



The Syrian conflict: A systems conflict analysis



ARK Group DMCC
February 2016



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ARK is a consultancy company specialising in the provision of policy-relevant research and the design and management of conflict prevention and transformation programmes to prevent and mitigate instability and promote positive social change and development. For more information about ARK or this paper, please contact: reports@arkgroupdmcc.com.

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CONTENTS

4 Acronyms

5 Acknowledgements

6 Executive summary

8 Introduction

- 8 Understanding the Syrian conflict
- 10 Analytical framework and report structure
 - 11 *What is a systems conflict analysis?*
 - 11 *How to read this report*

12 Brief contextual overview

16 Stakeholders analysis: conflict actors and interests

- 16 Local stakeholders: pro-regime
- 19 Local stakeholders: pro-opposition
- 22 Local stakeholders: the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)
- 22 Local stakeholders: Kurdish military and political actors
- 23 International stakeholders: backers of the regime
- 26 International stakeholders: backers of the Syrian opposition

30 Systems conflict analysis: factors for conflict and peace

- 30 Systems conflict analysis methodology
 - 31 *Defining a vision for peace*
 - 31 *Mapping forces for and against peace*
 - 32 *Identifying key drivers of conflict (KDFs)*
- 34 The results: systems map of the Syrian conflict
 - 35 *KDF 1: The level of violence against civilians*
 - 39 *KDF 2: Degree of united vision and action within the opposition (military and political)*
 - 41 *KDF 3: Level of strength of non-state extremist actors*
 - 43 *KDF 4: Level of comparative foreign political, military and economic intervention*
 - 48 *KDF 5: Degree of instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities*

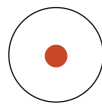
52 Leverage points

- 52 KDF 1: Level of violence against civilians
- 54 KDF 2: Degree of united vision and action within the opposition (military and political)
- 55 KDF 3: Level of strength of non-state extremist actors
- 57 KDF 4: Level of comparative foreign political, military, and economic intervention
- 59 KDF 5: Degree of instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities

62 Conclusion

66 Annexes

- 66 Annex A: A brief overview of ARK programming
- 68 Annex B: Long list of factors for peace, factors for conflict, and actors



ACRONYMS

AAS	Ahrar al-Sham
AKP	Justice and Development Party
ANF	Al-Nusra Front
EU	European Union
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HNC	High Negotiating Committee
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
JAI	Jaish al-Islam
KDF	Key Driving Factor of conflict
LC	Local Council
LCC	Local Coordination Committee
NC	National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces
NDF	National Defence Forces
NSU	Negotiation Support Unit
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SAF	Syrian Armed Forces
SAS	Suqur al-Sham
SMC	Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
VEO	Violent Extremist Organisation
YPG	People's Protection Units

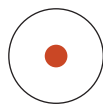
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was the product of many collaborative discussions within the ARK team, and is infused with the knowledge and passion of ARK's Syrian staff members. Our debt to them is considerable.

We are grateful to Anita Ernstorfer from CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, who moderated the initial collaborative workshop that began this project in June 2015 and produced the first draft of the report.

A number of ARK staff members contributed their time to expanding and refining the report into its current format, including the addition of the Stakeholder Analysis and Leverage Points sections. We are grateful to lead drafters Alice Gissinger, Dan Casey, Sahar Tabaja, and Ulric Shannon.

We also wish to acknowledge the valuable insights of Colin Eide, who offered his thoughts as an external reviewer.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the last eight months, ARK has been engaged in a systems conflict analysis exercise that aims to identify the key drivers of conflict in Syria, the inter-dependencies between those factors, and possible intervention points to break certain causal loops of the conflict. The process began with a workshop in June 2015 led by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects involving all ARK programme staff and has continued through structured discussions and complementary research led by ARK's Research and Analysis team. The resulting product is a conflict mapping consisting of not only this report but also a commitment to curate this analysis in the



Photo credit: Lens of a young Dimashqi

public discussion space as a living document that can evolve with the conflict and, we trust, maintain its relevance. ARK has led this exercise not as a contracted research product but rather as a self-funded corporate initiative to inform the scholarship about the Syrian conflict and support the work of governments and stabilisation practitioners by providing them with research-informed, evidence-based insights.

Unlike other reports targeting specific themes or geographies of the Syrian conflict, this report is meant as a tool rather than as a definitive history or a snapshot in time. It is therefore of limited value to attempt to summarise its content, as even the main Systems View of National Conflict map and the related sub-systems maps, which offer a schematic representation of our understanding of the conflict, require considerable narrative elaboration to achieve the desired effect. The section *'How to Read this Report'* outlines the principal substantive sections of our analysis and will allow the reader to move to the chapter of greatest interest. Nevertheless, we urge readers to treat their interaction with this analysis as a process, and to invest the time not only to read the report in its entirety but also to return to the analysis periodically through ARK's virtual space, as the conflict evolves, to contribute their insights to this living document.



INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Syrian conflict

As the crisis in Syria enters its sixth year, the list of challenges to peacebuilding and stabilisation grows ever more daunting. Syria today is plagued by violence, large-scale displacement, sectarianism, radicalisation, territorial fragmentation, and the collapse of critical infrastructure. The economy has been crippled, control of much of the country's natural resources has fallen to extremist groups, and a host of local and international actors are implicated in the conflict on a daily basis. What makes the Syrian conflict seem intractable is not just that the problems are so numerous; it is also that they appear so interconnected. When a host of factors and actors are working simultaneously to produce a particular outcome, how are policy-makers and practitioners to know how to begin to effect the desired change? When conflict drivers appear so cyclical and interconnected, can some dynamics be isolated as particularly salient to altering the direction of the conflict as a whole?

Since its inception in 2011, ARK has grappled with these issues on both an analytical and a programmatic basis. Working in areas of Syria lost to the armed opposition by the Syrian regime, ARK has delivered stabilisation programming in numerous fields. These include local governance, security, justice, civilian protection, media activism, and women's



participation and empowerment. (For more on ARK's programmes, please see Annex A.)

ARK's experience programming in Syria for the past four years has taught a key lesson: programming needs to be built on a deep and nuanced understanding of the conflict and its dynamics in local contexts. Solutions to local problems need to be devised and continually revised based on a thorough understanding of conflict drivers and an evidence-based, research-informed approach. ARK's programmes were designed on a foundation of research, analysis, and stakeholder engagement. In successive iterations, ARK's contacts with ever-growing networks generated programme designs that responded to local needs while bolstering good governance at the local level; they built networks, institutions, and aspirations to carry Syria into post-conflict transition.

But looking beyond local dynamics, how should we understand the Syrian conflict to address it as a whole? Although international appetite for finding a negotiated solution appears to be (at least temporarily) on the rise, the question of how to stabilise Syria in the coming years remains an intractable challenge. Beginning in the summer of 2015, ARK decided to put its collective experience of the Syrian conflict to use in the interest of producing a deeper analysis for the benefit of practitioners and as a contribution to the broader scholarship. We wished to make this

analysis as comprehensive as possible, ensuring that it would pay particular attention to the local drivers of conflict and their interplay with regional and international dynamics. Russia's entry into the war in late 2015 made it ever more urgent to review the driving factors of the conflict that are internal to Syria's population and geography and might outlive attempts to resolve the conflict from the outside.

The analysis of the Syrian conflict presented below is not meant to be a definitive history. It represents a ground-breaking but preliminary attempt to map key drivers of the Syrian conflict, in a language addressed to policy-makers and development and stabilisation practitioners. The study is informed by ARK's experience and the make-up of its teams, which may generate certain methodological biases. For example, ARK's programme teams have worked extensively in the fields of media and governance, and its analysts have a social-scientific background. This might well lead their analysis to privilege conflict drivers that are related to how people think, talk, and relate to one another politically, while discounting "harder" factors (e.g., military or economic) that might have been identified by analysts with different backgrounds and experiences. Possible shortcomings such as these are precisely why ARK shares the analysis – for it to be challenged and improved through interaction with the greater community of policy-makers, academics, and practitioners.

While we stand behind the current validity of our findings, we intend to treat this report as a living document. We aim to stimulate a conversation that can promote greater understanding, and thus better-informed policy and programming – something that is at the core of ARK’s philosophy.

Because ARK’s programmes historically engaged Syrian *opposition* stakeholders, readers may wonder to what extent these sympathies have coloured ARK’s analysis. Indeed, ARK as an organisation has aimed to catalyse individual and collective transformation to arrive at a more inclusive political system in Syria. Further, the participants in ARK’s analysis are, by and large, either politically neutral on the outcome of the conflict or committed to regime change. (Equally, the perspectives of extremist groups were not represented within the team and needed to be adduced through secondary analysis.) Readers who pay close attention to content and methodology may therefore detect this sentiment in the analysis. For example, when the report discusses “key drivers of conflict” in the Syrian crisis, the regime appears as a major culprit, being tied to cycles of violence that fuel dynamics of radicalisation and sectarianism. The conflict analysis also suggests that the fragmentation of the Syrian political and military opposition is undesirable. The report thereby concludes that a strengthened Syrian military and political opposition and Assad’s departure are two indispensable ingredients of a solution to the Syrian conflict.

If ARK is not neutral about the Assad regime, it is not engaging merely in moral judgement; its stance is also informed by empirical evidence about how Assad’s presence fuels existentialist violence in the Syrian conflict. The analysis ARK conducted challenges the fantasy that continued fragmentation of the Syrian opposition will result in a decisive victory for the Assad regime and a return to a sustainable pre-2011 status quo. The report instead suggests that if the Syrian opposition remains fragmented, current conflict dynamics are likely to continue for the worse. As a result, to the extent it looks past the conflict at possible

solutions, the report suggests that a credible, resourced, and unified Syrian opposition and a government without Assad are both indispensable to a solution to the Syrian conflict. The full case for these conclusions is presented in the report’s final sections, “Leverage Points” and “Conclusion.”

Analytical framework and report structure

To make sense of the conflicts they seek to influence, practitioners in conflict areas have a broad menu of analytical tools at their disposal. Selecting the right tool depends on the purpose of the analysis, the available information, and the parties involved. In a three-year study of conflict and peacebuilding programming, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects¹ (CDA) found that ineffective programmes often had something in common: they were either not based on a conflict analysis, or they were informed by inadequate analyses. Problematically, some of the widely used tools today yield conflict analyses that are either overly comprehensive (looking at the overall context and not the conflict) or too partial (limited to areas of interest to the organisation). Most produce static lists of conflict factors without prioritisation or illumination of the dynamics between them, or they generate analyses that are not easily updateable. All of these models are problematic because they are not conducive to identifying concrete entry points for action that is relevant and impactful.

ARK’s team was keen to select tools that would avoid these gaps and produce a robust and actionable conflict analysis. Additionally, as we went into a fifth year of programming in Syria, we were aware that we would benefit from looking at the conflict with a fresh pair of eyes. We also recognised that this required an independent and deliberate effort on the part of team members. ARK’s team concluded that in addition to a stakeholder analysis (actor-oriented analysis), a systems conflict analysis would offer a new perspective while addressing the shortcomings of other tools.

What is a systems conflict analysis?

Systems conflict analysis is a complementary approach to other types of conflict analysis, developed by CDA² in response to the problems in other analytical tools. It draws on insights from systems thinking to look at a conflict as a holistic system of interacting factors and dynamics that make up the conflict reality.

Systems thinking is a way of understanding reality that emphasises the *relationships* among a system's parts, rather than the parts themselves. *Systems conflict analysis* helps to understand the *dynamic relationships* and causalities between different conflict factors, and the *interconnectedness* between conflict factors and stakeholders. It operates based on an understanding of “feedback” (causal connections) between conflict factors and helps to understand reinforcing and balancing dynamics in conflict systems.³ In its different sub-systems, these factors and dynamics can maintain and sustain, escalate or deescalate a conflict.

In a highly volatile situation like that which exists in Syria, systems analysis also helps to develop *scenarios* and understand how different types of conflict scenarios influence specific factors in the conflict system and the systems as a whole. It also helps to identify *leverage points* for creating change in the conflict system, which in turn support the identification of entry points for stabilisation or development programming.

From the perspective of programming, a systems map provides a summary overview of key conflict dynamics. It is a representation of the conflict that teams can use and easily update, using it as a reference point throughout programming cycles. In this regard, it is a more user-friendly tool than, for instance, lengthy narrative reports. A systems map can also be accompanied by a narrative that explains conflict dynamics in more detail; that is the object of this report.

How to read this report

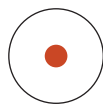
The remainder of this report is divided into five sections:

- *Brief contextual overview* presents a snapshot of the Syrian conflict, both its history and its impact on neighbouring countries.
- *Stakeholder analysis: Conflict actors and interests* looks in greater depth at key stakeholders in the conflict.
- *Systems conflict analysis* constitutes the bulk of the report. It is divided into a *Methodology* discussion, which explains how the conflict analysis was conducted, and a *Results* section, which lays out the results of the analysis. The Results section has five sub-sections, each dedicated to a core dynamic of the conflict articulated around one of the five “Key Driving Factors” of conflict identified by ARK’s analysis. Readers familiar with the Syrian context may elect to go directly to this section and skip the Brief contextual overview and/or Stakeholder analysis sections.
- *Leverage points* discusses leverage points that could impact each of the individual key driving factors of conflict. This section is written for both policy and practitioner audiences, but it does not propose specific programmatic interventions. Individual organisations and actors are encouraged to determine those based on their reading of this analysis.
- The *Conclusion* of this report situates this report in the broader conversation about the Syrian conflict.

¹ CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) is a non-profit organisation based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, affiliated with Collaborative for Development Action, Inc. CDA is committed to improving the effectiveness of international actors who provide humanitarian assistance, engage in peace practice, and are involved in supporting sustainable development. CDA is best known for its Do No Harm (DNH) and Reflecting on Peace Practice programmes, having piloted the DNH approach in 1993.

² As part of the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP), CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, Cambridge, MA, www.cdainc.com.

³ See Ricigliano, Robert, 2012: *Making Peace Last – a toolbox for sustainable peacebuilding*, p. 107-136.



BRIEF CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

Nearly five years of crisis and war have had massive implications for the lives of Syrians. In many areas of Syria, there is a complete breakdown of public services. Many children have missed several years of school. Epidemics are not uncommon, especially amongst the most vulnerable populations. Starvation and sexual violence are being used as weapons of war. Human security and livelihoods are dominated by a complex network of regional warlords, extremist groups, regime forces, foreign militias, and opposition civilian and military factions.

The Syrian civil war, sparked originally by a combination of a grassroots protest movement for socio-economic and political reform on the one hand, and President Assad's heavy-handed response to it on the other, has thus far killed over 200,000 people and displaced half of Syria's pre-war population of 24 million.⁴ The war in Syria is the largest source of displacement in the world. Syrians displaced within the country itself are estimated to number up to 6.6 million.⁵ Since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, nearly 4.6 million Syrian refugees have registered with the United Nations in neighbouring countries; many more are believed to remain unregistered.⁶ Most of these Syrians have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, mainly Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, with significant repercussions for those countries.⁷ Gradually, this outflux of refugees has also come to affect



European countries as Syrians fleeing war and facing insecurity or a lack of opportunity in neighbouring countries have begun to risk the dangerous journey through Mediterranean waters or overland to European Union (EU) destination countries.

Faced with depleted economic and human resources, the Syrian regime is surviving through the military and financial support of allies, and the political support or acquiescence of constituents who fear chaos should the Assad regime fall. The regime has lost control over large swathes of Syrian territory that it is now struggling to recover. What it can never recover, however, is its credibility: its wholesale and deliberate slaughter of civilians aimed at depopulating opposition areas, its use of prohibited weapons such as chemical agents, and its increasing surrender of national sovereignty to foreign armies and militias, offend the conscience and make the possibility of reconciliation with its opponents remote so long as Assad is around.

Fortunately for the Assad regime and its backers, the civilian and military opposition to Assad has shown few signs of coalescing into a credible movement with a unified approach to the conflict or a coherent vision for a post-Assad transition. The underlying reasons for the political opposition's difficulties are mainly due to the oppressive political environment from which it emerged, and the chasm that has opened up between the external

Syrian opposition – frequently dismissed as long-exiled dissidents with little credibility on the ground – and the internal armed opposition, which is increasingly dominated by groups with opaque strategies, uncoordinated affiliations to foreign donors, and in some cases, extreme and/or sectarian agendas.

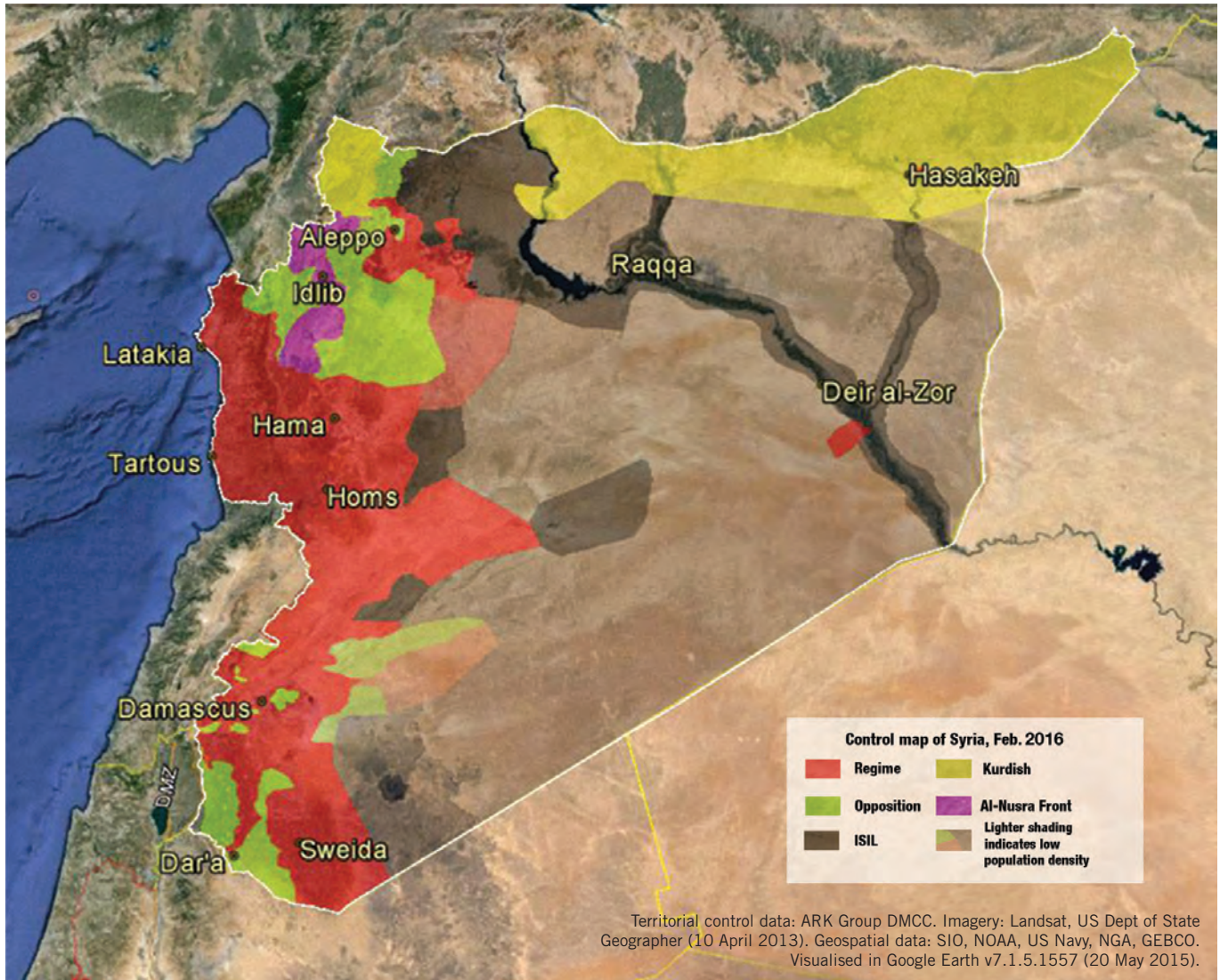
International stakeholders, including the Friends of Syria group, are criticised by nearly all Syrians depending on one's perspective: either for interfering in Syria's affairs, or for doing so only half-heartedly. The loose bloc of mainly Western and Gulf states supporting the armed opposition has lacked a coherent strategy and seems increasingly divided on the merits of provoking the Assad regime's immediate fall, earning the ire of Syrians who

⁴ Another estimate published by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research places the number of deaths as of the end of the year 2015 at 470,000, with an estimated 1.88 million injured based on a conservative 1:4 death to injury ratio. See Syria Centre for Policy Research, "Confronting Fragmentation", 11 February 2016, <http://goo.gl/TQwdGS>.

⁵ The highest number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) recorded by the United Nations dates to June 2015, when the number reached 7.6 million. See Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, <http://goo.gl/rVqFh0>; UNHCR, Syrian Arab Republic country operations profile, <http://goo.gl/4xB1hf>; and UNOCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic", <http://goo.gl/bNVojg>. UNOCHA's February 2016 estimate of IDPs is 6.6 million, and the figure of 6.36 million has been given by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (op. cit).

⁶ UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response, <http://goo.gl/49ZhQW>.

⁷ For example, there are nearly 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon – that is, currently, about one in four people living in Lebanon is a refugee from the Syrian war.



daily must face the regime's indiscriminate violence. The bloc of states and militias propping up Assad – Russia, Iran, and Shi'a militias – features much greater unity of purpose but has already absorbed considerable financial and human cost in the endeavour without a corresponding dividend in terms of the Syrian government's ability to restore a viable pre-war status quo.

Regional influences remain very important not only at a political level, but also in relation to Syria's poorly controlled borders, which enable different factions inside Syria to solicit

support from state and non-state actors. There has already been a marked spillover of the war across these porous borders into Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, and even Israel. Further, Syria has become a battleground for proxy wars fuelled by geopolitical rivalries and Sunni-Shi'a dynamics.

The power and influence of violent extremist groups is growing within the rebel landscape. The shared ideological background of these groups is Salafism, a literalist Sunni theological and legal movement that places emphasis on ritual and doctrinal aspects of Islam.

Salafism is often intolerant of other faiths, including non-Sunni Islamic minorities and Sufism, while generally shunning nationalism and other non-religious ideologies. In its political form, Salafism entails moving beyond religious outreach (*da'wa*) and personal piety to political and social activism; a variant of Salafism known as Salafi-jihadism preaches violent struggle as an individual duty for Muslims to establish their vision of Islamic order. Many anti-Assad groups today fall along the Salafi spectrum, and their existence has significantly impacted the conflict by transforming the original agenda of the 2011 Syrian revolution; driving sectarianism; and, ironically, by bolstering the relative moral posture of Assad. Another violent extremist group that cannot be categorised as “rebel” – ISIL (The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) – has significantly grown in influence and also affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrians living under its control. Pro-government militias are also playing an increasingly prominent role in the conflict, with the prospect that local or foreign militias backed by regional actors may degenerate into criminal gangs and create a long-term problem of warlordism.

The instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities has become a centrepiece of current conflict dynamics. This arose very early on in the conflict, as Alawites overwhelmingly remained loyal to the regime, which in turn began perpetrating atrocities disproportionately against Sunni civilians. Reports of ethnic cleansing and sectarian massacres emerged in mid- and late-2012 and have been sporadically documented ever since. Such incidents are likely to continue, as almost all networks of violence involved in the conflict are organised along recognisable sectarian lines. Fear and dehumanisation of people of different sects and ethnicities on opposite sides of the conflict is on the rise and, some have argued, may be irreversible.⁸

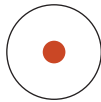
As a result of this collective over-investment of irreconcilable and maximalist agendas in the Syrian conflict, a negotiated political solution to the conflict does not seem likely in the near-term; neither does a military solution.

Many analysts, insiders and outsiders, have abandoned the idea that there will be winners and losers in the Syrian conflict. As one Syria analyst observed, “Many conflicts have no discernible end at all. They simply drag on until readers yawn and reporters leave, and go on to mutate into new forms, settling into spheres of influence and establishing stateless violence as the new normal.”⁹ Although Assad’s presence is a key factor in protracting the conflict, his fall would not end the war but rather simply move it into a new phase. The longer the impasse between government and opposition forces persists, the more the *de facto* partition of Syria will be entrenched, and the easier it will be for extremist forces such as ISIL to use the increasing vacuum and fragmentation to gain even more ground, with continued suffering for civilians.

The map opposite provides an overview of current control of terrain in Syria.

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- ⁸ One of the bleakest terms used to describe this potential trajectory for Syria is “Somalisation”, a term first used by the Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi when he assumed the role of United Nations and Arab League peace envoy in 2012.
 - ⁹ Aron Lund, “What if no one is winning the war in Syria?”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 28 May 2015, <http://goo.gl/qjmOe1>.

STAKEHOLDERS ANALYSIS: CONFLICT ACTORS AND INTERESTS



The Syrian conflict features a dizzying array of stakeholders who are politically, militarily, economically, and socially invested in the trajectory of the conflict. These actors' interests are not always publicly disclosed. They are not always rational, and in some cases they may not be evident to the actors themselves. Nonetheless, decisions of stakeholders in the Syrian conflict, as in any conflict, are guided by these stakeholders' interpretation of the context around them, and subsequently their self-interested assessments of the opportunities and risks presented by this context in both the short and the long term. This section focuses on six core groups of stakeholders who play prominent roles in the conflict dynamics, which are unpacked in the section *Systems conflict analysis: factors for conflict and peace*.

Local stakeholders: pro-regime

Pro-regime individuals and institutions, as defined in this section, have a stake in the survival of pre-2011 political, military, paramilitary, and socio-economic institutions and arrangements in regime-held Syria, and/or the position that they have acquired as a result of supporting the war effort on the side of the Assad regime. Pro-regime stakeholders include civilian as well as military actors. At the leadership level, the portrayal of the Assad regime below will underscore its extreme reluctance to share power, its willingness to resort to violence for political gain, and the emerging



fragmentation of national sovereignty. More generally, this section highlights how the combination of privilege and violence could lead elites and ordinary citizens to perceive the conflict in Syria as having extremely high, perhaps existential, stakes.

