty for Syrian companies of obtaining credit and foreign currency was compounded by foreign companies' reluctance to deal with Syrian companies.⁵¹⁹

508 Abboud (2015a), p 122.

509 Abboud (2015a).

510 Yazigi (2014).

511 Moret.

512 Moret, p 120.

513 Moret, p 120.

514 E.g. Khalaf (2015).

515 Turkmani and Haid.

516 Moret.

517 See e.g. Walker.

518 Cockburn (2016a); Walker.

519 Moret.

If we think of aid as simply being emergency food aid and healthcare, we may imagine some kind of compatibility between aid and sanctions, particularly since humanitarian aid is in theory exempt from sanctions. But in practice sanctions have strongly contributed to the humanitarian emergency in Syria, both through undermining the economy and through impeding humanitarian operations.⁵²⁰

A leaked May 2016 UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) study noted that “The combined effect of comprehensive, unilateral sanctions, terrorist concerns and the ongoing security environment have created immense hurdles for those engaged in delivering immediate humanitarian aid and wider stabilization programmes”,⁵²¹ with sanctions on banking channels having a major negative impact on humanitarian aid (including medicines). The manufacture of pharmaceuticals within Syria had been a major industry, and was strongly hit by sanctions, as was the import of medicines.⁵²² Many of those trying to start aid organisations and shore up local services found themselves unable even to open bank accounts to channel the necessary funding.⁵²³ Even established aid organisations had serious problems opening new bank accounts, and some had existing accounts closed down; banking restrictions also meant many staff went without salaries for prolonged periods. More generally, donors were wary of providing aid to local organisations, and the diaspora groups that were among the most committed to humanitarian aid also frequently lacked experience with donors’ (generally demanding) standards and reporting requirements.⁵²⁴ Sanctions also appear to have impeded attempts to help people return to areas from which ISIS has been displaced.⁵²⁵

If we think of aid as attempting to improve *employment/livelihoods* and perhaps even *governance* (priorities for a great many Syrians), then the contradictions between aid and sanctions become even starker. As inadequate aid was given with one hand, sanctions took away with the other. Sanctions, like the failure to provide aid, have made the West look hypocritical.

520 Walker.

521 Walker, p 6; see also Cockburn (2016a).

522 Walker.

523 E.g. Rana Khalaf, personal communication; Svoboda and Pantuliano.

524 Eva Svoboda and Sara Pantuliano (2015), ‘International and local/diaspora actors in the Syria response’, Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, March; Eva Svoboda (2014), ‘Addressing protection needs in Syria: overlooked, difficult, impossible?’, Humanitarian Policy Group, Policy Brief 57, April; see also Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015), p 64.

525 Baroness Cox, House of Lords Debate, 4 July 2017. Middle East (IRC Report) – Motion to Take Note, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, <https://www.hart-uk.org/news/house-lords-debate-4th-july-2017-middle-east-irc-report-motion-take-note/>.

Significantly, when Syrians discuss sanctions, they have tended strongly to emphasise the very *negative* effects. One of these has been to deepen the scarcity that the Syrian regime has in turn exploited through its strategy of starvation. Still another negative effect of sanctions is the way they have fuelled violence through what are sometimes called ‘bottom up’ mechanisms⁵²⁶ – notably by undermining livelihoods and contributing to very high unemployment; indeed, by deepening scarcity, sanctions have tended to fuel violence through many of the same mechanisms as the lack of humanitarian aid. Syrians have stressed that sanctions have had important negative impacts on rebel-held areas as well as on regime-held areas. It would seem that sanctions on Syria have continued to fuel conflict (and deepen humanitarian suffering) long after it became obvious that they were not going to dislodge Assad. In October 2016, Patrick Cockburn commented on the damage done by US and EU sanctions on Syria:

*In many respects, the situation resembles that in Iraq between 1990 and 2003 when UN sanctions destroyed the Iraqi economy and helped dissolve its society while doing nothing to reduce the power of Saddam Hussein as Iraqi leader. Many critics of Iraqi sanctions argue that the mass impoverishment they produced contributed significantly to the political and sectarian breakdown after the invasion of 2003.*⁵²⁷

Asked whether economic pressures on the regime could help reduce the conflict, one interviewee – an engineer – commented in 2013:

Economic pressure will make the situation worse because people will get hungry and poor and no factories will work. In these circumstances, a person has two solutions, working with the government or working with the extremists and they are both very bad for us [the Syrian people].

Again, this has a prophetic ring today. A Syrian businessman explained:

We have a family company, the transportation and logistics sector. We had 2500 staff at our peak and only around 500 now.... When you let people go, you know in all probability people are going to pick up a weapon.

Although sanctions have proven problematic, as Julian Border and Mona Mahmood noted in the *Guardian* in May 2013, the lifting of oil sanctions on rebel areas created a perverse effect:

*The EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions to aid the opposition has accelerated a scramble for control over wells and pipelines in rebel-held areas and helped consolidate the grip of jihadist groups over the country's key resources.*⁵²⁸

⁵²⁶ E.g. Keen (1998).

⁵²⁷ Cockburn (2016a).

⁵²⁸ Borger, Julian and Mona Mahmood (2013), ‘EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions boosts jihadist groups’, 19 May.

When ISIS gained control of much of the oil, a new perverse dynamic kicked in. Restrictions on diesel imports created significant dependence on ISIS oil among a variety of rebel groups, so that sanctions increased ISIS's bargaining power and influence.⁵²⁹ Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande noted in February 2016:

*ISIS... uses its control over resources to weaken opposition-held areas; the group halted oil sales to the armed opposition in Aleppo for example, causing a significant strain to both armed opposition forces and the civilian population under their control.*⁵³⁰

Although it was originally hoped that sanctions would lead Syrian elites to desert the regime or at least to put constructive pressure on Assad, in practice many elite actors were able to find ways around the sanctions, often helped by Russia and Iran.⁵³¹ One observer commented in November 2014: "Militias have been very successful in establishing private companies. Russia, Iran, and the UAE [United Arab Emirates] are helping to breach the sanctions. Those supposed to be affected are not being affected at all."

That would seem to be an exaggeration: some sanctions *have* impacted negatively on individuals close to the regime. But it is also true that some individuals close to the regime have *actively benefited*. Indeed, the Syrian conflict saw the emergence of a layer of people with a significant interest in continuation of both the sanctions and the war. One source said simply, "The regime is making money from sanctions."⁵³² There were certainly windfall profits from importing goods into Syria.

As the formal economy contracted (in part because of the sanctions), the informal economy has become more important, including imports of weapons, gas, diesel oil, heating oil, cooking oil, and a number of other smuggling operations.⁵³³ Government-linked militias, often funded by businessmen close to the regime, became heavily involved in these activities, as well as in outright looting.⁵³⁴ In many cases, the *shabiha* had evolved from smuggling networks that preceded the war.⁵³⁵ These militias and associated businessmen also drew income from shortages deepened by wartime and international sanctions.⁵³⁶ Just as Iran was helping to insulate the regime from sanctions, so too Iranian-backed militias were profiting from them.

529 Turkmani, Ali et al. (2015).

530 Cafarella and Casagrande, p 4.

531 E.g. Yazigi (2014); Lyme.

532 See also Yazigi (2014).

533 Lyme.

534 Lyme.

535 E.g. Salwa Amor and Ruth Sherlock (2014), 'How Bashar al-Assad created the feared shabiha militia: an insider speaks', *Telegraph*, 23 March; Droz-Vincent.

536 Hallaj.

While carefully targeted sanctions can avoid many of the negative effects of more generalised sanctions, it is not easy to make them work. Evasion has been common, and when individuals *have* found their activities inhibited by sanctions, a new stratum of businesspeople has often stepped into the gap.⁵³⁷ Abboud suggested in November 2015 that "... no individuals under sanction have aligned with the opposition..."⁵³⁸ He said sanctioned individuals have been very reluctant to cut their ties with the regime, especially since many have not been convinced that the opposition can actually win.⁵³⁹ Many were actively blackmailed or otherwise intimidated into continuing their support for the regime.⁵⁴⁰

Significantly, sanctions have also given the regime an opportunity to make *political* capital – notably by blaming people's suffering on the international community.⁵⁴¹ One seasoned observer of Syria said, "Sanctions create an excuse for authoritarian regimes to leverage more resources from their people." One sanctions expert said:

There's a perception against the international community (from sanctions). The perception is that the Syrians are going through the same experience of Iraq. The regime controls the information, saying 'You are victims of the international community. They are putting you under siege.' It played into their hands!

Of course, the regime was not the only actor in Syria that was trying (often successfully) to exploit and incite anti-Western sentiment: fundamentalist groups like ISIS and Nusra did the same.

Thus, while a case can be made for appropriate targeted sanctions as a way of putting pressure on individuals linked to the Syrian regime, in practice the more generalised sanctions imposed on Syria have tended to damage the conventional economy and to fuel the war economy, while simultaneously giving the Assad regime a 'legitimacy boost' by allowing it to paint both itself and the Syrian people as victims of an international community 'siege'. Sanctions (in combination with the inadequacy of international assistance) have also deepened the sense of neglect and rejection that many Syrians feel at the hands of the international community, sometimes adding to the attractions of transnational violent movements. By feeding an existing inequality gap, sanctions also exacerbated a major cause of the original rebellion.

⁵³⁷ Abboud (2013).

⁵³⁸ Abboud (2013), p 4; see also Yazigi (2014, 2016).

⁵³⁹ Abboud (2013).

⁵⁴⁰ Abboud (2013).

⁵⁴¹ See also Yazigi (2014), and Bitar. This has parallels in Serbia and Iraq, for example; see e.g. discussions in Keen (2008) and Keen (2012).

