The Syrian Civil War

A Never-Ending Story?

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Abstract

The civil war in Syria was the result of the regime's violent response to the Arab Uprisings in 2012. In ten years of war, a lot has changed in the Syrian Arab Republic due to the dynamics of conflict. Although the Arab Spring started as a popular movement against the al-Asad regime, a decade of violence has completely altered the main actors and their preferences. Al-Asad has almost won the war, the Kurds have achieved some autonomy, the opposition forces are practically defeated, and the "internal conflict" has become completely internationalized.

Through the scope of civil war theories and theories of international relations, it becomes clear that domestic, regional, and international actors with changing preferences are the main reason for this conflict's complexity. This then reflects upon the complexity to have fruitful peace processes. To end, a debate is opened about achieving durable peace: coercion does not lead to sustainable peace, but decentralization or even federalism, with the right incentives and cooperation, might be an answer.

Keywords

Introduction

July 14th, 2022 marked the tenth anniversary of the Syrian civil war[1], after the International Committee of the Red Cross announced in 2012 the hostilities in the entire country were to be considered as a "full-scale internal conflict", or civil war.[2] According to a report of the UN in 2021, the war caused more than 350,000 certified deaths (1/13 of the victims being children), with the real numbers being undoubtedly much higher.[3] Since the Arab Spring, which started in Syria in 2011, the country has been plunged in instability and violence between president al-Asad's forces and several other state and non-state actors. One of the reasons this conflict persists, is the added complexity by the involvement and influence of different regional and international actors since 2011.

Its shape must be understood in two ways: first, as a clash of domestic actors' preferences (Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, and many minorities) in a country *seemingly* fractured along ethno-religious lines. Second, as a broader clash of external actors' foreign policies (Russia, Türkiye, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the USA). The country is used to fight out proxy wars: there is a conflict for regional dominance between Saudi Arabia and Iran along the so-called "Shia-Sunni divide". The presence of several foreign violent non-state actors (Sunni Islamist groups, Shia militias, etc.) in the country only adds to the complexity. Internationally, Russia tries to maintain its influence on the country for historical, geopolitical, and strategic reasons, while the USA and their allies try to counter this.[4]

With the biggest cities currently under regime-control, like much of the rest of the country, and the north of the territory being divided between the Syrian Democratic Forces (*Quwāt Sūrīyā al-Dīmuqrāṭīya*), the Turkish army and its proxies, and the Islamist group *Hayʾat Taḥrīr al-Shām* (HTS),[5] it is interesting to consider how far the actors are from durable peace. This thesis thus researches the complexity of the Syrian conflict, and consequently the peace talks, between the start of the Arab Spring and June 2022. To study this complex internationalized civil war, a case study is made with an actor-based approach. This is done to understand how the internal and external actors' preferences are shaped, linked, and how that influences the conflict.

This paper first maps out the history the state, and how this resulted in the Arab Spring and the civil war subsequentially. Then, it studies the internal, regional, and international actors' behavior and preferences through the scope of constructivist theories.

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[1] Despite the many issues with terms like "civil war" and "internal conflict" in their definition and appliance in this conflict, both will be used interchangeably.

[2] ALMEIDA, K., "ICRC Confirms International Humanitarian Law Applies to Conflict in Syria," American Red Cross, July 15, 2012, https://redcrosschat.org/2012/07/15/icrc-confirms-international-humanitarian-law-applies-to-conflict-in-syria/ (accessed February 5, 2023).

[3] United Nations, "Syria: 10 years of war has left at least 350,000 dead," September 24, 2021, https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101162 (accessed February 5, 2023).

[4] BACZKO, A. DORRONSORO, G. and QUESNAY, A., *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 147-163.

[5] AL-ABDULLAH, M., "The State of Syria: Q2 2022-Q3 2022," The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, December 1, 2022, https://acleddata.com/2022/12/01/the-state-of-syria-q2-2022-q3-2022/ (accessed February 5, 2023).

A)   The Syrian Story

To understand the current situation, it is necessary to have an overview of the country's history, and the development of the conflict. As the most important part is the actual civil war, the sub-chapters are divided into a brief overview of the post-colonial era (1946-2000), Bashar al-Asad's rule and the Arab Spring (2000-2012), and finally the civil war (2012-present).

1.   Post-Colonial

The Syrian Arab Republic (SAR – *al-Jumhūrīya al-ʿArabīya al-Sūrīya*), as it is known today, can be traced back to 1916, when European colonial powers of the Entente redrew the borders of the Middle East. Under the Sykes-Picot agreement, designed to divide the to-be defeated Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence, France acquired Lebanon and Syria as mandates from 1920 to 1946. It is this agreement that divided the regions of the Middle East with little care for territories with ethnic majorities and minorities. This still has repercussions today, as the borders have not changed since 1923, except for Türkiye (the annexation of Alexandretta) and Israel. The rise of *The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant* (ISIL – *al-Dawla al-Islāmīya fī al-ʿIrāq wa al-Shām*) and the Kurds posed a threat to the Sykes-Picot era. However, the borders drawn by the French and the British still appear to be robust.[6]

Contrary to Lebanon, the new nation "The Syrian Republic" was politically turbulent – forming even the United Arab Republic with Egypt from 1958 to 1960 – until the Arab Socialist *Baʿath* Party (*Ḥizb al-Baʿath al-ʿArabī al-Ishtirākī*) organized a coup in 1963. The party was founded in 1947 by Michel Aflaq (Christian) and *Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Bīṭār* (Sunni Muslim) and adhered to the principles of secularist Pan-Arab nationalism, anti-imperialism, and socialism to reach renaissance (*baʿath*). The putschists army officers were predominantly *ʿAlawī* Shia Muslims[7] (originally called *Nuṣayrīs*), the largest minority in the country: prior to the civil war, they accounted for approximatively 12%[8] of the population.[9]

With the instauration of the *Baʿath* regime in the renamed "Syrian Arab Republic" came permanent martial law, censorship, and political repression, while conflict between the political and military wing of the party for power gradually started. The notion of pan-Arabism meant a complete marginalization of the Kurdish populations on a cultural (language, traditions, etc.) and political level. In 1967, the Six-Day war broke out between Israel on the one side and Syria, Jordan, and Iraq on the other side. The result was a strategic disaster for the Syrians, losing the Golan Heights to Israel, decreasing the distance from Damascus to a mere 60 kilometers. This

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[6] OCHSENWALD, W. and FISHER, S. N., *The Middle East: A History* (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2011), 639-647.

[7] *Shīʿa* Islam, a branch of the religion like Sunnism, is divided into multiple groups depending on the number of the Imams (Twelvers in Iran, Zaydī – with 5 imams – in Yemen, etc.). To simplify, the Nuṣayrīs are derived from the Ismāʿīlī, who have seven imams; BAR-ASHER, M. M. "ʿAlawīs, Classical Doctrines," in K. FLEET, G. KRÄMER, D. MATRINGE, J. NAWAS and D. J. STEWART (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_23431 (accessed April 19, 2022).

[8] Minority Rights Group International, "Syria," May 2018, https://minorityrights.org/country/syria/ (accessed January 29, 2023).

[9] OCHSENWALD, W. and FISHER, S. N., *The Middle East: A History* (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2011), 639-647.

continuous "Israeli danger", overseeing the capital from the Golan Heights was an important element used by Iran later to mobilize Syrian support for Shia militias against Israel.[10]

In 1970 the minister of defense, Hafiz al-Asad, took control of the party without any bloodshed, and eventually also became president a year later. Just like many other putschist officers, he was part of the *ʿAlawī* community, and by creating a dictatorship based on nepotism, made a regime in which a minority rules the majority (Arab Sunni Muslims). Religious freedom and inclusion of other groups in the parliament increased, but the *Baʿath* party (as ideology) had the exclusive right at political participation. The regime became more obsessed with security, restraining the media, opinion, and political dissidents.[11]

Syria's economy witnessed a boom with the export of oil, industrialization of the country, and more infrastructure: the *Gross Domestic Product* (GDP) of the country increased drastically in the seventies. Regarding foreign policy, Hafiz al-Asad allied himself to the Soviet Union, which resulted in the establishment of the Soviet Mediterranean fleet base in Syria instead of Egypt and giving a vast number of weapons to the regime. These are the foundations of the historical ties between the Russians and the al-Asad family. The main concern was still Israel, which led to the Yom Kippur war in 1973: the Syrian armed forces entered the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, with the perceived support of Egypt's president al-Sadat. The military operation ended in a failure after al-Sadat withdrew from the war, and the Golan Heights were placed under UN jurisdiction, before the annexation by Israel in 1981. Another policy was the control of Lebanon via the "divide and rule" strategy, moving troops in the country (until 2005) and supporting the local Shia organizations against Israel.[12]

The eighties saw the failure of Pan-Arabism. First, the estrangement of the Sunni population from the leading minority after multiple failed policies and discontent about nepotism and oppression. This led to clashes between Sunni "fundamentalists" and the Syrian armed forces. Second, the Syrians stood alone (except for help of some Lebanese and Palestinian groups) in the Lebanon war of 1982. Third, during the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-1988, Hafiz al-Asad supported the Islamic Republic of Iran (Shia-Persian) despite Saddam Hussein's (Sunni-Arab) *Baʿath* regime in Iraq. The end of the Soviet Union meant a cooldown of the tensions between the USA and Syria, that changed its preferences, as this new partnership was their best shot at positive developments concerning the Golan Heights. Thus, the regime supported the coalition against Iraq after the invasion of Kuwait.[13]

2.   Bashar al-Asad and the Arab Spring

Syria became a dynastic republic when Bashar al-Asad came to power on July 10, 2000, a month after his father died. Initially, nothing changed drastically under the new presidency: he maintained the basic political-military system that had served his father, with minor purges in the military, and foreign policy was still based upon Lebanon (Hezbollah[14]) and the Golan Heights. Syria's ties with Iran were still close due to this "Israeli danger", and those with Russia were rebuilt, while its relations with the USA, Israel, and Türkiye (focused on the Kurdish question)

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[10] *Ibid.*
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Lebanese political and militant Shia group and Iranian proxy in the region.

were difficult.[15] In 2011, the Arab Spring was a turning point for several countries in the *Middle East and North Africa* (MENA), with popular uprisings in Tunisia, Syria, Yemen, etc.