The Assad family and the Ba'th party

The foundations of the present-day configuration of power within the Syrian state date back to 1970. In the preceding decade, a series of coups brought to power leading military figures of the pan-Arab Syrian Regional Branch of the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party, a movement notionally committed to socialism, Arab unity, and freedom from non-Arab control and interference. Seizing power in Syria in 1970, a charismatic Air Force officer who belonged to this movement, Hafez al-Assad, set the pillars of governance and state that have since been handed down to his son Bashar al-Assad, who acceded to power following Hafez's death in 2000. The Syrian state has, since the 1970s, been characterised by a strong presidential system maintained by a cult of personality, control over political expression through single-party rule, brute-force repression of political dissent through the state's military and security institutions, family favouritism, Alawite privilege, and clientelism. In today's Syria, Alawites are entrusted with key political, military, and paramilitary posts. Some of the highest positions in government are held by direct relatives of the Assad family. These

individuals, including Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher al-Assad and numerous other relatives, have a vested stake in the preservation of the political status quo.

Security institutions

The Syrian state contains among the most extensive civilian and military intelligence apparatuses in the region. Institutions such as Air Force Intelligence and Military Intelligence are headed by staunch Assad regime loyalists and are mandated to quell both civilian and military opposition to the regime, through a combination of intimidation and violence. This goal is pursued with tactics like arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse, murder, and exile of opposition and protest figures. Officials in security institutions are greatly invested in their mission, because defeat of the regime would visit upon them either direct retribution from opposition forces or a reckoning with transitional or international justice.

Syrian Armed Forces

The largest organised force providing armed support to the Assad regime is the Syrian Armed Forces (SAF), which comprises an army, air force and a small navy. Today, the SAF's manpower is estimated at no more than 150,000 men, less than half of its pre-war level of approximately 300,000 troops.¹⁰ The

¹⁰ Chris Kozak, "An army in all corners': Assad's campaign strategy in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, April 2015, <http://goo.gl/o5p4LY>, p. 12.

SAF is mandated to challenge the opposition militarily, but it also executes the Syrian government's strategy of degrading the moderate opposition by demoralising its civilian supporters and exercising extreme and indiscriminate violence against both militants and civilians. Meanwhile, the SAF also attempts to deploy in as broad a geographic area as possible, keeping hold of provincial capitals and distant points in all corners of the Syrian map. This enables the regime to maintain its claim to sovereignty over the entire national territory and to assert that it has the ability to regain over control all of Syria in the future. This strategy also seeks to ensure that no piece of Syrian territory will be outside of the equation in any eventual negotiation. The SAF has recently responded to manpower shortages through forced conscription and an increased reliance on foreign allies, including Hezbollah, Iran and Iranian-backed militias, and the Russian military.

Syrian paramilitary groups

In addition to the SAF, the Syrian regime is bolstered by an estimated 60,000 to 100,000 part-time or full-time servicemen comprising the paramilitary National Defence Forces (NDF).¹¹ The NDF is an umbrella term for various militias established, for the most part, since the outset of the Syrian revolution and falling outside of, though often coordinating with, official military command. These militias were originally funded from official state organs (e.g. the Ba'ath party) or the private accounts of regime supporters. Over time, these militias became incorporated into a more formal and centralised state-led support vehicle through which they obtained contracts, salaries, and weapons. NDF brigades are staffed by civilians, and they are usually organised along neighbourhood lines. They defend loyalist neighbourhoods, patrol areas, man checkpoints, and occasionally assist the SAF in front-line missions (especially in Alawite areas). In many villages and neighbourhoods with a strong minority population, NDF contingents are disproportionately manned by individuals from that religious confession or ethnicity.¹² Recognising the critical importance

of the NDF to the regime, and their utility as future clients, both Hezbollah and Iran have helped train NDF forces. Iran is also rumoured to be a major funder for the NDF architecture. In addition to the NDF, the Syrian regime receives the support of a small number of leftist and Palestinian groups.¹³

Loyalist socio-economic elites

Since the presidency of Hafez al-Assad, Syria's socio-economic elite has by and large been composed of persons with personal ties to the Assad family, either in the form of blood ties or in the form of political loyalty to the Assad clan. Direct relatives of the Assad family and their clients attain social and economic privilege due to their loyalty: they are often given first access to government contracts, and they enjoy relative freedom to engage in illicit and illegal activities.¹⁴ Some socio-economic elites have sided with Syria's opposition or fled the country with their wealth. A few are known to have made an early choice to throw their lot in with the Assad regime, bankrolling paramilitary groups that suppressed anti-Assad demonstrators, and which subsequently turned into fully fledged militias. These individuals see that their position would be jeopardised in a Syrian state where the opposition emerges victorious and the Assad family no longer rules. No matter what the outcome of the conflict, however, individuals who fund networks of violence are invested in the survival of their paramilitary groups in order to secure political spoils when conflict subsides.¹⁵

Religious minorities

Among Syrian citizens in regime-held areas, religious minorities are believed to be the most steadfast supporters of the Assad regime. This is particularly true of Alawites, but also of Shi'a, Isma'ili, and various Christian minorities. Members of minorities have been observing the rise of Islamism in the opposition, as well as the trope that minorities are accessories to the Assad regime's violence. In this environment, they fear that the long-term empowerment of Syrian opposition civilian and military groups would, at best, threaten their socio-economic opportunities, and their

religious and political freedoms, or, at worst, threaten their survival. The Syrian regime has had some success portraying itself as a secular regime that is a bulwark against “terrorism” and the best protector of Syria’s religiously diverse population. It encourages minorities to organise in self-defence, for example by sponsoring NDF groups. The main exception to the generally pro-regime alignment of religious minorities is the Druze community in southern Syria.¹⁶ The small community remains tacitly neutral, its main concern being survival, the preservation of its customs, and avoidance of direct embroilment in the war. Kurdish stakeholders, for their part, are discussed in the section *Local stakeholders: Kurdish military and political actors* below.

Local stakeholders: pro-opposition

The overarching goal shared by individuals and groups aligned with Syria’s opposition is to topple the Assad regime. Initially a peaceful protest movement for political and economic reform, the opposition to Assad’s regime has diversified in the nearly five years since the outbreak of protests to encompass vastly disparate civilian and military actors based both inside and outside Syria. Beyond a shared commitment to ousting Assad and his allies among the economic and political elite, these opposition actors differ widely in their ideological motivations, regional and international alliances, spheres of activity, and visions for the future of Syria.

Opposition institutions

When the revolution started, the Syrian opposition did not possess a robust internal or external structure through which to operate. Strictures on freedom of expression meant that subtle criticism and calls for political reform tended to come from individuals, not movements, many of whom spoke out from the safe position of exile. As a result, almost all Syrian opposition movements, organisations, and institutions with any significant role in the conflict today date from 2011 or later. On the

civilian as well as the military front, the Syrian opposition has never generated a nation-wide structure that simultaneously enjoyed both international and local legitimacy.

There have been many attempts to create a civilian entity that would speak on behalf of Syria’s civilian and military groups opposing the Assad regime. Currently, the closest approximation to such a body is the National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (NC). The NC is currently based in Turkey and brings together slightly over 100 figures.¹⁷ The NC is the culmination of Arab and Western governments’ attempts to help create a body that can serve as a legitimate

¹¹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹² Statistics on this phenomenon are not readily available. However, it is important to underline that even in the absence of quantitative information to buttress this claim, it is widely *perceived* among both opposition and regime supporters that NDF groups are organised along sectarian lines. For an analysis of the impact of this phenomenon on sectarian dynamics, see the section *KDF 1: Level of violence against civilians* and the section *KDF 5: Degree of instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities*.

¹³ For a recent listing of pro-Assad Syrian militia groups, see Aron Lund, “Who are the Pro-Assad Militias?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2015, <http://goo.gl/LE7AVi>.

¹⁴ Often cited as an example is Bashar al-Assad’s brother-in-law Rami Makhlof, who has been described as a *de facto* mandatory partner in almost all multi-national ventures in Syria. For a detailed description of Assad family clans’ involvement in smuggling, illicit trade, and bankrolling paramilitary groups, see Mohammad D., “The original Shabiha,” Syria Comment, 17 August 2012, <http://goo.gl/4cJ10t>.

¹⁵ For more on the relationship between Assad regime supporters and military groups, see Kheder Khaddour, “Securing the Syrian Regime,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 June 2014, <http://goo.gl/Jkt019> and Aron Lund, “Gangs of Latakia: The Militiafication of the Assad regime,” Syria Comment, 23 July 2013, <http://goo.gl/71WSBg>.

¹⁶ The Turkmen community is largely aligned with the opposition, particularly due to ties with Turkey and, likely, assurances of protection from its kin across the border.

¹⁷ Together, the NC is composed of Muslim Brotherhood supporters, independent and secular dissidents, Kurdish figures, and representatives of grassroots organisations and military groups inside Syria. Planning for the Geneva III negotiations in December 2015 also catalysed the formation of a new structure called the High Negotiating Committee (HNC). The HNC brings together representatives of Syria’s civilian opposition as well as representatives of armed groups for the specific purpose of mandating opposition representatives in future UN-mediated negotiations. The HNC is relevant insofar as it now represents another platform through which nationwide opposition interests are articulated before the international community.

Syrian interlocutor for themselves, the United Nations, and other negotiating partners, and as a core component of any future political transition. It was also once hoped that the NC could act as civilian oversight body and as a coordinator of funding for armed opposition groups, but since 2013 these hopes have faded. The NC has become largely marginalised inside Syria, due to a toxic combination of internal weaknesses (infighting, accusations of corruption, and insufficient outreach to the grassroots opposition) and external factors (a vicious cycle of low funding and capacity, low credibility, and selective and self-interested sponsorship by donors). The military correlate of the exiled political opposition, the Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army (SMC), once served as a conduit for aid to moderate armed opposition groups but is effectively defunct.

Local civilian institutions

At the local level, opposition-held areas of Syria host a large number of grassroots organisations and governance bodies. One key set of actors are the Local Councils (LCs). Local Councils are approximations of municipal councils, composed of activists, professionals, local notables, and former public-sector employees. They seek to keep public order, contain brain drain, and maintain a suitable standard of living in opposition-held areas by delivering services and humanitarian aid (usually with funding from international aid organisations and expatriates from their own towns). In practice, LCs are vastly under-resourced, and they sometimes function as a vehicle through which powerful individuals, such as notables and the heads of major families, exploit their public positions for private gain.¹⁸ In most areas with any opposition presence, LC delegates and other notables periodically elect Provincial Councils that are nominally mandated to set provincial-level governance plans.¹⁹

LC members are generally strongly committed to the overthrow of the Assad regime. This is chiefly because their members tend to be individuals who were involved in anti-regime activism and aid coordination early on in the

protest movement.²⁰ As a result, they are not only ideologically opposed to the survival of the Assad regime, but they also fear the consequences of a reassertion of state power over the areas in which they have been active. Sharing this perspective are a variety of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and charitable organisations that have grown in opposition areas. Civilian CSOs appear to be more active in opposition-held areas than they are in regime areas, as they benefit from the easing of restrictions on assembly and free speech. CSOs and Local Councils rarely enjoy complete autonomy, however. Their activities are almost always subject to the implicit or explicit consent of the armed brigades providing security in their areas.²¹

Armed opposition groups

From the outbreak of the revolution, individual rejection of regime oppression and violence, an unwillingness to target fellow Syrians, and a calculation that political transition might be achievable led a number of Syrian army officers as well as lower-ranking conscripts to defect from the Syrian regime and announce the creation of an anti-regime military entity, the “Free Syrian Army” (FSA). The FSA rapidly became an umbrella term for a constellation of armed groups led, for the most part, by SAF defectors, ex-conscripts and civilians. However, the FSA failed notably to create an agreed chain of command or an overarching strategy to guide tactics. Its work was complicated by the fact that the most senior defected officers fled Syria entirely, leading to a leadership gap within the thin FSA command talent pool. Although many groups continue to be identified with the “Free Syrian Army”, a number of them have lost their ties to what remains of the exiled FSA command structure. Having found this latter structure ineffective as a source of strategy and support, they instead draw strength from alliances on the ground with other rebel groups. They solicit funding directly from state and individual benefactors, often on a haphazard basis in the lead-up to specific military campaigns.

Today, the armed opposition comprises groups that represent different ideological currents and receive backing from different entities. A number of armed opposition groups are remnants of the original, mostly ex-military FSA components and have a secular, nationalist orientation; these brigades have received direct support from Western governments in the form of intelligence, funding, training, and weapons. A small number of brigades are seen as *de facto* arms of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, or similarly oriented in their political vision; they espouse a modernist, nominally democratic, softly stated Islamisation of society. Other brigades fall farther towards political Salafism along the Islamist spectrum; they share the objective of toppling the Assad regime and reforming the Syrian state, but foresee a more direct role for Islam as a source of legislation and state-sanctioned social norms.²² Often, the leadership of these latter brigades includes individuals who were formerly imprisoned as Islamist extremists under the Assad regime and released in prisoner amnesties in 2011. Backers of Islamist-oriented groups often include individuals based in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait. Armed groups in this category deserving special mention are Ahrar al-Sham (AAS), believed to be the single largest and most organised opposition armed group, and Jaish al-Islam, the dominant armed group in Eastern Ghouta just outside central Damascus.

Some groups in opposition-held areas have ties to transnational Salafi-jihadi networks. The Al-Nusra Front (ANF) is foremost among these and represents the Al-Qaeda network's local branch in Syria.²³ Its aim is to topple the Assad regime and establish an Islamic emirate in Syria. In contrast to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), described below, ANF has tended to favour an incremental approach to its objectives, portraying itself as an exemplary Syrian actor whose Islamisation project is only marginally ahead of local norms. By leveraging unique capabilities, such as bomb-making expertise, a reserve of suicide bombers, and reportedly a high degree of internal discipline,

ANF has built a reputation as an indispensable tactical ally of other rebel groups. These factors, a clear vision, and ample funding and armaments have helped it to survive in spite of occasional friction with local values and confrontations with other armed groups.

While virtually all armed opposition groups are expected to play some role actively fighting the regime, many armed opposition groups also engage in local governance. Groups across the ideological spectrum often play a role in local criminal justice by setting up and supporting informal courts. Some also distribute humanitarian aid; others are directly or indirectly represented in local governing bodies.

¹⁸ For example, an LC member may capitalise on his role in aid distribution to siphon off and re-sell aid or give it to relatives. An LC member may also benefit from blood ties or political allegiance to armed groups who control justice, freedom of movement, and smuggling at the local level. Robust, quantitative information about the extent of corruption and nepotism in LCs is not readily available. As is the case with information about the proportion of minority fighters in NDF militias, however, it is not just facts that matter: perceptions are equally important. It is not uncommon to hear residents of opposition-held areas complain that the LC in their locality or in nearby towns is corrupt. The resource-scarce environment helps to nurture these perceptions: thus, shortages of goods and skyrocketing prices, to name one example, are attributed to aid diversion rather than to the simple fact that no aid has been provided.

¹⁹ The LCCs and PCs both send representatives to the NC.

²⁰ Most LCs are either similar to, or descendants of, Local Coordination Committees (LCC), whose members – typically young activists – have, at various points of the revolution, helped organise protests, humanitarian aid delivery, and media coverage of the Syrian crisis.

²¹ Civilian-military relations are often cooperative, as when armed groups give their protection to aid convoys and bread ovens, or donate fuel and vehicles to Local Councils. Cooperative relationships tend to be stronger when both LC members and brigade members hail from the same communities. However, activists and governance actors in opposition-held areas occasionally complain that military actors overreach their authority (e.g., ANF in northwestern Syria, Jaish al-Islam in Eastern Ghouta, and ANF and Syrian extremists groups in southern Syria). There are numerous reports of armed groups imposing their will on local administrations or intimidating CSOs and governance bodies that they see as political and/or ideological rivals through violent means such as threats, beatings, arrests, kidnappings, raids, confiscating property, and assassinations.

²² It should be noted that ideology is not homogenous in these groups: personal ideology and religious fervour can vary greatly among the combatants, and many groups have shifted their ideological stances as a result of changes in leadership or strategic decisions about how to obtain funding.

²³ The Al-Nusra Front is also known by a number of other names and acronyms, including Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN or JN) and “al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria” or “al-Qaeda’s affiliate in the Levant.”

In areas where they are strong, ANF and other Salafi-jihadi groups have attempted to direct local populations' practice of Islam through either concerted campaigns or through the actions of individual fighters, with or without the leadership's approval.²⁴

Local stakeholders: the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is a violent organisation established in territory spanning oil- and gas-rich desert regions of Syria and Iraq surrounding the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. ISIL is a mutation of a long line of Iraq-based Salafi-jihadi groups led by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and a number of other commanders, the latest iteration of which was the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) led by the Iraqi militant Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISIL entered the Syrian field after ANF, effectively ISI's sub-branch in Syria, refused to pledge exclusive allegiance to al-Baghdadi. In a bold move, ISIL had unilaterally declared that it, rather than al-Qaeda's Afghanistan-based leadership, would now be responsible for commanding ANF in Syria. Both ANF and al-Qaeda Central rejected this move, with ANF asserting it answered to al-Qaeda Central and no other. The episode sparked a deep-running enmity between ISIL and ANF.

Like ANF, ISIL was committed to establishing an Islamic state, acting on this goal by declaring a caliphate in June 2014 and calling on Muslims around the world to migrate to its territories. Unlike ANF, however, ISIL's ambitions are more explicitly and consistently transnational, including a complete rejection of the concept of the nation-state. Its short-term objectives are to deploy human and material resources in the territory it controls, this in the interest of consolidating power, raising funds to acquire armaments, and building a support base from which to raise future generations of fighters who will carry out its mission. ISIL has also deployed hyper-brutality to terrorise local populations into submission (to a level of pervasiveness

perhaps not seen since the Khmer Rouge) and to create a unique global brand that has attracted high numbers of volunteers. ISIL's rapid growth, its threat to international borders, and its genocidal intent against minorities sparked international intervention against ISIL starting in September 2014. Perversely, this intervention bolstered ISIL's narrative of Muslim oppression by "Crusaders."

ISIL has, in essence, become a common enemy to nearly all those involved in the Syrian conflict, but particularly the range of opposition movements, Kurdish groups, and the Syrian regime. Its presence in the Syrian theatre has had a disproportionate influence over international stakeholders' positions on the conflict.

Local stakeholders: Kurdish military and political actors

Owing to Syria's ethno-sectarian geography, the vast majority of Syrian towns with a sizeable Kurdish population fall in northern Syria, in regions close to or directly on Syria's border with Turkey. Kurdish populations in these regions have, since the outbreak of hostilities in 2011, generally organised into three autonomous cantons that are largely self-governing.²⁵ Following the successful rollback of ISIL along some regions of the Turkish border, two of these cantons are now contiguous.²⁶ The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) are, respectively, the main political and military entities governing these areas. This state of self-governance is a radical change from the pre-2011 situation, when Kurds suffered severe socio-political marginalisation under the Assad regime.

The PYD's relationship with the Syrian regime is characterised by a mutually advantageous state of non-hostility that is cemented by the two sides' common enemy in the form of ISIL. The Syrian regime, by most estimates, does not have the resources to fight both Kurdish groups and Arab opposition groups at once. It has consequently pursued a strategy of mollifying Kurds through conciliatory gestures (e.g.,

granting Kurds citizenship rights shortly after the outbreak of uprisings), while withdrawing its military forces from Kurdish-majority areas, effectively devolving security there to the YPG. The PYD and YPG have fully capitalised on this opportunity, aiming to develop and consolidate their control over Kurdish areas with a view to an eventual bid for a decentralised regional government in a post-conflict Syria.

Kurdish groups' relations with Syria's armed opposition have often reflected the latter's ideological orientation and relationships with international actors. Because of its generally secular disposition and its geographic position at the northern edges of ISIL territory, the YPG has become a core recipient of military aid through the US-led international Coalition against ISIL in Syria.²⁷ In this context, the YPG has formed operations rooms with Western-backed Arab FSA groups; it has also maintained mostly cordial relationships with FSA groups in northwestern Aleppo, where Kurdish villages are scattered among Arab ones. The YPG's relations with Islamist and Salafi-jihadi groups in the opposition, however, have at times been so tense as to break out into overt fighting. This is partly due to tensions over the YPG's willingness to receive Western backing; tensions linked to Turkey's patronage of many of these Arab groups; the perception that Kurdish populations are lenient in their practice of Islam; and concern over the expansion of Kurdish enclaves into Arab areas as the YPG rolls back territory formerly controlled by ISIL. These same concerns lie at the core of the contentious fight currently ongoing between Kurdish groups and ISIL.

Tensions between Kurdish and Arab populations have increased alongside ongoing hostilities between the YPG and ISIL. There have been accusations that, during its offensives against ISIL, the YPG forcibly displaced Arabs from their villages and destroyed their homes, ostensibly as retribution for what was seen as Arab support for ISIL, which had committed similar acts against Kurds.²⁸ These acts have fed perceptions among some Arabs that the YPG is an existential threat.

To date, the PYD has officially sought regional autonomy within Syria rather than independence in a post-conflict settlement. It appears to be aiming to leverage its legacy of fighting ISIL, as well as its appealing, though questionable, narrative of democratic self-governance and secularism, as a means to obtain international support for greater autonomy in a post-conflict Syria.

International stakeholders: backers of the regime

Russia

Russia has taken a firm position in support of the Assad regime since the beginning of the Syrian revolution, most recently by intervening directly in support of Assad's troops through air strikes that have, in the main, targeted the non-ISIL opposition to the Assad regime. This support builds on strong relations stretching back to a history of Soviet support for Syria's leadership throughout much of the Cold War. Today, Russian support for Assad is in large part driven by Russian President Vladimir Putin's intent to project power and challenge American dominance in regions beyond Russia's near abroad. This projection likely

²⁴ Examples of concerted action are crackdowns on smoking, religious lectures, gender segregation, and distributions of conservative clothing for women. An example of individual action would be harassment of women who are seen as insufficiently modest, or threats made to the men chaperoning them at checkpoints. There are many examples of the former in areas of northwestern Syria controlled by ANF, and examples of the latter across opposition-held Syria.

²⁵ The main known exception to this pattern is one Kurdish-majority neighbourhood in Aleppo city that has remained *de facto* aligned with the Syrian opposition. Also, Hasakeh City and Qamishli are divided into regime-controlled and Kurdish-controlled areas, and cooperation in governance is common.

²⁶ The third, to the west, remains separated by the northern reaches of the Aleppo countryside, whose population is by and large Sunni Arab and whose armed groups range from moderate FSA factions to ANF.

²⁷ This aid comes in spite of the Turkish authorities' turbulent relationship with the YPG, which is seen as a Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

²⁸ Whether this displacement was systematic enough to constitute ethnic cleansing under international humanitarian law is still under debate. A well-documented account of these practices can be found in Amnesty International's report "We Had Nowhere Else to Go: Forced Displacement and Demolitions in Northern Syria," 12 October 2015, <https://goo.gl/em2A0H>.

ties into Russian perceptions that the United States and the European Union have attempted to gain influence in what the Russian leadership considers its traditional spheres of influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Economic considerations have also played a role in maintaining strong relations between Russia and the Syrian regime. Syria is host to Russia's only foothold in the Mediterranean Sea, a naval installation at the port city of Tartus. Syria is also strategically important for Russia in light of its position in the eastern Mediterranean, an area that connects three continents and provides Russia maritime access from the Black Sea to East Asian markets via the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean. Additionally, Syria is a major procurer of Russian military equipment, having spent billions on Russian military equipment, particularly since the start of the civil war.²⁹

Russian support for the Assad regime is also, in part, linked to Russia's nominal alliance with Iran. While this alliance has held strong in recent years, it will likely be tested as sanctions on Iran are lifted in the wake of the six-party nuclear agreement and as Iran attempts to export gas to the European market and challenge Russian dominance in the gas market. In addition, Turkish-Russian relations and Russian relations with Arab opponents of the Assad regime have, over the past decade, improved as Turkey and Gulf Arab states pursued large-scale economic cooperation initiatives and pursue strategies of hedging vis-à-vis international powers. As has been witnessed since Turkey's November 2015 downing of a Russian fighter jet in response to alleged airspace breaches, these relations will be tested by Russia's direct intervention in Syria; they will also test the Russian-Iranian alliance as Russian interests in the Levant increasingly begin to diverge from those of a post-sanctions Iran.

Iran

Iran remains the Syrian regime's most vested international ally, playing a direct military role on the ground and providing it with substantial financial and military aid. Iran's financial

assistance has taken the form of billions of dollars in credit to Syria's government. The elite Iranian Revolutionary Guard-Quds Force militia has also engaged in combat alongside the Syrian Armed Forces, while simultaneously training Syrian pro-regime militias. In 2015, there were persistent reports of growing Iranian involvement in strategic decision-making at the middle and upper levels of Syria's own armed forces. Diplomatically, Iran has, like Russia, obstructed international efforts to curb the actions of the Assad regime.