One of the troubling questions that emerges from Syria's experience of war and sanctions (as well as experience elsewhere) is the following: what is the difference between a siege (such as the sieges imposed by the Syrian regime, which have been almost universally condemned) and a set of international sanctions (which are usually presented as righteous and justified but sometimes presented by the Assad regime as a siege)? Of course, there *are* differences, and one cannot dismiss the argument that while regime sieges aim to undermine human rights, sanctions aim to promote them. Even so, it is important to note that both sieges and international sanctions have had the effect of deepening the humanitarian crisis in Syria, while both have involved intentionally creating resource shortages so as to persuade the victims to effect social change (whether this is rejecting rebels in the case of regime-imposed sieges or rejecting a regime in the case of the international sanctions on Syria). Arguably, international sanctions are indeed one category of siege. Both domestic sieges and international sanctions may be perceived as radically unfair collective punishment. And both may end up strengthening entities they ostensibly aim to weaken.

5

Conclusion

Addressing the complex causes of violence: beyond a 'war on terror'

It is natural to assume that the aim in a war is to win, and the war in Syria has routinely been portrayed within this framework. A standard and 'common sense' interpretation is that rebels have been trying to overthrow the regime, the regime has been seeking ruthlessly to suppress the rebellion, and terrorists have been seeking to impose their own twisted ideology. While this picture contains important elements of truth, a closer look suggests that the aims in Syria's war are much more complex and diverse than simply winning. Beyond the purely military functions of violence, we need to take account of its economic, political and psychological functions. Mapping these can give us a better idea of the causes and function of Syria's long-running war, a war that is not simply a contest but also a *system* – a system of profit, power and protection that has shown a capacity to mutate and has exhibited considerable resilience.

Some neglected aspects of the war in Syria include: the intensification of rebellion as a result of regime violence against civilians; the strategic manipulation of disorder by various parties; the instrumentalisation by local and international actors of a 'war on terror'; the way the regime has adapted to its own (partial) disintegration; the war economy; the elements of collusion between ostensible enemies; and the tendency among civilians to turn to

violent jihadist elements in search of services and even sometimes a degree of protection. Syria's war has seen various warring parties offering (and sometimes providing) protection – both from their own violence and from violence by others.

So long as we imagine that war is all about winning, debates about international interventions tend to focus on which side to support and whether (and against whom) to intervene militarily. Those in favour of overthrowing Assad by military means have pointed to his horrendous human rights abuses against his own people, while those opposed to military intervention against Assad have pointed to the inability of previous Western military interventions to reduce violence in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Faced with the question of whether to intervene militarily against Assad, Western policymakers might be seen as facing an impossible dilemma: damned if they do; damned if they don't. A parallel set of dilemmas centres on whether there should be military interventions against non-governmental militants and, if so, which ones?

However, if we try to step away from the view of war as a binary struggle with the aim of winning, the possibilities for intervening helpfully are much more numerous and varied than simply going to war or not. One possibility is to engage with – and counteract – the war economy. While this is difficult, the task is very different from simply 'picking sides' in a military intervention. Another possibility is to try to alter the incentives that have encouraged the strategic manipulation of disorder by various actors inside and outside Syria. Stepping away from a 'war on terror' framework can be part of this, as can attempting to see and respond to Syria's war as a system rather than simply a contest or a humanitarian disaster. Rather than focusing on physically eliminating violent jihadist groups while responding to humanitarian need, the international community should put the protection of civilians and the careful construction of just and lasting peace at the core of all actions in Syria.

While the abuses of the Assad regime have been widely remarked upon, a growing focus on counter-terrorism has tended to dilute the focus on Assad while also distracting attention from other abusive parties inside and outside Syria and from the need for a more holistic solution. Distilling lessons from elsewhere, the 2015 Saferworld report I wrote with Larry Attree (*Dilemmas of counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding*) noted:

In the counter-terrorism paradigm, designating certain actors as 'spoilers', 'radicals', 'terrorists' or 'extremists' risks framing the problem from the outset as lying with those actors alone – the solution being to 'counter' them, change their wrong-thinking (or physically eliminate them). Less biased analysis would ensure we understand the perceptions and motives of all actors in a conflict. It would also mean seeking to

*identify what all relevant actors – including national, regional and international governments – can change to contribute towards lasting peace.*⁵⁴²

Naturally, the dangers of a confused and counterproductive approach increased once Western military interventions reinforced the media's focus on ISIS as 'public enemy number one'. The fantasy that the 'bad guys' in Syria can be separated from the 'good guys' (and then eliminated) has repeatedly proven to be a dangerous illusion, contributing strongly to the destruction of eastern Aleppo in 2016. It has also proven to be a pretext for abuses by a variety of local and international actors, who have hidden behind the apparent 'legitimacy' provided by a 'war on terror'.

One lesson from Syria's war – and from many other conflicts⁵⁴³ – is that the *declared* enemy of key actors is not always the same as the *actual* enemy. While the former can logically be identified from statements, the latter must be identified from *patterns of violence (and collusion)*. Yet Assad's declared antipathy to ISIS was rarely questioned (at least publicly) within Western official circles. Meanwhile, by pursuing their own versions of a 'war on terror', Western governments seem to have encouraged Assad to present his violence within this 'war on terror' framework, to present himself as a better alternative, and indeed to nurture the violent jihadist groups on whose existence this political strategy depended. The idea that one could reasonably 'go easy' on Assad because he was confronting 'terrorists' was a significant part of his impunity; yet, as this report shows, the regime's 'confrontation' with ISIS has generally been more apparent than real.

If the distinction between declared and actual enemies had been properly explored, there would also have been a better chance of challenging Russian violence in Syria. In particular, Russia's declared aim of standing up to terrorists would have been vigorously denounced as a smokescreen for Russian determination to support Assad.

It is of course true that governments have for centuries responded violently to protest and rebellion: you do not necessarily need a 'war on terror' framework to do this. But in every era, the *legitimation* of violence is an important consideration, and impunity deepens when abusive local and international actors successfully present their own violence within the framework of a righteous 'global' war. We have noted a growing perception among many Sunni Arabs that the West was complicit with Russia, Iran and the Assad regime in their devastating (and ostensibly 'anti-terrorist') campaigns, a perception that itself undermines Western security interests.

⁵⁴² Keen with Attree, p 37.

⁵⁴³ Keen (2012).

We should acknowledge, also, that the ‘war on terror’ framework is only one among *many* concerns and frameworks that have influenced Syria’s war: other important concerns include human rights, humanitarian aid, trade, and the desire to strengthen ties with various governments in the region. At the same time, many of these concerns (such as humanitarian aid and relations with regional states) have themselves been strongly influenced (and often distorted) by the perceived need to wage war to counter terrorism.

Counteracting the most abusive military factions in Syria – and improving the humanitarian situation more generally – demands a holistic approach that seeks to support the Syrian economy, to support relatively benign forms of governance within the country, to establish and uphold mechanisms for physical protection of civilians, and to put a serious spotlight – and serious pressure – on those actors who have been fuelling conflict from the outside. The most important of these actors have been Russia and Iran, both of which have been crucial in shoring up Assad’s abusive regime.

This concluding section looks at the economic, political and psychological functions of violence, and considers them with reference to four key themes: the war economy; the political manipulation of disorder; the failure of the ‘war on terror’ framework, and disillusion in relation to Western responses to Syria. The conclusion goes on to outline four recommendations.

5.1 Four main themes

The war economy

The economic functions of violence in Syria are varied and complex, and Syria’s war economy has created important economic incentives for continuing the war. Even before the war, Syrians had suffered from the evolution of a kind of ‘shadow state’⁵⁴⁴ in which many influential actors used state power and the threat of violence for private accumulation. Unsurprisingly, this system did not disappear in wartime; rather, it mutated and, more often than not, intensified. A war economy has flourished both within government-held areas and within rebel-held areas. Where these two zones have come into close contact with each other in besieged areas, the war economy has tended to be especially exploitative.

⁵⁴⁴ The term was used by William Reno in his study of Sierra Leone (Reno).

When it came to *rebel areas*, many rebel fighters quickly became involved in a variety of economic activities – some of these designed to fund the fighting but many soon becoming important in their own right. One important activity was extracting 'protection money' from families and businesses, including through resort to kidnapping. Another was stripping and selling industrial assets from industrial plants. Then there was looting of banks, people-smuggling, stealing and selling ancient artefacts, extracting oil, and stealing aid. Meanwhile, donations to rebels from abroad frequently found their way into private pockets, and civilians suspected that some local 'battles' were being exaggerated or even prolonged to maximise the flow of funds.

Profiteering activities have often involved 'moderate' rebels as well as the more violent jihadist groups like ISIS. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that a desire to overthrow Assad has remained a powerful motivation to a great many rebels, and has been constantly stoked by the regime's abuses; the revival of the FSA from around September 2015 – with external (including US) support – reflects the continuing strength of this desire.

Often forgotten has been the war economy in *regime-controlled* areas, a system that has involved large-scale looting and extortion by government soldiers and *shabiha* and National Defence Force militias, the stealing of aid, the use of force to manipulate markets, the manipulation of exchange rates and currency reserves, and the confiscation of assets belonging to those labelled as 'disloyal'. Many elements of the elite linked to the regime have also profited from the sanctions that the regime's abuses have provoked. While different variations of the evolving 'shadow state' emerged in rebel-held and regime-held areas, these two systems have had important points of similarity.

Meanwhile, elements of the war economy have fed strongly into collusion. Indeed, economic motivations have sometimes combined with a simple survival instinct to encourage military 'stand-offs' in which accumulation takes precedence over confrontation. Meanwhile, as the war economy became more important and more rapacious, civilians increasingly looked for some kind of remedy – and opportunities for violent jihadist groups to offer their own versions of 'protection' (including clampdowns on criminality) increased.

