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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.