Above and beyond the sectarian nature of Iranian-Syrian relations as perceived by many across Shi'a and Sunni populations in the Middle East, access to and influence in Syria are critical geopolitical interests for Iran, as it aims to project Iranian regional influence and undermine US and Gulf Arab influence in the Middle East. Syria was among the first countries to recognise the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, and a strong strategic alliance emerged upon the Syrian leadership's support for Iran following Iraq's invasion in 1980 (conversely, several influential Iranian clerics helped legitimate the Alawite ruling elite put in place by the Ba'thist coup of Hafez al-Assad, by issuing *fatwas* declaring the Alawites to be Muslims).³⁰ In subsequent years, Syria has served as a bridge for funds, weapons, and technical assistance to Iranian-backed non-state actors (Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad) in Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian Territories. The two states, along with Iran's non-state proxies and — more recently — Iraqi allies, have formed what its proponents refer to as the "axis of resistance" against the influence in the Middle East of both the US and its regional allies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia. In a statement made in 2012, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Sa'id Jalili, stated that "what is happening in Syria is not an internal issue, but a conflict between the axis of resistance and its enemies in the region and the world. Iran will not tolerate, in any form, the breaking of the axis of resistance, of which Syria is an intrinsic part."³¹

While security and political considerations

remain the most crucial strategic interests for Iran, Syria also presents significant geo-economic opportunities to Iran, particularly given its maritime access to the Mediterranean Sea and, thereby, Europe. Iran and Syria's economic relations grew following the start of the conflict in 2011 with Iranian companies significantly increasing exports to Syria.³² In April 2015, Iran announced plans to establish a direct shipping line between the two countries.³³ Further, a 2011 preliminary agreement and a 2013 framework agreement were signed by Iran, Iraq, and Syria, signalling intent to build a \$10 billion "Friendship Pipeline" aimed at transporting Iranian gas to Iraq, Syria, and possibly Lebanon and Europe upon the expected lifting of Iranian sanctions.³⁴

Hezbollah and other non-Syrian militias

Hezbollah is a Lebanese militant group and political party that was formed in 1982 with support from Iran in the form of funds, weapons, training, and fighters. Though Hezbollah engaged in battle with Syrian troops and Syrian allies in Lebanon in the mid-1980s, relations subsequently improved as Iranian investment in Hezbollah and the group's successes in Lebanon increased. Hezbollah's ideology is directly linked to that of Iran's revolutionary leaders and it has at times overtly intervened in Syria — at times at the expense of its local interests in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria is largely driven by calculations of post-Assad scenarios, some of which may represent an existential threat to the organisation. It is unlikely that an opposition-led Syria would continue to serve as a bridge from Iran or provide strategic depth for Hezbollah as it has under Assad. Hezbollah's control of some airborne and maritime transportation hubs in Lebanon notwithstanding, this is likely to create challenges for Hezbollah's capacity to remain a powerful non-state military presence in Lebanon. More generally, it would be threatening for Hezbollah to be fully surrounded in Lebanon by two hostile opponents (Israel and a non-Assad Syria). As such, observers have noted that both Iran and Hezbollah have been invested

in bolstering their presence inside Syria and setting up Syrian militias capable of maintaining the influence of the "axis of resistance" in a post-Assad world.³⁵

There is little doubt that Hezbollah perceives Sunni extremist groups such as ISIL and ANF as a threat to the Shi'a community in Lebanon. However, Hezbollah's calculus and involvement continue to go beyond the presence of extremist elements and in large part revolves around either propping up the Assad regime or ensuring its continued strategic relevance in a post-Assad environment. According to Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, "We are fighting... in Damascus and Aleppo and Dayr al-Zor, and Qusayr and Hasakeh and Idlib... and will be present in all the places in Syria that this battle requires."³⁶

The Syrian conflict has attracted the participation of other non-Syrian militias comprising Iraqi, Iranian, and Afghan fighters. Some of these militias received state sponsorship as early as 2012: for example, Iraqi, Afghan, and other fighters began streaming into Syria under Iranian auspices and joining sectarian militias. One of the first, Kata'ib Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, comprised both Syrian and foreign Shi'a fighters. ISIL's emergence as a force in Iraq and Syria in 2014 represented a threat to Iran and its allies, increasing perceptions that the war was sectarian and, to some, existential in nature. These factors continue to attract

²⁹ See, e.g., data and reports from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <http://goo.gl/b7Nk9q>; Defence Industry Daily, <http://goo.gl/nh6cFf>; and The Moscow Times, <http://goo.gl/lDsk7K>.

³⁰ See Stephen Suleyman Schwartz, "What is Really 'Broken' in Syria?", Gatestone Institute International Policy Council, 29 March 2013, <http://goo.gl/ATwzUh>.

³¹ See, e.g., The Telegraph, <http://goo.gl/wB1yne>; CBS News, <http://goo.gl/MMeypl>.

³² Salam al-Saadi, "Iran's Stakes in Syria's Economy," Carnegie Endowment, 2 June 2015, <http://goo.gl/ngKyOh>.

³³ PressTV, "Iran to launch direct shipping line to Syria," 28 April 2015, <http://goo.gl/fd30vz>.

³⁴ The Wall Street Journal, 25 July 2011, <http://goo.gl/Sv18bh>.

³⁵ Matthew Levitt and Bernard Gwertzmann, "The Hezbollah Connection in Iran and Syria," Council on Foreign Relations, 15 February 2013, <http://goo.gl/HnuABf>.

³⁶ Speaking in May 2015, as cited in Al-Jazeera News, <http://goo.gl/fNjG22>.

non-Syrian Shi'a fighters, with a slight exception for Iraqi militias: although open involvement of Iraqi militias began in 2012 and continues to this day, their numbers decreased in mid-2014 as ISIL began to gain territory in Iraq and many fighters returned to face the threat closer to home.

International stakeholders: backers of the Syrian opposition

*The United States*³⁷

The United States was among the first countries to call on Bashar al-Assad to step down from power, in the heady months that followed the fall of Tunisian and Egyptian dictators, who were erstwhile US allies. A similar outcome in Syria loomed as a major geopolitical prize for the United States, as the collapse of the Assad regime promised to limit Iranian influence in the region and undermine Russian efforts to maintain a foothold on the Mediterranean. As the regime responded with increasing violence, the US faced significant pressure to intervene from Arab and Turkish allies as well as the moral dilemma of its own precedents, such as its direct intervention in Libya to avert civilian massacres.

As the conflict grew militarised, US support for the armed opposition was cautious and inconsistent. A lack of consensus within the Syrian moderate opposition and the clear influence of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements was cause for American anxiety, leading to fears about the shape of a hypothetical post-Assad, post-secular Syria. Drawing parallels to the disastrous effects of de-Ba'athification in Iraq, the US administration also feared the complete collapse of the Syrian state and the scattering of its considerable arsenal of non-conventional weapons.

While the US, along with its Western and Arab allies, has provided both lethal and non-lethal support to the Syrian opposition, it has done so cautiously and has stopped well short of providing advanced military hardware. This is

due in part to fears that such hardware may fall into the hands of extremist groups and be turned against the US and its allies (a credible scenario, as demonstrated by ANF's dismantlement of US-supported brigades in the fall of 2014 and early 2015 and its seizure of their equipment). More significantly, however, the US is clearly reluctant to tip the balance decisively in the rebels' favour and provoke the immediate fall of the regime.

Concern over the rise in extremism among Syria's opposition has been a key factor behind Washington's loss of faith in the moderate armed opposition and its growing ambivalence toward its stated goal of toppling Assad. This attitude has become more pronounced as ISIL has expanded in eastern Syria and western Iraq, prompting the US to create a coalition that has directly intervened in Syria through airstrikes and attempts at moulding local anti-ISIL forces that will agree to deprioritise the fight against Assad. This has frayed US relations with its key partners in the anti-Assad camp, such as Turkey and Gulf states – relations already strained by US-led efforts toward a regional accommodation with Iran.

*Saudi Arabia*³⁸

Riyadh has employed various approaches across the region to assert its leadership of the Sunni Arab world, to challenge and defeat threats to the monarchy's sustainability, and to project influence in what it considers its natural sphere of influence. More specifically, Saudi Arabia has been preoccupied with undercutting Iranian influence and co-opting and undermining the Muslim Brotherhood as an alternative to Wahhabi Islam following the Brotherhood's brief ascendancy following the 2011 Arab popular uprisings.

Since 2011, Saudi Arabia has been a staunch opponent of the Assad regime, working diplomatically to undermine its pan-Arab and pro-Iranian positions. The Saudi leadership considers the defeat of the Assad regime to be a central pillar of its strategy to reduce Iranian influence and power in the region by breaking the territorial contiguity of a "Shi'a Crescent" loyal to Iran stretching through Iraq and Syria

to Lebanon. In 2008, Saudi Arabia attempted a rapprochement with the Assad regime, with the goal of driving a wedge between Syria and the Iranian Republic. Upon the outbreak of the revolution, however, Saudi Arabia shifted gears and has aimed to topple Assad through a multi-pronged approach of diplomatic, financial, and military support for numerous rebel groups while attempting to undermine and co-opt the Muslim Brotherhood within the larger opposition. While Saudi regional interests generally have not aligned with those of Turkey and Qatar, Saudi Arabia has succeeded in both usurping the Qatari agenda in Syria since 2013 and in collaborating with Turkey (a state it considers an ally of the Muslim Brotherhood and a competitor for leadership of the Sunni world) in supporting certain anti-Assad groups.

The Saudi leadership has endorsed the international community in fighting ISIL, a militant Salafi group whose goals include the toppling of the Saudi kingdom and expanding its self-proclaimed caliphate into the Arabian peninsula. As ISIL commands the support of individuals in Saudi Arabia and has gained control over territory along Saudi Arabia's border, Saudi leaders have an interest in undermining ISIL and inhibiting its further growth. However, while Saudi Arabia was an initial participant in airstrikes targeting the group, this has largely ceased since January 2015 following the capture and execution by ISIL of a Jordanian pilot participating in coalition airstrikes.

Turkey

Turkey has been among the states most affected by the Syrian civil war. With a southern border straddling Syria's north for over 800 km, Turkey has been a strong proponent of direct intervention in support of the Syrian opposition. While Turkey's leadership had since 2004 fostered improved relations with Syria and, upon the start of protests in 2011, had initially sought to convince Bashar al-Assad to accede to protester demands and allow a transition of power, his intransigence resulted in the Turkish leadership adopting a more

active position aimed at toppling the Assad regime.

Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) was elected to power in 2003, it has worked towards reviving and strengthening relations with states comprising the former Ottoman hinterland so as to gain influence, transform itself into a "central" regional power, and establish an open regional trade environment. The spread of revolutionary movements across the Arab world in 2011 presented opportunities that political parties with a similar orientation as the AKP (namely, the Muslim Brotherhood) might gain influence in the emerging democratic space.

Turkey's strategy in Syria has been driven in large part by its pursuit of a leadership role in the Middle East and by its desire for a more accommodating neighbour, politically and economically, than Assad-ruled Syria represented. Turkey has often presented itself as a successful and benevolent alternative to Iranian and Saudi regional hegemony. Though Turkish-Saudi relations have, since the start of the Arab Spring, been largely defined by their disagreements and their competition over Sunni leadership, the two powers have

³⁷ The United States has been foregrounded as an international stakeholder in this section due to the pre-eminent role played by US foreign policy in the Syria policies of Western governments as a whole. However, other key Western governments have a critical impact on the Syrian conflict: they include European members of the "Friends of Syria" group, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, and other key actors such as Canada and the Nordic countries. These countries' impact on the course of the Syrian conflict has been considerable, whether through different interventions including military action, political engagement and Track II negotiating initiatives, humanitarian and development aid in and outside Syria, or refugee policy. In the absence of individual sections, the United States stands as a placeholder for Western governments and European members of the Friends of Syria group, insofar as both the US and these states share broad strategic interests in the Syrian space.

³⁸ Our conflict analysis exercise treated Saudi Arabia's position as largely representative of the consensus of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and thus did not examine the interests of other GCC states such as Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait separately. There was acknowledgement that Qatari interests, especially, diverged from those of Saudi Arabia in the early years of the conflict as they jockeyed for influence among the Syrian political opposition, but it was felt that in the latter half of 2015 Qatar had largely fallen into line with the Saudi-led GCC consensus, and therefore that the distinction between Gulf national positions was no longer significant.



Photo credit: SyriaGraph

cooperated, albeit inconsistently, in bolstering the opposition to the Assad regime. This has been most visible since the ascension of King Salman to the Saudi throne in January 2015.

Although Turkey has had marked disagreements with Russia, Iran, and China on Syrian matters, economic and energy considerations have constrained Turkey's willingness to take unilateral action. While the United States and Saudi Arabia have worked towards limiting Russia and Iran's regional influence and have been prepared to confront them through proxies, Russia, China, and Iran remain three of Turkey's main trading partners, which has likely influenced the Turkish balancing act on Syria.³⁹

More important to its calculations, Turkey has found itself faced with multiple, often contradictory threats emanating from Syria.

The 2011 protests brought about significant challenges as violence drove large numbers of Syrian refugees into Turkey, which threatened to bring instability. Turkey's most pressing concern in respect to Syria is the potential for state collapse to lead to the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria. As Syria's Kurdish regions have come under the rule of PYD, an off-shoot of the separatist PKK (a Turkey-based Maoist Kurdish nationalist group), Turkish interventions have been largely driven by limiting the spillover into southern Turkey of Kurdish momentum towards autonomous self-rule.

More recently, the growth of ISIL has threatened Turkey's territory and its interests in Syria (and Iraq). Turkey's critics charge that Ankara was slow to recognise the unique threat posed by ISIL and that the group indirectly gained

from Turkey's lax border policies. Meanwhile, Turkey has offered sanctuary, money and materiel to a number of Islamist and Free Syrian Army groups. ISIL's particular hostility to the Kurds may offer further explanation for Turkey's seeming lenience towards the group since its split from ANF in 2013. However, the growing evidence of a subversive ISIL presence in southern Turkey (including the October 10, 2015 suicide bombing in Ankara that killed over 100 peace activists) and the increased frequency of ISIL threats against the Turkish government, including through targeted Turkish-language propaganda, appears to have pushed Turkey into a more categorical stance against ISIL, as evidenced by Turkish consent to the use of air bases on its territory to conduct air strikes against ISIL.

Jordan

Jordan has sought a balanced approach to dealing with the Syrian crisis, largely aimed at ensuring stability and the monarchy's survival. With border crossings into Syria falling merely 120 km from central Damascus, Jordan is hypothetically positioned to decisively impact the course of the military conflict. Jordan's generally pro-opposition stance in the conflict has been measured, however; it is sustained by the policies of foreign allies but tempered by fears of conflict spillover. While taking an anti-Assad position, serving as a bridge for funds and arms to rebels from the Arab Gulf, and hosting rebels trained by Western allies, Jordan has continued to focus on diplomacy and pushed for a political solution to the crisis. With less capacity for independent action or intervention in Syria, Jordan has pursued a policy in line with its more powerful allies, particularly the United States and Saudi Arabia; in turn, these allies have aided the Jordanian monarchy in securing its borders and have provided Jordan with financial and practical incentives for nominal cooperation in the anti-Assad coalition.

Jordan's fears of conflict spillover primarily stem from both the influx of refugees and the influence of Islamist actors within Jordanian territory such as Salafi movements and the

Muslim Brotherhood. Further, though Jordan's Syria policy has remained anti-Assad, it has taken a relatively reserved stance out of fear that direct action or a firmer anti-Assad stance could provoke the Syrian regime to respond in a hostile fashion and (either directly or indirectly) undermine Jordanian security and stability. To fend off these risks, Jordan has pursued a tight border-control policy to limit the influx of both refugees and Islamist actors. In addition, Jordan has exerted its influence in southern Syria, alongside its more powerful allies, with the aims of limiting the presence and power of extremist and Islamist forces near its border, improving living conditions for civilians, and pre-empting the negative effects of a possible state collapse.

³⁹ See statistics from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Trade, <http://goo.gl/11jj2A>. Turkey's top five trade partners in 2013 were the EU, Russia, China, USA, and Iran.

SYSTEMS CONFLICT ANALYSIS: FACTORS FOR CONFLICT AND PEACE



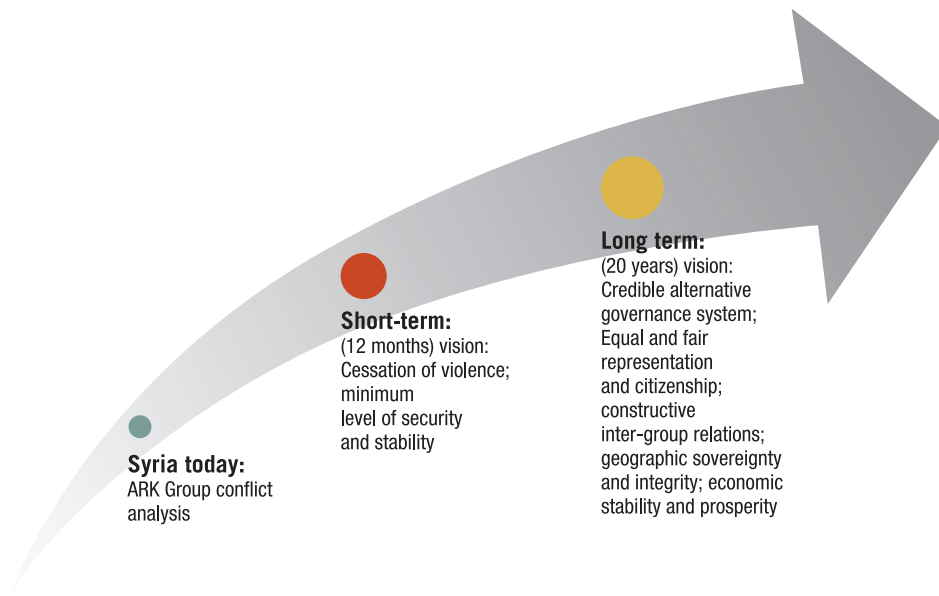
Systems conflict analysis methodology⁴⁰

Systems conflict analysis is an integrative analytical tool utilised as a second step to data collection as well as other analytical tools. For the purposes of this exercise, ARK elected to rely on the knowledge and experience within the team, the wealth of research and analysis on Syrian issues undertaken over the last five years, as well as additional review of secondary research for the purpose of validating some analytical results.

The systems analysis was undertaken during a four-day workshop bringing together 23 members of the ARK Syria team between June 10-13, 2015. A majority of participants were Syrian, and all had direct experience as implementers in Syria-related programming.⁴¹ The workshop was facilitated by a CDA conflict analysis expert.

Step 1	Develop vision for peace
Step 2	Identify factors towards peace and towards conflict
Step 3	Identify key driving factors (KDFs) for conflict
Step 4	Analyse feedback (causal) loops amongst KDFs
Step 5	Map the story of the conflict

Figure: Steps in a systems conflict analysis



Defining a vision for peace

The first step in a systems conflict analysis is developing a vision for what “peace” looks like. Given the nature of this analytical exercise, defining what peace looks like was necessarily limited to the team and did not involve outside consultations. The term “peace” is used as a placeholder to describe a desired, positive scenario in Syria – in comparison to the current status quo.

The team agreed two possible visions as a working model to describe this state, to distinguish between possible short-term and long-term positive change in Syria. The first vision, framed around what might be achieved in the short term (12 months), comprised the cessation of violence and a minimum level of security and stability. The second vision was aimed at the long term (20 years) and comprised a credible alternate governance system to those currently in place; equal and fair representation and citizenship; constructive relations between different social groups; geographic sovereignty and integrity; human security; and economic stability and prosperity.

Mapping forces for and against peace

In the second step, the team discussed the factors obstructing progress towards both of

these visions, as well as factors that could support movement towards it. This analysis is done through a three-box exercise that also considers key actors.

Among the most critical factors for peace, ARK’s team identified factors related to governance, civil society and civic engagement, the positioning of extremist actors like ANF, the role of local notables, the places of moderate Islam, the media, and educational levels among the population. As key driving factors for conflict/against peace, the team identified factors related to violence against civilians, the degree of unity within Syria’s opposition, the role of non-state extremist actors, the role of international actors, and the instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities. The full list of factors, as well as the key actors, can be found under Annex B.

⁴⁰ This methodology was developed by CDA and this description of the process is adapted from the RPP Conflict Analysis Field Guide, CDA, 2012.

⁴¹ None of the participating staff members lives or operates in Syria currently. However, the ARK Group works with a large network of partners and stakeholders in different parts of Syria. Since 2011, ARK has supported opposition viewpoints and opposition activists and stakeholders in Syria. The workshop did not include participants with a pro-regime attitude. Likewise, there was no representation of any of the extremist factions operating in Syria.

Forces for Peace	Forces against Peace/ for Conflict	Key Actors
<p>What are the forces in the situation that exist now that can be built upon to promote movement towards peace? What currently connects people across conflict lines? How do people cooperate? Who exercises leadership for peace and how? (These are not things you <i>want</i> to exist or that you would like to see—they must be true <i>now</i>)</p>	<p>What factors are working against peace or for conflict? What factors, issues or elements are causing conflict and/or dividing people, and how?</p>	<p>Which individuals or groups in the situation are in a position to strongly influence the conflict—either positively or negatively? Who can decide for/against peace? (Note: these are not necessarily people who may be programme targets/participants, such as women, youth, or religious leaders. We may be interested in engaging with those groups, but they are not always “key” in the situation.)</p>

System: An inter-connected set of elements that is coherently organised in a way that achieves a “purpose” or particular state.

Factors: Individual features of the conflict or system. These are not actors or events.

Key driving factor: A dynamic or element, without which the conflict would not exist, or would be completely different.

Reinforcing loop (R): One where elements build on each other in a virtuous or vicious cycle.

Balancing loop (B): One where dynamics serve to return to an equilibrium, a desired state, or to counteract a reinforcing loop.

System map: A graphic depiction of the causal relations between factors in a system.

Leverage point: Particular points in the system that could effect the most change with the least effort by either breaking a feedback loop, reversing a dynamic or creating a new balancing or positive dynamic.

Table: Systems mapping terminology

Identifying key drivers of conflict (KDFs)

Having worked through the above steps in the conflict analysis process, the ARK team moved to the third, crucial step — identifying key driving factors (KDFs) from among all other factors. A key driving factor is, in conflict analysis terminology, “a dynamic or element without which the conflict would not exist, or would be completely different.” The

team agreed on the working KDFs through a consultative process of reflection on the possible options among the driving factors for and against peace.

When the team had agreed on the core KDFs, the KDFs were treated as the pillars around which to unpack the conflict dynamics. The team thus broke into sub-groups to discuss causes and effects (manifestations) of each of the five identified KDFs. To facilitate this

Most critical Factors for Peace / Against Conflict ⇨

Level of local governance actors' commitment to public interest – Degree of presence and effectiveness of local administrations and public provision institutions (e.g., local councils)

Level of citizen engagement with civil society organisations in regime and opposition held areas – Existing civil society initiatives (education, women's participation, capacity building, awareness)

Level of ANF (Al Nusra-Front) commitment to local credibility

Level of influence of local notables (select tribal, community, religious, military leaders)

Degree of credibility of moderate Islam
Level of **diversity of media** and skill-sets of media representatives

Level of **education** of many Syrians contributing to their independence and resilience

P
E
A
C
E

Key driving Factors for Conflict/ Against Peace ⇨

Level of **violence against civilians**
Degree of united vision and action within military and political opposition (FSA, Moderate Islamist groups, PYD)

Degree of influence / presence of **non-state extremist institutions**

Level of comparative* foreign intervention on (i) political, (ii) military, and (iii) economic levels

Instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities (by regime and non-regime forces, including the use of sectarian rhetoric to mobilise armed violence)

* “Comparative” refers to the different and disparate types of influences by Gulf countries, Turkey, Iran, and Western countries

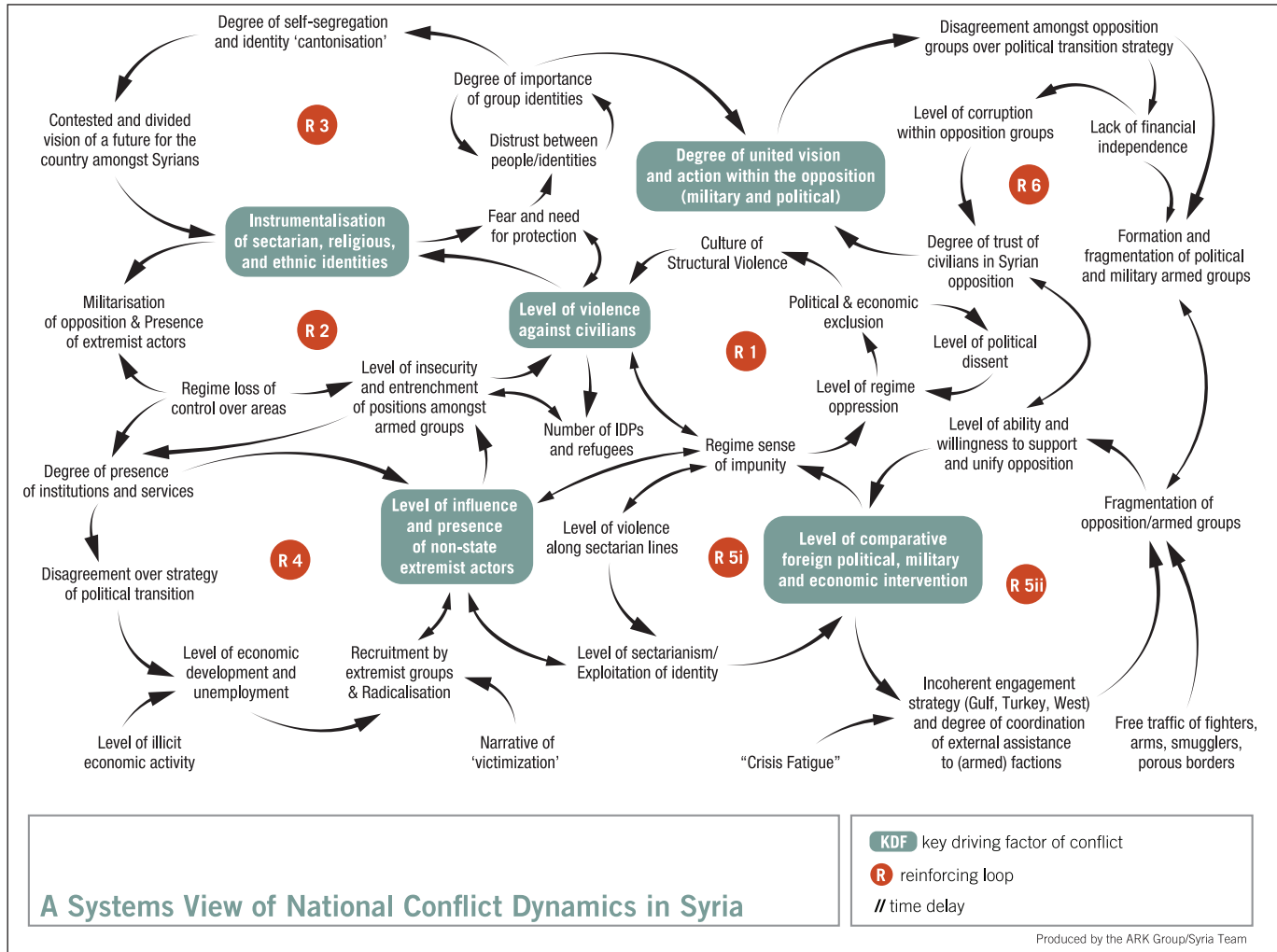
exercise, the groups drew up what are called “feedback loops,” namely, conceptual maps that break down causes and effects and examine them for interconnections and causal relationships. Teams had the option to identify a variety of loops: loops could reinforce either a positive or negative dynamic, or balance a number of elements. The teams strived to create coherent feedback loops that could be related to one another and thereby articulated around a single KDF.