Political reasons (like freedom, representation, etc.) for the Arab Spring are only a small part of the story: socioeconomic and environmental issues were just as important, if not more so. Syria is considered a *Resource-Rich* ($250-$10,000 in oil production/capita), *Labor-Abundant* (RRLA) country. Just as the other RRLA countries of the MENA – Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, and Yemen –, the country is hit by the oil curse.[16] The existence of natural resources is an important element too, according to Mansoob Murshed. He acknowledges the greed and grievance dimension on theorizing civil war, but stresses the importance of social contracts. Weak social contracts can be rooted in the same issues of some grievances, such as favoring certain ethnic groups over others. The breakdown of the social contract and ultimately the start of violent internal conflict, have mostly an important fiscal element too: revenue (mostly from raw materials), public spending and taxing is unfairly distributed. He defines the social contract as a well-ordered society, without large-scale violence, with authority and exercise of power used for rational self-interest (autocracies), or with consent (democracies). The collapse can happen in two scenarios: disagreement on how to share resources while being in economic decline; and malfunctioning institutions. Here, malfunctioning institutions are linked with state capacity: having access to a wide variety of public goods such as health and education is a base feature of the social contract. Thus, if the social contracts are weak and the potential spoils, that the rebelling population was deprived of, are rich, warfare becomes significantly more plausible.[17]

Syria introduced economic neo-liberal reforms after decennia of state-led development, which resulted in crony-capitalism: i.e. "granting monopoly rights to close associates of the rulers, selling public firms and land at reduced prices, and manipulating the financial markets for the benefit of a few insiders."[18] This corruption and the economic problems the country faced were key factors in the population's discontent: with lower economic growth rates, public investment related to infrastructure and health (5.1% of GDP in 2003 to 3.3% of GDP in 2010) decreased.[19] These numbers must also be understood in the context of the demography: in 10 years, the population increased with 30% (16.4 M in 2000 to 21.4 M in 2010).[20] The growth affected the age distribution in the country, while the MENA already had a large "young population": the median age in 2010

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[15] OCHSENWALD, W. and FISHER, S. N., *The Middle East: A History* (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2011), 639-647.

[16] "The political and economic dysfunction known as the "oil curse" is a complex, structural phenomenon, caused largely by poor management or investment of oil revenues by the governments of oil-producing countries"; PECK, S. and CHAYES, S., "The Oil Curse: A Remedial Role for the Oil Industry," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 30, 2015, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_250_Peck_Chayes_Oil_Curse_Final.pdf (accessed December 18, 2022).

[17] MURSHED, S. M., *Explaining Civil War: A Rational Choice Approach* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2010), 135-161.

[18] CAMMETT, M. DIWAN, I. RICHARDS, A. and WATERBURY, J. *A Political Economy Of The Middle East*, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), 287.

[19] The World Bank, "Current health expenditure (% of GDP) - Syrian Arab Republic," January 30, 2022, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.CHEX.GD.ZS?locations=SY (accessed April 23, 2022).

[20] The World Bank, "Population, total - Syrian Arab Republic," 2022, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=SY (accessed April 23, 2022).

was 21.[21] Additionally, the literacy rate increased for youth between 15 and 24 years old (88% in 1990 to 94.5% in 2008), while low youth employment to total employment rate decreased (30.8% in 2001 to 20.4% in 2008).[22] The SAR found itself in an explosive combination called "the youth bulge": a situation in which too many young people enter the labor market in times of economic difficulty, with high unemployment and the risk of social unrest as a result. All of this affected increasingly the economic growth, especially in rural areas such as *Darʿā* and *Dayr al-Zawr*.[23]

Climate was a crucial factor in the popular uprisings in Syria: severe drought hit the country at the end of the nineties, and even harder between 2007 and 2009. Failed rains caused water, and subsequently food shortages, impacting the lives of more than 1.3 million people by destroying crops (70% farmers had minimal to no harvest) and taking livestock (30% increase of animal mortality). This resulteded in a large migration from rural to urban areas, an increasing demand for work, and rising food prices – all while being already in the aforementioned economic context.[24] These occurrences correlate with Hugh Miall's findings on "emergent conflict." He argues that social (the youth bulge) and/or environmental (drought) change can lead to conflicts between the interests of several actors. The response of some actors (the regime) to these changes will determine their "viability" and can, in the worst case, "lead to political mobilization resulting both in movements for reform and violent revolutionary uprisings, violent repression and other forms of violent conflict."[25]

The biggest determinant of (short term) *success* of the Arab Spring was the position of the army: if the army decided not to attack the demonstrators (Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen[26]), the regime would fall and transition would take place. If the army, or parts of it, stayed loyal to the regime (Libya and Syria), the situation would directly result in civil war. The Syrian regime first tried to deny the existence of protests by repressing them, and later promised minor reforms and national dialogue. It quickly resorted to the use of violence against – initially – peaceful protestors (claiming that foreign terrorists were inciting conflict) however, which eventually triggered the formation of dominant armed factions within the resistance. The peaceful nature of the demonstrations was soon replaced by the continuing violence from both sides.[27]

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[21] ROUDI, F., "Youth Population & Employment in the Middle East & North Africa," Population Reference Bureau, July 2011, https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/unpd_egm_072011_roudi_youth_population_and_employment.pdf (accessed April 23, 2022).

[22] United Nations Development Program "Syrian Arab Republic Third National MDGs Progress Report," August 13, 2014, https://www.sy.undp.org/content/dam/syria/Reports/MDG2010.pdf (accessed April 25, 2022).

[23] CAMMETT, M. DIWAN, I. RICHARDS, A. and WATERBURY, J. *A Political Economy Of The Middle East*, *4th ed.* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), 63, 125-126.

[24] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "FAO's Role in the Syria Drought Response Plan 2009," August 11, 2009, https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/emergencies/docs/app_syriadrought2009.pdf (accessed April 25, 2022).

[25] MIALL, H., *Emergent Conflict and Peaceful Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 62.

[26] Yemen is a special case, as the Arab Spring did succeed initially: the vice president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi replaced (by consensus) the sitting president Ali Abdullah Saleh. He did not address the issues that led to the Arab Spring however, which resulted in the Houthi Uprising in 2014 and ultimately the current civil war; CAMMETT, M. DIWAN, I. RICHARDS, A. and WATERBURY, J. *A Political Economy Of The Middle East*, *4th ed.* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), 414.

[27] *Ibid*, 398-399.

The human element must not be underestimated for the start of a chain reaction of events: despite long-lasting grievances, the Arab Spring broke out only in 2011 after specific events, such as the self-immolation of a man in *Sīdī Būzīd* (Tunisia). The trigger for the demonstrations in Syria was the violent response of the regime to the revolutionary slogans[28] painted on walls in the city of *Darʿā* by teenagers on March 13. After the arrest and torture of the children, several people died while protesting peacefully for their release on March 18, 2011, which initiated a vicious circle of even bigger protests and even more violence. The little efforts made by al-Asad to calm the situation (liberating the children and firing the governor) were in vain, because of the continuing repression of the security apparatus. With the spread of protests from rural to urban areas came a transformation of the demands: the growth of the movement changed the demands from local issues to more regional and national issues, demanding the end of emergency law and eventually the demission of al-Asad.[29]

The president gave several speeches: on March 30 and June 20, he declared the protests were a foreign conspiracy against the regime. He also called for national dialogue, which was rejected by the opposition as the death toll had exceeded 1,300.[30] Large demonstrations then appeared everywhere in Syria, the largest one being in *Ḥamāa* on July 1, 2011, with estimates of tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands attending them.[31]

After a graduous escalation of the violence, the *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC) categorized the conflict on July 14, 2022, as an "internal armed conflict" (the Geneva convention does not mention the term "civil war"), making it possible to prosecute the fighters for war crimes after violating humanitarian international law.[32] The ICRC's definition of "non-international armed conflict" states that: "Non-international armed conflicts are protracted armed confrontations occurring between governmental armed forces and the forces of one or more armed groups, or between such groups arising on the territory of a State [party to the Geneva Conventions]. The armed confrontation must reach a minimum level of intensity and the parties involved must show a minimum of organization."[33]

B)   Theoretic Framework

As will be clear in the following pages, preferences are subject to change. The demands and goals at the start of the uprisings are different from the current ones. This fits well with the constructivist theory, preoccupied with, inter alia, questions on the relation between actors and the structure of (international) politics. It sees actors as having different changeable identities and perceptions

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[28] "*Al-shaʿb yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām*" (the people want the overthrow of the regime).