While it is easy to think of the international community as 'helpless' in the face of local predation, the behaviour of international actors has powerfully shaped Syria's evolving war economy. Funding from Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, as well as Turkey, fed into strategies of accumulation among rebel leaders. Meanwhile, Iran appears to have strongly sponsored a kind of 'shadow state' in regime-held areas, funding militias and constructing lines

of authority that gravitate towards Tehran rather than Damascus. The result is that, with or without Assad, Iran has ways of exerting strong influence on the country in the context of its ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia over Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain and other countries in the region.

Other elements of international interaction with the local war economy have also been notable. For example, profits from antiquities have depended on finding willing international buyers, while much of the profit derived from oil has often depended on such buyers. This underlines the importance of placing restrictions on these kinds of trading networks, particularly when they are funding abusive groups.

Resource scarcities and ‘scarcity profits’ of various kinds have been strongly fuelled by the manipulation of aid (particularly by the regime), the lack of international relief and development assistance (particularly in besieged and hard-to-reach areas) and international sanctions. They have had a devastating humanitarian impact in Syria, and have contributed significantly to the war. In 2017, access from cross-line convoys has so far been even worse than in the equivalent part of 2016; even a reduction in violence in some areas does not seem to have helped. In addition to its adverse effects on the humanitarian situation, we have seen that resource scarcity has fed the conflict through at least eleven mechanisms:

1. It has played into the Syrian regime’s strategy of imposing starvation and offering resources (and ‘protection’) as an alternative.
2. It has been an incentive to join armed groups, whether in regime or rebel areas.
3. It has created an appetite for services – including humanitarian aid – that have been provided by fundamentalist groups.
4. It has encouraged crime and economically motivated violence.
5. It has encouraged people to tolerate abusive armed groups that promise to rein in criminality.
6. It has contributed powerfully to a sense of anger – and a loss of faith – in relation to the West and the ‘human rights’ discourse that the West has tended to promote, fuelling the emotional attraction of violent jihadist groups.
7. It has created additional incentives for keeping the war going by contributing to windfall profits for warlords, militias and associated businessmen who have been able to breach sanctions or sieges.⁵⁴⁵

545 Cf. Keen (1994).

8. Actors linked to the regime have been able to make 'political capital' out of international sanctions.
9. By fuelling criminality and fundamentalist groups, scarcity helped to reduce the perceived legitimacy of rebellion, particularly in international eyes, which in turn further undermined relief to opposition areas in a vicious circle.
10. Scarcity has encouraged a focus of international effort and energy on emergency humanitarian assistance, to a degree taking focus from the underlying protection crisis while also making the UN solicitous of Damascus's cooperation with a view to improving relief delivery.
11. Among Syrian refugees suffering from lack of educational and other opportunities in neighbouring countries, scarcity has in some cases encouraged recruitment into Syrian armed groups.

The political manipulation of disorder

Violence in Syria has also had *political* functions that go beyond simply achieving a military victory. A key part of this has been the widespread manipulation of disorder for political purposes. In particular, offering protection against one's own and others' violence has been one way of building a political constituency. As in many other countries (for example, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka), continued adherence to the idea of a global 'war on terror' has played a significant role in allowing and encouraging these political strategies.

To a large extent, the Assad regime succeeded in delegitimising a rebellion founded in genuine political grievances. Rather than seeking to destroy all rebel groups, Assad nurtured certain kinds of rebel violence while systematically denouncing rebels as 'criminal' and 'terrorist'. This in turn helped the regime to carve out significant impunity – both nationally and internationally – for its abuses. Part of Assad's political manipulation of disorder lay in the degree of encouragement he gave to the Kurds in resisting militant fundamentalist groups he had also encouraged. In addition to its domestic protection rackets, the Assad regime has also been running a kind of protection racket in relation to Western governments: facing possible overthrow in the wake of Saddam's forced departure, Assad stoked jihadist violence in Iraq (while simultaneously offering to rein it in); soon he was stoking jihadist violence within Syria (while again offering his services to the West and the wider international community as someone who could prevent the jihadists from taking over Syria). As the crisis elicited significant humanitarian aid, the regime was able to skim off a

large portion of this aid and tweak the aid tap for ‘leverage’.⁵⁴⁶ Looking ahead, capitalising on European and US concerns about immigration from Syria, there will be increasing opportunities for Assad to offer ‘stability’ as an antidote to the disorder – and mass migration – that he himself has promoted, adding another insidious element to his protection rackets.⁵⁴⁷

It seems pretty clear that jihadism has been intentionally nurtured in Iraq and Syria to function as a protection racket. While the emerging protection rackets around humanitarian aid and migration were probably not planned, they have been – and will be – exploited opportunistically by a regime with a well-honed instinct for survival.

Failure of the ‘war on terror’ framework

To a significant extent (and increasingly as time has passed), the Syrian war has been seen and presented internationally within a framework that identifies violent jihadist groups as ‘public enemy number one’ and that prioritises their elimination through military means. While Obama rejected the term ‘war on terror’, he did say the US was at war with the Taliban and al-Qaeda and affiliates and he did authorise military strikes against ISIS and al-Nusra/JFS in Syria. Under President Trump, the idea of a ‘war on terror’ appears to have been given new backing, and June 2017 saw a major US-backed offensive aimed at pushing ISIS out of its Syrian headquarters at Raqqa.

While we often think of the ‘war on terror’ as impacting countries invaded by Western governments (notably Afghanistan and Iraq), studies of Yemen, Somalia and Sri Lanka (for example) show that the ‘war on terror’ can have damaging effects on countries that are not invaded by Western governments, notably by helping to create impunity for abuses carried out by ‘counter-terrorism’ forces. This report suggests that continued adherence in practice (if not always in words) to a ‘war on terror’ framework has had at least nine adverse effects in Syria.

First, it has provided important cover and a veneer of legitimacy for abuses by the Assad regime, which has presented itself as ‘the lesser of two evils’. The growing international priority attached to combating ISIS and al-Nusra/JFS/HTS has distracted from abuses by the Assad regime and its allies, who have been responsible for the overwhelming majority of civilian casualties in Syria.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁶ Leenders.

⁵⁴⁷ Cf. Andersson; de Waal.

⁵⁴⁸ Lynch.

Second, the 'war on terror' framework provided a strong incentive for the Assad regime to nurture violent jihadist groups – both before and during the war. This applied particularly to ISIS. Again, when it comes to these kinds of perverse incentives, Syria is not an isolated example: others include Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Third, the idea of a 'war on terror' has provided cover and a veneer of legitimacy for abuses by Russia and Iran, both of which have allied with Assad and both of which have (like Assad) portrayed their own violence as 'anti-terrorist'. Even the new Russia-Iran-Turkey agreement on 'de-escalation' zones makes provision for the Assad regime to continue to attack 'terrorists' within these zones.⁵⁴⁹ Yet the violence that Russia and Iran have perpetrated within Syria has generally served important military, political and economic purposes that have little or nothing to do with a 'war on terror'. Russia has repeatedly shown that its main priority is to weaken the Syrian insurgency and to shore up the Assad regime rather than defeating ISIS; another Russian aim may well be to create another 'bargaining card' in diplomatic games with the West. Meanwhile, Iran seems primarily concerned to extend its own influence in Syria (and Iraq) so as to keep up pressure on Israel (via Hezbollah and supply routes through Syria) and as part of its ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Russian and Iranian determination to tackle terrorism is also called into doubt by the fact that the casualties inflicted by Russia and Iranian-backed militias have had the predictable effect of generating support for violent jihadist groups.

Washington's declared intention to wage war on al-Nusra/JFS helped to create a *permissive environment* for the escalating 2016 attacks on Aleppo by Russia, the Assad regime and Iranian forces on the ground. In particular, the United States's rapprochement with Russia (in the expectation – or at least the hope – of a shared 'war on terror' agenda) involved a plan – articulated at various points in 2016 – *jointly* to attack al-Nusra/JFS, and to do so even in areas where al-Nusra/JFS was acknowledged to be a weak presence or where there was no certainty of its presence at all. The US also carried out its own attacks on al-Nusra/JFS, away from Aleppo city, and continues to do so on the HTS successor group. When Washington and other Western capitals reacted to the escalating and devastating attacks on Aleppo with strong condemnation, it was already too late to prevent them.

While US officials were aware of Russia's overwhelming focus on non-ISIS targets from the beginning of Russia's military intervention in September 2015 (a bias that sometimes attracted public criticism from the US), there was

also a tendency to project excessive optimism in relation to Russia's avowed intentions to target ISIS.

A fourth problem with the 'war on terror' framework has been the effect on the Kurds and on Turkey. US support for the Kurds as the 'best hope' against ISIS has helped to destabilise the peace process within Turkey, to push Turkey closer to Russia (including what some analysts see as Turkey 'selling' Aleppo to the Russians), and to precipitate Turkish military incursions into Syria (such as occurred in August 2016 and April 2017). The YPG's role in standing up to ISIS has also been complicated by its interest in confronting US- and Turkey-backed rebels, and by its interest in suppressing dissent. Nor can the strategy of using Kurdish fighters to defeat ISIS be expected to work in predominantly Sunni areas.⁵⁵⁰ An overriding focus on defeating ISIS tends to push these important considerations dangerously to the side.⁵⁵¹ As Turkey extends its zone of influence within Syria, Russia may lack the desire to protect the Kurds, and even US support for the Kurds is uncertain.