As a guiding principle in systems analysis, all factors or elements, including KDFs, must be named in such a way that they represent *existing drivers* in the conflict whose intensity or degree of presence has the potential to fluctuate. Thus, a particular event, or a particular conflict actor, could not be listed as a KDF or a factor in a feedback loop. Factors must also be specific. For example, “governance” or “human rights” are not factors; rather, “degree of responsiveness of local government to

minority concerns” or “level of human rights violations perpetrated by military” are factors. In addition, systems thinking allowed for the possibility that the strength of the causal links (arrows) between elements of feedback loops might vary according to the surrounding circumstances at any given time. When teams had identified a number of relevant feedback loops, they integrated them into a single concept map articulated around their respective KDF.

In a final step, the ARK team reconvened as a whole to critique each of the proposed concept maps, also known as sub-system maps, for each of the KDFs. Once these sub-system maps had been agreed upon, they were combined into a single conflict map. This map gives a condensed picture of all of the conflict dynamics singled out in the exercise.

After five KDFs were identified at the initial workshop, the workshop’s results were treated



as an advanced draft and a living document. In the months that followed, ARK held further consultations within its team, corresponded with external reviewers, and conducted additional research into secondary sources to verify facts and causal assumptions. ARK's analytical team also monitored and integrated new developments in the conflict. As a result of this work and these changes, the KDFs and their sub-system maps underwent small modifications to bring them up to their current form. The living nature of this report remains true to this day. As ever, a conflict analysis is meant to be a living document that, while it is fundamentally structurally sound, absorbs new advances in analysis and responds to changes in the conflict context.

The results: systems map of the Syrian conflict

The KDFs identified by ARK's team were selected as a result of their consistent recurrence in all discussions about the upstream causes of conflict in Syria. They are the following:

- Level of violence against civilians
- Degree of united vision and action within the opposition (military and political)
- Level of strength of non-state extremist actors such as ANF, ISIL, and smaller Salafijihadi groups
- Level of comparative foreign political, military and economic intervention

- Degree of instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities

It should be noted that the number of each KDF is not a reflection of its importance. The KDFs have merely been numbered for ease of reference, and ordered in this particular way to make for a more cogent reading of the narrative in the sections below.

The next section of the report explains in depth the dynamics surrounding each KDF. The sub-system map containing its associated feedback loops is also provided. Readers are strongly encouraged to refer to both tools simultaneously – the sub-system maps and the narrative – in order to get the most out of the conflict analysis.

KDF 1: The level of violence against civilians

The level of violence against civilians is one of the central drivers of the Syrian conflict. Violence against civilians is defined here as physical violence that targets individuals causing injury, death, and/or psychological trauma, and violence that destroys or damages private property. Violence is not only a defining characteristic of conflict; it is also intimately tied to its history and perpetuation. As explained below, violence became a feature of the Syrian crisis largely as the result of a chain reaction in which the violent repression of civilian protests led to an armed uprising against the regime. Today, violence has become entrenched in conflict dynamics because it is sustained by, and gives rise to, other key driving factors of the conflict.

Well before the start of the revolution in 2011, violence was the default mode of political control under the Assad regime. The Syrian Ba'athist regime had a history of resorting to violence to dissuade potential critics and eliminate rivals. In 1982, under the rule of Hafez al-Assad, parts of the city of Hama were razed to the ground as a means to quell an Islamist insurgency.⁴² On repeated occasions during the rule of Bashar al-Assad, peaceful calls for reform at first tolerated by the regime were repressed through the intimidation,

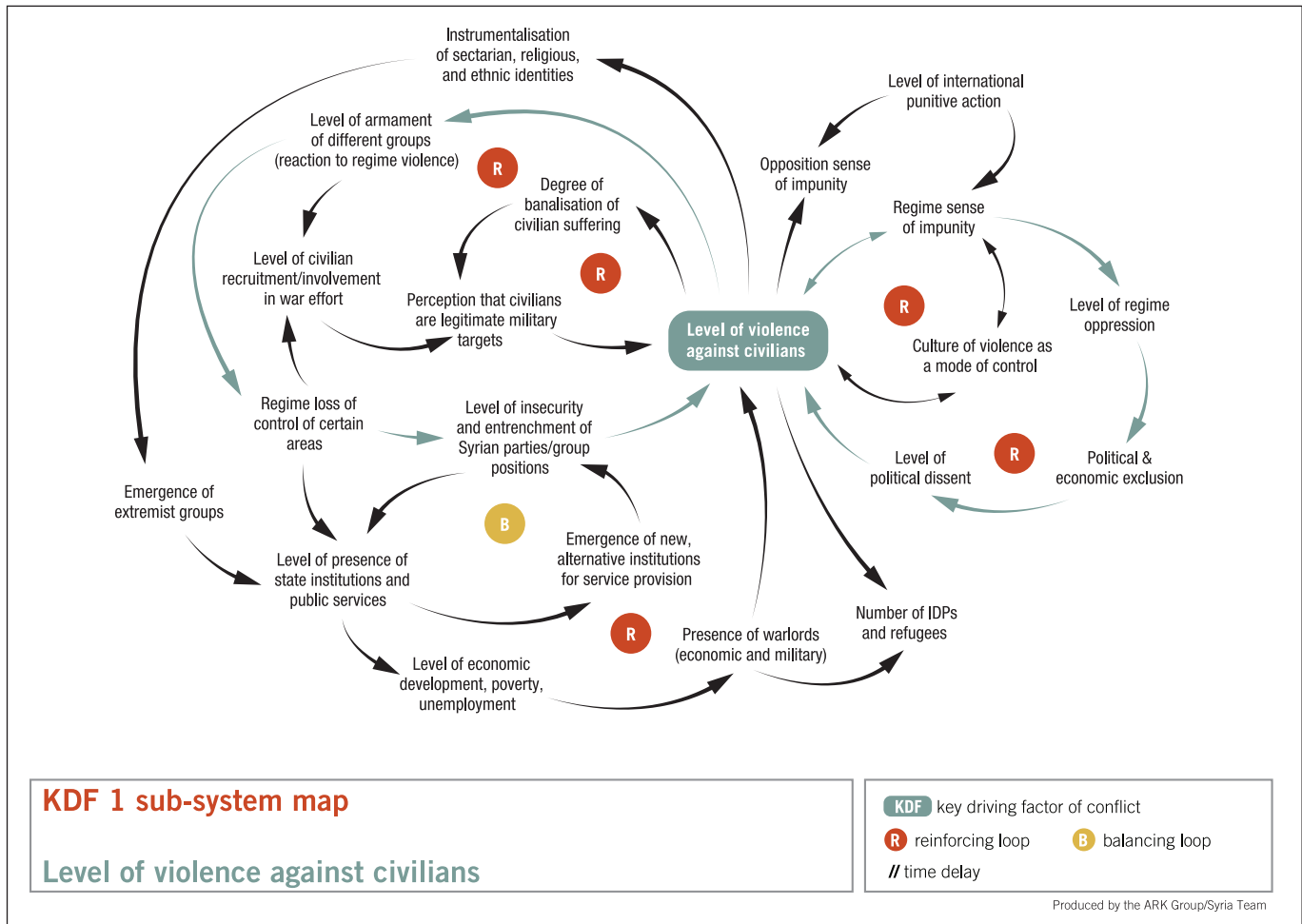
imprisonment, torture, murder, or exile of opposition and protest figures. The pattern was repeated in 2011 when the Arab uprisings reached Syria. Violence was the *modus operandi* of regime security forces, and while senior political officials clearly contemplated other ways to quell popular unrest, Syria's security institutions soon got to work forcibly dismantling the protest movement.⁴³ Live fire was used against protesters within weeks of the first substantial public demonstrations in the country. Simultaneously, Syria's police and intelligence institutions began systematically arresting protesters and rounding up suspected dissidents, subjecting them to torture in attempts to force them to disclose the names of associates.

Bashar al-Assad volunteered some cosmetic political reforms in the spring of 2011. The superficial nature of these reforms, however, combined with continued crackdowns on protests, led activists to believe that the regime envisaged a military, not a political, resolution to the impasse. Many within the opposition insisted that the protest movement should remain peaceful.⁴⁴ Some, however, began to take up weapons, judging this a legitimate means to protect their communities from arbitrary arrest campaigns and from attacks by the army and pro-regime vigilantes. In July 2011, a group of high-ranking SAF defectors announced that they were forming a so-called "Free Syrian Army" and invited military personnel and civilians to join them. Through the convergence of perceived need and the

⁴² It should be noted that the regime was cracking down on a small but nonetheless *violent* insurrection. Dissent against the Ba'athist regime at the time (1976-1982) was manifested not just in protests, but also in terror attacks on civilians as well as military targets, perpetrated by a militant offshoot of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

⁴³ Samer Abboud, *Syria* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), pp. 57-59.

⁴⁴ Groups pushing against militarisation included many activists as well as the state-sanctioned opposition parties, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (officially), and the pro-revolution Local Coordination Committees (LCCs). These groups argued that if the opposition took up arms, then the regime's violent response to the insurrection would become seen as legitimate by Syrians as well as external observers. This prediction appears to have been correct, at least as concerns some audiences.



provision of resources by external donors, this armed opposition has, through its many mutations, swollen to somewhere between 100,000 and 150,000 today.⁴⁵

The militarisation of the opposition lies at the root of two vicious cycles (“reinforcing loops” in the sub-system map) in which violence against civilians has the potential to increase wherever the regime loses territory to opposition groups. There are two principal reasons for this. The first is that so long as armed conflict continues, civilians are caught in the crosshairs of nearly all warring parties. This is particularly visible for the Syrian regime. Violence against civilians is part of the Syrian regime’s war strategy: through violence and by denying services and humanitarian aid to areas held by anti-regime armed groups,

the regime hopes to depopulate opposition areas, crush the morale of those left behind, and force them to accept local cease-fires or surrender. Likewise, opposition brigades have targeted civilians in regime-held areas and denied them services to project power, to exact retribution, and to obtain concessions from the regime.⁴⁶ Thus, when *armed actors* become entrenched in opposition areas, civilian populations in both those areas and nearby regime areas tend to experience violence.⁴⁷

Second, when armed opposition groups succeed in taking territory from the regime, the rebel institutions that emerge to fill the governance vacuum left by the regime tend to also become targets of violence. The Syrian regime has routinely eliminated or disrupted the provision of services in areas that it loses to the

opposition. Opposition-held areas experiencing such gaps in key governance functions have established alternative institutions to fulfil some of the functions of regime institutions. These attempts to create rudimentary local administrations prompt regime attacks on opposition areas, irrespective of those areas' strategic importance from a military standpoint. Schools, hospitals, police stations, and Local Council headquarters have repeatedly been subject to deliberate attack, creating an environment inimical to functional operations for numerous reasons.⁴⁸ These attacks appear to be part of a strategy of undermining opposition governance to decrease its credibility in the eyes of both Syrian and international audiences.

Violence against civilians in any part of Syria adds fuel to other cycles of conflict. These attacks sustain fear and the need for protection, a sense of regime impunity, and recruitment among armed groups including extremist groups.⁴⁹ All of the above dynamics have contributed to a humanitarian crisis and protection gap that fuel an exodus of Syrian refugees and IDPs. Critically, the international community, for its part, has not acted decisively to curb the Assad regime, and this lack of accountability has bolstered the regime's sense of impunity and undermined any sense by the opposition that it must abide by the laws of war.

In the absence of either self-restraint or punitive international action, targeting of civilians in Syria has become banal. Ideas about who and what constitutes a legitimate target of violence have shifted. Everyday conversations, media coverage, and military rhetoric in both pro-opposition and pro-regime circles are rife with discourse that labels civilians as accomplices to military action or simply discounts their presence in areas targeted by indiscriminate weapons. In the case of the regime, official and semi-official media as well as social media pages and comments essentialise opposition supporters as so-called "terrorists". The Syrian regime has long been spearheading this rhetoric. It is directed not just at an international but also a Syrian audience: to get buy-in for operations in which civilians would

suffer, it was important to maintain the perception that a war was being fought against "terrorists" and thus, that the populations harbouring them were legitimate targets. Early on, individuals who defected from state military and security institutions were, indeed, publicly naming the state's willingness to harm civilians as a key motive for their defection. Later, the importance of labelling targets of violence as "terrorists" grew proportionally to the indiscriminate nature of the weapons being used, such as barrel bombs, cluster bombs, and chemical weapons.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ This estimate includes members of ANF and ISIL. See estimates by U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper cited in "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response," U.S. Congressional Research Service, 9 October 2015, <https://goo.gl/8v4cih>, p. 9; estimates compiled by Charles Lister, Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Doha Centre in November 2015, <http://goo.gl/vkAv6y>; and Hasan Mustafa, May 2015, <https://goo.gl/bkLjb1>.

⁴⁶ In January 2015, for example, Jaish al-Islam in Eastern Ghouta began a large-scale campaign of rocket attacks on regime-held areas of Damascus; it was echoed by armed groups in northern Syria which targeted Fu'ah and Kafraya (Idlib) as well as Nubul and Zahraa (Aleppo). Since that time, mortar and rocket attacks on regime-held areas of Damascus or Aleppo have become commonplace. Armed groups and governance bodies that control power stations and water treatment plants servicing regime areas have also at times deliberately shut them down. These tactics exact a toll upon civilians and form part of the cycle of KDF 1. They are intended to project power and, the armed groups claim, to achieve military objectives and to obtain concessions from the regime (e.g., better service provision, lifting of sieges, or prisoner releases).

⁴⁷ For a visual representation of this paragraph, see left-hand side of the subsystem map.

⁴⁸ For example, haphazard and recurring airstrikes create an insecure and unpredictable environment, destroy infrastructure, prevent the development of livelihoods, and threaten law and order; denial of humanitarian aid and services creates critical shortages that open the way to black-market trade, favouritism, and corruption. In this environment, even the best attempts at governance set up by pro-opposition civilians and armed actors have difficulty functioning or earning local credibility. Local governance operates with low levels of formality and efficacy, and generally reflects a crisis mentality that precludes long-term planning. Governance actors thus focus on responding to emergencies, conducting ad hoc repairs, and securing basic necessities for themselves and their communities without having the time, resources, or peace of mind to implement more functional or representative governance.

⁴⁹ For a visual representation of this paragraph, see left-hand side of the subsystem map.

⁵⁰ A discourse around "terrorists" was probably also directed at residents of opposition-controlled areas, as the regime aimed to convince them that those in control of their neighbourhoods were "terrorists" and that any support or acceptance of their rule would legitimise the regime's use of total war.

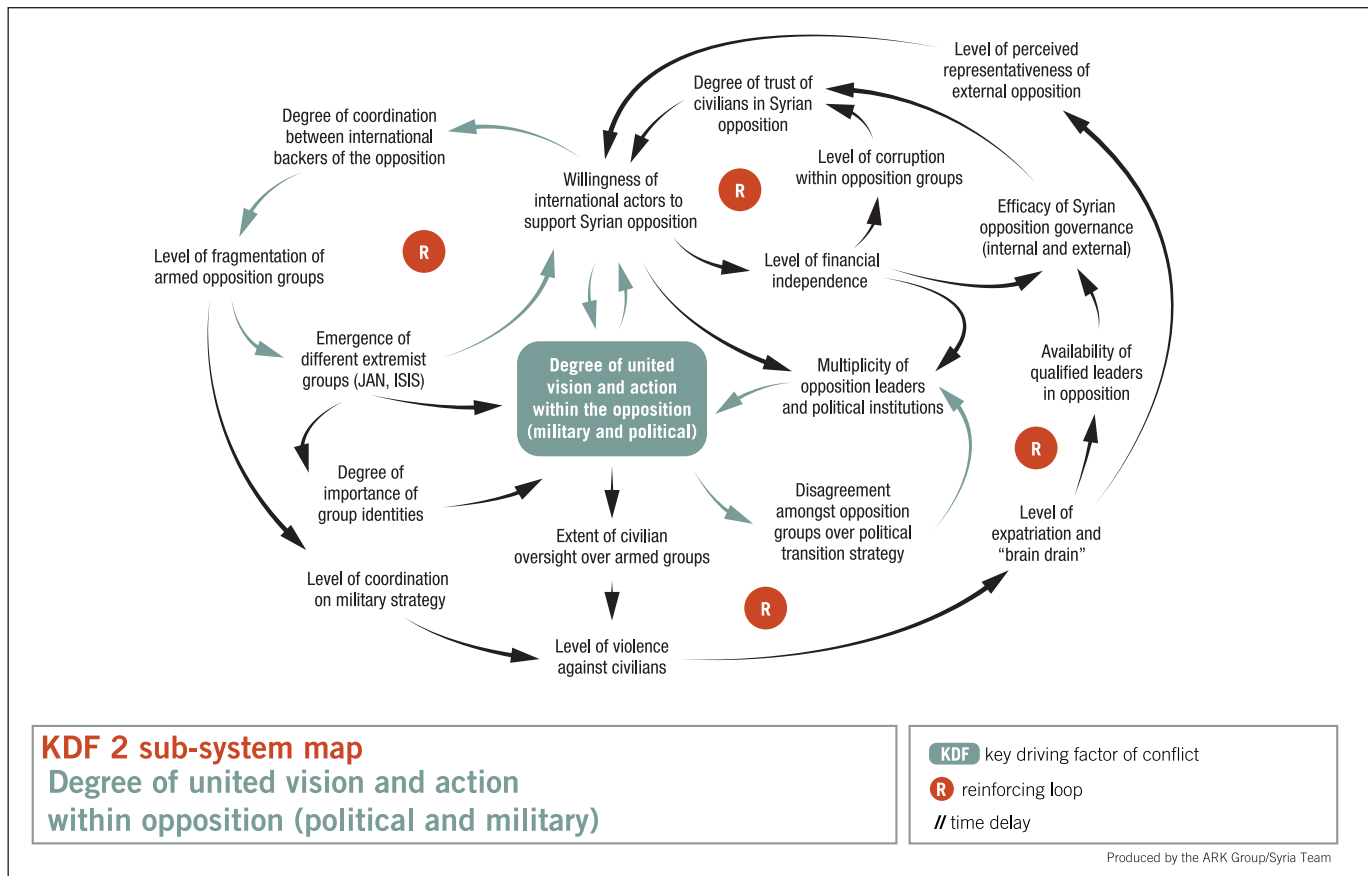
Today, the conceptual amalgamation of civilian and military targets has become accentuated among opposition groups as well. This is partly a response to the regime's dependence on paramilitary groups for neighbourhood protection: the strong *civilian* component of the NDF legitimates the idea that civilians in such neighbourhoods are accomplices to regime violence. Minority dynamics also play a role. It is a relatively widespread trope in opposition discourse that while regime areas as a whole still contain many Sunnis, both military actors (NDF, foreign militias) and civilians in regime-held neighbourhoods contain large proportions of minorities. This perception fuels the judgment that people in these neighbourhoods are existentially invested in the survival of the Syrian regime and, therefore, at least partly in agreement with and thus accountable for its military tactics. The power of this perception has been amply demonstrated since the beginning of the conflict; it grew more pronounced in 2015 with increased attacks on regime-held neighbourhoods with large civilian populations.⁵¹ Not only did attacks on civilians become more common, but they did not occasion widespread condemnation nor a perceived need to reclaim the moral high ground.

Finally, cycles of violence in Syria are exacerbated by the rise of an overarching structural problem – the rise of a war economy and warlordism. Warlords have been defined as “individuals who control small slices of territory, in defiance of genuine state sovereignty, through a combination of patronage and force.”⁵² These individuals and their affiliated and dependent networks of violence aim to entrench themselves in certain areas and to profit from the chaotic nature of war. In opposition-held areas of Syria, the most successful warlords were able to acquire a reputation for providing goods and services to compensate the reputational risks of engaging in illicit activities to raise funds (such as trading in artefacts, weaponry, and drugs; hostage-taking; smuggling; and imposing tolls at checkpoints and border crossings). Syria has witnessed numerous examples of opposition groups

demonstrating warlord-like behaviour.⁵³ Critically, warlords flourish in areas like opposition-held areas of Syria, where state institutions have broken down. This is because state withdrawal causes (1) a gap in service provision and a sharp rise in insecurity, creating demands for the secure transit of essential goods and alternate sources of security, and (2) a rise in unemployment through the loss of public-sector salaries, prompting individuals to seek employment with anyone who can provide them with alternatives, licit or illicit.⁵⁴

Although warlords and their networks may provide rudiments of justice where there otherwise would be none, they are complicit in the perpetuation of violence against civilians in at least two ways. First, warlords may directly exercise violence against civilians by engaging, for example, in kidnapping or arbitrary executions of alleged traitors and informants. Second, a common trait among warlords is that they have a vested stake in the protracting of conflict with the state. Although some profess to wish to topple the regime, warlords can be an obstacle to the end of the conflict, as they stand to benefit financially and politically from the conditions – breakdown of law and order, demand for weapons, black-market trading, humanitarian aid economies, smuggling opportunities, and the like – that enabled their rise in the first place.

In sum, violence against civilians, a factor that helped spark the armed conflict in Syria, is now entrenched in national conflict dynamics. The level of violence is affected by the degree of continued competition over territory and influence by armed parties, as well as the general breakdown of law and order and the rise of warlordism. Violence also feeds other vicious dynamics of the Syrian conflict explored below. It feeds into fear and need for protection (see KDF 5), sustains the rise of extremist groups (KDF 5), while increasing the number of IDPs and refugees, in turn expanding the crisis outside Syria's borders and raising the stakes of non-involvement for international actors (see KDF 4).



KDF 2: Degree of united vision and action within the opposition (military and political)

Syria's revolution arguably began with unity of purpose in March 2011. At its outset, it was united on at least three points. First, the movement was non-violent: opponents of the Assad regime called for peaceful demonstrations and civil disobedience, not attacks on government installations or other civilians. Second, the demands of the protest movement centred on socioeconomic and political reform: protesters asked for dignity, the end of the security state, sustained economic opportunity, and an end to cronyism, corruption, and privilege. Third, the movement was nationalistic and non-sectarian, claiming to represent all Syrians. The movement has been described as having a "Sunni Islamic touch from the beginning" insofar as protests often took place after Friday

⁵¹ It is visible in documented massacres perpetrated by opposition forces on minority-majority towns taken by the opposition; indiscriminate and highly publicised rocket attacks on besieged regime-held towns (e.g., Fu'ah, Kafraya in Idlib, and Nubul, and Zahraa in Aleppo); and more generally, sporadic indiscriminate rocket attacks on regime-held neighbourhoods in Aleppo and Damascus that have become a constant since January 2015.

⁵² Strachan, Hew and Scheipers, Sibylle, *The Changing Character of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 303.

⁵³ They include, for example, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in northeastern Syria; Jamal Maarouf's Syrian Revolutionaries' Front in Idlib; the Shuhada' Badr brigade in Aleppo; Jaysh al-Islam in Eastern Ghouta; and, in some respects, any armed group controlling checkpoints within or around opposition-held areas. For more on warlords, see Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj, "The balance-sheet of conflict: criminal revenues and warlords in Syria," May 2015, <http://goo.gl/jChPW>.

⁵⁴ For a visual representation of this paragraph, see loop running bottom-left of the subsystem map.

prayer and were heavily dominated by Sunni Arabs. However, there were few calls at the outset for an Islamisation of either society or the political system.⁵⁵

One important feature of the opposition movement, however, was that it was decentralised and lacked recognised leaders. This was partly the result of Syria's history of repression of political dissent; opposition activists stayed below the radar by working as networks, not as formalised associations (let alone independent political parties, which were banned). However, this low level of institutionalisation meant that the opposition was soon characterised by disagreement and incoherence, as the various factions within the political opposition failed to come to agreeable terms. The uprising was supported by numerous constituencies and social and political networks, including secular, educated, urban middle classes; clan members hailing from socioeconomically deprived areas; political Islamists; political activists; and the unemployed and marginalised.⁵⁶ Despite their common grievances against the Syrian regime, these constituencies could not agree on a revolutionary strategy or a common vision for political transition, and they lacked an agreed-upon institutional platform where this strategy and vision could even be negotiated. Thus weakened, the opposition failed to create a credible, national alternative to the current regime.

When considered as a whole, the Syrian opposition appears significantly fragmented, at times affected by an increase in (sometimes violent) competition between groups over influence, power, and resources. In turn, disunity and disorder among opposition groups has led to higher levels of public distrust of the military and political opposition and of their capacity to lead Syria to safe ground. The main opposition political body in exile, for example, has lost virtually all public credibility due to internal bickering and perceived ineffectiveness.

Militarily, the Free Syrian Army and its civilian representatives, nearly since the start of the revolution, have been unable to maintain

a common front and agree upon leadership, direction, or vision for how the revolution should be managed and what post-Assad Syria should look like. Such disagreements, coupled with personality clashes between ambitious leaders, have led to a multiplicity of civilian and military leaders, frequent changes in leadership, and often overlapping and uncoordinated military, political, and governance structures.