[29] NOUEIHED, L. and WARREN, A. *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 215-229.

[30] *Ibid*.

[31] Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Shootings, Arrests Follow Hama Protest," July 6, 2011, https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/07/06/syria-shootings-arrests-follow-hama-protest (accessed June 5, 2022).

[32] NEBEHAY, S. "Exclusive: Syria now an 'internal armed conflict' – Red Cross," *Reuters*, July 14, 2012, https://www.reuters.com/article/oukwd-uk-syria-crisis-icrc-idAFBRE86D09B20120714 (accessed June 5, 2022).

[33] International Committee of the Red Cross "Convention (III) relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 12 August 1949. Commentary of 2020, Article 3: Conflicts not of an International Character", https://ihl-data-bases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciii-1949/article-3/commentary/2020?activeTab=undefined (accessed June 5, 2022).

built by the (social) outside environment, they are not created outside of society. Their actions are formed by socially created ideas and identities, relating to the actions at the start of the uprisings, which then get into interaction with other actors, thus inevitably changing.[34]

Constructivism is not an original International Relations theory, but originally a theory of sociology. By bringing it into the field of international relations, authors (such as Alexander Wendt) tried to put an emphasis on the "social factors" of politics. The main assumption is that international politics are not vastly different from other human activities, meaning that just like human behavior, the practices are based on socially constructed ideas. This theory's importance rose in the context of other theories failing to explain the end of the Cold War.[35]

An important notion in IR's constructivism includes interests: actors have interests they base their behavior on. While rationalists will focus on preferences "set in stone," constructivists argue that those are socially constructed and thus prone to change. The meaning of this can be explained through three focal points, the first one being "intersubjectivity," arguing that concepts are independent of our will: just like a banknote has nothing but the meaning society has given it, social facts (norms, identities, institutions, etc.) exist in IR too. The second point is the "mutual constitution of structure and agency." This refers to the presumption that actors coevolve with each other and thus influence each other's behavior: actors create structures, but their identity itself is, and has been forged by the structures. The last point is "double hermeneutics," arguing humans give meaning to objects of their environment, and then act upon that meaning.[36]

This correlates well with Woodward's argument on conflict dynamics: all the actors' preferences (except for the regime, that always has acted with the logic of winning *versus* losing everything) have changed over the course of the conflict. This is due to the transformative nature of conflicts: she argues that war transforms the *society* (migration from rural populations, gender roles, demographics, etc.), the *economy* (smuggling, decrease of foreign direct investments, etc.), and, more importantly here, *preferences*. The shift of interests of – especially – militia and army leaders, who have learned to mobilize people and resources, and govern territories, must be considered in any post-war plan.[37]

C)   The Main Domestic Actors and their Preferences

1.   Demographics

In order to understand the case of Syria, it is necessary to have a deeper look at the ethno-religious composition of the country (before the conflict), as well as at the current division of territory.

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[34] BARNETT, M. L., "Constructivism," in A. GHECIU and W.C. WOHLFORTH (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 86-99, https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198777854.013.7.

[35] McGILL, V. P., "Constructivism in International Relations," in B. BADIE, D. BERG-SCHLOSSER, and L. MORLINO (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2011), 425-430, https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412994163.

[36] *Ibid*.

[37] WOODWARD, S. L. "Do the Root Causes of Civil War Matter? On Using Knowledge to Improve Peacebuilding Interventions," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1, no. 2 (April 2007): 143-170, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970701302789.

Religiously (figure 1), the country can be divided into four main groups and a few other small minority groups. In 2010, 68.4% of the population identified itself as a Sunni Muslim. However, this is not one homogenous group, as not only are there subdivisions of *Shāfiʿī* and *Ḥanafī*, but there are also multiple ethnicities adhering to these currents of Islam: Arabs, Kurds, Circassians, Kabarda and Chechens. The biggest minority are the Shia: with the Twelver (*Imāmīya*), *ʾIsmaʿīlī* and *ʿAlawī* (or *Nuṣayrī*), they form 15.8% of the population. Next are the Christians (11.2%), who are also of various currents, but mostly Oriental Orthodoxy and Eastern Catholic. 3.2% belongs to the Druze faith. Finally, there are some small, gnostic religions such as the Yezidi and Alevi. In comparison to its neighbor, Lebanon, the territorial division of these groups is quite clear: the Shia are majoritarian in the western part of the country at the Mediterranean, in the governates of Latakia and Tartus. Just next to them are some Christian groups, while the Druze are in the south, in the governates of *al-Sūwaydāʾ* and *Darʿā*. The rest of the country is mainly inhabited by Sunni.[38]

In terms of ethnicity (figure 2), the country is made up of two larger groups and several small minorities: the majority of the population is Arab (87.9%), being part of Muslim, Christian or different gnostic religious groups. Next there are the Kurds, comprising 8.9% of the Syrian people. The smaller groups (3.2%) consist of Assyrians, Armenians, Turkomans, Circassians, Kabardas, Chechens and Aramaeans, of whom most are Christian and Alevis. On the map of the ethnic composition, it is clear that the Kurds are majoritarian in the northern parts of the Aleppo and Hasaka governates.[39]

2.   The Main Domestic Actors

The importance of the ethno-religious distribution and the location of natural resources is partly explained by Murshed's theory of social contracts. When comparing the ethno-religious maps to maps of natural resources (figure 3), it is clear that most of the oil and gas fields are on land that has a majority of Kurds or Sunni Arabs. The oil fields are mainly located in the north-east of the country (close to the Iraqi border) and in the center of the country (east to the city of Homs). The two main refineries are located in the city of Homs and *Bāniyās*, in the west of the country, while the two main export terminals are the cities of Tartus and Latakia: all cities with a strong government and Shia presence. The gas fields are more concentrated in the center of the country (to the east of Homs too) and a few in the north-east of the country. All the companies involved with the exploration and investment of natural resources are state-owned, with the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources overseeing the *General Petroleum Company* (GPC), the *Syrian Petroleum Company* (SPC) and the *Syrian Gas Company* (SGC). International oil companies got involved in the industry as joint ventures such as the *Al-Furat Petroleum Company* (AFPC), an SPC-subsidiary.[40]

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[38] IZADY, M., "Syria: Religious Composition in 2010," *Atlas of the Islamic Word and Vicinity* (New York: Columbia University), https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Religion_Detailed_lg.png (accessed May 13, 2022).

[39] IZADY, M., "Syria: Ethnic Composition in 2010," *Atlas of the Islamic Word and Vicinity* (New York: Columbia University), https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Ethnic_Detailed_lg.png (accessed May 13, 2022).

[40] U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Syria," June 24, 2015, https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Syria/syria.pdf (accessed May 15, 2022).

2.1   The Regime

As previously mentioned, Hafiz al-Asad cemented the link between the family, the ʿAlawī community, and the military. Despite the perceived Shia minority ruling the Sunni majority, the social coalition of elites within the country included members of all religious communities, due to the extent of cronyism in the SAR. According to Corstange and York, the regime especially has used sectarianism to portray itself as protector of minorities in the country, in order to rally those groups against the threat of "religious extremism." Subsequently, the Christian and Druze communities have generally been on the side of the regime, whether it was out of fear from an Islamist alternative or because they saw al-Asad winning the conflict.[41] This sectarian framing is only a part of the story however: firstly, the rate of Sunni Arabs (majority) to minority groups is approximatively three to one; secondly, the sectarian narrative has way less effect on the people than one would think. Government supporters do put more emphasis on this way to frame the war than opposition supporters, but even for the first group the importance of sectarian issues decreases against other frames (democracy, secularism, foreign involvement, etc.).[42] It is thus not a religious war, as different parties merely *use* the sectarian divisions as an excuse to mobilize people and rile them up against each other.

Although the conflict has never been purely "internal" (with Western embargos, and Russian or Hezbollah's support to the regime), there is still a significant difference between the early and later stages of the war. Most attacks, except for multiple Israeli airstrikes against Syrian and Hezbollah military targets in 2013,[43] were issued by Syrians themselves. While the SAA was losing factions to different AOGs since the start of the protests, several Shia domestic- and foreign militias, and Russia helped the regime.[44] The first years of the civil war were tough for the regime, that allegedly resorted to the use of chemical warfare agents, such as sarin.[45]

Following the creation of ISIL in the middle of 2014, the regime asked for Russian help in the "war against terrorism. Practice differed from theory however, as a large part of the intervention focused on the original rebel groups, "misidentified as Jahbhat al-Nusra [sic.]" The stronger international support meant a turning point for government forces, who managed to oust the rebels out of Homs in 2015 and Aleppo in December 2016 (two of the three largest cities in Syria) after

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[41] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 43-44.

[42] CORSTANGE, D. and YORK, E.A, "Sectarian Framing in the Syrian Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 2 (April 2018): 441-455, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12348.

[43] EVANS, D. and HOLMES, O., "Israel strikes Syria, says targeting Hezbollah arms," *Reuters*, May 5, 2013, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-blasts-idUSBRE94400020130505 (accessed May 15, 2022).

[44] LISTER, C., "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, 26 (November 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army1.pdf (accessed May 20, 2022).