A fifth problem with a 'war on terror' framework is that it has tended to increase disunity within the armed opposition (an opposition already severely prone to fracturing), and to destabilise fragile moves towards peace, including the 2016 ceasefire(s). Even as Russia and the United States intervened militarily against al-Nusra/JFS and even as Aleppo was devastated in 2016, al-Nusra/JFS *gained* in power and influence – in large part because of its local reputation for standing up to Assad.⁵⁵²

Particularly in 2016, Western governments and Russia tried to push a distinction between terrorists and non-terrorists in a context where this line was hard to draw, and the 2016 ceasefires explicitly committed some elements of the armed opposition to the elimination of more 'extreme' elements. Yet by labelling al-Nusra as a peace 'spoiler' and excluding it from the peace process, the international community created important incentives for al-Nusra to wreck any peace process. It was also difficult for other parts of the armed opposition to endorse the physical elimination of al-Nusra – with its strong record of standing up to Assad – as a condition for signing up to the February 2016 ceasefire. Ceasefire breaches by the Assad regime encouraged al-Nusra attacks, which were then cited to justify the regime violence, and so on.⁵⁵³

550 Back in September 2014, in an assessment of operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Peter Neumann of King's College London observed, "The Kurds are never going to take territories that are 100 per cent Sunni because they are unpopular there." (Shackle).

551 Bonsey (2017b). Washington's support for a YPG that alienates Turkey cannot be guaranteed; nor can the situation where American soldiers are used as something close to 'human shields' against Turkish strikes on YPG areas.

552 E.g. Lister (2017a).

553 Bonsey (2016) (2017a).

This helped the regime to wreck ceasefires without taking all the blame.

A sixth problem is that Western military intervention under the 'war on terror' framework has killed large numbers of civilians and caused other kinds of suffering among civilians, including injury, mass displacement and a deepening of the humanitarian crisis. Even though only a very small proportion of Syrians have signed up to ISIS or al-Qaeda,⁵⁵⁴ the suffering arising from Western military interventions risks prompting additional support for violent jihadist groups among civilians. In other contexts, even attempts to target terrorists rather precisely in drone killings have sometimes led to huge resentment.⁵⁵⁵

We also know from contexts beyond Syria that heavy-handed military interventions often reverse what appears to be a natural tendency for ordinary people to recoil from violent fundamentalist groups.⁵⁵⁶ Provoking such a response is typically part of the *intention* behind acts of terrorism, and many militant groups are aware that they do best under conditions of outright conflict in which the West is directly involved.⁵⁵⁷ While it is true that most people in Raqqa are desperate for ISIS to depart,⁵⁵⁸ the widespread suffering among civilians resulting directly from US-led attacks also carries a huge risk of 'losing hearts and minds'. Damage to local economies compounds this problem and (as we have seen in the past) can propel people into militias, even if only in search of an income.

A seventh problem with a 'war on terror' framework in Syria is the sheer difficulty of winning. If we focus on Syria and Iraq themselves, it appears that some progress has been made in the military campaign against ISIS. According to one UK House of Commons report, by end-June 2017 ISIS had lost 71 per cent of the territory it had held in Iraq and around half its territory in Syria.⁵⁵⁹ But there are many grounds for believing that a comprehensive and lasting victory will be extremely difficult to achieve. Evidence from around the world suggests that the defeat of terrorist groups by military means is rare.⁵⁶⁰ And in Syria the obstacles have been particularly potent.

Even in neighbouring Iraq, ISIS has proven somewhat resilient, and here international efforts to defeat it have taken place in harness with efforts by the national government and associated Shia militias (with a great deal of suffering

⁵⁵⁴ Lister (2017b).

⁵⁵⁵ See e.g. Afzal.

⁵⁵⁶ See e.g. Gerges (2005). See also Kilcullen (on Afghanistan) and Shackle.

⁵⁵⁷ See e.g. Gerges (2005).

⁵⁵⁸ See e.g. Samer.

⁵⁵⁹ Smith and Mills.

⁵⁶⁰ Jones and Libicki; Cronin.

inflicted on civilians, for example in Mosul). Moreover, Iraqi insurgent groups that predated the rise of ISIS remain active, feeding many of the grievances that allowed ISIS to grow in Iraq.⁵⁶¹ Yet in Syria, it has been practically and morally impossible for Western governments to ally with the national government to defeat ISIS. This is a huge disadvantage for any international counterterrorism effort. Moreover, far from supporting international counterterrorism efforts, the Assad regime has in many ways been actively undermining them. All this underlines the need for the US and Russia as well as other interested parties – if they are serious about undermining terrorism – to exert coordinated pressure for a speedy transition away from the rule of Assad, whose regime has had a symbiotic relationship with ISIS in particular.

In Syria, ISIS has had a number of other advantages that have given it a significant degree of resilience. It has generally been well financed. It has had many commanders with military experience (notably from Saddam's Iraqi army). It has usually been able to retreat to the desert. And its fighters have often benefited from being able to move backwards and forwards across the international border between Syria and Iraq (as the Taliban has moved between Afghanistan and Pakistan). ISIS's recapture of Palmyra in December 2016 starkly illustrated the difficulties of waging a 'war on terror' across Syria and Iraq against a highly mobile enemy, since ISIS forces had earlier been pushed out of Mosul in Iraq before they headed to Raqqa, Deir al-Zour and eventually Palmyra.⁵⁶² In the summer of 2017, after Western publics were sold the US-led military assault on Raqqa as an attack on 'ISIS HQ' that would fatally weaken the organisation, experts were already saying that the big battle looming would be for Deir al-Zour in eastern Syria. Yet if Kurdish/SDA forces spearhead an assault on Deir al-Zour, the Kurds will be even further from home than they are in the largely Arab town of Raqqa.⁵⁶³ As in the past, the prospects of 'winning' the war on terror continue to recede even as significant 'victories' are declared.

Another major obstacle to military victory against ISIS has been its ability to recruit new fighters. While this ability is waning, ISIS has often in the past been able to replace lost fighters through international recruitment or through local recruitment assisted by its relatively high salaries in a context of drastic economic decline. Turkmani observed in 2015 that ISIS's "ability to recruit

⁵⁶¹ Anagnostos (2017).

⁵⁶² Fisk.

⁵⁶³ ICG (2017b). A February 2016 Institute for the Study of War report noted, "ISIS has established itself in multiple major urban centers, including Fallujah [in Iraq], Palmyra and Deir ez Zour [both Syria]. Any of these cities in Iraq or Syria could serve as a *de facto* capital for its caliphate were it deprived of Mosul or ar Raqqa." (Cafarella, Gambhir, and Zimmerman (2016), p 7).

based on economic needs is not something that can be countered by aerial bombardment.”⁵⁶⁴ ISIS is getting weaker. But ISIS or its successor groups are still likely to draw on significant local grievances (certainly on grievances among the Sunni in Iraq but also on grievances that centre on lack of protection and services in Syria). So too is HTS (formerly Nusra/JFS).

Even if it proves possible to declare victory against ISIS and/or successor groups in Syria and Iraq, this does not mean ‘winning’ worldwide. Indeed, ISIS’s reduced territorial control in Syria and Iraq may be spurring an *increase* in ISIS-linked terror attacks in the West. Consider Morocco and Tunisia, for example. About a thousand former ISIS members are thought to have been smuggled back to Morocco and Tunisia as ISIS’s caliphate has weakened in Syria and Iraq. The threat posed by such individuals is significant. In the wake of the August Barcelona attack, a former leader member of ISIS’s external operations arm said he believed some will take their grievances back to their European countries of birth and pursue revenge for ISIS’s loss of land and personnel. Combat with ISIS has been very bloody. In Syria, thousands of young men – mostly foreigners – died within ISIS in a series of futile military pushes, mostly against US-backed Kurdish groups. “We would send hundreds of people out to be killed and they would all die,” the former leader said.⁵⁶⁵ In the case of people who have survived such carnage, it is hard to imagine a swift or easy transition to peaceful coexistence in the short or long term.

While there are good grounds to expect further violence in destination countries – and there will need to be an efficient criminal justice approach to prevent and interdict violent acts – any violations of human rights will tend to nurture violent fundamentalism even if ISIS (and any successor groups) are defeated in Syria and Iraq.

An eighth problem is that the ‘war on terror’ framework within Syria is part of a much wider ‘war on terror’ that has done a great deal to nurture the violence in Syria. This includes the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Turkey’s long-running (if intermittent) domestic ‘war on terror’, and the ‘war on terror’ that Baghdad has been waging on ISIS. On a broad view of the problem, it seems unlikely that a ‘war on terror’ is going to remedy a situation that a ‘war on terror’ did much to create. It is also important to note that Russia and Iran’s destructive actions in Syria reflect, to a significant degree, a perception that *their own*

⁵⁶⁴ Turkmani, p 5.

⁵⁶⁵ Chulov (2017).

security is at risk in a world where governments in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have been toppled by Western governments.⁵⁶⁶

A ninth difficulty is that the 'war on terror' framework has contributed to sanctions and aid approaches that, as noted above, have had very adverse humanitarian effects while feeding strongly into the war.

Disillusionment with the West

Negative perceptions around international aid, around sanctions and around the pattern of military interventions and non-interventions have fuelled a significant disillusionment with the West, which in turn has helped violent jihadist groups. Many Syrians report being treated by the international community as 'less than human', whether inside or outside Syria.⁵⁶⁷ For example, many Syrians have seen a focus on confronting terrorists rather than Assad as evidence of a prioritisation of Western over Syrian lives. We have noted also the perception among many Syrians, especially Sunni Arabs, that they have been deserted by the West and even the perception of a *de facto* Western alliance with Russia, Iran and the Assad regime.