This disunity among leaders of the anti-Assad opposition – including the deep chasm between the exiled opposition and those members still in Syria – has been a key cause of the failure to coalesce around a unified transition plan and a coherent strategy of war and wartime governance. This has been especially costly to the credibility of those Syrians advocating a pluralistic vision of a future Syria and created room for the growth of Islamist groups as competitors for public support.

The emergence and growth of extremist groups such as ANF and ISIL as influential actors in Syria remains among the most powerful causes — and is in part an effect — of the lack of unity within the opposition. The presence of these ideological organisations that have greater internal cohesion, more tangible governance alternatives to the Assad regime, and more battlefield success has attracted notable numbers of rebel fighters away from the more moderate groups. Disagreements on how to deal with such extremist organisations have since continued to affect and undermine unity in rebel lines. The fact that such hard-line groups also succeeded at forming effective judicial and rule of law structures (the brutality of their implementation notwithstanding) amid a multiplicity of often ineffective opposition courts also resulted in greater public support for these groups.

The presence of competing institutions and disorganised governance structures in opposition-controlled Syria has been particularly visible as rival judicial institutions have appeared, at times claiming overlapping jurisdiction. In Dar'a, for example, the FSA-backed Gharz Court had to compete for influence

with the ANF-backed Kobra Court, leading to decreased legitimacy for both. In Kafranbel, Idlib, there were as many as three courts active within the same jurisdiction at one point in 2014.⁵⁷ The regime's deliberate attempts to undermine opposition governance (see discussion above in KDF 1) has also been a critical factor preventing the emergence of cohesion, institutionalisation, effectiveness, and legitimacy within opposition structures.

The Syrian opposition also suffers from high levels of "brain drain" from Syria, itself a result of both general violence and the regime's deliberate targeting of civilian populations, resulting in a widespread sense of hopelessness. Many of the most skilled and capable have left Syria, particularly from areas under opposition control, in search of greater security and better livelihoods. While some have stayed and joined international organisations working in Syria, this too has contributed to the exodus of qualified individuals away from local Syrian institutions working on the ground and undermined the mobilisation of skills necessary for governing liberated territory.

With the absence of qualified individuals, and amid the spread of competition within the opposition and pressures from extremist groups, dependence on foreign funding has increased, as each individual group seeks to secure its own pipeline of support. A lack of financial independence and the necessity of pandering to foreign backers' demands has led to perceptions of corruption, while exacerbating the inability of the opposition to work around a unified platform and strategy within the opposition.⁵⁸ This lack of unity, in turn, also deters the opposition's foreign backers from effectively and decisively funding and supporting the Syrian opposition. Instead, foreign backers have engaged in patronage of different armed groups and competitively backed various communities and groups in order to secure their interests and ensure that their agenda and influence are projected into the conflict. This, combined with the relative dearth of support for "national" opposition institutions, has led to further fragmentation and decreased coordination within the opposition,

undermining Syrian public support for moderate alternatives to the Assad regime, especially among fence-sitters and current regime supporters.

KDF 3: Level of strength of non-state extremist actors

Numerous non-state armed groups active in Syria today fall along the Salafi and Salafi-jihadi spectrum, ranging from the nationally-focused Salafi-jihadi group Ahrar al Sham to the more transnational but Syria-focused Salafi-jihadi ANF, to the brutal top-down global Salafi-jihadism espoused by ISIL.⁵⁹ Each group plays a slightly different role in the conflict dynamics being studied; dynamics specifically related to ISIL are addressed at the end of this section.

This section provides background to the factors that enabled the rise of Salafi groups, Salafi-jihadi groups, and ISIL during the course of the Syrian insurrection. It then explains some of the key dynamics articulated around these groups – dynamics that are likely to reproduce themselves in the future even as individual organisations and leaders arise or disappear. Some of the key discussion points will touch on the role of the Assad regime and foreign backers in the rise of these groups; what factors of the conflict drive recruitment to these groups; and the impact they have on international intervention in Syria, sectarianism, the

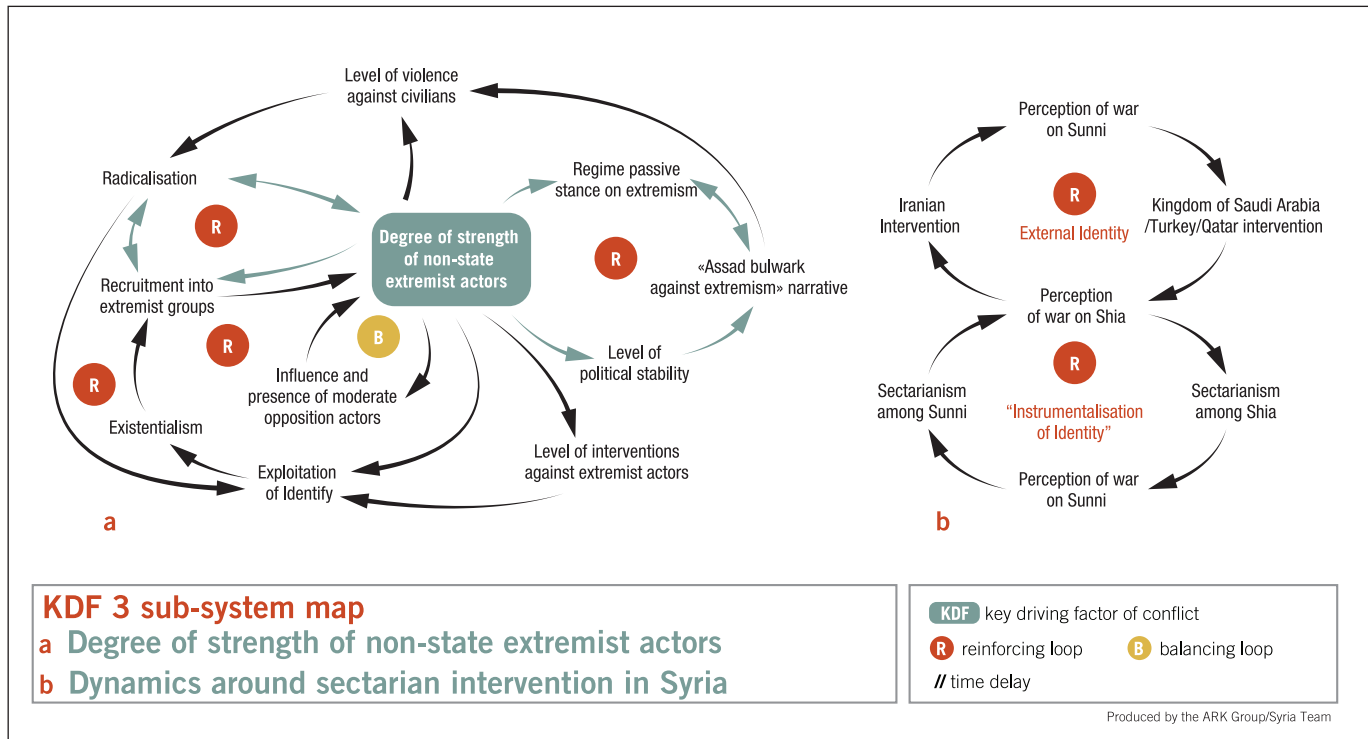
⁵⁵ See Aron Lund, "Syria's Salafi insurgents: The rise of the Syrian Islamic Front," Swedish Institute of International Affairs Occasional Papers #17, March 2013, <http://goo.gl/5uy78>.

⁵⁶ Abboud, op. cit., pp. 64-65.

⁵⁷ Interviews with Syrian security and justice stakeholders, July – December 2014.

⁵⁸ Ironically, low levels of support are in turn partly responsible for the rise of extremist groups, who absorb manpower from FSA groups by offering them better salaries and are able to purchase large shares of spoils of war after joint operations.

⁵⁹ Pointing to the broad definition of "violent extremist" organisations, some argue that a discussion of organisations like AAS, ANF, or ISIL should mention the "extremist" nature of the Syrian regime and non-Syrian sectarian militias. We recognise that these groups drive similar dynamics as Salafi-jihadi groups – in particular, they create fear and the need for protection and drive the instrumentalisation of sectarian and ethnic identities.



level of violence against civilians, and prospects for a political solution.

Several factors have contributed to creating an enabling environment for the rise of extremist groups in Syria. According to some interpretations, key figures and strategists in the Assad regime long ago made the calculation that the rise of moderate alternatives to the Assad regime would be a more immediate threat to its long-term survival than the rise of well-armed Islamist militants, who would be less likely to attract Western sympathy and patronage.⁶⁰ According to this analysis, it would have been in the interest of the regime to enable – within reason – the rise of adversaries who could be credibly painted as terrorists before a domestic and international audience. There is evidence to suggest that this line of thinking may indeed have informed the regime's handling of both the mainstream opposition and ISIL. For example, at the early onset of the Syrian crisis, in mid-2011, the regime issued a series of amnesties through which political detainees were released from Syrian prisons. These detainees included hundreds of hardline

Islamists and ex-jihadis; many went on to hold command positions within the radical branches of the Syrian armed opposition.⁶¹ It has also been suggested that the Syrian military and its allies have devoted much more resources to confronting moderate rebels and, to a lesser degree, other Islamist rebels than it has to fighting the most extreme group in Syria, ISIL.⁶²

Instability in Syria has attracted international competition over the country's future, and in this context, some of the most generous benefactors of the armed opposition have been sympathetic to the worldview of violent extremist groups. In 2011, Syria's political space was opened to serious contestation for the first time since, arguably, the 1976-1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising against Hafez al-Assad. These cracks in the façade created a moment in which Syria's political future could be shaped, rapidly attracting Syrian and regional actors with a vested interest in the outcome of the conflict. Some of the most generous donors to the Syrian opposition were Islamists keen to throw their support behind

Salafi and Salafi-jihadi movements. The Assad regime's historical alignment with the Shi'a axis of Iran and Hezbollah helped galvanise support around the Sunni cause and define the struggle as one of minority Shi'a subjugation of a Sunni majority. Significant logistical and financial support began to flow in late 2011 to newlyminted armed brigades that were led by seasoned Salafi-jihadis and at least partly populated by individuals committed to Salafi-jihadi ideology.⁶³ It is not clear how much foreign financing has supported the rise of ISIL (many argue that the organisation is largely self-financed through oil sales, extortion, and smuggling), but foreign donors – both wealthy, sometimes well-connected financiers and ordinary individuals contributing through social media campaigns – are widely believed to have bolstered the position of groups such as AAS, SAS (Suqur al-Sham), JAI (Jaysh al-Islam), ANF, and many smaller Salafi brigades.⁶⁴

Bolstered by international backers, extremist groups in Syria grew in size and influence as they acquired members and supporters. Salafi groups have been particularly successful at recruiting military-age males and socialising them into their worldview. One driving factor behind recruitment is historical: at the time the uprising broke out, the areas where socio-economic grievances spurred revolutionary sentiment most acutely were also areas where Salafism had existing appeal among the population. Further, Salafism had the potential to resonate with military-age males as the conflict moved towards its current form. As others have observed, Salafism provides a narrative that resonates with the experience of Sunnis in Syria: it offers a sense of belonging at a time of loss; promises paradise for fighters after their death; provides moral assurance in the face of self-doubt; in some cases, explains the theological imperative to fight Shi'a Muslims; and contextualises the messy Syrian war in a coherent narrative of a war fought on behalf of the Muslim nation, or *umma*.⁶⁵ Salafi groups have been successful at drawing in fighters through one or more of these themes, and this appeal may grow

⁶⁰ This argument has been made by both diplomats and analysts: see, e.g., interviews cited in Time Magazine <http://goo.gl/luT7G2>; The Atlantic, <http://goo.gl/SqoNmJ>; The Telegraph, <http://goo.gl/PTM5mf>; Middle East Eye, <http://goo.gl/ip6vDu>; and the preface to a Syria Comment article specifically on this question, <http://goo.gl/XrEYYY>.

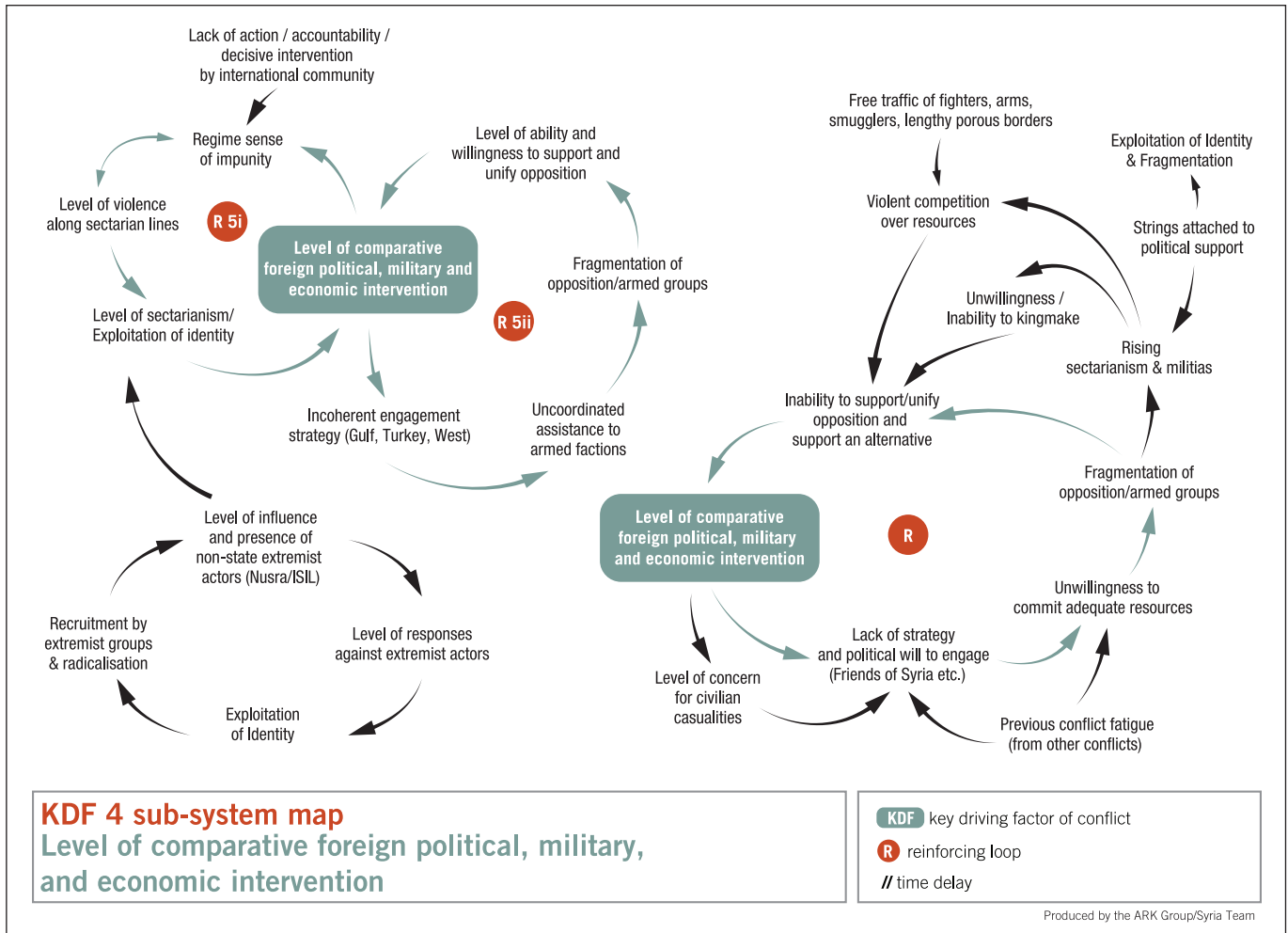
⁶¹ Known ex-prisoners who then commanded the armed opposition include the onetime leaders of Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham, Jaysh al-Islam, and Liwa' al-Haqq. It is rumoured that Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the leader of ANF, may also have been a prisoner released by the regime; the group is said to have drawn many commanders from among ex-prisoners. The amnesties are said to have begun in late May 2011 and continued until October 2011. For one in-depth article, see The National, "Assad regime set free extremists from prison to fire up trouble during peaceful uprising," 21 January 2014, <http://goo.gl/cmL2E7>.

⁶² The extent of regime-against-ISIL hostilities as compared with regime-against-non-ISIL hostilities is a controversial topic among Syria analysts. Some have argued that at least until late 2014, regime attacks on ISIL were less numerous than those against other opposition groups (IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, <http://nbcnews.to/1JXLbbv>, December 2014, and the associated infographic at <http://goo.gl/hkN0k2>). At the same time, there is no denying that there has been fierce competition between the regime and ISIL over territory and resources. ISIL has taken strategically important territory from the regime, and there has been intense fighting in places such as Hasakeh, Deir al-Zor (Deir al-Zor Airbase), Aleppo (Kwairis Airbase), Raqqa (Division 17, Tabqa Airbase), Homs, and Rural Damascus. Perhaps the key difference between the regime's strategy against its two opponents is that indiscriminate airstrikes on civilian areas appear to have been more numerous and devastating in non-ISIL (opposition) areas than in ISIL areas. This forms the basis of the argument that while the regime has indeed engaged ISIL militarily for any number of reasons (e.g., to hold key infrastructure, save SAF servicemen's lives, and maintain a hold over natural resources), it has not attempted to degrade ISIL as a governance actor to the same degree. This is then adduced as proof that the regime is pursuing a strategy of the "last man standing". Namely, this analysis claims, regime decision-makers are gambling that if military and civilian institutions in opposition areas crumble, then the international community will support the Assad regime over ISIL, while the same cannot be said of the inverse scenario where ISIL is defeated.

⁶³ It is useful to distinguish between leadership and rank-and-file of Salafi-jihadi organisations in Syria because individual religious fervour and ideological conviction can vary greatly across members of a single group.

⁶⁴ See, e.g., reporting from 2013 to the present at Foreign Policy, <http://goo.gl/8Yf2N8>; the Brookings Institution, <http://goo.gl/AkOGJP>; Lund 2013, op. cit.; The Wall Street Journal, <http://goo.gl/j6K9W3>; The Independent, <http://goo.gl/cvF8Db>; The Camstoll Group, <http://goo.gl/L7eohK>; the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), <http://goo.gl/oH1ORg>; The National, <http://goo.gl/A6JY9R>; and The Long War Journal, <http://goo.gl/dEIHxG>. This is by no means to say that these backers are exclusively responsible for the rise of Salafi-jihadist organisations – only that they played a very significant role sustaining their growth. Salafism and Salafi-jihadism had a presence in Syria before 2011.

⁶⁵ Lund 2013, op. cit., p. 10. Salafi scholars, while generally in agreement that Shi'a are in error or disbelievers, have disagreed on the merits of large-scale violence against them. In a well-known case during the Zarqawi-led insurgency against American forces in Iraq in 2004, a doctrine of total war on the Shi'a put into motion by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi was publicly denounced by al-Qaeda's second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri as well as Zarqawi's mentor Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. The rationale against such visible attacks on Shi'a religious targets and civilians was that too much violence against people whom many still perceived as Muslims would turn public opinion against the Salafi-jihadi movement.



the longer violence against civilians persists and is seen to be perpetrated by members of one sect against another. In parallel, radical groups have been able to *de facto* take the upper hand when more moderate opposition groups have lost credibility due to their perceived ineffectiveness.⁶⁶

The presence of Salafi groups also affects conflict dynamics through its impact on the policies of Western governments, notably by tempering their appetite for arming the Syrian opposition or taking decisive action against Assad. This foreign policy stance may over time generate a delayed feedback loop that drives recruitment, by feeding a narrative of abandonment by the West. This belief does not necessarily generate radicalisation directly, but it does create an environment of

doubt and disillusionment in which coherent narratives centred on oppression, righteousness, and purpose can become appealing. It can also lead to the weakening of nationalist opposition groups, causing their members to join more effective Salafi ones (this trend was particularly visible in 2014). Finally, international action in the form of Coalition airstrikes against some Salafi-jihadi groups such as ANF and, on at least one occasion, AAS has roiled Syrian public opinion against the West and directly boosted the credibility and influence of more radical groups at the expense of the moderate armed opposition.⁶⁷

A different and much more radical brand of messianic Salafi-jihadism has manifested itself in the form of ISIL. Although ISIL fits in to some conflict dynamics, the group is distinct

from more mainstream Syrian Salafi and Salafi-jihadi groups in several ways. First, the causes that contributed to ISIL's rise differ significantly from those of other groups in Syria: notably, the group's roots are chiefly in Iraq, its main adversary is the moderate opposition and not the regime, and its rise has been accelerated by weapons stolen from the Iraqi army and by access to oil and gas as sources of income. Some characteristics of ISIL as a fighting force are unique to that group as well, including its predilection for ruthless and dehumanising tactics broadcast through slick media productions, combined with strict control over communications with the outside world, resulting in a level of popular fear and isolation not observed – at least to date – in areas held by non-ISIL groups.⁶⁶

ISIL has also had a distinct impact on Syrian conflict dynamics. Even prior to the start of its campaign of international operations targeting Russia, Lebanon, the US, and France, its genocidal intent toward Kurds, Yazidis, and other ethnic minorities had pushed the international community to prioritise the fight against ISIL over the need to unseat Assad. Simultaneously, ISIL weakens the already thinly-resourced Syrian armed opposition by forcing it to fight on multiple fronts, as well as causing internal tensions within and between Salafi-jihadi groups that are divided over ISIL's claim to the caliphate.

Ultimately, the presence and influence of non-state extremist actors across the ideological spectrum makes it more difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at a negotiated political solution. The political vision of regime supporters on the one hand (particularly minorities) and of Sunni extremists on the other are difficult to reconcile. Salafi-jihadis openly say they want Islamic law (as interpreted by their own scholars) to be applied to the entire Syrian territory, and they make scant allowance for religious minorities or secular Sunnis who may not share this vision. ISIL and ANF have used language that suggests a willingness to resort to extermination, ethnic cleansing, or forced conversion of other religious groups, while more mainstream Salafi brigades have

deliberately targeted civilian areas populated by minorities. These positions invite an existential and uncompromising response from regime supporters but also from political “fence-sitters” and regime critics who might otherwise be sympathetic to the views of the opposition but who fear the agendas of extremist groups fighting the regime. Even if political negotiations make progress, the radical positions of extremist actors, including their inability to articulate limited war aims that do not imply a threat to the continued existence of minority groups makes it difficult for major international players to include them at the negotiating table, raising the likelihood that these groups will emerge as spoilers.

KDF 4: Level of comparative foreign political, military and economic intervention

The disparate and fragmented nature of political, military, and economic foreign intervention in Syria remains among the major drivers of conflict in the country. Foreign intervention in and of itself is a factor known to extend the duration of internal conflict. According to a study of civil wars between 1960 and 1999,

⁶⁶ While many moderate groups have maintained defensive positions citing limited external support, more ideological factions that continued to make battlefield gains have gained a corresponding share of public support. For example, when the reputedly corrupt FSA Commander Ahmad Ni'meh was arrested and jailed by ANF in Dar'a in May 2014, few Dar'a residents or representatives of other FSA factions raised significant objections. In Idlib, ANF's move to dismantle and drive the Syrian Revolutionaries' Front (SRF) out of the province in the fall of 2014 were also largely met with local acquiescence if not support. Both the SRF and Ahmad Ni'meh were perceived to be corrupt and ineffective Western “stooges.”

⁶⁷ For an in-depth analysis of how anti-ANF airstrikes may have led to the demise of Western-backed brigades in Idlib in 2014, see ARK Group, “Anger, Betrayal and Mistrust: Public reactions to the initiation of coalition airstrikes in Syria,” November 2014, <http://goo.gl/d1DTzX>.

⁶⁸ This may be slowly changing in areas held by ANF. Through the months of December 2015 and January and February 2016, ANF has begun to mimic ISIL's practice of limiting communications with the outside world. Mobile phone searches and raids on internet cafés in Idlib, where ANF is strong, have now become routine; ANF has also cracked down on independent media and the use of cameras in public. This makes ANF's methods of information control increasingly indistinguishable from those of ISIL, although Idlib continues to have a robust civil society and activist community that speaks out against these practices.

internal conflicts in which no foreign party intervenes end, on average, within 1.5 years, while civil wars in which foreign actors intervene last nine years on average.⁶⁹

States are rational and self-interested actors and, though pressures may sometimes appear for intervention due to moral or humanitarian reasons, it is rare that a state will intervene in another state's internal conflict where it is not in its interest to do so. In the case of Syria, both contiguous and non-contiguous states have pursued their interests through different types and levels of intervention that have extended the capabilities of indigenous stakeholders and created a rough equilibrium of forces. To date, these interventions have protracted the conflict by preventing either camp from prevailing decisively over the other, as well as by persuading many Syrians that it is no longer within their power to extricate Syria from its current predicament.