[45] Human Rights Watch issued a report suspecting the Syrian government of conducting the 2013 attacks, based on remnants of Soviet and Iranian rockets. The UN however did not make any conclusions about a perpetrator; Human Rights Watch "Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria", September 2013, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria_cw0913_web_1.pdf (accessed May 20, 2022); SELLSTRÖM, Å., "United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic: Final Report," United Nations, December 12, 2013, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/762282/files/A_68_663--S_2013_735-EN.pdf (accessed May 15, 2022).

three months of heavy bombardment.[46] July 2018 was an important month for the regime, as it managed to recapture the entire southwest area, *Darʿā* and *al-Qunayṭira* (up to Jordan, and Israeli-controlled territories) from the rebels. The surrendering of the rebels did not calm the region however, as civilians still got arrested and protests resumed in 2019.[47]

The last map available of the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project* (ACLED), that mapped the State of Syria between July and September of 2022, indicated that the majority of Syria was under "control" of the regime. There is some doubt on the amount of control and authority the regime exerts because these regions are *de facto* governed by hundreds of local "pro-regime" militias (National Defense Forces, etc.) and several other foreign militias (Hezbollah, etc.). How far their loyalty actually goes, once the government will want to centralize its power again, is yet to be seen.[48] In the south of the country (governates of *Darʿā* and *al-Qunayṭira*), there was still activity of unidentified armed groups against the SAA. The east of Syria is under control of the regime, but witnessed activity due to remnants of ISIL militants. In the governate of Idlib in the north-west, *Hayʾat Taḥrīr al-Shām*,[49] Opposition Rebels and the Regime were contesting multiple areas. The northeast is under control of the *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF, or QSD on the map), while the Turkish military control multiple areas of the Aleppo and al-Raqqa governate (figure 4).[50]

Comparing previous control maps provided by ACLED, it is clear that since the end of 2019,[51] no major changes happened in the composition of territories. Multiple regions are subjected to periods of peace, unrest or fighting: the fighting does not result in any change of the status quo however, as the different actors find themselves in a stalemate. It is clear that the regime's preferences haven't changed, as they want to control the whole territory again. However, (temporary) alliances on the ground change constantly depending on the actions of the other actors, as will be explained further.

2.2   *The Opposition*

The organized opposition started as a response to the violent reaction of the military to peaceful protests about the regime's treatment of the children tagging walls with revolutionary slogans. First, there was the establishment of the *Local Coordination Council* (LCC) demanding an end of violence, a release of political prisoners, constitutional amendments for democratic transition, separation of powers, freedom of press, etc. The perception of political opportunity has to be

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[46] BACZKO, A. DORRONSORO, G. and QUESNAY, A., *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 147-163.

[47] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 65-75.

[48] EZZI, M. "The Regime and Loyal Militias Will Struggle to Disentangle Their Relationship," Chatham House, July 2017, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/the-regime-and-loyal-militias-will-struggle-to-disentangle-their-relationship (accessed May 7, 2022).

[49] Formerly al-Nusra Front or *Jabhat Fataḥ al-Shām*.

[50] AL-ABDULLAH, M., "The State of Syria: Q2 2022-Q3 2022," The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, December 1, 2022, https://acleddata.com/2022/12/01/the-state-of-syria-q2-2022-q3-2022/ (accessed February 5, 2023).

[51] AL-ABDULLAH, M., "The State of Syria: Q4 2019-Q1 2020," The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, April 17, 2020, https://acleddata.com/2020/04/17/the-state-of-syria-q4-2019-q1-2020/ (accessed May 23, 2022).

understood in the larger context of the Arab Spring, (seemingly) bringing change in Tunisia and Egypt. With the increasing violence from both the regime and opposition groups, the importance of the LCC started waning quickly in favor of the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA).[52]

July 29, 2011, marked the creation of the FSA by former Colonel *Riyāḍ Mūsā al-Asaʿd* and six other officers after their defection from the *Syrian Arab Army* (SAA). They later absorbed other *Armed Opposition Groups* (AOGs), such as the *Free Officers Movement* (FOM). Their goal was to "work hand in hand with the people to achieve freedom and dignity to bring this regime down, protect the revolution and the country's resources, and stand in the face of the irresponsible military machine that protects the regime."[53] On October 2, the *Syrian National Council* (SNC – *al-Majlis al-Waṭanī al-Sūrī*) was officially created in Istanbul to coordinate the opposition. The council had reserved seats for more than thirty distinct groups (the Society of the Muslim Brothers, Kurds, liberals, etc.), with 40% of the seats reserved for the Syrians in exile. The idea was to put a liberal democracy in place after the ousting of the regime, but the diverse groups in the SNC included, from the start, Islamist groups. To receive international support, the SNC established ties with the West and the Gulf, and on November 29, the FSA recognized the council to coordinate political actions and military operations.[54]

The end of 2012 saw the emergence of Islamic AOGs such as the *Syrian Islamic Liberation Front* (SILF) – which identified itself as FSA – and the *Syrian Islamic Front* (SIF). Instead of a unified military front supported by foreign actors, this meant a fracture of the opposition forces, with the *Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (KSA), Qatar, and Türkiye all supporting different factions. One of the most infamous groups rising into prominence was *Jabhat al-Nuṣra li-Ahl al-Shām* (al-Nusra). The fact that these Islamist groups have been part of the opposition since the start, but steadily have become more dominant than the FSA and other moderate AOGs, shows how the opposition was incoherent from the start.[55]

The rise of Islamist groups within and outside of the FSA (especially ISIL), the subsequent Russian intervention, and US focus on the SDF as their ally meant a continuous decrease in relevance for the decentralized opposition force. With the regime recapturing the biggest cities of the country, the Free Syrian Army was finally done for: the remnants had to flee to the north (Idlib) with other opposition forces, where most were picked up by Türkiye. The now so-called *Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army* (TFSA) or *Syrian National Army* (SNA), a coalition of Arab-nationalists and jihadist groups, shifted its goals drastically to survive. It became an instrument of Turkish foreign policy, instrumentalized to answer the "Kurdish question" in the *Autonomous*

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[52] GANI, J. K., "Three Faces of the Syrian Opposition and 'Externalisation' of Contention," in J. K. GANI and R. HINNEBUSCH (eds.), *Actors and Dynamics in the Syrian Conflict's Middle Phase* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2022), 58-73, http://doi.org/10.4324/9781003254904-4.

[53] LISTER, C., "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, 26 (November 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army1.pdf (accessed May 20, 2022).

[54] BACZKO, A. DORRONSORO, G. and QUESNAY, A., *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 133-144.

[55] LISTER, C., "The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand," *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, 26 (November 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army1.pdf (accessed May 20, 2022).

Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) – instead of fighting the regime in the name of "democracy" and the "protection of the people."[56]

2.3   *Islamist Groups*

The most important groups in this section are divided across three lines: some of them were connected to the Muslim Brotherhood,[57] supported by regional actors such as Türkiye and Qatar, but not Saudi Arabia. Others are more lenient to Salafi[58] doctrine and were generally supported by the KSA. Finally, there are the Jihadis. The members of the first group have had the biggest role in fighting alongside Türkiye during their interventions in Syria: *Jaysh al-Mujāhidīn*, *Faylaq al-Shām*, etc. are part of *Aḥrār al-Shām* and the National Liberation Front, divisions of the SNA. What distinguished the two first groups, is their pan-Islamism and nationalism respectively – until they all came to be under the umbrella organization of the SNA, following Turkish policy in Syria. Members of the second group include *Aḥrār al-Shām*, *Jaysh al-Islām*, which became later too part of the SNA.[59]

The two most notorious members of the third group are al-Nusra and ISIL, both of which were originally part of al-Qaeda Iraq. Al-Nusra connected itself to *Aḥrār al-Shām* (until 2017, when al-Nusra renamed itself *Hayʾat Taḥrīr al-Shām*), and initially received support of the three aforementioned countries. The nationalistic undertone of the organization is what separated them from al-Qaeda or ISIL. That last group was commanded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who declared the new state on June 29, 2014 after a successful military campaign in Iraq and Syria. The group was attracted by the opportunity of a withdrawn state in the south-east and financial assests (selling oil and antiques, establishing slavery and a taxation system – with an estimation of earnings between 500 and 750 million USD over time). They even sold oil to the regime, this "Shia" regime the "Sunni" Islamist were fighting in the first place. Their emergence led eventually to international interventions and the creation of the Washington-backed SDF.[60] Their momentum in taking the west of the country was first halted at Palmyra in May 2015,[61] and in 2017 they were ousted from their selfproclaimed capital al-Raqqa. After the killing of its leader by US Navy Seals in

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[56] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 97.

[57] *Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* or Muslim Brotherhood is a religious and political movement with the goal to "create an authentically Muslim state," and are strongly linked to the idea of the return to the faith of the *salaf* (see under); DELANOUE, G., "Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn," in P. BEARMAN, Th. BIANQUIS, C. E. BOSWORTH, E. VAN DONZEL, W. P. HEINRICHS (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0355 (accessed June 7, 2022).

[58] *Salafiyya* is neo-orthodox Islamic reformism (*iṣlāḥ*) from 19th century Egypt, aiming to regenerate Islam by a return to the tradition. *Muḥammad ʿAbduh* put the stress on social and cultural considerations rather than religious ones. Some doctrines include: the preference of the literal reading (*tafsīr*) over the subjective interpretation (*taʾwīl*); the tradition of the *salaf*, i.e., returning to the way in which the "virtuous forefathers" practiced their religion; MERAD, A., ALGAR, H., BERKES, N., and AHMAD, A., "Iṣlāḥ," in P. BEARMAN, Th. BIANQUIS, C. E. BOSWORTH, E. VAN DONZEL, W. P. HEINRICHS (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0386 (accessed June 7, 2022).