Such perceptions carry a significant risk of building support for anti-Western militancy, at least in certain individuals. The perception also echoes many Syrians' explanations for the original 2011 rebellion, explanations that often centre on affronts to 'dignity' and 'humanity' in the pre-war period.

Given the threat to people's safety and survival and the extreme injustices experienced by many of Syria's people, it is unsurprising that, in Syria as in other deeply insecure environments, many people have aligned themselves with violent groups in search of resources, safety and even some kind of moral certainty.

Within Syria, ISIS and al-Nusra/JFS/HTS (while often extremely violent and extremely abusive) have offered – and sometimes even delivered – an element of protection and a modicum of services in a context where these precious public goods had virtually collapsed. This statement may seem particularly odd in relation to ISIS, whose vicious behaviour has included filmed beheadings of Westerners and mass rape of Yazidi women. But even the Taliban in Afghanistan, an organisation that has been similarly reviled, is known to have

⁵⁶⁶ Noting the 'color revolutions' in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 as well as NATO overtures to Georgia and Ukraine and NATO's 2011 toppling of Gaddafi, Russia expert Fiona Hill observes, "In Putin's view... the United States was now responsible for a long sequence of revolutions close to Russia's borders and in countries with close ties to Moscow." (Hill).

⁵⁶⁷ E.g. author's research in 2016, Calais, France.

offered some services and some protection against warlords. In any peace process and any political transition, it will be vital to give people a sense that they are being protected and their needs are being met. Vital in itself, this goal is also essential if violent jihadist groups are to be successfully countered.

As in other wars, a desire for revenge has also become an important motivation for violence, effectively superimposing itself on the desire to win, to make money, and to find protection. Indeed, in the absence of mechanisms for establishing justice (and a properly functioning state), revenge can easily be seen as *a form of justice*.⁵⁶⁸

The severe shortfalls in meeting the needs of Syrian refugees have also fed a sense of neglect and even betrayal. Compounding the problem, President Trump's executive order of 27 January 2017 suspended the US refugee programme entirely for 120 days and indefinitely for Syrian refugees. Donors have often been very slow to commit money they have pledged.⁵⁶⁹ And Syrians are being sent back from Greece to Turkey without EU evaluation of their protection claims.⁵⁷⁰ In these circumstances, it hardly seems helpful that some of the most prominent academic commentators (Alex Betts and Paul Collier) have recently advocated assistance in the region (and especially the use of migrants' labour) *in preference to* asylum in the West, while presenting the latter as politically destabilising. One needs to take seriously the common perception of the West as washing its hands of problems that it has done a great deal to create.

5.2 Four main recommendations

Four key ways forward for international interventions emerge from the report: first, a clear rejection of a 'war on terror' framework; second, relieving the scarcity of resources through improving aid and shifting from generalized sanctions; third, a stronger diplomatic push for peace; and fourth (linked with this push for peace), a major push for an inclusive political transition led by Syrians, probably including some elements of decentralisation, so as to tackle Syria's endemic governance problem and weaken Assad's formal political power even if he were to remain president in the short term.

⁵⁶⁸ Cf. Pendle.

⁵⁶⁹ Wintour (2016).

⁵⁷⁰ E.g. Human Rights Watch (2016a).

Rejecting the 'war on terror' framework

In Syria there can be no shortcuts to the defeat of particular problem groups without finding a solution to the wider conflict. Paradoxically, as in many contexts (such as Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen), abandoning a 'war on terror' framework is a necessary step towards bringing about the conditions in which ISIS and its successor movements are unable to wage violent attacks and claim control over people's lives. It would be easier to think clearly about ending the conflict and bringing about a just peace if the simplistic solutions promised by a 'war on terror' framework were put to one side. Doing so would remove important blind spots in international strategy and would allow a focus on tackling the damaging behaviour of many other actors involved, including the Syrian regime, international actors like Russia and Iran, and apparent 'allies' – for all of whom the 'war on terror' has provided an important pretext for pursuing their own interests, with destabilising results.

Given the limited potential to end the Syrian war and defeat individual violent groups through military action, international strategy cannot afford to depend on Trump's promise to 'bomb the hell out of ISIS'.⁵⁷¹ Rather than attacking those groups seen as most dangerous without a broader strategy in place, it will be vital to recognise the counterproductive impacts of violence in feeding cycles of revenge, and explore alternatives to the use of force more vigorously.

Meanwhile, the international community needs to put the protection of civilians and the careful construction of just and lasting peace at the core of all actions in Syria. Influencing the situation in the right direction requires seeing the motives, grievances and relations between actors that are shaping the conflict as a system, at local, national, regional and international levels, and attempting to influence these in a more strategic way.

Resource scarcities and violence: the role of aid and sanctions

If resource scarcities had damaging *effects* (humanitarian effects and impact on the conflict itself), the *causes* of this scarcity have been complex. Many people were living in poverty even before the war, and the conflict massively disrupted the economy. On top of this, international aid has fallen severely short of needs, and international sanctions have further contributed to scarcity. Going forward, the international community should ensure it meets its obligation to deliver aid based on needs, notably in the besieged and hard-to-

571 Johnson.

reach areas. Obstruction of humanitarian aid to besieged areas must be clearly identified as a war crime.⁵⁷²

Delivering more aid would require overcoming obstacles such as legal restrictions, pervasive insecurity and the risks posed by theft; and, as with all aid in conflict contexts, it would be important to monitor and mitigate the potential negative impacts of injecting resources on local power dynamics. But the consequences of scarcity require that these obstacles be overcome.

Beyond the immediate humanitarian needs, Syria also urgently needs developmental interventions such as livelihoods and education.⁵⁷³ Developmental interventions hold out the prospect of providing economic alternatives to joining military factions, and shortcomings here have fed the conflict. Livelihoods programmes would need to be cognisant of the lessons of similar such efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and be complemented by other types of programmes and actions. For example, large-scale delivery of fuel – especially diesel – can help to support local livelihoods (including agriculture), and to reduce the leverage that ISIS has sometimes exerted through controlling oil supplies to other rebel groups.⁵⁷⁴ Fuel delivery would carry risks of diversion by armed actors, but if these could be mitigated it would have clear benefits.

Particularly in any peace process or genuine 'de-escalation', local councils will need strong external support if they are to fashion alternative forms of governance to those offered by the regime and by abusive military factions. In many ways, the space for such interventions narrowed as violent jihadist factions gained an increasing hold. But the need for good local governance is present even in conditions of conflict, and relatively un-abusive groups will be unable to retain local control without appropriate resources. A peace process would also rapidly reopen these spaces, re-energising the initiative that Syrians have already shown in providing their own services. Going forward, local governance and 'bottom up' approaches will be an essential component.⁵⁷⁵ The Trump administration has taken the line that 'nation-building' is not part of the US's agenda, and in areas retaken from ISIS we are already seeing a dangerous neglect of services. A June 2017 Center for New American Security report noted, "In the counter-ISIS fight, the new administration... has thus far put much less emphasis on humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and economic aid to areas liberated from ISIS

572 Turkmani et al. (2015).

573 Turkmani, Ali et al.

574 Turkmani et al. (2015).

575 Turkmani et al. (2015).

than the Obama administration did.”⁵⁷⁶ Yet it is precisely this kind of vacuum that encouraged the rise of ISIS in the first place.

Over the course of Syria’s war, fears about aid being diverted into the hands of fundamentalist groups have overridden other important concerns, with damaging consequences. But while the aspiration that aid should ‘do no harm’ is understandable at an abstract level, in practice it has tended to be quite crippling.⁵⁷⁷ Concerns around aid manipulation have been taken up very *selectively* in the case of Syria (as in other recent emergencies like those in Somalia, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka), and regime manipulation of aid has often proceeded relatively unhindered alongside international concerns about fuelling terrorism. To uphold the commitment to ‘do no harm’ donors and humanitarian agencies need to redouble their efforts to circumvent the manipulation of relief by the regime while redoubling efforts to reach those in need in opposition-held areas.

They must also seek to reverse levels of scarcity and lack of support for livelihoods, recognising these as a greater problem than the risks posed by aid falling into the hands of abusive non-governmental groups. As we have seen, diversion of aid into the hands of militants tends to have relatively little impact in circumstances where militant groups have access to other more valuable resources. NSAGs in the country have tended to have diverse and lucrative sources of funding (including oil, protection money, loot, and money from foreign donors), so that the value of any stolen aid has been much less significant than in, say, Sudan, Ethiopia or Mozambique (countries where ‘do no harm’ originated).

In discussions on sanctions, Syrians have repeatedly emphasised the very *negative* effects on the country exerted by prolonged and relatively generalised sanctions. Sanctions have strongly impeded humanitarian operations and have fuelled shortages of key supplies like medicines. Sanctions have also fuelled violence by deepening resource scarcities and undermining livelihoods. They have also made it easier for the regime (and actors close to it) to profit from scarcity – profiting economically, militarily (through the policy of starvation) and politically (through the message that Syrians are victims of shortages imposed by the international community). Sanctions have had important negative impacts on rebel-held areas as well as on regime-held areas.

⁵⁷⁶ Kahl et al.

⁵⁷⁷ The author’s work on the misuse of aid in Sudan (Keen, 1994) was one of a number of studies (e.g. Africa Watch) that informed this agenda (and in particular Mary Anderson’s influential book *Do No Harm* [Anderson]).

Targeted sanctions offer a way round this impasse, but must go a lot further than at present. In February 2017, Russia and China vetoed a UN resolution to impose sanctions (including targeted sanctions on selected individuals as well as a ban on helicopter sales) as punishment for use of chemical weapons.⁵⁷⁸

Since ISIS (unlike many terrorist organisations) needs a lot of money to finance its governance project, effective efforts to restrict key resource flows such as oil can play – and have played – a role in weakening it.⁵⁷⁹ Such measures include border controls implemented by Turkey and Iraq in particular, attempting to ensure that ISIS is not smuggling oil and antiquities or receiving new military supplies or recruits.⁵⁸⁰ Pressure is also needed to stem the flow of private funding from Gulf States to fundamentalist organisations within Syria.