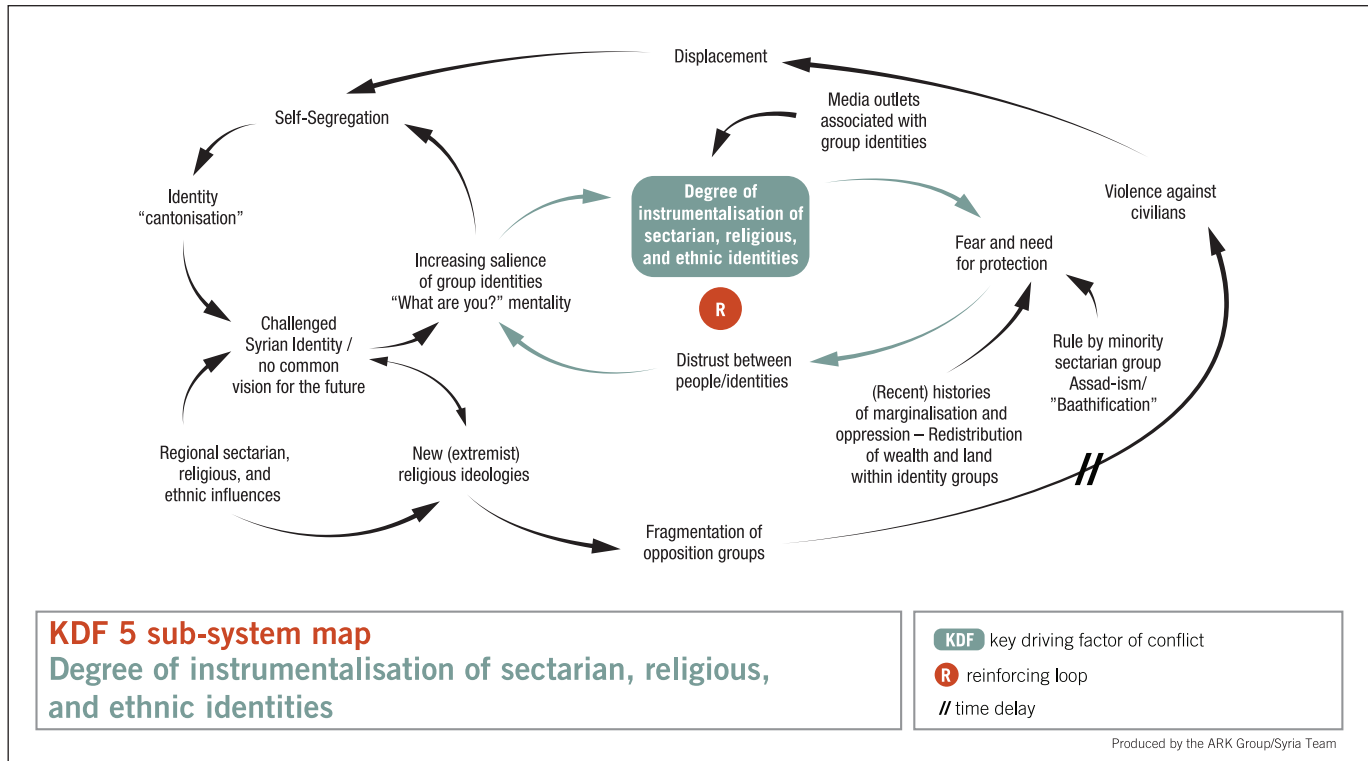
Actors from neighbouring countries, including Jordan, Turkey, and Hezbollah, have been most concerned with the conflict's spillover effect. Academic studies have found that, over the past few decades, intervention from neighbouring states often stems from direct security concerns. The spillover effects of intra-state conflict often threaten neighbouring states as violence and instability traverses their borders.⁷⁰ A large number of refugees being driven from the conflict state has been found to compel neighbouring states to intervene.⁷¹ The spread of refugees in contiguous regions of the conflict state tends to coincide with or lead to a decline in territorial integrity whereby fighters, weapons, and black-market goods increasingly begin to cross the conflict state's porous borders.⁷² Consequently, regional and bordering states are found to be probable interveners, either in order to pre-empt or address the destabilising effects of such risk factors or to influence the outcome of the conflict.⁷³ In the Syrian conflict, neighbouring actors, including the Turkish, Israeli and Jordanian governments, but also Hezbollah and militants from Iraq have, in one form or another, intervened in the Syrian civil war as those neighbouring countries began to

face these challenges and their perceived national security interests have been threatened.

The specific challenges faced by intervening neighbours of Syria have at times brought them into tension with non-contiguous intervenors, who may be sheltered from the immediate ramifications of certain types of interventions, particularly those that result in mass displacement. This has been especially evident among the Syrian opposition's allies, who have found themselves unable to agree on a unified course of action. One clear example has been the disagreement about priorities between Turkey and the United States. While both are committed to a future Syria without Bashar al-Assad, Turkey seeks to ensure that the Kurdish YPG/PYD do not create an autonomous Kurdish enclave along the Turkish border and that the PKK does not acquire leverage through its intervention into the Syrian conflict. Meanwhile, the United States has cooperated with and supported the PYD to counter the ISIL threat. While Turkey has repeatedly called for the creation of a humanitarian zone or no-fly zone, in part to stem or reverse the movement of over two million Syrian refugees into Turkey, the United States and European allies have pushed back against such proposals, fearing a slippery slope for Western militaries that would likely be mandated with enforcing such a zone.

The disparate and, at times, divergent interests, motives, and perceptions of conflict dynamics of the opposition's main external backers (Turkey, US, UK, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) has resulted in weak strategic coordination of the anti-Assad camp. This has manifested itself in the uncoordinated nature of international and regional assistance to armed factions, which in turn has played a significant role in weakening and fragmenting the more moderate of the armed groups backed by these foreign states.

While Western members of this camp have been inclined to support the FSA and other secular-leaning or otherwise moderate Islamist brigades, this assistance has been intermittent, non-decisive, and clearly hampered by



misgivings. Factors fuelling these misgivings include the lack of unity and leadership within both the civilian and the military opposition; the moderate opposition's underwhelming performance; and civilian and military cooperation between FSA-affiliated armed groups and more powerful Salafi-oriented militant groups. Underpinning these doubts is concern about the power vacuum that could emerge where moderate groups are able to gain – but not hold – Syrian regime territory, creating space for groups such as ANF to deploy their preferred model of governance. By contrast, armed groups that (at least initially) enjoyed little foreign backing, including ANF, have maintained their cohesiveness and have grown in strength vis-a-vis the more moderate foreign-backed armed groups, making them more appealing over time to patrons in the Gulf.

The Russian-Iranian-Hezbollah camp, for its part, has been able to ensure the Assad regime's survival in large part due to its unity of purpose and by making a much more significant investment of financial and human

resources, proportional to their national capabilities, than the members of the anti-Assad camp. While each member of this axis is pursuing some degree of parochial interests, the relative simplicity of their common desired end-state (a return to the pre-2011 status quo) and the existence of a clear lead actor for achieving this (the Syrian Armed Forces and affiliated militias) allows for a more efficient

- ⁶⁹ Nicholas Sambanis and Ibrahim A. Elbadawi, "External Interventions and the Duration of Civil Wars," World Bank Policy Research Papers, 2000.
- ⁷⁰ Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis, *Understanding civil war* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005); Ted Gurr, *Minorities At Risk: A Global View of Ethnopolitical Conflicts* (Washington, D.C.: The US Institute of Peace Press, 1993).
- ⁷¹ Patrick Regan, "Choosing to Intervene: Outside Interventions in Internal Conflicts," *The Journal of Politics* 60/3 (1998), pp. 754-79.
- ⁷² Christian Davenport, Steven Poe, and Will Moore, "Sometimes you just have to leave: Domestic threats and forced migration, 1964-1989," *International Interactions* 29/1 (2003), pp. 27-55.
- ⁷³ Deepa Khosla, "Third world states as intervenors in ethnic conflicts: Implications for regional and international security," *Third World Quarterly* 20/6 (1999), pp. 1143-1156.

use of their combined contributions.⁷⁴ This has been likened to a poker game, where in the anti-Assad camp has played a strong hand poorly while the pro-regime forces have played a weak hand well. There is little doubt that this situation has also contributed to the Assad regime's sense of impunity. Its pursuit of a strategy of total war against civilians in opposition-held areas has been unencumbered either by the deployment of decisive assistance to the armed opposition (including weapons systems capable of grounding Assad's air force) or by any evident demands of self-restraint from his backers. The resulting lack of accountability appears to be influencing the regime's calculus and fuelling its uncompromising political and military strategy.

KDF 5: Degree of instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities

As the conflict enters its fifth year, prejudicial and generalised labels have become increasingly prevalent within the Syrian conversation. Ingrained in the psyches of Syrians across the country, identity markers have come to define people's communities and their perceptions of themselves and their opponents' communities. Armed actors and sympathetic activists and media organisations have — intentionally or otherwise — abused identity markers and instrumentalised ethnic and sectarian identity through the use of generalised and often fear-inducing narratives.

The level of violence against civilians (KDF 1) impacts at least two other phenomena. First, violence is intimately tied with the dynamic of the sectarianisation of the conflict. For a variety of reasons, the perpetration of violence in the Syrian conflict has been, and been perceived to be, taking place along sectarian lines. Although many conscripts in the Syrian army are Sunnis, they are most often commanded by Alawite officers who are seen to perpetrate atrocities against civilians; conversely, victims of violence by regime and pro-regime forces are overwhelmingly Sunni. Likewise, pro-regime militias and armed opposition groups have tended to organise along ethnic and/

or sectarian lines and to name themselves accordingly. Pro-regime militias are largely Alawite or Shi'a and are trained, funded, and equipped by Iran and Hezbollah; and Iranian, Iraqi, and Hezbollah Shi'a militias continue to play direct fighting roles. Conversely, opposition groups are overwhelmingly Sunni Arab. This has helped give credence to a narrative of an identity-based existential conflict pitting Sunnis on the one hand against Alawites and Shi'a on the other.

What began as a movement aimed at transitioning to an inclusive Syria has become divided and infiltrated. Both regime and opposition proponents, and a majority of extremist trends that emerged over the years to follow, have employed identity as a tool for both mobilisation and fear-mongering. Communities have come to view the threats facing them as emanating from the Shi'a (and Alawite) or the Sunni (and Salafi), rather than one involving communities with complex identities and multi-dimensional histories and positions.

Among the opposition and its supporters, the evils of the Assad regime and its armed allies (*shabbiha*, Hezbollah, Iran, and other Shi'a militias) have become transferable, with ease, to all Alawites and Shi'a rather than limited to the perpetrators themselves. It has become commonplace, for example, for statements by rebel leaders to describe military operations against "the *nusayriyya*" and "the *rawafid*" (disparaging terms for Alawites and Shi'a respectively) rather than "the Assad regime" or "Hezbollah." This choice of terminology not only essentialises armed groups in terms of their sectarian identity exclusively, but also elides the distinction between combatants and civilians. For its part, the regime has, from the early days of the revolution, dismissed the opposition as "Salafi" and "jihadi" "terrorists" and their supporters as "traitors to the Syrian people" rather than employing descriptive organisational names such as the al-Nusra Front or the Free Syrian Army and Ahrar al-Sham. As in the case of opposition discourse, this labelling amalgamates both civilian and military opponents to the Assad regime under a single label.⁷⁵

This escalation in rhetoric has occurred as part of a process of “Othering”. Members of ethnic or sectarian groups have increasingly come to reduce all members of other identity groups to negative and one-dimensional stereotypes that reflect the worst actions of the most extreme components of Other groups, perceiving their goals through a zero-sum lens where the prosperity of one community can only occur at another’s expense. In tandem with this perception, individuals may dehumanise Others and be desensitised to their suffering.⁷⁶ The growth in mutual dehumanisation of the Other has occurred alongside an increased perception that one’s respective community has no place in the opponent’s future vision for Syria. This has worked to significantly increase fear and distrust between various communities in Syria. Opposing actors’ visions for a future Syria, in turn, have become increasingly contested, divided and mutually exclusive as communities increasingly perceive their identities to be incompatible with those of their opponents. Armed actors on both sides have added fuel to this dynamic: rebel groups, by failing to articulate limited war aims that clearly distinguish their desire to eliminate the Assad regime from a broader and possibly existential threat to the Alawites, and the regime, through its deliberate application of scorched-earth tactics against mostly Sunni civilians.

As instrumentalisation of identity markers has escalated in a vicious cycle, identities themselves have become increasingly entrenched, with many members of society now identifying others through a narrowly defined lens through which they are judged primarily according to their identity group. While one may view his own personal identity as complex and consisting of multiple levels, he will be unable to project such nuance on his presumed adversary: for example, one may perceive himself as a Sunni Muslim Arab resident of Damascus City and a supporter of the revolution, but upon meeting a Shi’a Muslim Arab resident of Damascus City and a supporter of the regime, the former would perceive the latter as simply a Shi’a regime-supporter, while the latter

would perceive the former simply as a Sunni terrorist-supporter. Thus, shared identity markers – being a resident of Damascus City, a Syrian citizen, an Arab, or having a similar age, profession, or educational background, for example – become less important as a result of Othering.

Syrian communities across the board have begun feeling secure only with those who identify with their narrow identity groups, reinforcing the mutually negative perception of the Other. Segregation between groups has become widespread, either voluntarily or by force, as people retreat into their identity groups and fall back into geographically distinct divisions. In effect, this has led to further self-segregation and identity-based balkanisation.

The instrumentalisation of ethnic and sectarian identities has further increased the prevalence and power of extremism. The most extreme and hardened visions and ideas have become among the most attractive as their proponents achieve battlefield success and mobilise identity to motivate and recruit. Groups whose vision and public rhetoric appealed to unity and inclusiveness have increasingly been perceived as less effective (and at times corrupt) and have lost support and influence to more hardened and ideologically distinct, or “purer”, visions. Such visions and the ideological bases of such actors’ strategies within the regime and the opposition are those most

⁷⁴ It should be noted that the recent Russian intervention in Syria carries potentially significant costs at the strategic level for Tehran. Russia will have more leverage in negotiations to reach a settlement, the terms of which may not benefit Iran. Retaining Assad, or someone just as pliable for Iran, may not be as important for Russia, for example. Russia might also opt to take a bigger role in Iraq – Iran’s backyard – on the premise that it is fighting ISIL there, a move that could create tensions within this camp.

⁷⁵ See the section *KDF 1: Level of violence against civilians* for additional analysis of dynamics around the level of discourse that treats civilians as legitimate military targets.

⁷⁶ As an example, it has become more common on social media for supporters of the regime or the opposition to express support for attacks on targets across lines of control, including where the target cannot be readily ascertained as military or civilian. On pro-regime social media, in particular, many commentators express support for eliminating all “terrorists,” that is, those who live outside areas of regime control.

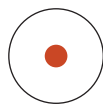


Photo credit: Lens of a young Dimashqi

likely to gain hardened and uncompromising recruits with narrow perceptions of the Other. In fact, recruitment strategies of the most extreme actors have often exploited, employed, and instrumentalised such identity based patterns.

Instrumentalisation of sectarian and ethnic identity has been closely linked to dynamics of violence along sectarian and ethnic lines and has run parallel to escalation of violence. This too has served as a vicious cycle whereby the instrumentalisation of identity leads to dispute, grievance, and violence in defence of one's respective identity group as well as pre-emptively justified violent action against both the opponent and their respective community.

The sectarian nature of regional interventions also fuels such instrumentalisation and bolsters perceptions on both sides that their opponents' backers (e.g. Iran, Saudi Arabia) are motivated primarily by sectarian considerations. It is presumed by supporters of the regime that the agendas of the armed rebels are, at least in part, dictated by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar and therefore that the rebels' own aims and goals are sectarian, if not existential, in nature. Likewise, supporters of the opposition perceive the regime's survival as a necessary instrument of Iran's sectarian designs on Syria and the Middle East. Foreign intervention is thus a catalyst for the existing fire of violence, displacement, and mutual perceptions that opponents will seek to create unitary and exclusive geographic regions in which the Other will not be welcome.



LEVERAGE POINTS

This section attempts to identify elements of the conflict dynamics presented in our conflict systems map and sub-system maps that are susceptible to change as a result of outside pressure, and thus hold the potential to break certain feedback loops that the exercise has identified as central to the conflict. These were selected based on their importance to the conflict in terms of their significance either within a particular Key Driving Factor of conflict (KDF) or as a pervasive theme cutting across several KDFs. Some of these potential leverage points are political in nature – touching on regional and international efforts to manage and influence conflict stakeholders – while others may be relevant to humanitarian, development, and stabilisation programming interventions by donor governments. This section does not imply that these leverage points can be operationalised easily or even feasibly under current conflict circumstances. Rather, they are meant as “evergreen” findings that are adjudged likely to hold true through future iterations of the conflict; some of these opportunities may ripen under more opportune circumstances, while others may remain aspirational.

KDF 1: Level of violence against civilians

Addressing the protection gap faced by Syrian civilians is urgently required, not only to attenuate human suffering but also to limit the



Photo credit: Abd Alkader Habak (SyriaGraph)

impact of the Syrian civil war on neighbouring countries, reduce the sectarianisation of the conflict, reduce the appeal of violent extremist groups, create a workable space for a political process, and start to rebuild trust ahead of negotiations and an eventual transition.

- The creation of a safe zone in opposition-held Syria would be the most effective way of bridging the protection gap. This can be achieved through a number (or combination) of means, although none appears politically feasible at the moment: demands for a no-fly zone over parts of northern Syria by Syrian civilians as well as Turkey have not been endorsed by those members of the Friends of Syria group that are capable of mobilising the necessary military capabilities, and there is evidently even less appetite for a ground-supported disengagement zone or humanitarian corridor under the auspices of the UN or other international or regional coalition.
- Cease-fires may achieve the same result, although during the life of the Syrian conflict these have been successfully deployed only in limited geographies and for a limited time, in response to changes in the tactical balance. They have not been used primarily for the purpose of attenuating civilian suffering. Tellingly, successful cease-fires to date have not been negotiated exclusively between political stakeholders such as the Syrian regime and the NC but often between armed factions themselves, and in some cases between proxies directly (such as the Zabadani cease-fire). While UN envoy Staffan de Mistura has worked to promote a more comprehensive cease-fire within the Geneva/Vienna process, most stakeholders continue to view them as a tool for consolidation of territory (usually by the regime) rather than as an instrument for sparing civilian lives.
- Voluntary self-restraint by fighting factions, with a view to protecting civilians, is nowhere in evidence. However, it can be encouraged through different approaches and with appropriate pressure. In the case of the Syrian regime, the doctrine of total war by the Syrian Armed Forces and affiliated militias against opposition-held Syria seems entrenched and is unlikely to change without direct pressure by Bashar al-Assad's patrons, Russia and Iran. Russia's entry into the war and its adoption of indiscriminate aerial bombardment tactics indistinguishable from those of the regime makes such pressure seem even more illusory. Although SAF operations are a potent recruiting tool for violent extremists and have destroyed any latent support for Assad within the broader international community, it does not appear that sufficient inducements currently exist for the regime to modify its approach.
- The armed opposition, for its part, has not had the means to terrorise civilians in

regime-held areas on the same scale, yet it too has been guilty of indiscriminate attacks that either target, or are indifferent to, non-combatant populations (for example, in their shelling of the majority Shi'a towns of Fu'ah and Kafraya). While some efforts have been made by Western governments to acquaint opposition brigades with the strictures of International Humanitarian Law and the laws of war, a more rigorous effort is needed to condition any support for such groups on their compliance with these conventions. Claims to ownership of higher moral ground are key to the opposition narrative against the regime, and thus need to be substantiated on the ground in order to maintain their potency, both in terms of recruitment as well as morale in opposition-held areas. Respect for IHL is also a key criterion for evaluating groups on the Salafijihadi spectrum in terms of isolating potential spoilers that are indifferent to pressure and international norms.

- Nascent institutions in opposition-held Syria have tried, within their limited means, to close the protection gap faced by civilians. Of these, the most successful have been the White Helmets, Syria's volunteer Civil Defence forces, who are credited with saving 20,000 lives to date, mostly by rescuing civilians trapped in the rubble following regime barrel bombings. The White Helmets have also delivered impactful public education campaigns to better prepare civilians to respond when they are struck. For their part, the Free Syrian Police have brought some measure of public order to Aleppo, Idlib, and to a lesser extent Latakia, although their capabilities are overshadowed by those of armed groups that have the ultimate say in those areas. The Free Police nonetheless play a key arbitration role and serve as a living reminder of the distinction between combatant and non-combatant roles in the opposition, and of the need for subordination to civilian authority. Other actors have also provided medical treatment and psycho-social support services to survivors of violence. While these institutions

have deservedly benefitted from international donor support, they remain largely a palliative response in the face of indiscriminate regime violence – which, in fact, has also repeatedly targeted these very institutions.

KDF 2: Degree of united vision and action within the opposition (military and political)

A more united opposition would affect conflict dynamics positively in a number of ways: by more efficiently marshalling its variegated sources of support the armed opposition would be a more effective military actor, with the potential to dissuade the regime from pursuing futile strategies to recapture opposition-held territory and thereby spare a greater number of civilians from exposure to violence. A more effective and united opposition would also blunt the appeal of more extreme groups that have gained popularity, at least initially, as a result of their perceived effectiveness and their ability to attract regional sponsorship. A united opposition would also be better able to articulate limited and consensual war aims that focus on the original goals of the revolution, giving reassurance to citizens in regime-controlled areas – Alawites especially – that violence will end with the toppling of the Assad regime. Finally, a more united opposition would be better able to resist the clientelism of foreign patrons (and the divide-and-conquer tactics that have occasionally accompanied this support) and to assert Syrian ownership over the opposition's negotiating agenda.

- There have been sporadic donor efforts to enhance the performance of opposition institutions such as the NC, which has received intermittent funding and training support. However, its performance has not allayed donor scepticism, particularly about the NC's representativeness and credibility with constituents inside Syria, especially among armed actors. But by judging the NC over a relatively limited time-frame, donors may be guilty of short-term thinking. A multi-year investment in the NC, aimed

specifically at enhancing its negotiating skills, would represent a timely reminder by the Friends of Syria about the need for a negotiated solution as well as a healthier basis for judging the NC's performance in that process.⁷⁷

- Support for moderate security, justice, and civil administration services within opposition-held Syria remains a key stabilisation priority for donors and our analysis validates its importance. Left ungoverned, these spaces are susceptible to exploitation by extremist groups with their own vision of local governance, one that is likely to exacerbate other conflict drivers. In the justice space – whose importance is manifest in the resources that different groups have deployed to compete for position – Western states have made a potentially short-sighted decision not to engage with opposition courts that dispense Shari'a, leaving the sector under-serviced and susceptible to influence by more extreme and well-funded patrons. A re-examination of that position, supported by research on the situation in Syria as well as comparative case studies, would be timely. Similarly, while a number of Local Councils in opposition areas have distinguished themselves under very trying circumstances, Western support remains *ad hoc* and is not geared toward the creation of alternative national-level institutions.
- Finally, support for livelihoods in opposition-held Syria is not only a humanitarian requirement but a stabilisation one as well, insofar as it is necessary to stem the “brain drain” of qualified Syrians and keep them engaged in the delivery of services in opposition-controlled Syria. It has the added virtue of discouraging child labour and blunting financially-motivated recruitment by well-funded extremist groups.

KDF 3: Level of strength of non-state extremist actors

As addressed at KDF 1, the protection gap faced by civilians is one of the main factors

driving recruitment by violent extremist groups as they are able to frame popular suffering within a potent narrative of Alawite persecution of mainly Sunni civilians. Although Western countries have taken steps through kinetic action to degrade the capabilities of groups such as ANF and ISIL, absent a willingness to commit ground troops this approach is unlikely to be more than palliative unless the root causes of extremist recruitment are also addressed.

- The rise of extremist groups in Syria has been proportional to the relative weakness of armed groups with a more secular or nationalist orientation. There is ample anecdotal evidence to suggest that one of the main factors shaping the appeal of any given armed group among Syrians is its perceived effectiveness, both in combat and in terms of the financial resources it is able to mobilise or attract from patrons.⁷⁸ Western efforts to support more moderate armed groups have been intermittent and often half-hearted, for reasons already described in the Stakeholders section. Nonetheless, bolstering support to such groups remains a viable option for states invested in undermining the recruiting appeal of violent extremist groups, provided that the mission of these moderate brigades is clearly seen to be fighting the Assad regime. The experience of the

⁷⁷ One possible model is the multi-year donor investment in creating a Negotiation Support Unit (NSU) within the Negotiations Affairs Department of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. The NSU was an office of legal and technical specialists and was intended to provide Palestinian leaders with the confidence necessary to engage in detailed discussions with their better-resourced Israeli counterparts.

⁷⁸ Syrian stakeholders and journalists frequently report on this phenomenon for ANF and well-funded Salafi-jihadi factions. They note that ANF's popularity among the general public is a direct result of its perceived battlefield effectiveness: it is seen as bringing skills and discipline unrivalled in other groups. As an illustration of the converse phenomenon, several individuals from southern Syria reached by ARK's teams in recent months have observed that the Southern Front's reputation as a military group has suffered as a result of its failure to generate military gains since mid-2015. Financing, meanwhile, also plays a critical role in recruitment power. Many stakeholders with whom ARK teams have interacted over the years have observed that young men migrate from one armed group to another not on the basis of ideological affinities, but simply in search of better compensation. In this balance-sheet, the benefits offered by groups supported by Western patrons are typically much lower than those available from better-resourced Salafi and Salafi-jihadi groups.



Photo credit: Lens of a young Dimashqi

ill-fated Harakat Hazm group illustrates the risk associated with sponsoring groups with a nebulous mandate, which can be seen as a threat by the al-Qaeda linked ANF and its battlefield ally Ahrar al Sham, which together represent the dominant armed actors in opposition-controlled areas.

- A conscious strategy to undermine violent extremist groups requires a diplomatic strategy of selective engagement aimed at identifying spoilers that will never commit to a negotiated solution short of complete surrender by the regime camp (an unrealistic scenario under almost any circumstances) and isolating them from the broader opposition. Such a strategy must necessarily include the foreign patrons of groups at the Islamist end of the spectrum, such as Turkey and Qatar, that are well positioned to incentivise certain factions to “come in from the cold” and segregate their armed activity against the Assad regime from the global Salafi-jihadi agenda. Currently, Track II efforts are underway with respect to Ahrar al Sham, one of the most effective and popular Islamist armed groups in northern Syria, which appears susceptible to being coaxed away from the aegis of the Al Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front (ANF). ANF itself has at various times been rumoured to be on the verge of renouncing its association to Al

Qaeda, which would open up potential new avenues to Western engagement and even support, but repeated public statements by its leader, Muhammad al Jolani, have appeared to shut the door on this possibility.