[59] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 97-105.

[60] *Ibid*.

[61] BACZKO, A. DORRONSORO, G. and QUESNAY, A., *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 178-198.

Idlib at the end of 2019, the Islamic State's influence has been greatly reduced, however remnants still persist in the east of the country. HTS still has influence in the northwestern part of the country, contesting the regime and remnants of the opposition in multiple areas of the Idlib governate.[62] After reports of the improving relations between the Syrian regime and Türkiye, HTS increased its attacks in December 2022. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, this was as a reaction specifically against the de-escalation zone put in place by agreements between Ankara, Damascus, and Moscow.[63]

2.4 The Kurds

The Kurds, who had been organizing politically along their ethnic identity in Iraq, Syria and Türkiye since the 1950s, were alienated and marginalized culturally, economically, and politically by the al-Asad clan over the years. This changed with the uprisings: the regime invited Kurdish representatives for talks in 2011 and released several political prisoners, such as the leader of the *Democratic Union Party* (PYD), Salih Muslim. The *People's Defense Units* (YPG) was created in 2011 by *Kurdistan Wokers' Party* (PKK) seniors in Iraq as a military wing of the PYD, and contained a "nucleus of Kurdish PKK cadres."[64] With the party's strong mobilization capacities, it rose to power in the region called, since 2018, AANES. The Kurds took control of it without any bloodshed, while the regime effectively retreated to the western parts of the region (to concentrate on areas with a large population). Suspicion arose then about an informal agreement between the Kurds and the regime along converging interests: Salih Muslim stated that both were fighting Islamic extremists for distinct reasons. The PYD also never stated any separatist goals to antagonize the regime, claiming its goal was a democratic federal republic.[65]

The withdrawal out of this region also meant a complete breakdown of the social contract, which gave the opportunity for the Kurds to immediately create institutions to manage their increased autonomy.[66] The PYD created with US support the SDF, an organization of factions from different communities (Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, …), and entered the conflict to defend their territory against the upcoming threat of Islamist groups. This also eased the relations between those groups in the areas the Kurds now controlled as a minority. Along directives from their main ally, the United States, they only fought ISIL and other Islamist groups, which kept the relations with the regime in a good state. The SDF fought with the United States-led international

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[62] AL-ABDULLAH, M., "The State of Syria: Q2 2022-Q3 2022," The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, December 1, 2022, https://acleddata.com/2022/12/01/the-state-of-syria-q2-2022-q3-2022/ (accessed February 5, 2023).

[63] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights "Amid frequent reports about potential rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus | H-T-S escalates military operations on frontlines of 'de-escalation zone,'" December 18, 2022, https://www.syriahr.com/en/280976/ (accessed February 5, 2023).

[64] VAN WILGENBURG, W. and FUMERTON, M., "From the PYD-YPG to the SDF: the Consolidation of Power in Kurdish-Controlled Northeast Syria," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (January 2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.2013758.

[65] KATMAN, F. and MUHAMMAD, D., "Tracing Kurdish Politics in Syria and its Prospects," in J. K. GANI and R. HINNEBUSCH (eds.), *Actors and Dynamics in the Syrian Conflict's Middle Phase* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2022), 236-247, http://doi.org/10.4324/9781003254904-15.

[66] *Ibid.*

coalition against ISIL, meaning they were ambiguously allied to Türkiye (being a NATO member) for these operations.[67]

Türkiye's intervention since 2016 in the AANES due to fear of political spill-over into its southern region, and waning US support to the Kurds have made the balance of power in the region even more complex. On the one side, the Kurds want to keep a certain degree of autonomy in their currrent territory. On the other side, they need SAA support against the Turkish air force, which could put them at a disadvantage in negotiations. They also have an ace up the sleeve, i.e. the danger of an ISIL resurrection: the SDF controls the prisons and camps where fighters and their families are detained, which they use as leverage in high-level talks. With the threat of new Turkish interventions in 2022, Mazloum Abdi stated that the SDF forces were open to work with the SAA to fend off the Turkish troops, suggesting the use of the regime's anti-aircraft artillery. Turkish interventions are driving the two main powers in Syria closer together, altering the balance of power.[68] At the end of May, the first-ever joint border patrol of the SAA and the SDF, under protection of Russian planes, would have taken place in northeast Syria.[69]

D)   The Regional and International Agenda

As the conflict progressed, the "internal war" became increasingly internationalized, with multiple regional and international actors using "proxies". According to Karl Deutsch, a proxy war is "an international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country, disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country, and using some of that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies."[70] Phillips and Valbjørn argue that regional powers are more likely to use ethno-religious-focused proxies, while global powers favor national-focused groups. There is also a difference between state and non-state actors, i.e. state actors are more likely to try to moderate their proxies (e.g., the USA with the PYD, etc.). On the other hand, non-state actors tend to have a more radicalizing effect on AOGs (e.g., the PKK with the PYD).[71]

The war became thus increasingly complex, with different axes fighting for their own agendas. First, the USA and EU oppose Russia. Second, Iran and Saudi Arabia are in a struggle for regional dominance in the Middle East, extending their conflict to multiple countries such as Yemen and Syria. Third, Türkiye had to deal with instability at the border, and the Kurdish question, as the SDF managed to control the northern part of the country (AANES).

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[67] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 43-44.

[68] GEBEILY, M., "Syrian army should use air defences against Turkish invasion, U.S.-backed force says," *Reuters*, June 5, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-army-should-use-air-defences-against-turkish-invasion-us-backed-sdf-says-2022-06-05/ (accessed June 10, 2022).

[69] ZENKLO, K., "Dawrīya mushtaraka sūrīya maʿa "qsd" bihimāya rūsīya fī al-Darbāsīya bi-l-Ḥaksa," *Alwatan Online*, May 27, 2022, https://www.alwatanonline.com/دورية-مشتركة-سورية-مع-قسد-بحماية-روسي/ (accessed June 10, 2022).

[70] DEUTSCH, K.W. "External Involvement in Internal Wars," in H. ECKSTEIN (ed.), *Internal war: problems and approaches*, (New York: Free Press, 1964), 102.

[71] PHILLIPS, C. and VALBJØRN, M. "'What's in a Name?': The Role of (Different) Identities in the Multiple Proxy Wars in Syria," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 3 (May 2018), https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1455328.

1.   Regional and International Actors

1.1   *Saudi Arabia and Iran*

Although the Saudis' involvement in this conflict is more limited compared to other MENA conflicts, such as in Yemen or Bahrain, Syria does play a key role in the context of their regional struggle with Iran. The country's fear is what king Abdullah II of Jordan called the "Shia crescent"[72] on the map of the Middle East, a metaphor for the Iranian influence on the countries of the region. In practice, this refers to a sphere of influence of the Islamic Republic in the shape of a crescent, usually following the religious cleavage of Sunnism and Shiism. This crescent contains the following countries: Bahrain and Iraq (Shia majority); Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen (strong Shia minorities); Palestine (Hamas, supported by Iran). If a direct conflict would arise between the two countries, the several Shia power bases would be considered a serious security issue for Saudi Arabia.

The result of this regional struggle is a "cold war" between both parties, for which they use proxies in several countries to fight each other without entering a direct conflict. In the case of Syria, the Saudis sided with the opposition against the ʿAlawī regime, as one of the main financial and logistical supporters of Islamist factions that marginalized the liberal trends within the insurgency. To achieve their goals, they unsuccessfully attempted to persuade the Russians with arms contracts and strategic guarantees to stop supporting the al-Asad regime. They also helped sectarianizing the conflict, by having Sheikhs preach about the conflict within a religious frame. Syria became the model for other countries of the region, where sectarian differences began dominating the rationale, despite the actual reasons for conflict. A shift happened in the Kingdom's support of the opposition when it saw the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIL as a danger to their own internal stability. The country thus backed officers, conservatives, tribes, and liberals, rather than groups linked to political Islam.[73] The main group they supported was *Aḥrār al-Shām*, but they also helped the secularist FSA.

With a civil war close to their borders and the acceptance in 2016 that the regime would survive, the KSA finally shifted its focus completely on its neighbor, Yemen.[74] There, the KSA had entered the conflict on formal request of the president in 2015, to fight the Houthis (a Shia tribe in the north). The Iranians were initially less involved, but over time they sent more military equipment and advisors to help the Houthis against the intervention force.[75]

Iran, however, was deeply involved in the civil war: the Syrian regime received support from Iran and, by extension, Hezbollah. This "Shia alliance," actively polarizing the conflict, was a clear response to the competing Sunni powers' support of the opposition. Israel is the key factor in Syria's importance for both Hezbollah and Iran. To support Hezbollah in fighting Israel, Iranian

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[72] MATTHEWS, C. "King Abdullah II of Jordan," *NBC News*, December 8, 2004, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna6679774#.UcV3GZymV9s (accessed June 2, 2022).

[73] BACZKO, A. DORRONSORO, G. and QUESNAY, A., *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 147-163.

[74] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 146-147.