Finally, there is the question of assistance to victims of Syria's war outside of Syria. Assistance to Syrians in nearby countries is clearly vital and must be greatly enhanced including by significantly improving access to education. Apart from the obvious humanitarian benefits, a much more generous reception for Syrian refugees in Western countries – not least the UK and US – would also help to address the strong sense of neglect and even betrayal that has fed the rise of fundamentalist groups within Syria as well as anger outside the country.⁵⁸¹

The need for a diplomatic solution

Syria's war has been messy and complex, and peace will be correspondingly messy and complex. Peace will necessarily involve, for example, a series of compromises with many unsavoury actors. But complexity should not preclude taking some relatively obvious steps. Nor should the need for compromise be a barrier to action.

Most importantly, the US and EU governments need to ramp up the diplomatic pressure on Russia and Iran to stop their support for a profoundly vicious regime while working with Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to find an acceptable political transition that will (necessarily) be distasteful to all relevant parties. The Assad regime's heavy dependence on foreign backers, while it has fed the Syrian war in various ways, is also an

⁵⁷⁸ Reuters/*Guardian*.

⁵⁷⁹ Financial Action Task Force/OECD.

⁵⁸⁰ Turkmani, p 27; see also Khalaf (2015).

⁵⁸¹ It is worth noting that the humanitarian response from Gulf countries has generally been weak.

opportunity – not least because the regime’s own military forces are considerably weaker than they have often been made to appear.⁵⁸²

Of course, the rebels too are weak and divided, but this presents opportunities in relation to *their* backers. Given that Assad has been responsible for mass murder on a horrifying scale, it would be profoundly disturbing (to say the least) if he were a part of a political transition in Syria. It was also disturbing when Slobodan Milosevic was part of the political transition in former Yugoslavia. However, in the absence of anything resembling a viable intention or plan to oust Assad, insisting that he disappears immediately as a condition for peace would seem to be an act of wishful or even magical thinking (or rather a continuation of the wishful thinking that started very early in the war); it may be a deal-breaker as far as Russia and Iran are concerned, though these powers are likely to be more concerned with protecting their own interests (and saving face) than with Assad *per se*.

Russia has reasons to move towards a more peaceful situation as well as reasons to continue fighting, and diplomacy can appeal to the former. In particular, Russia may be anxious not to get drawn into a permanent (and expensive) quagmire in Syria. In theory at least, there would appear to be considerable overlap with US interests, including an interest in stability in Syria, in keeping a limit on Iranian power, and (particularly given Russia’s large Muslim population) in limiting the rise of Islamist jihadist groups.⁵⁸³

Militant jihadist groups tend to do well in conditions of war (and may also be aware of the ‘advantages’ of provoking external military interventions). Pushing strongly towards a political transition will undermine violent jihadist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda far more effectively than some variation of a ‘war on terror’ that brings its own destruction and invites, to varying degrees, the cooperation of Assad, Russia and Iran. Insofar as Russia and Iran are interested in defeating terrorism, this point will be of interest to them. Fundamentalist jihadi groups are primarily a *symptom* of the wartime collapse of services and protection. As Fawaz Gerges notes: “The most effective means to degrade IS [ISIS] is to dismantle its social base by winning over hearts and

582 A March 2017 report from the Institute for the Study of War noted: “The pro-regime coalition is a house of cards that consists of a small core of Syrian Arab Army forces concentrated around Damascus, a group of Syrian militias paid for and controlled by various individuals in the Syrian elite, many thousands of Lebanese Hizbollah fighters who report to their commander and to the Iranians, tens of thousands of Iraq Shi’a militias paid for and controlled directly by Iran. The Iranians have also periodically deployed their own conventional ground forces, while the Russians have provided limited contingents of special forces troops.” (Cafarella et al. (2017), p 16).

583 Hill.

minds, a difficult and prolonged task, and to resolve the Syria conflict that has given IS motivation, resources and a safe haven.”⁵⁸⁴

Once you let go of the fantasy that ‘bad guys’ can be separated from ‘good guys’ and eliminated (the fantasy that lies at the heart of a continuing adherence to some version of a ‘war on terror’), it then becomes easier to consider how peace can be achieved through vigorous diplomatic efforts, and to pursue a diplomatic solution to the war based on a transition from the Assad regime to more inclusive governance.

Even in terms of defeating ‘terrorism’, a peace settlement and a shift towards more inclusive government are much more likely to be effective than a policy of waging war on ‘spoilers’ (particularly those with significant local support). Given the significant backing Nusra/JFS/HTS has had, it will be important to open dialogue and explore the viability of political options for engaging the movement – or at least elements of it – in a process to end the conflict and shape a future settlement.⁵⁸⁵

Clearly a number of diplomatic ‘games’ have been taking place between the US and Russia, the US and Iran, the EU and Russia, and the EU and Iran. The US and the EU need to give Syria a higher priority in relations with Russia. When it comes to sanctions, Russia’s actions in Ukraine have been much more censured than Russia’s actions in Syria. Yet the latter have been immensely destructive. While asset freezes (and travel bans) were imposed on more than 100 people as part of the sanctions responding to Moscow’s military intervention in the Ukraine,⁵⁸⁶ only a limited number of sanctions have been imposed on Russian entities that have provided support to Assad.⁵⁸⁷ While new US sanctions were imposed in June 2017 over Moscow’s military intervention in Ukraine, we did not see a similar move in relation to Russia’s military intervention in Syria. Since the US was planning joint military operations with Russia, this would have been very odd in any case. Even at the height of Russia’s attacks on eastern Aleppo, EU leaders decided to keep in reserve the possibility of sanctions on Russia for abuses in Syria, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel saying that providing humanitarian relief to people in Aleppo should be the top priority.⁵⁸⁸ Increased pressure on Russia should include a strengthening of targeted sanctions – for example, restricting access to US and European markets for Russian banks known to be supporting Assad.

⁵⁸⁴ Gerges (2015); Kilcullen.

⁵⁸⁵ See, notably, Powell, on the importance of dialogue with such groups (Powell).

⁵⁸⁶ Ashford.

⁵⁸⁷ Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg

⁵⁸⁸ Trojanovski and Norman (2016).

For its part, Iran has played a hugely destructive role in Syria and there is an urgent need for the international community to do everything possible to rein in this behaviour. This means speaking clearly and strongly about Iran's continuing abuses in Syria. It also means there is a need for more explicit conditionality when it comes to these abuses. Charles Lister has suggested, for example, that "The United States' best method of pressure on Iran and its use of militant groups in Syria is the use of targeted sanctions, especially against airlines used to fly weaponry and militiamen daily from Iran to Damascus."⁵⁸⁹ In a February 2015 article in the *New York Review of Books*, Sarah Birke noted that the pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran had allowed the Iranian Government to provide support to the Assad government with a degree of impunity.⁵⁹⁰ Now, with the deal in place and the President Hassan Rouhani anxious to honour the agreement (and fresh from a landslide re-election), Western actors may be in a position to try to coax a different approach from Iran in relation to Syria, appealing to Iranians' desire for quick economic progress.⁵⁹¹

Pressuring Russia and Iran should not mean demonising them; nor does it mean ignoring or minimising their security fears – including (in both cases) the fear of 'being ganged up on' by the international community. The UK Trade Envoy to Iran, Lord Lamont, recently described Iran as insecure and fearful of its own security, surrounded by potentially hostile and well-armed opponents.⁵⁹² Iranian insecurities stem from decades of international censure and sanctions and were reinforced by Western military intervention to overthrow Saddam Hussein in Iraq.⁵⁹³ Security fears in Russia are well known and are informed by a long and bloody history.

A recent UK House of Lords report also noted a growing sense in Iran that the country had 'humiliated' itself in the July 2015 nuclear deal, and was not getting the benefits promised in the deal – in terms of a greatly improved economic environment.⁵⁹⁴ The threat of fines for international banks continues to make it extremely difficult to finance trade with Iran. And now, under President Trump, the US's economic relationship with Iran is under threat.⁵⁹⁵ If relations cool still further, Iran will turn further towards Russia and China.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁸⁹ Lister (2017b).

⁵⁹⁰ Birke (2015).

⁵⁹¹ On this desire, see International Crisis Group (2017a).

⁵⁹² House of Lords (UK), p 45.

⁵⁹³ See e.g. House of Lords (UK), p 53.

⁵⁹⁴ House of Lords (UK), p 49.

⁵⁹⁵ House of Lords (UK), p 30.

⁵⁹⁶ House of Lords (UK).

As part of any effective pressure on Iran, Western governments need to grasp the nettle of recalibrating their military and economic alliance with Iran's chief rival in the region, Saudi Arabia. Noting the UK's extensive trade connections (including major arms sales), a recent House of Lords report stressed that it was dangerous to see the region through the eyes of the Gulf States, ignoring Iranian insecurities.⁵⁹⁷ The UK's influence in Iran is naturally eroded by the sale of weapons that the Saudis have used in Yemen, where Saudi rivalry with Iran has strongly fuelled the war and Saudi bombing and siege tactics are inflicting huge suffering. In pressuring for peace in Syria (and gaining credibility in Iran), it is also important to pressure Riyadh in relation to its support for its proxies in Syria, which are formally or informally allied with HTS (formerly Jabhat Fateh al-Salem and al-Nusra).⁵⁹⁸

Some greater degree of humility in relation to the West's own role in the Syrian war could also be helpful in relations with Russia and Iran. This could include acknowledgement of the civilian suffering arising both from Western airstrikes and from the wider 'war on terror' (not least in Iraq).⁵⁹⁹ In any conflict, humiliating your opposite number may reinforce the underlying violence, and both Russia and Iran have shown themselves to be very sensitive to humiliation. There is a danger that Trump's increasingly hostile stance towards Iran will be mirrored by many experts in US civil society. For example, a March 2017 report by the Institute for the Study of War noted, "We must show once again that we are willing to fight and die with Sunni Arabs against their enemies and ours – al-Qaeda, ISIS and Iran."⁶⁰⁰ Such language is unhelpful.