- Patrons of the armed opposition, particularly Gulf states and Turkey, have prioritised support for Islamist factions over secular-nationalist groups, either because the former are seen as more effective in achieving those states’ objective of toppling the Assad regime, or because they better reflect their own ideological sensibilities. Our analysis finds this to be a short-sighted bargain. By infusing extremist and sectarian agendas into the fight against the Assad regime, those particular client groups bolster the Assad narrative that it is waging an existential battle on behalf not only of itself, but of all minority groups in Syria, of Syria’s tolerant traditions, and indeed on behalf of the international community. This pushes “fence-sitters” in particular – individuals who might normally oppose the regime but who fear for their safety in the chaos of an Islamist-led successor regime – to either acquiescence of the regime or to outright support, thus protracting the war. This suggests that supporters of the opposition may wish to consider a longer-term approach that redirects support from Islamist factions to

secular-nationalist groups or groups amenable to a form of government that fence-sitters can find acceptable.

- One potent factor contributing to the rise of extremist groups is the impunity enjoyed by the Assad regime, including as regards “red lines” that have been set by the international community and subsequently ignored by the regime without consequence. (The only country that has struck Syrian regime assets since 2011 has been Israel.) This impunity, and the global inaction with which it has been met, undermines any notion that the armed opposition must itself abide by conventions such as the laws of war and international humanitarian law. It also feeds a mutual perception of total war and thus undermines any argument, among anti-Assad Syrians, that there may be groups in that camp that are beyond the pale. Tangible international action to impose clear, painful punishments against the Assad regime, including through specific indictments before the International Criminal Court, would represent baby steps toward weakening the potent narrative of abandonment that extremist groups, in particular, have exploited with great skill.

Undermining ISIL, as explored earlier, is a unique challenge in its own right – one that requires concerted action not only against its physical capabilities but indeed against the belief systems that underpin it. Air strikes against ISIL have likely already reached the point of diminishing marginal returns, while support for indigenous anti-ISIL forces such as the Kurds is unlikely to produce results deep in the Sunni heartland straddling Syria and Iraq. Sunni Arab forces committed to fighting ISIL, such as the New Syrian Forces, suffer from weak legitimacy among Syrians, because they are understood to have agreed not to fight the Assad regime as a condition for Western support. A comprehensive anti-ISIL strategy must therefore also include:

- Undermining the Sunni narrative of persecution by taking tangible action, including under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, to close

the protection gap faced by (mainly Sunni) Syrian civilians.

- Taking clear measures against the Assad regime under international law to curtail its sense of immunity.
- Ensuring that international opprobrium is not limited to Sunni extremist groups in Syria but also extends to Shi’a foreign fighters including Hezbollah and Shi’a militias from Iraq.⁷⁹
- Studying carefully the Sahwa (“awakening”) movement of Sunni tribal leaders that rose up against the ISIL precursor, the Islamic State of Iraq, from 2005-8, for usable models for securing the loyalty and support of Sunni clans against ISIL, including by deploying superior financial incentives.
- Demonstrating the symbiotic relationship, long asserted by many Syrians, that exists between ISIL and the Assad regime, wherein both have prioritised eliminating the more moderate nationalist opposition that carries the original values of the Syrian revolution.

KDF 4: Level of comparative foreign political, military, and economic intervention

As explained earlier in this report, foreign intervention has protracted the Syrian civil war by extending the finite capabilities of Syrian stakeholders (with patrons willing to fight, through their proxies, to the last Syrian) and by placing those capabilities in a kind of stasis, where the war cannot end through natural attrition or by one side decisively prevailing over the other. This stasis has resulted from the nominally weaker pro-Assad axis (Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah) overinvesting their capabilities with the clear objective of defending the regime, and the nominally stronger pro-opposition camp (Western and Gulf countries, along with Turkey) intervening half-heartedly,

⁷⁹ Kyle Orton, “Destroying Islamic State, Defeating Assad: A Strategy for Syria”, Henry Jackson Society, November 2015, <http://goo.gl/Bp75wW>.

and often at cross-purposes, without a shared vision of desired outcomes. (Many Syrians now believe that, for this latter group, the status quo has supplanted toppling the Assad regime as their preferred outcome.) More perversely perhaps, a large segment of Syrian society is also now convinced that a resolution to the war *by Syrians* and *for Syrians* is no longer possible, thus diminishing any sense of urgency – among the opposition especially – in defining an agreed vision of a future Syria that can meet the bottom line of a majority of Syrian stakeholders. It is perhaps a truism at this point to say that a more concerted armed opposition, and better coordination among its backers, would result in the application of more consequential pressure on the Assad regime and force it to sue for peace. However this capability, and perhaps the necessary will, has eluded the opposition and its backers for four years, such that an external shock may be required to create the necessary urgency. Russia's entry into the war on the side of the regime, which has seen it targeting largely the FSA and other moderate Islamist factions including some beneficiaries of Western support, does not appear to have generated this effect, while ISIL's launch of international terrorist operations in Europe, Lebanon, and the Sinai, has succeeded only in feeding doubts in Western capitals about the desirability of an immediate toppling of Assad.

It remains unclear that the necessary incentives are in place to motivate Russia and Iran to reconsider their near-term support to the Assad regime. Although battle dynamics over the last four years evince little hope that the Syrian Armed Forces could ever re-assert complete regime control over the liberated areas of Syria and their people (as opposed to simply depopulating them through indiscriminate violence), its ability to preserve the Damascus-Latakia corridor appears to represent a minimally satisfactory bottom line to those patrons. Further, the launch of transnational terror attacks by ISIL is portrayed by Moscow as vindication for its reductionist narrative of a Manichean choice for the international community between global jihadi terror and an

accommodation with the Assad regime. Four years after world leaders first called for Bashar al Assad's departure, Iran and Russia may believe that time is on their side.

However, a useful parallel may exist in neighbouring Iraq, where despite their own mutual enmity, the U.S. and Iran both came to the conclusion in the summer of 2014 that the sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (an Iranian client) had made him a common liability, and worked together to replace him with the more moderate Haidar al-Abadi, who has made efforts to reach out to disaffected Sunnis.

- A similar diplomatic effort is needed in Syria. Rather than trying to coerce Iran and Russia into abandoning their client Assad, Western leaders should use the metastatic threat of ISIL to demonstrate that Assad has become a complete liability to them: a self-interested individual who has neither the ability nor the desire to stem the rise of the ISIL threat, and whose devastating war against principally Sunni civilians (with over 100,000 killed to date) is the leading recruitment tool for ISIL.
- In this optic, the discussion with Russia and Iran could usefully shift to identifying the Syrian version of Haidar al-Abadi — a figure acceptable to the Alawites and the Ba'athist establishment who can take over the duties of the president and begin a process of purging the Syrian state of the Assad clan, oversee a meaningfully representative non-sectarian technocratic government with Sunnis in prominent positions, suspend the gratuitous and deliberate barrel-bombing of civilians in opposition areas, launch a process of cease-fire negotiations with the armed opposition, and take meaningful action against ISIL. Key to this approach will be convincing Russia and Iran that moving beyond Assad is not a defeat for them but rather a necessary precursor to excising the cancer of ISIL from the region.

Ultimately, however, our analysis finds that international intervention in the Syrian conflict is not only a cause, but also a symptom, of the entrenched and irreconcilable positions of

different Syrian stakeholders, which have invited foreign assistance to their cause while denouncing the same behaviour by their adversaries. However remote the likelihood of a Syrian political accommodation given the current circumstances, it remains within the power of the different Syrian stakeholders to insist on full respect of the norms of non-intervention, and to agree on the illegitimacy of all foreign fighters and militias on Syrian soil. Although the current UN-led peace process and the resulting Geneva and Vienna declarations have been largely driven by foreign agendas and have featured scant representation from the Syrian opposition and regime, they will inevitably need to cede the way to meaningful inter-Syrian discussions that may require the backing of regional and international guarantees, but that can no longer accept the instrumentalisation of Syrian stakeholders in the service of proxy wars.

KDF 5: Degree of instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities

There is a near-consensus among Syrians that the ferocious mobilisation of sectarian identities since the outbreak of violence in 2011 is an epiphenomenon of the war and that it has no grounding in Syrian history or values as a traditionally moderate, if not secular, state. Although some historians beg to differ and have cited evidence of a persistent strain of identity-based violence throughout Syria's modern political history,⁸⁰ the existence of such a vision, even if it is in some degree mythological, is a useful tool for de-escalating the conflict from one of existential stakes to one of more prosaic interests that can more readily be captured within a traditional process of negotiation.

- The most important step that the warring parties can take – and should be induced or compelled to take – is articulating clear and limited war aims that will communicate to their adversaries the circumstances under which the war can realistically end,

and convey reassurance that a new post-Assad order need not represent an existential threat to any identity group. This is particularly relevant to the armed opposition, which includes a number of Islamist factions that have taken ambiguous if not hostile positions toward the Shi'a and Alawite communities – at times suggesting a fundamental inability to contemplate future coexistence that extends well beyond the legitimate grievances that can be directed at combatants and leaders within those communities.⁸¹ From the perspective of Shi'a and Alawites, this may reasonably be perceived as eliminationist rhetoric requiring an uncompromising and unlimited response including the pre-emptive waging of total war, which roughly describes Assad regime behaviour to date.

- Although the opposition is fighting to secure very clear and legitimate *defensive* ends (such as an end to indiscriminate barrel bombing of civilian populations), its *offensive* ends, beyond achieving the fall of Assad, remain nebulous. It has sought to gain control of territory wherever possible but without a clear political objective in mind. Its intentions with regard to the largely Alawite heartland centred around Latakia are especially vague; while several groups have spoken of this as an ultimate prize, it remains unclear whether they are prepared to occupy the area as a hostile force in the likely event that they are not welcomed there as liberators. In some respects, the opposition is subject to the same pressures as the regime: its credibility rests on claiming a national agenda, in an environment where

⁸⁰ Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria. Politics and Society under Assad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011.

⁸¹ ANF leader Muhammad al Jolani's comments to Al Jazeera in June 2015 are illustrative: "Even the Alawites, if we show them their mistakes and the reasons for why they left their religion, and they refrained from this, and dropped their weapons, and distanced themselves from the deeds of Bashar Al-Assad, if they do this then they are not only safe from us, moreover we will take the responsibility of protecting them and defending them. Because they will have returned to their religion." <https://goo.gl/8Hpxua>.



Photo credit: Ibn Alshahba (SyriaGraph)

the notion of partition of Syria into sectarian and ethnic-based zones of control – however appealing from the standpoint of achieving a short-term truce – is anathema to most Syrians. However this unwillingness to publicly acknowledge the significant demographic distinctions between different areas of Syria, and their relevance to the war aims of the different sides, create an environment where it is difficult to build trust that this is not an existential conflict.

The Assad regime is, of course, by far the worst offender insofar as – beyond mere rhetoric – it is actively waging a strategy of total war against mainly Sunni civilians in the liberated areas. The regime has made this sectarian distinction explicit by mobilising resources in support of Shi'a civilians also affected by conflict, for example by going to great lengths to secure the mainly Shi'a villages of Fu'ah and Kafraya in Idlib province while subjecting surrounding (majority Sunni) villages to indiscriminate bombing. Armed opposition groups have seized on the regime's explicit discrimination in terms of the value of civilian life by treating Fu'ah and Kafraya, and other Shi'a and Alawite areas, as bargaining chips that can be traded for regime concessions in respect of Sunni communities elsewhere. This is an unhealthy cycle that the opposition is wrong to perpetuate,⁸² but the regime has clearly signalled that threatening Shi'a and Alawite civilians is the only means available to gain concessions from it. Ultimately, the regime's sponsors, Russia and Iran, may be the only actors capable of compelling the regime to cease its deliberate tactic of mass depopulation of mainly Sunni opposition-controlled areas. This would appear the *sine qua non* of any effort to then compel the armed opposition to clarify its offensive war aims and to articulate them in a manner that acknowledges demographic and geographic distinctions and conveys reassurance to Shi'a and Alawite populations that they need not fear occupation and ethnic cleansing.

- Related to this point is the need for Syrians generally, and the opposition in particular, to refrain from sectarian incitement, which

now permeates the public discussion about the war. Once again, the Assad regime has set the tone by describing as “terrorists” all who oppose it and denying the existence of a moderate or nationalistic opposition. And while Salafi-jihadi groups such as ANF and ISIL have predictably cast the conflict in identity terms, others on the opposition spectrum are guilty of describing their enemies as not merely the Assad regime but rather as “*rawafid*” (“rejectors”, meaning Shi'a) and “*nusayriyya*” (a derogatory term for Alawites) – pejorative labels that feed perceptions of a zero-sum future for Syria and that repel members of those minority groups who might otherwise sympathise with, and join, the opposition. While the external political opposition, such as the NC, has done an admirable job of presenting a diverse image and using inclusive language, forces closer to the ground may need additional guidance in avoiding such counter-productive rhetoric and reclaiming the moral high ground against the regime. Donor efforts in the opposition media space must show sensitivity to this issue, including by supporting efforts by Syrians to challenge the increasing currency and normalcy of sectarian incitement.

⁸² The need for regime accountability including through ICC indictments explained under KDF 3 holds true for opposition figures who are suspected of complicity in war crimes such as the shelling of civilian areas of regime-held Aleppo, of Nubul and Zahra, of Fu'ah and Kafraya, and the massacre of Alawites in Latakia in 2013. Although these crimes differ from regime violations in terms of scale, they nonetheless affect conflict dynamics (particularly KDF 5) in terms of their effect on perceptions of the opposition among civilians in regime areas, especially from minority communities. It would be important for the international community to reassure potential fence-sitters in this population that there will be no role in a future Syria for those who previously set rockets on them indiscriminately.



CONCLUSION

As this report goes to press, the situation on the ground in Syria remains typically fluid. Five months of Russian air strikes have succeeded in bolstering Syrian regime spirits and helping the Syrian Armed Forces and affiliated militias regain small but strategic territory, including the critical rebel resupply corridor between Aleppo and the Turkish border. Russia and the regime have also succeeded in killing several key commanders in the armed opposition. Despite Russia's claims that it has intervened to fight ISIL and other "terrorist" groups, the bulk of Russian strikes have targeted areas with no ISIL presence; rather, Russia's actions seem geared toward eliminating the Free Syrian Army and its allies, in some cases to the direct benefit of ISIL, which remains largely unscathed.

Against this backdrop, international efforts to end the bloodshed have been focused almost exclusively on reviving the negotiation track under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura. The most immediate hurdle to this initiative was a requirement that the Syrian opposition nominate a negotiating committee free of violent extremist groups including the Al-Qaeda affiliate al-Nusra Front. Despite initial warnings from groups inside Syria, such as Nusra affiliate Ahrar al-Sham, that such a formula would meet with popular rejection, the Syrian opposition under the increasingly firm leadership of former Prime Minister Riyad Hijab was able



to placate different stakeholders sufficiently to allow the appointment of a High Negotiating Committee (HNC) that enjoys a broad base of credibility among Syrians. Although the emergence of the HNC has created yet another Syrian opposition structure (thus eclipsing further the National Coalition) and risks exacerbating divisions, the HNC, for now, appears to have achieved a rare balance of internal credibility (including through the inclusion of effective armed groups) and palatability to the sponsors of the process.

The brief, unsuccessful resumption of indirect talks in February 2016, billed as the Geneva III round, highlighted a number of structural impediments to a negotiated solution that are central themes in this report. The involvement of outside sponsors to the Syrian regime, especially since the start of Russian air strikes, has resulted in regime gains on the ground that obviate any motivation by Assad to negotiate in good faith. The failure of the opposition's backers and of the UN envoy to insist on meaningful steps to protect civilians and implement Security Council Resolution 2254 has further emboldened the regime's sense of impunity and validated its use of siege and starvation tactics as bargaining chips. Although the armed and political opposition to Assad may be less divided now than at any previous point in the conflict, they have yet to see a tangible dividend from their sponsors either in terms of achievements through the

diplomatic track or a meaningful uplift in their fighting capabilities. Violent extremist groups remain, along with the Syrian regime, the main beneficiaries of these circumstances, which validate their narrative of an existential conflict along sectarian lines, abandonment and hostility by the non-Sunni Muslim world, and the fecklessness if not illegitimacy of any negotiated solution.

The next phase of the conflict may be defined by how the opposition's backers respond to this shift in the strategic balance. Turkey, which was publicly critical of proceeding with the Geneva III round with the opposition in an enfeebled position, may not sit idly by and watch its proxies in Syria be cut off and encircled. Gulf states, and maybe even the US, may come to the conclusion that the Geneva process, which they entered into in good faith, will not succeed without a tangible reversal of regime momentum that is sufficient to change current calculations in Damascus and Moscow. More broadly, the failure of the Geneva track and the refusal of the Syrian regime to even acknowledge its obligations under Security Council Resolution 2254 may push the international community to consider more assertive steps to counter the regime's use of besiegement and starvation as tactics of total war. Although recent history has tended to validate cynicism about the ability and willingness of the opposition's backers to match the intent of Russia and Iran, the impending



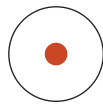
Photo credit: Lens of a young Dimashqi

end of the Obama administration may presage a shift in the heretofore ambivalent US leadership of that camp. Further complicating this picture, ISIL's launch of overseas operations in the fall of 2015 has consumed much of the Syria bandwidth of Western governments. This has also obscured, for some, the intimate linkage between that phenomenon and the continued existence and posture of the Assad regime. (In much the same way, the exodus of Syrian refugees across the Mediterranean in 2014 and 2015 was widely attributed to ISIL, even if statistically the vast majority were fleeing regime violence.)

What this analysis has sought to achieve, ultimately, is to challenge reductionist, periscope-like visions of the Syrian conflict that have gained wide currency and the equally simplistic solutions that are often associated with them. These include recommendations that the international community rehabilitate the Assad regime as a partner in the fight against terrorism, or that the West expiate its sins of commission or omission in Iraq and Libya by indulging in neutrality which, in the face of calculated violence by the strong against the weak, is anything but neutral. In between, a number of possible approaches and outcomes exist – few of them appealing, some perhaps less catastrophic than others, and none entirely predictable. In attempting to render the Syrian conflict in its full complexity, this report does not seek to counsel inaction or to suggest that trade-offs will not be possible and indeed necessary. But each potential intervention should be weighed in relation to all the known drivers of conflict and their interrelation, and in turn every new phase of the

conflict should occasion a renewed analysis of those drivers of conflict. For this reason, ARK intends to curate this systems conflict analysis report as a living document. While a research-informed, evidence-based approach to the Syrian conflict may not, in and of itself, generate a more appealing range of options, it may improve slightly our odds of making better choices.

ARK Group DMCC
Istanbul, Amman, and Dubai
16 February 2016

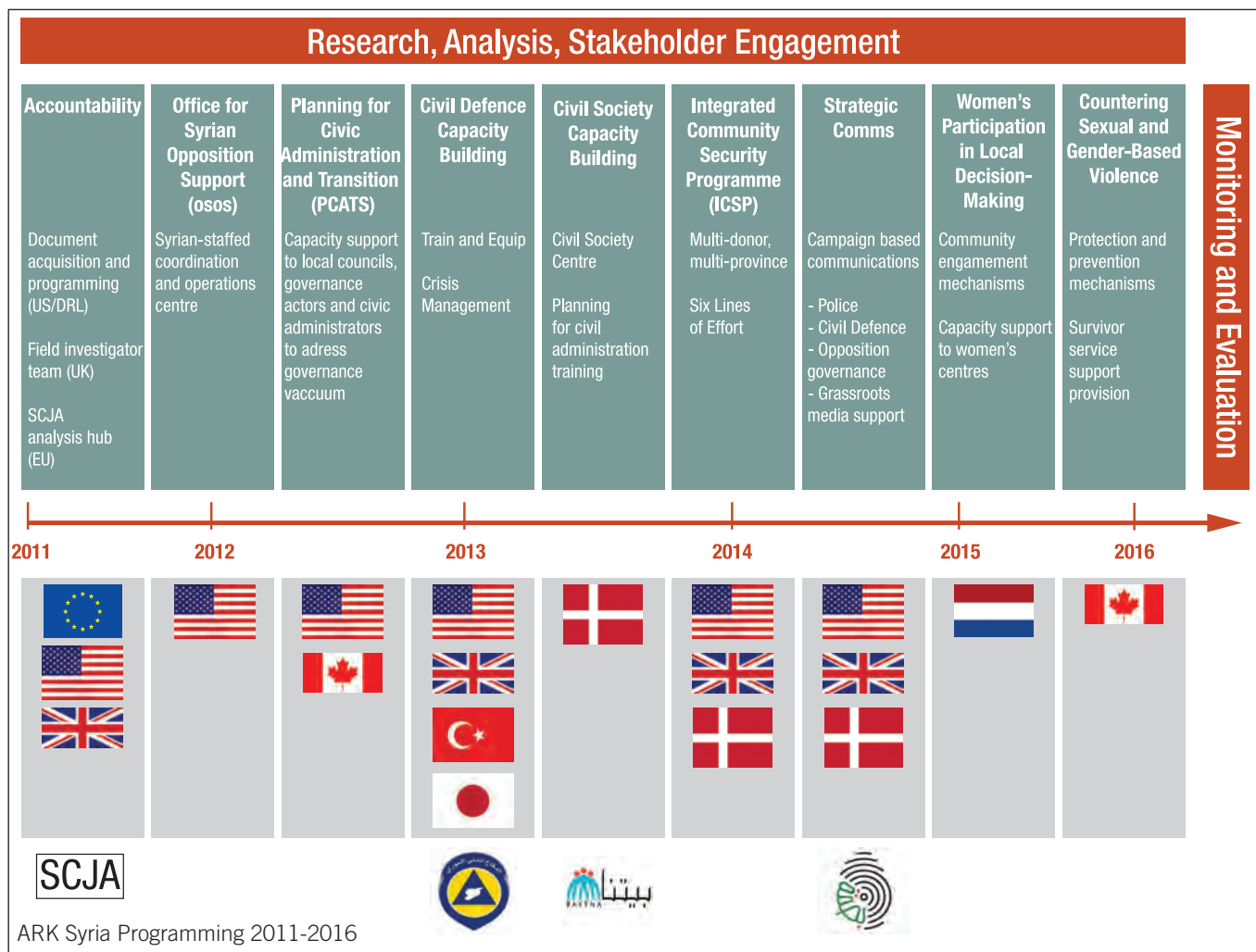


ANNEXES

Annex A: A brief overview of ARK programming

ARK Group DMCC is a research, conflict transformation and stabilisation consultancy providing communications, research, and programme implementation services in fragile and conflict-affected states. ARK partners with local stakeholders to provide insight and develop programmes that are of immediate, tangible assistance to conflict-affected communities. ARK's core areas of activity are Research and Analysis, Capacity Building, Strategic Communications, Programme and Project Design and Management, and Monitoring and Evaluation, which it carries out in line with the international standards and the guiding principles of these professions. ARK's teams include a mix of international and local consultants with career experience in government, the military, law enforcement, civil society, academia, and the private sector.

ARK's focus since 2010 has been delivering highly effective, politically- and conflict-sensitive programming in the Middle East (principally Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Yemen) on behalf of government clients including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, and the European Union. ARK has been a pioneering stabilisation partner for these governments' response to the regional Syria crisis, delivering in the fields of strategic communications and support to freedom of expression,



human rights and accountability, civil society capacity building, civil defence, support to political pluralism and civic activism, policing and justice, enhancing women's participation, and the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence.

ARK has frequently been an incubator of innovative and successful programmes. This is because ARK's relations with in-country stakeholders have enabled it to identify beneficiary needs early, initiating programmes that were then developed by partner local organisations and/or recognised international experts. This pattern of work that anticipates needs is visible throughout ARK's history, from its work to establish the Syrian Commission for Justice and Accountability to the launching of the programme to support Syria Civil Defence.

At the core of ARK's philosophy is the belief that programming must be evidence-based and research-informed, whether at the design, implementation, or monitoring and evaluation stage. ARK therefore maintains a dedicated Research and Analysis unit. This unit is dedicated to programme support but also produces research such as this Conflict Analysis report for the benefit of practitioners, policy makers, and the academic community. Like all of ARK's research, the Conflict Analysis report aims to produce actionable knowledge. ARK seeks to not only situate and explain problems, but also to identify the policy and programming options to resolve them.

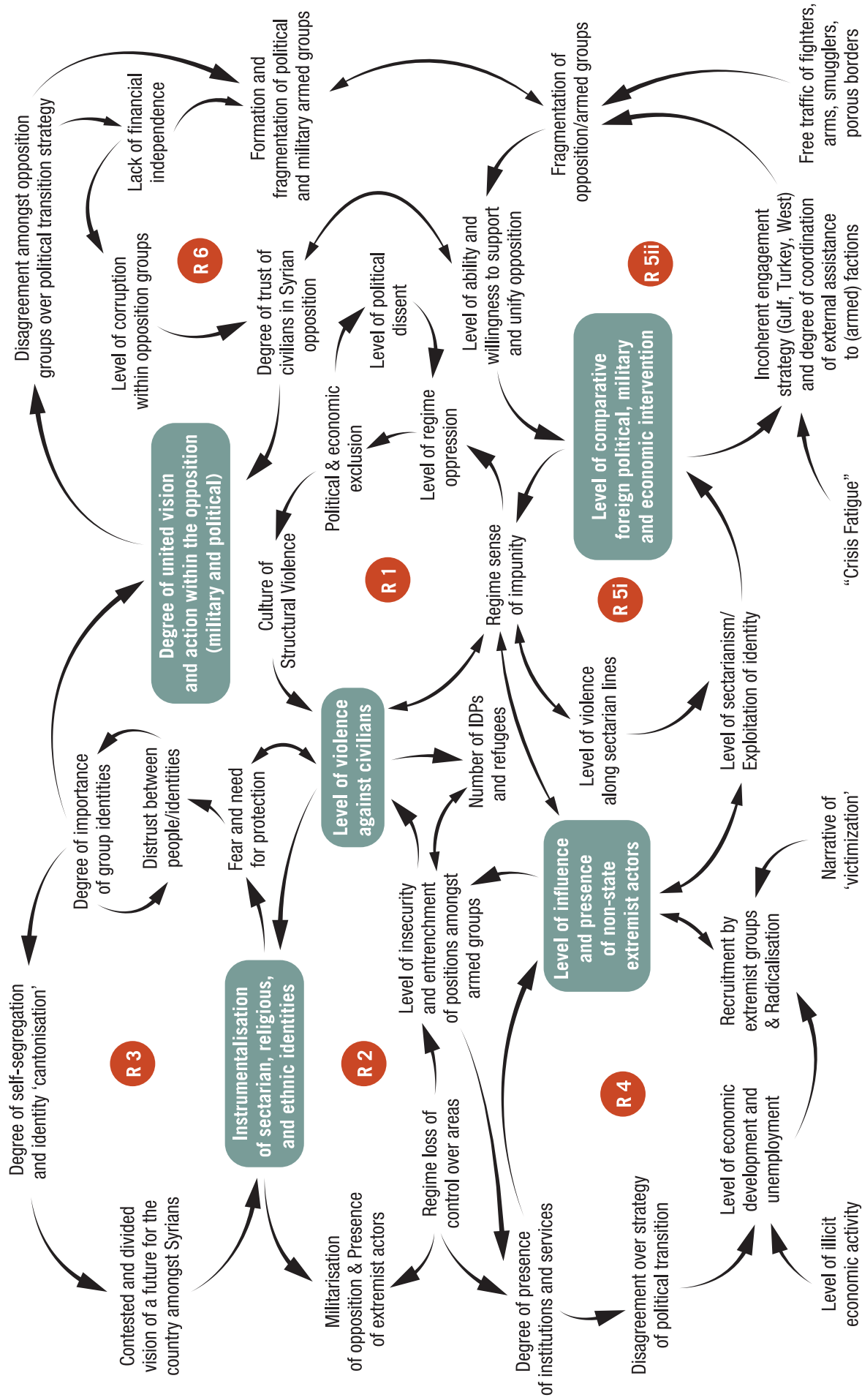
The chart above provides an overview of ARK's Syria programmes from 2011 to the present day.