[75] DAY, S. W. and BREHONY, N., *Global, Regional and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis* (Basel: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2020).

weapons and other military equipment pass through the airport of Damascus, before entering Lebanon by land. The capture of Aleppo in 2016 brought a shift in the importance of Syria: instead of using the country with the goal to reach Hezbollah, it started pursuing regional hegemony (naval base in the Mediterranean, strategic infrastructure, etc.)[76]

To assure the investments will be successful on the long term, Iran launched drones from Syria to Israel, leading to the launch of a wave of rockets. One theory is that the Iranians wanted to move the perception of danger to the Sunni-majority from themselves to the Israelis, who have not been very involved in the war. From the start of the conflict, Israeli policy was to prefer a known and more predictable regime in Syria, as the alternative would likely be an Islamist unstable regime on their northern border. This, and Russian support of the regime, which limited their freedom of action, meant that they stayed mostly on the defensive. The Islamic Republic also used the sectarian frame to rally local Shia militias and foreign Shia militias from Lebanon (Hezbollah), Afghanistan (*Liwāʾ al-Faṭimīyūn*) and Pakistan (*Liwāʾ al-Zaynabīyun*). However, the real reason for why the last two joined the fight had probably more to do with promised pay, residence, and even citizenship in Iran. The rise of ISIL resulted in the direct involvement of Iranian forces (the army and the IRGC's Quds Force) in the fighting.[77]

1.2   *Türkiye*

Unlike the other neighboring countries, Türkiye has been deeply involved in the conflict since its start. The reason for this is the Kurdish question, a problem the Turkish government has tried to "resolve" for several decades. Syria in this regard has always been important, as the country was residence to the leader of the PKK, and has up to today a large Kurdish minority close to Türkiye's border. However, even before the Kurds became an important subject on the agenda of the Turkish government, hostility existed with Syria because of Türkiye's annexation of a region called Alexandretta. In addition to this, the country is part of NATO, while Syria has been historically an ally of the Soviet-Union. Despite this, relations between the two governments improved when Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father.[78]

The Arab uprisings worsened these relations again when Erdogan advised al-Asad to make a few concessions in the form of reforms, in order to contain the situation. The Syrian president did not follow the advice of the Turkish government, and the actions of the SAA prompted the Turks to host and support the opposition. They joined Qatar sending financial and military support to groups affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, to force a regime-change by creating a military force.[79]

There are multiple pivotal moments in Turkish foreign policy towards Syria: first, the rise of ISIL in 2014 meant the start of an ambiguous stance towards the Islamist organization. While officially opposing ISIL, they also supported them temporarily and selectively against their common enemies, the Syrian Kurds and the al-Asad regime. However, they are also part of NATO, and thus

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[76] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 122-130.

[77] *Ibid.*

[78] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 130-137.

[79] *Ibid*.

allied to the USA, who supported the Kurds in the fight against ISIL. Second, the start of the Russian intervention in 2015 marked initially a strained relationship, as Ankara was not happy with Russian military presence and infrastructure, limiting their freedom of movement. In 2016, negotiations improved the relations between the two countries, and Türkiye became involved in the Astana Russian-led peace process. After the battle of Aleppo, and the acceptance that the regime was there to stay with the help of the Iranians and Russians, Ankara decided it was better to have a strong Syrian regime, rather than a Kurdish region with far reaching autonomy.[80]

Thus, they started to focus their attention to the north of Syria, where the PYD had managed to consolidate their control by defeating ISIL-units with US-support. With the goal to disconnect Kurdish-held territories, the Turks started rallying remnants of the FSA and small Islamist AOGs to create a Syrian proxy, the SNA. Next, they conducted four military operations south to their border with Syria: first, operation "Euphrates Shield," (August 2016) said to be aimed at ISIL and the SDF, the last being the real target. Second, operation "Olive Branch" (October 2017) against the city of Afrin, under control of the Kurds. The Turks reached a deal with the Russians to leave the city, after which they suppported parts of the SNA with airstrikes into taking control of it. The third and fourth operations, respectively "Peace Spring" (October 2019) and "Spring Shield" (February 2020), targeted the AANES region (with clashes against the SDF and the SAA) again after a shift of policy by US president Trump. The last operation caused clashes between the Turkish armed forces and the SAA, that ended in a ceasefire brokered by Russia a month later.[81]

The context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent applications of Sweden and Finland to join NATO has given Türkiye (veto-right) the leverage to prepare for another intervention in the Kurdish-controlled north of Syria. Following this news, Mazloum Abdi stated that the SDF-forces were open to work with the SAA to fend off the Turkish troops, suggesting the use of the regime's anti-aircraft artillery. Turkish interventions are thus driving the two main powers in Syria closer together, altering the balance of power.[82] After the bombing in Istanbul on November 13, 2022, Türkiye started operation "Claw Sword" from November 20 to November 28, 2022.[83] According to SOHR, the Turkish military targeted mainly AANES-territory and its SDF forces, but also hit regime forces.[84] This operation was possible, because Ankara blamed the the Kurds for the bombing in Istanbul, and called upon its "right to defend itself." After the attacks on northern Syria, the US resumed patrols with the SDF in the region.[85]

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[80] *Ibid*.

[81] *Ibid*.

[82] GEBEILY, M., "Syrian army should use air defences against Turkish invasion, U.S.-backed force says," *Reuters*, June 5, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syria-army-should-use-air-defences-against-turkish-invasion-us-backed-sdf-says-2022-06-05/ (accessed June 10, 2022).

[83] Human Rights Watch, "Northeast Syria: Turkish Strikes Exacerbate Humanitarian Crisis," December 7, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/07/northeast-syria-turkish-strikes-exacerbate-humanitarian-crisis (accessed June 2, 2022).

[84] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights "Turkish military escalation in five days | 50 airstrikes by fighter jets…26 attacks by drones…hundreds of rockets hit nearly 65 positions," November 25, 2022, https://www.syr-iahr.com/en/277571/ (accessed June 2, 2022).

[85] Middle East Monitor "US Forces resume joint patrols with SDF in north-east Syria, amid looming Turkish operation,", December 5, 2022, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221205-us-forces-resume-joint-patrols-with-sdf-in-north-east-syria-amid-looming-turkish-operation/ (accessed June 5, 2022).

2.   Other International Actors

2.1   *The United States of America*

The US policy in Syria can be divided in two parts: policy under Obama, and policy under Trump. Obama's decision must be understood in the context of that time: Washington's involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, which Obama promised to end in 2008, shaped its preferences in the early years of the conflict. In addition to that, the United States' involvement in the Libyan uprisings had disastrous consequences (2012 Benghazi attack), and Obama wanted to reach the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA, or nuclear deal) with Iran to obtain regional stability. Thus, encouraged by estimates that the regime would fall without Washington's involvement, the *President of the United States* (POTUS) refused to intervene in the conflict. At the very start of the Arab Spring, the American and French ambassadors visited the city at that time to show support to the protestors and to advert any massacre, to which al-Asad referred as clear proof of foreign involvement.[86]

Initially, the administration saw the opportunity to support the opposition in an attempt to democratize the region. While the conflict militarized, they started giving the FSA limited assistance, in order to not get caught up in another conflict. Thus, the focus was on finding a diplomatic solution, which the Russians blocked, just like any resolution from the UNSC. The chemical attacks used by the regime were supposed to be a "red line" for Obama, but even after this, he did not intervene in the conflict, choosing eventually for an agreement with Putin to have al-Asad destroy his arsenal.[87]

This policy changed when ISIL rose: the changing dynamics of the war prompted Washington to act via an international coalition, and an ally on the ground, the YPG.[88] The United States supported the Kurds by arming them, bombing strategic positions of ISIL, and sending military advisors and special forces, while demanding a more nationalistic agenda (rather than an ethnocentric one). The YPG allied itself with local fighters of several ethnicities, forming the SDF. With US air support they then captured territory in the north of Syria, aspiring to create a region with far-reaching autonomy within the Syrian state, instead of a Kurdish state. To support the YPG, despite having branded the PKK as a "terrorist" organization, Washington argued they were two distinct organizations.[89]

US policy towards Syria initially did not change when the Obama administration was replaced by the Trump administration in 2017, to ensure the defeat of ISIL. With ISIL losing more territory, Trump showed an increased lack of interest in the conflict, leaving all the space for Russia to act. Despite claims he would retreat the small force stationed in the east of the country, they did stay there to control oil fields in the AANES and to prevent ISIL from returning. Balancing loyalty between a NATO member (Türkiye) and their greatest ally on the ground against ISIL became

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[86] Reuters Staff, "Syria summons U.S. and French envoys over Hama visit," *Reuters*, July 10, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-ambassadors-idUSTRE7691GO20110710 (accessed May 22, 2022).

[87] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 157-185.

[88] *Ibid.*

[89] VAN WILGENBURG, W. and FUMERTON, M., "From the PYD-YPG to the SDF: the Consolidation of Power in Kurdish-Controlled Northeast Syria," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (January 2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.2013758.

increasingly difficult. The US thus accepted some interventions from the Turkish armed forces, but drawing a line concerning the city of Manbij, which was ultimately perceived as an abandonment of their allies in Syria. While US support did continue after that (to ensure the control of the oil fields), Türkiye has now control over several regions in the AANES region. Some other substantial changes in policy were first to support Israel in annexing the Golan Heights to decrease Iranian pressure on the country, and second to leave the JCPOA (to increase the sanctions on Iran). All these changes of preferences strained the relations with Iran and Syria even further, and consequentially marginalized the USA's position in the conflict and the peace talks, leaving the main stage to Russia.[90]

Despite Biden's critique of Trump's policy in Syria towards the Kurds, no drastic positive changement happened after he entered the Oval Office. On the one hand, Washington did not greenlight Ankara's wish for a new operation at the end of 2021, on the other hand, Biden cut the SDF's budget in half in May 2021.[91] Just like under the previous two presidents, it seems like the Kurds are instrumentalized to realize policies towards other actors, like Iran and ISIL.