In Russia and Iran – as in Syria – it is important to note that even some targeted sanctions can cause relatively widespread suffering, while also sometimes feeding into exploitative systems.⁶⁰¹ Some of the so-called 'smart' or targeted sanctions against Russia have actually inflicted significant economic damage, effectively inflicting widespread punishment on the Russian population (notably by restricting access to international finance during a recession).⁶⁰² The impact of these sanctions is difficult to know. Some experts say they have prevented Russia from seizing additional Ukrainian territory,⁶⁰³ while others

⁵⁹⁷ See e.g. House of Lords (UK), p 57.

⁵⁹⁸ House of Lords (UK), p 47.

⁵⁹⁹ The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq helped to destabilise the region and, more specifically, to foster the eventual emergence of ISIS. ISIS emerged from al-Qaeda in Iraq, an organisation that had itself been formed in large part by Baathists who were humiliated and discarded with the defeat of Saddam Hussein and the quick disbandment of Saddam's army (e.g. Dodge and Wasser).

⁶⁰⁰ Cafarella (2017), p 17.

⁶⁰¹ See e.g. discussion in Keen (2012).

⁶⁰² Ashford.

⁶⁰³ Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg.

point out that Russia has not stopped supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine or occupying the Crimean peninsula.⁶⁰⁴ Interestingly, Moscow has tried to compensate for the impact of sanctions on key businesspeople by offering them lucrative public procurement contracts.⁶⁰⁵ Between January 2014 and June 2015, billionaires with stakes in sanctioned Russian companies lost far less of their wealth (3 per cent) than did those who had no such stakes (9 per cent), suggesting that the Kremlin was able to shield those with connections to the ruling circle.⁶⁰⁶ Meanwhile, those sanctioned are sometimes able to hide assets or transfer them to family members.⁶⁰⁷ Sanctions always carry the risk of a *loss* of influence, and China has stepped in to finance Russian oil and gas projects.⁶⁰⁸ In one Russian poll, more than two thirds of respondents said they thought the main goal of sanctions was to weaken and humiliate Russia.⁶⁰⁹ Such perceptions can easily strengthen a leader like Putin.⁶¹⁰

Nevertheless, extensive and well-enforced targeted sanctions can send a useful signal and influence decision makers, even if they are rarely enough on their own. Where there are political obstacles to recrafting targeted international ‘sanctions’ in a formal sense, it will be important to try to establish alternatives, such as financial controls on relevant businesses and individuals within the jurisdiction of the US and supporting countries.

Another part of a diplomatic solution for Syria will be the right kinds of pressure in relation to Turkey. As things stand, the West’s ‘war on terror’ framework has tended to provide a useful cover for the Erdogan regime to intimidate a wide range of civil society professionals and activists under the rubric of combating the PKK. Yet Turkey’s move towards authoritarianism and its resumption of oppressive policies towards the Kurds have damaging implications for Syria and require much more careful scrutiny and much more vigorous criticism.

Even as Turkey looks increasingly to Russia, Europe retains bargaining power in relation to Turkey, thanks largely to Turkey’s long quest to join the European Union. But this leverage seems to have been weakened by European governments’ preoccupations with ensuring Turkey is an ally against ISIS and in the ‘fight’ against migration. Robert Worth noted in May 2016 in a *New York Times* investigation,

⁶⁰⁴ Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg; Ashford.

⁶⁰⁵ Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg; Ashford.

⁶⁰⁶ Ashford.

⁶⁰⁷ Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg.

⁶⁰⁸ Harrell, Keatinge, Lain and Rosenberg.

⁶⁰⁹ Ashford.

⁶¹⁰ Hill.

*European Union officials are now so desperate for Turkey to stop the flow of refugees that they have made little mention of Turkey's civil rights issues or the Kurds in recent talks. One Kurd who lost his house in Cizre [south-eastern Turkey] told me bitterly that no-one would help, 'because the EU only cares about stopping the migrants.'*⁶¹¹

At present, the twin Western preoccupations with reducing flows of migrants (notably from Syria) and with waging war against ISIS have given the Erdogan regime a great deal of bargaining power, since Ankara's cooperation has been considered essential for both endeavours. This has reinforced the impunity of the Turkish Government by inducing a reluctance to criticise or hold Erdogan to account. Western governments also fear driving Turkey further into the arms of Russia, a trend that has been greatly accelerated by Turkish military purges (particularly of pro-Western officers) following the unsuccessful July 2016 coup attempt.⁶¹² But if Western governments choose to abandon the Turkish Kurds and Turkish civil society more generally in the interests of stemming migration, promoting the fight against ISIS, and engaging in super-power rivalry, this will only fuel conflict within Turkey, Syria and the wider region.

In these circumstances, there is a pressing need to set conditions on support to Kurdish groups, strongly encouraging an increased role for non-YPG and non-Kurdish elements and recognising the dangers of further escalating existing levels of confrontation and instability in Turkey.⁶¹³ Likewise, the US should push for a Turkish ceasefire with the PKK.⁶¹⁴

The need for inclusive governance

The international community should provide major and prompt assistance to Syrians in building an inclusive state that can provide services, protection, dignity and representation to the Syrian people. The only lasting solution to the threats that have emerged from Syria will be the construction of functioning and accountable states.⁶¹⁵ Any peace agreement will be only the beginning of a long struggle for more accountability that will require vigorous external involvement and generous external resources, particularly since more oppressive versions of peace-as-surrender are already being pushed on a continuous basis by Damascus and its allies.

611 Worth.

612 Jacinto (2017).

613 See e.g. ICG (2017c).

614 See e.g. Lister (2017b).

615 See e.g. Wasser and Dodge; Gerges (2016).

International actors who recognise the need for Assad to go must make a concerted effort to pressure and persuade those who disagree so as to secure a peaceful transition towards new governance arrangements in Syria. Of course, this will be difficult. But a close look at the causes and functions of the war suggests a number of relevant considerations.

Crucially, it was a lack of good governance that gave rise to rebellion in the first place. This deficit nurtured violent jihadist groups, and has continued to do so even as individual ‘terrorists’ have been killed. Rather than reducing the war to the rebels’ initial passion for democracy or to the ‘evil’ of Assad or ISIS, there is a pressing need to look carefully at the complex grievances that produced the war as well as the grievances that have arisen from – and fed into – the war as it evolved.

Without a fair and functioning state, ‘rogue’ or terrorist groups will tend to revive in some form, as we saw in Iraq when the ‘defeat’ of AQI was quickly followed by the emergence of ISIS amid Sunni grievances that remained largely unaddressed.

Although it is easy to imagine that the salient grievance in Syria was that democracy was absent and Assad was a tyrant, grievances were naturally much more complicated than this. One key problem that is easy to overlook was resentment within the Syrian military; this fed directly into the rebellion and will need to be addressed in any reconstruction. Grievances within the pro-regime militias will also be important to understand as well as grievances within the wider Alawite community on which the regime has relied heavily for support (including fighting – and dying – in the war). Not without reason, the Alawite community has tended to fear violent ‘retaliation’ in a post-Assad Syria – so a viable peace could in part depend on what security guarantees are offered to them.

A key priority in ending the Syrian war must be delivering some sense of redress for injustices suffered during the conflict. There is a pressing need to reduce impunity. To work towards this, international actors should continue to support the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, and should also throw their weight behind the UN General Assembly’s initiative to investigate and prosecute crimes during Syria’s war.⁶¹⁶ These bodies will lay the groundwork for legal-judicial responses to the abuses committed in Syria. It is important for these mechanisms to avoid politicisation and to remain independent, if they are to lay the foundation for any future process of transitional justice.

616 UN General Assembly.

Part of the peace strategy must be doing everything possible to support livelihoods and to provide economic alternatives to enlisting with the various militias. This could include livelihoods in a reformed Syrian military. Simply dismantling state institutions is likely to be counterproductive, as it was in Iraq after 2003.

Another important set of grievances in Syria have been those centred on the 'mafia' linked to the regime, a mafia whose peacetime extraction of resources through the use and threat of violence has been mirrored in more extreme forms of mafia activity during the war itself. A 'liberal peacebuilding' model that emphasises privatisation could easily provide opportunities for a small ruling clique, as it did in Russia and Iraq for example. Emphasising privatisation and tight controls on public spending would also be inconsistent with the strong evidence that privatisation and official austerity helped to generate the Syrian war in the first place. Considering Syria's economic future, it could therefore be important to maintain public enterprise and service provision, and ensure checks on economic actors who may seek to make windfall profits in the post-war phase without advancing the public interest.

