

Syria

Playing into their hands



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

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Executive Summary

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

The war as a system of power, profit and protection

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

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

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

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

The regime's role in nurturing violence and fundamentalism

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

Kurdish activist

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

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

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

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

International impacts on the Syrian war

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The new Saferworld study *Syria: Playing into their hands* by David Keen shows important ways in which both the Syrian regime and international actors have fuelled violence and fundamentalism in the Syrian war.

The hard-hitting analysis suggests that military engagement, diplomacy, aid policy, and sanctions – all of them shaped by the idea of ‘war on terror’ – have interacted damagingly with Syria’s war system, a system in which manipulating disorder and even colluding with ‘enemies’ has sometimes taken precedence over ‘winning’. The study challenges international actors to rethink their assumptions and their future engagement, and recommends: rejecting the ‘war on terror’ framework, revisiting the role of aid and sanctions, redoubling the search for a political solution, and supporting the emergence of new governance arrangements to address conflict drivers and enable reconciliation.

COVER PHOTOS TOP ROW: Man looks at graffiti left by ISIS fighters on a wall of the family home in 2016. ©IVA ZIMOVA/PANOS · ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi taken by US armed forces while in detention in Iraq, 2004. ©US ARMY · President Hassan Rouhani of Iran Addresses General Assembly, 28 September 2015. ©UN PHOTO/LOEY FELIPE. ‘Bachar al-Assad, painted portrait’. ©THEIRRY EHRMANN. **BOTTOM ROW:** Zahran Alloush, Hassan Abboud and Ahmed Issa al-Sheikh. Released by the regime from Saydnaya prison shortly after the start of the Syrian civil war, all three would become commanders of violent jihadist groups fighting in the war. ©SYRIAN OBSERVER · ‘Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, painted portrait’. ©THEIRRY EHRMANN · ‘Bashar al-Assad’ (billboard). ©WOJTEK OGRODOWCZYK.

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