The US-supported, UN-led peace process' goal is to reform the state into a liberal democracy.[92] The ratification of the UNSC Resolution emphasized the "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned" peace plan and is comprised of four themes of the peace talks: security, constitutional change, displaced people, and refugees. However, the Geneva Peace Talks have been focusing too much on the issue of constitutional change. This does not match the agenda of the regime, that systematically disagrees with any constitutional proposition. The US and its international allies are another reason for the failure of those talks, not being overly concerned with the peace process, as they have practically left the lead role to Russia in the conflict. Pedersen, the fourth Special Envoy to the conflict, stressed thus that different approaches are needed, and that the UN must continue developing upon the Resolution and divide its focus better between the protection of civilians, international peace and security, and a political process.[93]

2.2   *Russia*

Russia has been directly involved in the conflict since 2015, but before that, it has supported the regime since the uprisings. Moscow had strategic interests in the country, having a naval base in Tartus that gave them access to the Mediterranean. In addition to that, after witnessing the military operations in Libya, it supported the principle of nonintervention by blocking any UNSC resolution hostile to the regime. Since the start, it has developed a coherent policy concerning the Middle Eastern country, i.e. giving (diplomatic and logistical) support to strengthen the regime's position in the country and around the negotiation table. With the rise of ISIL, the regime sent an official request for military intervention. Russia shifted its foreign policy then to a "war on terrorism"

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[90] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 157-185.

[91] MICHNIK, W. and PLAKOUDAS, S., "The Biden Administration and Rojava: Old Wine, New Bottle?" *Middle East Policy* 29 (May 2022): 55–66. https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12629.

[92] WOODWARD, S. L. "Do the Root Causes of Civil War Matter? On Using Knowledge to Improve Peacebuilding Interventions," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1, no. 2 (April 2007): 143-170, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502970701302789.

[93] MIESZKALSKI, G. and ZYLA, B., *Engaging Displaced Populations in a Future Syrian Transitional Justice Proces: The Peacebuilding-Transitional Justice Nexus* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2021).

with military presence and started bombing opposition strongholds, mostly "misidentified" as al-Nusra territory. At the same time, it coordinated its attacks with Iran-backed militias on the ground.[94] Great shifts in policy did not happen anymore since 2015, Russia continued to support the Syrian regime by making agreements with different countries such as the US, Türkiye and Iran, but only stayed loyal to these agreements when it suited their goals in Syria.[95]

Competition with the US did not only translate into proxies, it also translated into different peace processes: The US supported the "UN peace process", while the Russians had an alternative "Astana peace process". This way, political stabilization would immediately follow a military victory. Türkiye joined the Russian-led peace process in 2016, which was important for mediation between the Turks and the regime when Ankara intervened in the north of Syria, leading to clashes with the SAA in 2019.[96]

This process, joined by Iran and Türkiye in 2016, includes security, rehabilitation, early recovery, reconstruction, and refugee return, but no reform. The focus on security translated into a cease-fire agreement and four de-escalation zones across the country, which were not respected from the start by the diverse parties.[97] The three countries use the Astana process not to limit human suffering, but as an instrument to protect their interests in Syria.[98] They instrumentalize the "peace process" to sanction certain groups (like the SDF) with violence in the whole country. These forms of "tripartite sanctioned violence" are occurring throughout the country, and by the Syrian regime as well. Abboud writes that due to this, "violence will be an endemic feature of post-conflict Syria and not an aberration […] the tripartite powers and the Syrian regime have actively crafted the continuity of violence as a structural feature of post-conflict order."[99] With the failure of the Geneva peace talks, the future for Syria looks grim.

Conclusion

The Syrian civil war is an extremely complex conflict rooted in a multitude of ethno-religious, economic, and geo-political problems. First, European colonial powers defined the country's borders without any consideration of ethno-religious differences, and these internal divisions have been kept in place by the military "democratic" system. This way, the Kurds have been marginalized for decades from the cultural and political landscape of the country, while ʿAlawīs have held top-positions in the government or military. Next, the neoliberal policies of the government since the 1980s, the access to oil and gas, and other economic issues (related to demography and climate) have heavily destabilized the state capacity. These issues led to the Arab Spring, and by

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[94] BACZKO, A. DORRONSORO, G. and QUESNAY, A., *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 147-163.

[95] RABINOVICH, I. and VALENSI, C., *Syrian requiem: the civil war and its aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 185-191.

[96] *Ibid.*

[97] *Ibid.*

[98] WIELAND, C., *Syria and the Neutrality Trap: Dilemmas of Delivering Humanitarian Aid through Violent Regimes* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021).

[99] ABBOUD, S., "Making peace to sustain war: the Astana Process and Syria's illiberal peace," *Peacebuilding* 9, no. 3 (March 2021): 326-343, https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2021.1895609.

extension, the civil war. Lastly, the stakes that each actor has in the conflict, complicate constantly the relations between those actors, and consequently any peace process.

Through the lens of constructivism, it is shown how essential and ever-changing the actors' preferences are, which ultimately negatively impacts the peace negotiations. Due to the weight of Iran, Russia, and Türkiye in the conflict, there is considerable evidence pointing in the way that any formal end of conflict will be reached when those three actors negotiate an agreement. Concerning the other actors mentioned, al-Asad has almost won the conflict, his position is stronger than ever in the past ten years, although he is dependent on Russia and Iran. A question must also be raised on the loyalty of the hundreds of militias effectively controlling much of his territory. ISIL has been territorially defeated, but the stakeholders should keep monitoring a potential return. The opposition has been practically defeated, and the remaining groups of the FSA have gathered around other remaining (Islamist) groups to form the Turkish proxy, the SNA. Arabia focuses on its neighbor, Yemen, and the USA have been bouncing between backing the SDF, and letting its NATO partner, Türkiye, intervene in northern Syria.

This leaves the Kurds as the last influential actor. The Kurds have established the AANES and started institutionalizing and organizing a multi-ethnic and religious army, the SDF. They managed to reach *de facto* autonomy, but feel threatened by the Turkish forces and are thus pushed towards working together with the regime.

So what is next? All of this opens the discussion to the future system of the Syrian state: it is a diverse country with ethno-religious groups trying to live together, but with a degree of territorial division and a notion of secessionism, with the Kurds wanting to have a certain level of autonomy. Violent ethnic conflict has been happening, which opens the door for thinking about federalism to facilitate conflict resolution. Keil and Belser have written about the subject, arguing it "seems the best alternative to frozen territorial conflicts and long-term instability." One possibility could be to have Western states promote federalism and make incentives to host inclusive negotiations without *imposing* their ideas, instead of letting China or Russia, in this case, promote and support authoritarianism.[100]

Despite this, power-sharing (with the oil fields subsequentially in the hand of a Kurdish autonomous region) is not on the agenda of any party on the negotiation table, except for the Kurds, which is a dealbreaker to them. A peace treaty thus seems still far off. The current powers seem to accept the status quo of the stillstand in fighting, thus change does not seem to be on the horizon. However, when thinking about durable peace, this might be one of the only possibilities for the Syrian Arab Republic.

With the news of the devastating earthquacke in Türkiye and northern Syria reaching the world, bringing yet more suffering to the local populations, the question then comes up whether or not this will influence the different actors in the conflict. It would be interesting to research how much international aid will influence the regime's ties with the international community, and whether or not the Turkish military will take advantage of the destruction to increase their influence in northern Syria.

