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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.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.