Annex B: Long list of factors for peace, factors for conflict, and actors

Factors for Peace / Against Conflict ➡	Factors for Conflict / Against Peace	Actors
<p>Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Degree of responsiveness and interaction of transitional government (examples: wheat subsidy project, healthcare) – Level of governance actors' commitment to public interests (e.g. some of the local councils) – small but successful democratic experiences – Number of governance mechanisms that support public interest – Citizen's perceptions of functioning governance mechanisms (e.g. local councils, Civil Defence, Police) – Ability of Syrian people to fill institutional/governance vacuum (rejuvenating the role of labour unions and syndicated/free lawyers and journalists) – The presence of nationalist military actors who are not pigeonholed <p>Civil Society and Civic Engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level of citizen engagement with Civil Society Organizations – Level of potential women's participation in local service provision and decision-making – Maturation of level of civil activism (but needs to be utilised) – Existing schools and education initiatives set-up in liberated areas (civil society efforts) – Civil Society Support to strengthening inter-personal skills for conflict resolution – War weariness – Strong individuals: Centrist charismatic characters and campaigns 	<p>Sectarian – Religious – cultural dynamics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level of propagation & instrumentalisation of sectarian narratives (regime and non-regime) – Level of Sectarianism: Use of sectarian rhetoric to mobilise armed violence <p>Democratic representation, basic political and human rights and political participation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Degree of political participation/exclusion – Degree of freedom of expression – Level of political awareness – Use of violence by the regime (human rights violations/oppression of dissent) – Deliberate discriminatory economic policy – Degree of security institutions' control of state institutions – Alawite control of key power positions in government, civil administration and security institutions (One party state) <p>Militarisation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level of arms supply to both sides across the borders – Degree of influence/presence of parallel extremist institutions 	<p>Nationalist armed opposition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Free Syrian Army, including vetted, Western-backed groups – Nationalistic and moderate Salafi to Salafi-jihadi groups (Ahrar al Sham, Jaysh al Islam...) <p>Transnationally oriented Salafi-jihadi groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Al-Nusra Front – Jund al-Aqsa – ISIL <p>Kurdish actors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – PYD – YPG <p>Pro-regime Regime:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – National Defence Groups & Armed Internal Militias – Army (operational) – Security forces (activists, road blocks, movement) (strategic) – Assad & his inner circle <p>Notes: Social acceptance of leaders comes from the base; debate around the ramifications of the fall of Assad; importance of prominent Alawite actors.</p> <p>Pro-Regime:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Armed external militias (Lebanese, Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi)

Factors for Peace / Against Conflict ▶▶	Factors for Conflict / Against Peace ◀◀	Actors
<p>Media:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level of Independence of Media – Level of Skills of Media – Level of ongoing presence of Media <p>Internal capacities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Quality and level of intervention & influence of local notables' (select tribal, religious, and military leaders) – Level of education amongst Syrians (rejection of negative external ideas) <p>Issues/Experiences related to external factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Degree of moderation of regional powers and pushing for cessation of conflict – Types of positive experiences from “refugeehood” from host countries (inspirational for other situations) – Level of Economic Interdependence 	<p>Existing “opposition” alternatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Extent of common vision and opposition strategy – Degree of influence/presence of credible alternative institutions and political representatives <p>Socio-economic situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level of Access to Resources & Basic Services – Level of Access to Opportunities <p>Foreign/External Influences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Level of foreign intervention / interference: e.g. number of foreign fighters across borders (to support regime and opposition) – Level of fragmentation of external support to armed groups – Degree of influence of foreign governments on fragmented opposition groups – Degree of influence of foreign governments on fragmented opposition groups <p>Rhetoric / Instrumentalisation of media:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Degree of regime media misrepresentation of revolutionary aims/values 	<p>External actors</p> <p>Pro-Regime:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Russia – Iranian – Shi’a Iraqis – Lebanese Shi’a – Chinese (economic and political) <p>Anti-regime:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Coalition Task Force – Saudi Arabia – Qatar – Al Qaeda – Jordan (non-porous borders) – Turkey (porous border aids transport of weapons and foreign fighters (ISIS), anti-Kurdish, support armed opposition) <p>Note: Importance of security around borders, international sphere of influence (Russia v. USA v. Iran, Saudi v. Qatar)</p>

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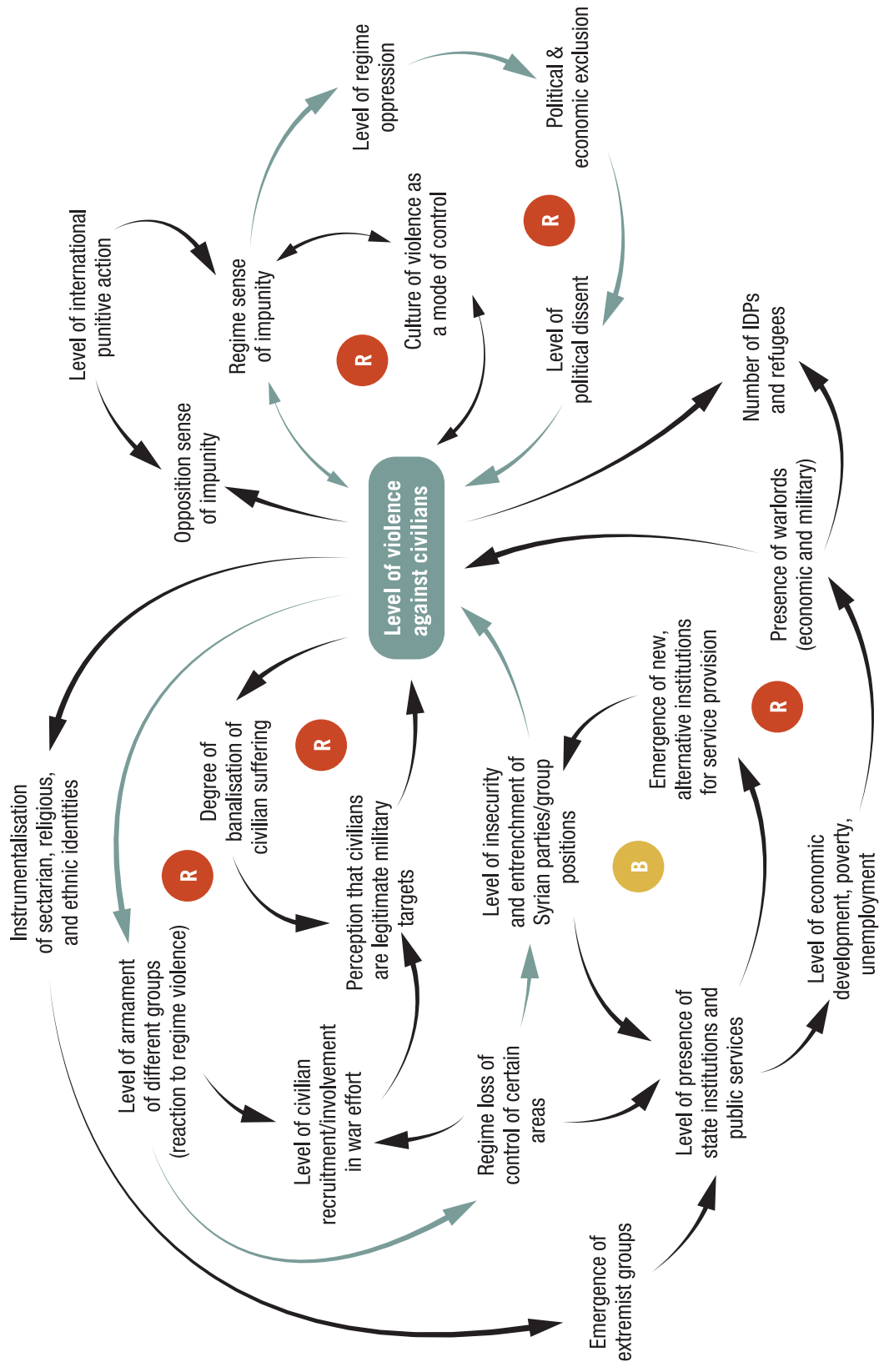


A Systems View of National Conflict Dynamics in Syria

KDF key driving factor of conflict

R reinforcing loop

// time delay



KDF 1 sub-system map

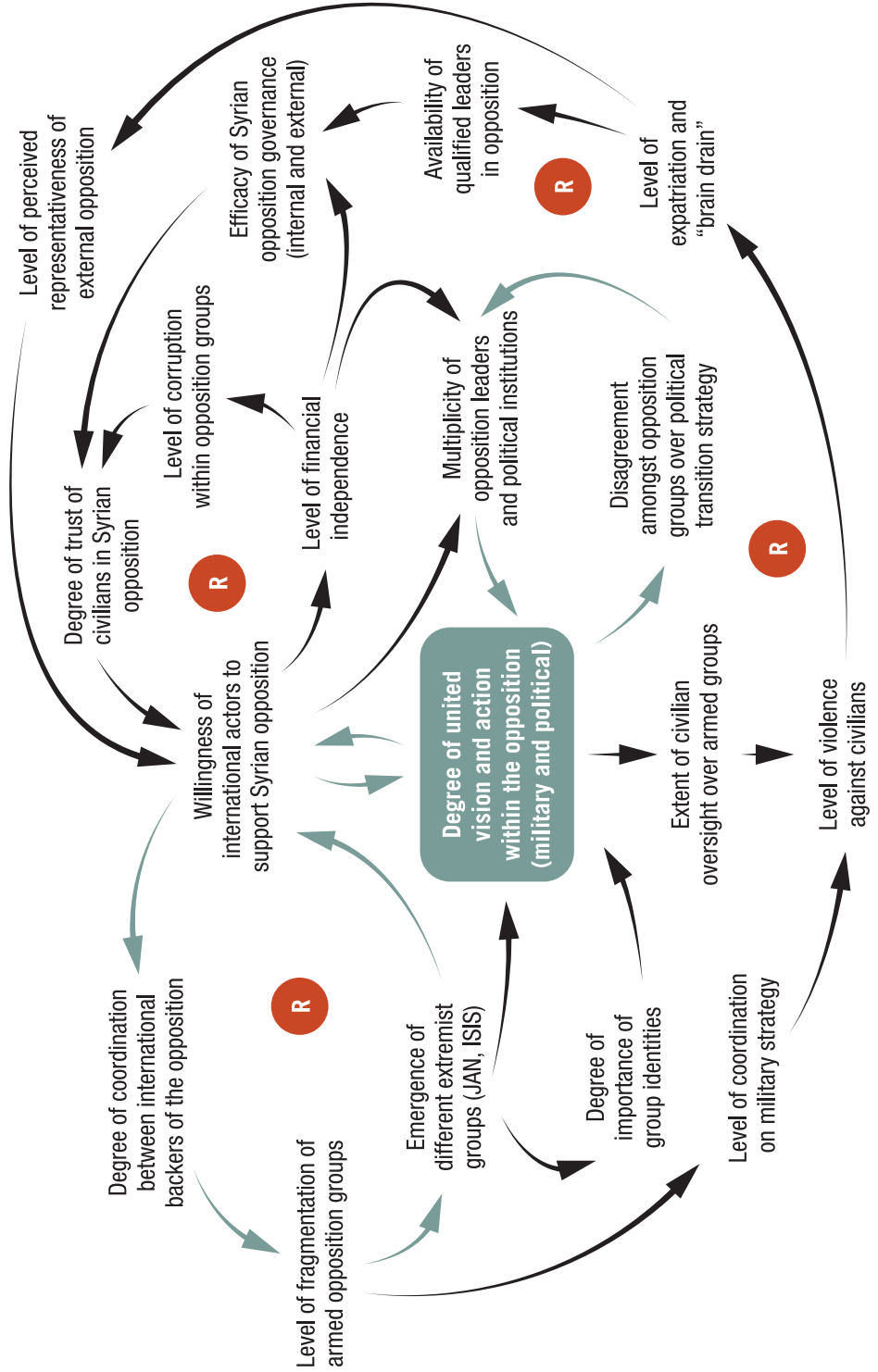
Level of violence against civilians

KDF key driving factor of conflict

R reinforcing loop

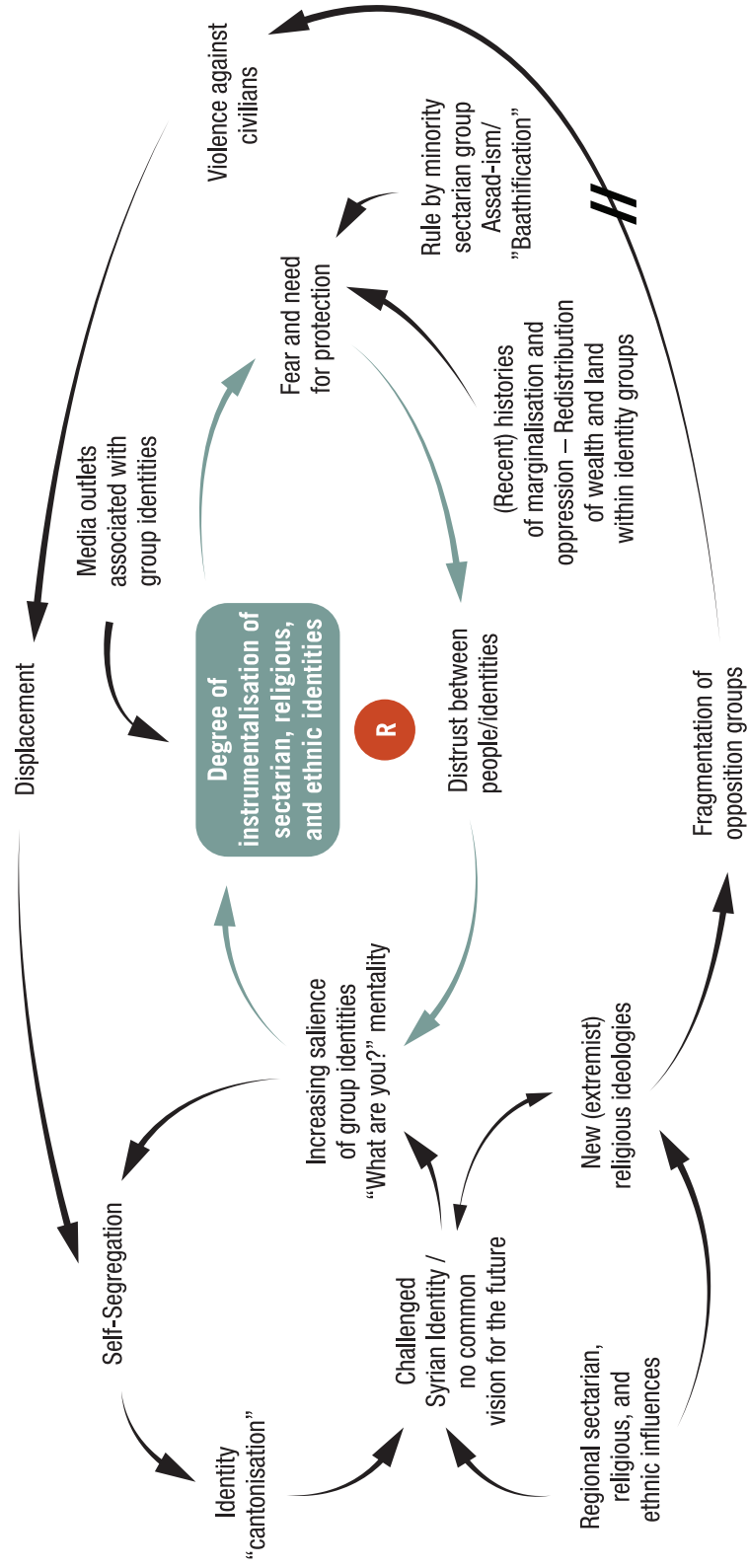
B balancing loop

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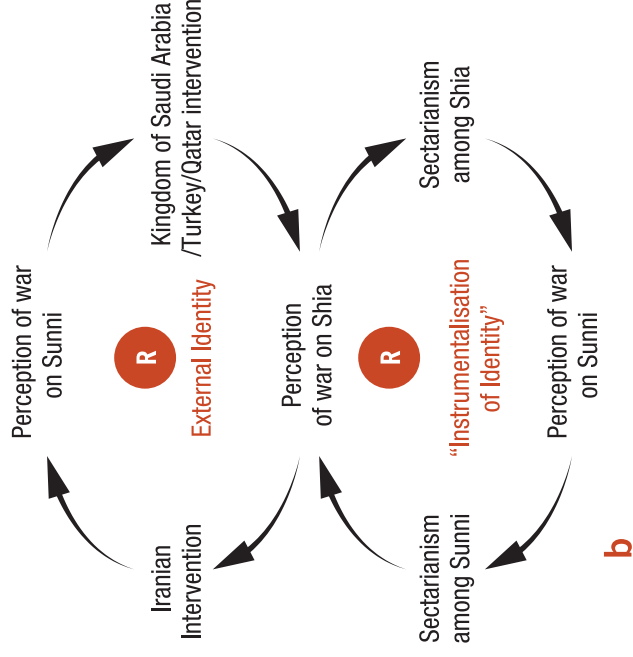
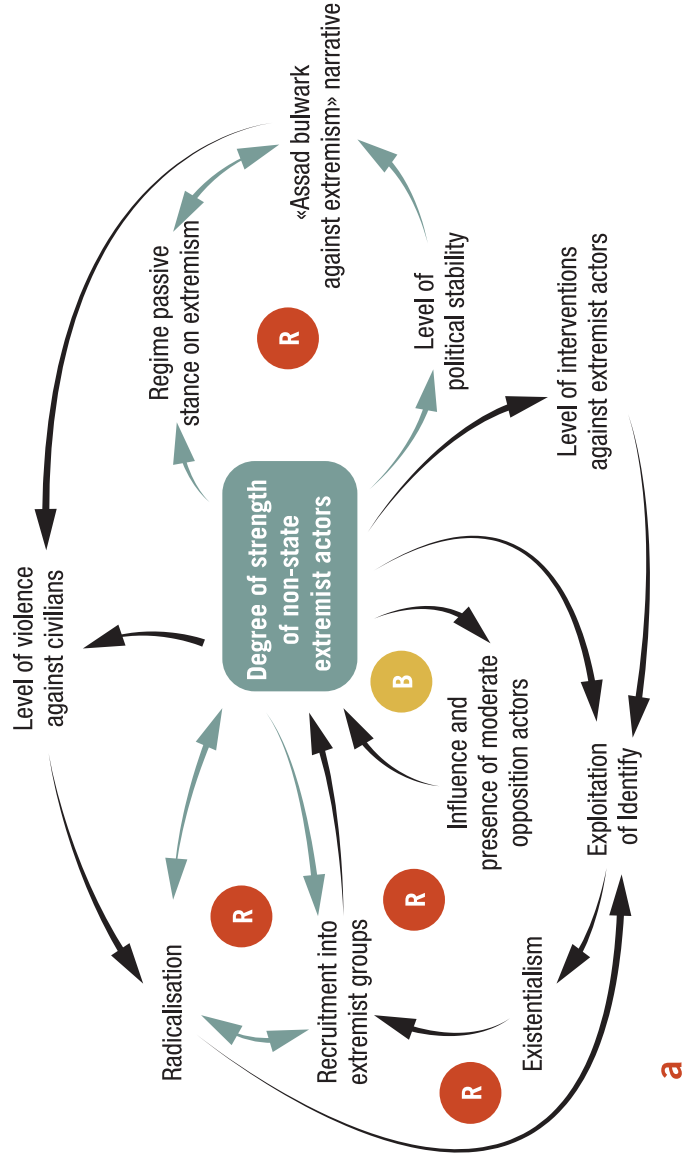
KDF 2 sub-system map
Degree of united vision and action
within opposition (political and military)

KDF key driving factor of conflict
R reinforcing loop
 // time delay



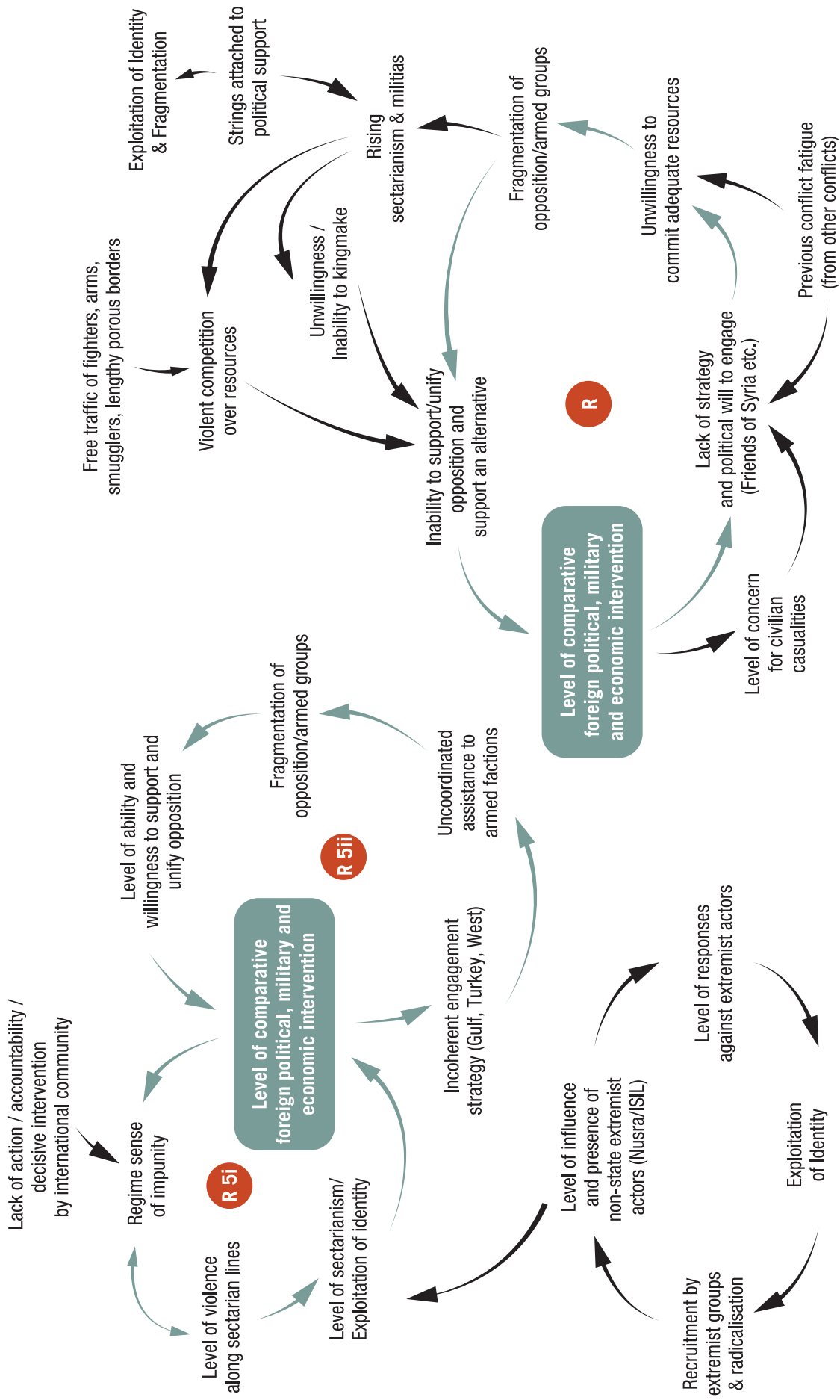
KDF 5 sub-system map
 Degree of instrumentalisation of sectarian, religious, and ethnic identities

KDF key driving factor of conflict
R reinforcing loop
 // time delay



KDF 3 sub-system map
a Degree of strength of non-state extremist actors
b Dynamics around sectarian intervention in Syria

KDF key driving factor of conflict
R reinforcing loop **B** balancing loop
 // time delay



KDF 4 sub-system map
Level of comparative foreign political, military, and economic intervention

KDF key driving factor of conflict
R reinforcing loop
 // time delay



The ARK Group is a network of stabilisation and conflict transformation consultancies that provides research-informed analysis and policy recommendations, as well as evidence-based interventions in conflict-affected states on behalf of public and private sector clients. Working with and through local communities, we seek to understand and then mitigate the negative effects of conflict and instability to enhance community safety and promote human security, development and economic opportunity.

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