Inclusion will be critical. It is crucial that civil society – and in particular civil society groups that are led by, or represent, women and youth – are substantially included in peace talks and peace processes: where armed actors are given an excessive or exclusive stake, their vested interest in war can be a powerful obstacle to peace. Without the genuine involvement of civil society, any move towards peace would almost certainly enable impunity and the war economy to continue into peacetime, including a continued manipulation of shortages and a widespread use of violence to enhance profits during reconstruction.⁶¹⁷ Already, when regaining opposition areas (for example, in the Damascus countryside), the Syrian regime has been destroying opposition governance and entrenching the privileges of local sheikhs and other elites, while often imposing conscription and reneging on promises of services; all this has been done under the heading of 'reconciliation'.⁶¹⁸ Meanwhile, business elites close to the regime have their eye on real estate development in land 'vacated' by those forcibly displaced.⁶¹⁹

In any Syrian peace process, it will be important to recognise that newly empowered groups and regions will not easily cede what they have gained in wartime, while many people could oppose the re-imposition of state

⁶¹⁷ As they have been in post-war Lebanon and Bosnia, for example. (Turkmani et al. (2015); Keen (2000); Berdal and Keen; Kaldor; de Waal.

⁶¹⁸ Ezzi.

⁶¹⁹ See also Hallaj.

authority.⁶²⁰ Yet, peacemaking should itself be informed by the war economy, and even collusive and corrupt economic relationships in wartime can sometimes create a basis for more peaceful cooperation.⁶²¹ The role of international actors is not to establish new arrangements on behalf of Syrians, but to midwife alternative governance arrangements in support of Syrians. The failure of Yemen's federalisation process after 2011⁶²² illustrates the importance of avoiding any hastily agreed elite bargain, which would likely prove exclusionary and therefore unsustainable.

Solving Syria's conflict will require looking beyond the reconstruction of a unitary and centralised nation state. Any simple attempt at 'reconstruction' would risk recreating the conditions that led to war in the first place, and simply prescribing 'democracy' is unlikely to be a solution in itself. Some degree of decentralisation is probably desirable, and it offers a way of accommodating the interests of a variety of factions. Importantly, it may offer a way of 'knitting together' zones of relative peace (policed by a variety of international actors) alongside a regime in Damascus that may, unfortunately, bear at least some resemblance (at least in the short term) to the present regime.

On one reading, Syria has fragmented into six zones: Assad's statelet; al-Qaeda's north-western haven; northern Syria, divided between Turkey and the Kurds; ISIS-held eastern Syria; and a moderate opposition buffer supported by Jordan and Israel in the southwest.⁶²³ It may be possible to build on elements of autonomy that have already evolved – for example, the partial autonomy in predominantly Kurdish regions of Syria.⁶²⁴ Decentralisation may also help with one of the root causes of Syria's war – the fact that many of the areas richest in resources are also among the poorest in terms of income.⁶²⁵

At the same time, any decentralisation will be highly contentious – not least because the richer areas will not want to lose access to resources. It would require a willingness to work together towards mutually agreed-upon goals among deeply divided groups, and thus depend for its success on concerted long-term efforts at reconciliation. Formal recognition of autonomous zones dominated by particular ethnic groups could also result in repression of minorities in particular areas. A Kurdish entity within Syria could feed further into regional instability given the conflict between Turkey and the PKK and the struggle for autonomy underway in neighbouring Iraq. If any

⁶²⁰ Yazigi (2014).

⁶²¹ Ken (2000); Le Billon (2003); Turkmani et al. (2015).

⁶²² Attree.

⁶²³ Kahl et al.

⁶²⁴ Kurdish ambitions will always be sensitive in Turkey, Iran and Iraq, and have to be handled carefully.

⁶²⁵ Yazigi (2016).

reconstruction is left in the hands of Russia and Iran and a regime with some resemblance to the present one, the 'peace' is likely to involve high levels of violence and corruption – and to be ultimately unsustainable. International actors should do everything in their power to mitigate such risks by offering long-term support to a process led by Syrians, applying pressure on Russia, Iran and the regime, together with financial and political support for Syrian civil society in what will be a lengthy struggle.

One possibility is to link the construction of a relatively decentralised state with the construction of a variety of safe – or relatively safe – zones within Syria. Turkey has established a zone of influence in northern Syria, prompting significant return of refugees as well as the evacuation of al-Qaeda from northern Aleppo province.⁶²⁶ In May 2017 the governments of Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed to establish so-called 'de-escalation areas' in Syria, aiming at conditions for safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs. Four areas were listed: Idlib governorate, south-west Syria, eastern Ghouta, and the northern Homs countryside. A proliferation or expansion of such zones might conceivably join up (in what is sometimes called an 'ink-spot' strategy).⁶²⁷

At the same time, it is crucial to remember the chequered history of so-called 'safe zones'. In Bosnia and Rwanda, for example, 'safe zones' were also killing zones.⁶²⁸ Even in Iraq (often seen as a more successful example), there were severe limits to the protection that the UN-declared 'safe haven' could provide.⁶²⁹ Safe zones may also legitimise a refusal of asylum. For example, a Turkish-sponsored 'safe zone' risks legitimising forcible returns from Turkey as well as increased Turkish violence against the PYD.⁶³⁰

UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien has pointed out that the four 'de-escalation' areas "essentially encompass all the besieged locations except for those in Damascus and Deir ez-Zour."⁶³¹ One might reasonably ask why the Syrian Government and its Russian and Iranian allies, having promoted a policy of siege and bombardment for these areas, would suddenly turn around and promote humanitarian access and improved human rights observance; of course, the strong suspicion is that the condition for peace and humanitarian access will (as has already been the case with besieged areas) be some kind of surrender. The Assad regime is already selling surrender as peace and 'reconciliation' and its international allies may be more

626 Lister (2017b).

627 Lister (2017b).

628 See e.g. Frelick; Cameron.

629 See e.g. Keen (1993).

630 On Kurdish fears in relation to such a 'safe zone' see e.g. Steele (2015).

631 O'Brien (2017).

than willing to 'buy'. O'Brien has also highlighted the danger of the international community standing by while violence flares up outside any agreed 'de-escalation' zones.⁶³²

Looking at the rise of violent jihadist groups and at the fate of Iraq and Libya after the fall of Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi, some Syrians fear a future that could be even worse than the present. Such perceptions represent a major triumph for the Assad regime's strategy of 'action as propaganda' that this report has documented – for Assad has repeatedly and successfully used violence to create a situation that deprives large parts of the rebellion of international legitimacy. Nevertheless, these fears about further disintegration are real, and any peace process will need huge international support if Syria is not to degenerate further into a chaotic zone of decentralised violence that is strongly fed (as it has been during the war to date) by opportunistic international actors of various kinds. There must be no repeat of the grievous neglect of reconstruction in Iraq and Libya.

Without a wider strategy, it is hard to envisage a future that moves beyond the kind of fractured, authoritarian states that spawned and nourished the current generation of violent fundamentalist factions. It will be vital to address the vacuum of a collapsing state that these groups have attempted to fill. This must be approached in a just way that seeks to heal the divides between the different groups involved – learning from past mistakes in Iraq, Libya, Yemen and comparable contexts.⁶³³ Alongside a recognition of the difficulty in achieving a military victory over ISIS in Syria and Iraq, we also need to look at what is making ISIS's cause attractive in many other countries far from ISIS's 'heartlands.' Anger at the suffering of people in countries destabilised by Western (and Western-backed) military interventions is a significant factor – as are Western strategic alliances with repressive regimes. In Syria and beyond, a perception that Western lives count while Syrian lives do not continues to feed support for jihadist groups.

ISIS is a vicious organisation, but it is all too easy to forget its members are human beings. Nor does the systematic manipulation and even brainwashing of new recruits abolish this humanity. International Alert interviewed a young Syrian man:

My friend was involved in the demonstrations with me for a long time. He got picked up by the regime. He was raped and tortured in prison. As soon as he came out, he renounced the revolution as ineffective in defeating the regime. He went and joined

⁶³² O'Brien (2017).

⁶³³ See Keen with Attree; House of Commons (2016).

*one of the small battalions around Aleppo before eventually going over to Islamic State. He is completely brainwashed now. Last time I wrote to him online, he said that if he ever saw me again he would happily kill me.*⁶³⁴

This is just one story of trauma among millions thrown up by the horrendous violence of the Syrian war; it seems very unlikely that more war – no matter how righteous it is made to appear – will be a solution.

⁶³⁴ Aubrey et al., p 21.

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The new Saferworld study *Syria: Playing into their hands* by David Keen shows important ways in which both the Syrian regime and international actors have fuelled violence and fundamentalism in the Syrian war. The hard-hitting analysis suggests that military engagement, diplomacy, aid policy, and sanctions – all of them shaped by the idea of ‘war on terror’ – have interacted damagingly with Syria’s war system, a system in which manipulating disorder and even colluding with ‘enemies’ has sometimes taken precedence over ‘winning’. The study challenges international actors to rethink their assumptions and their future engagement, and recommends: rejecting the ‘war on terror’ framework, revisiting the role of aid and sanctions, redoubling the search for a political solution, and supporting the emergence of new governance arrangements to address conflict drivers and enable reconciliation.

COVER PHOTOS TOP ROW: Man looks at graffiti left by ISIS fighters on a wall of the family home in 2016. ©IVA ZIMOVA/PANOS · ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi taken by US armed forces while in detention in Iraq, 2004. ©US ARMY · President Hassan Rouhani of Iran Addresses General Assembly, 28 September 2015. ©UN PHOTO/LOEY FELIPE. ‘Bachar al-Assad, painted portrait’. ©THEIRRY EHRMANN. **BOTTOM ROW:** Zahran Alloush, Hassan Abboud and Ahmed Issa al-Sheikh. Released by the regime from Saydnaya prison shortly after the start of the Syrian civil war, all three would become commanders of violent jihadist groups fighting in the war. ©SYRIAN OBSERVER · ‘Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, painted portrait’. ©THEIRRY EHRMANN · ‘Bashar al-Assad’ (billboard). ©WOJTEK OGRODOWCZYK.

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives.

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