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[100] BELSER, E. M. and KEIL, S., "Learning from Iraq? Debates on Federalism and Decentralization for Post-War Syria," in S. KEIL and S. KROPP (eds.) *Emerging Federal Structures in the Post-Cold War Era* (Cham: Spring Nature Switzerland AG, 2022), 208-210.
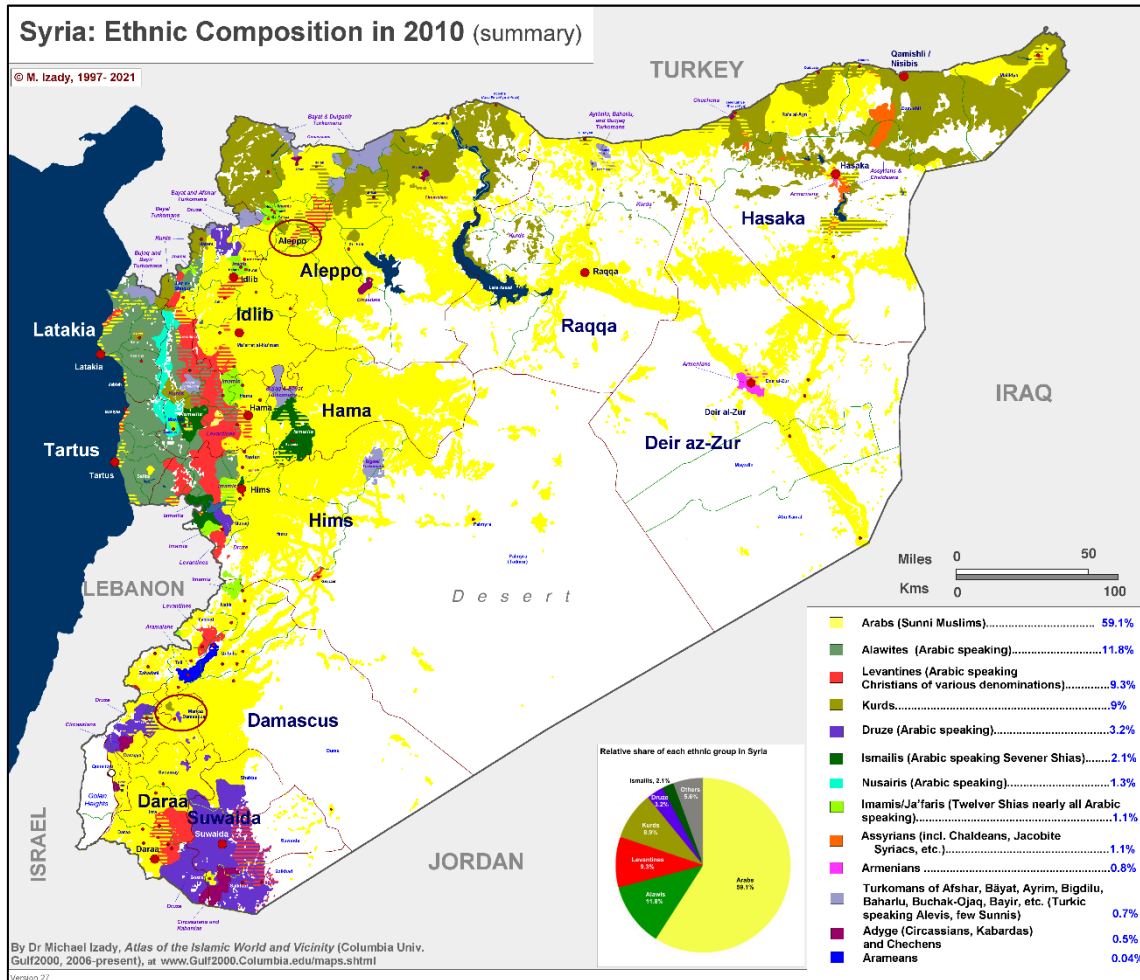
Maps

Figure 1: Syria: Religious Composition in 2010 (summary).[101]
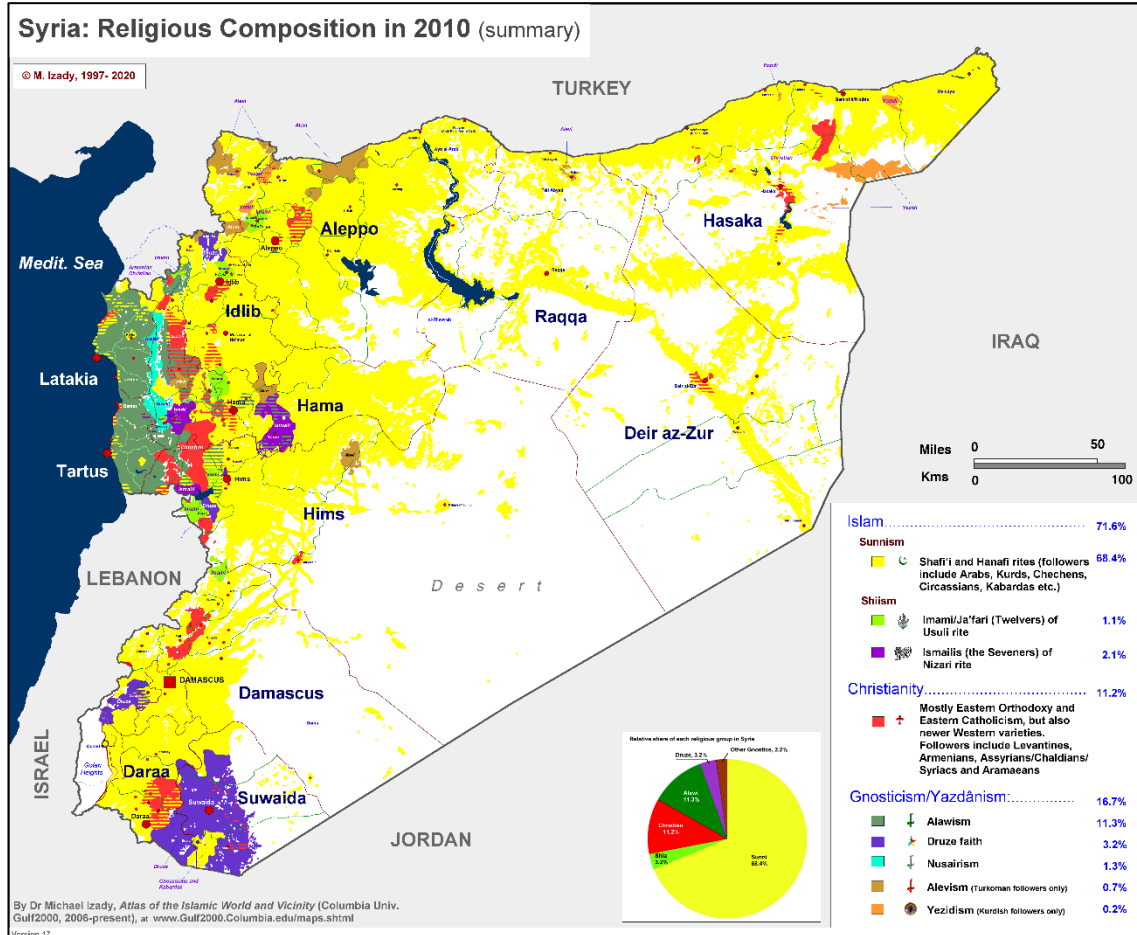
[101] IZADY, M."Syria: Religious Composition in 2010 [map]," *Atlas of the Islamic Word and Vicinity* (New York: Columbia University, Gulf 2000 Project), https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Religion_summary_lg.png (accessed May 13, 2022).

Figure 2: Syria: Ethnic Composition in 2010 (summary).[102]

[102] IZADY, M., "Syria: Ethnic Composition in 2010 [map]," *Atlas of the Islamic Word and Vicinity* (New York: Columbia University, Gulf 2000 Project), https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Ethnic_summary_lg.png (accessed May 13, 2022).

Figure 3: Syria selected energy infrastructure.[103]

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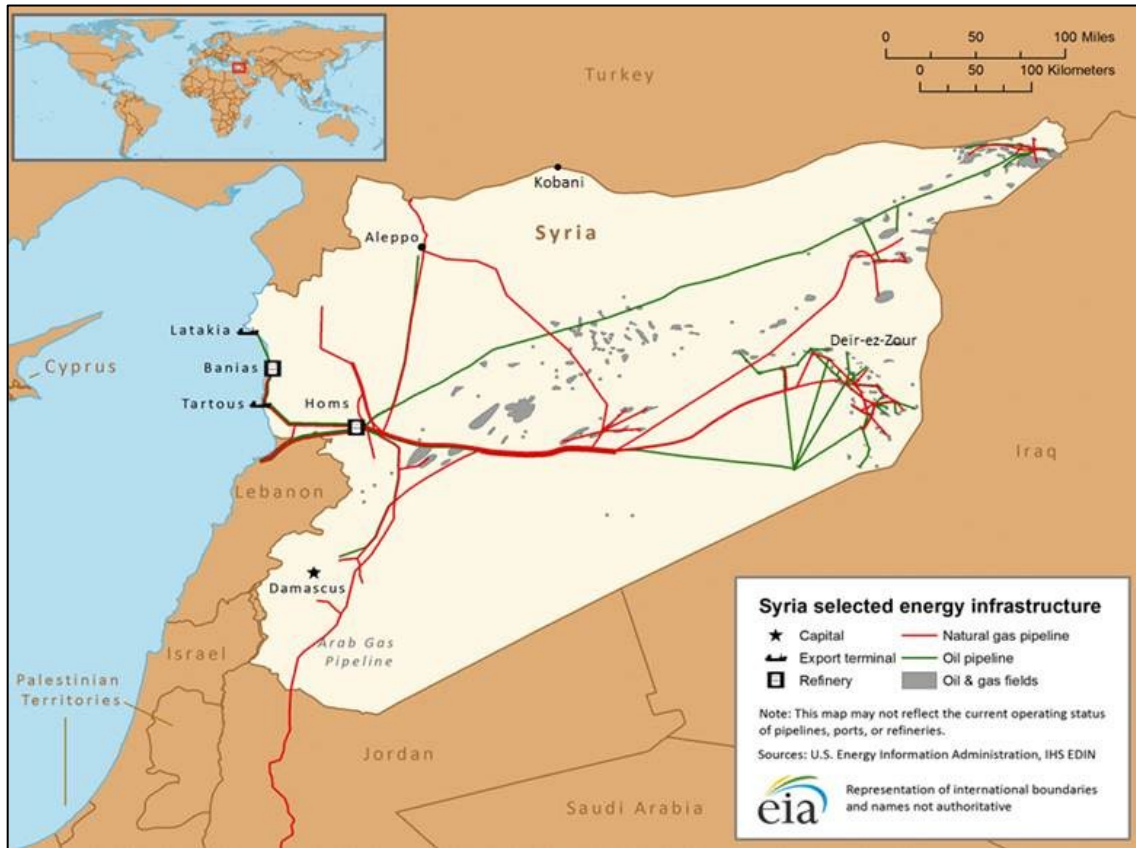
[103] U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Syria," June 24, 2015, https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Syria/syria.pdf (accessed May 15, 2022).

Figure 4: The State of Syria: Q2 2022-Q3 2022.[104]
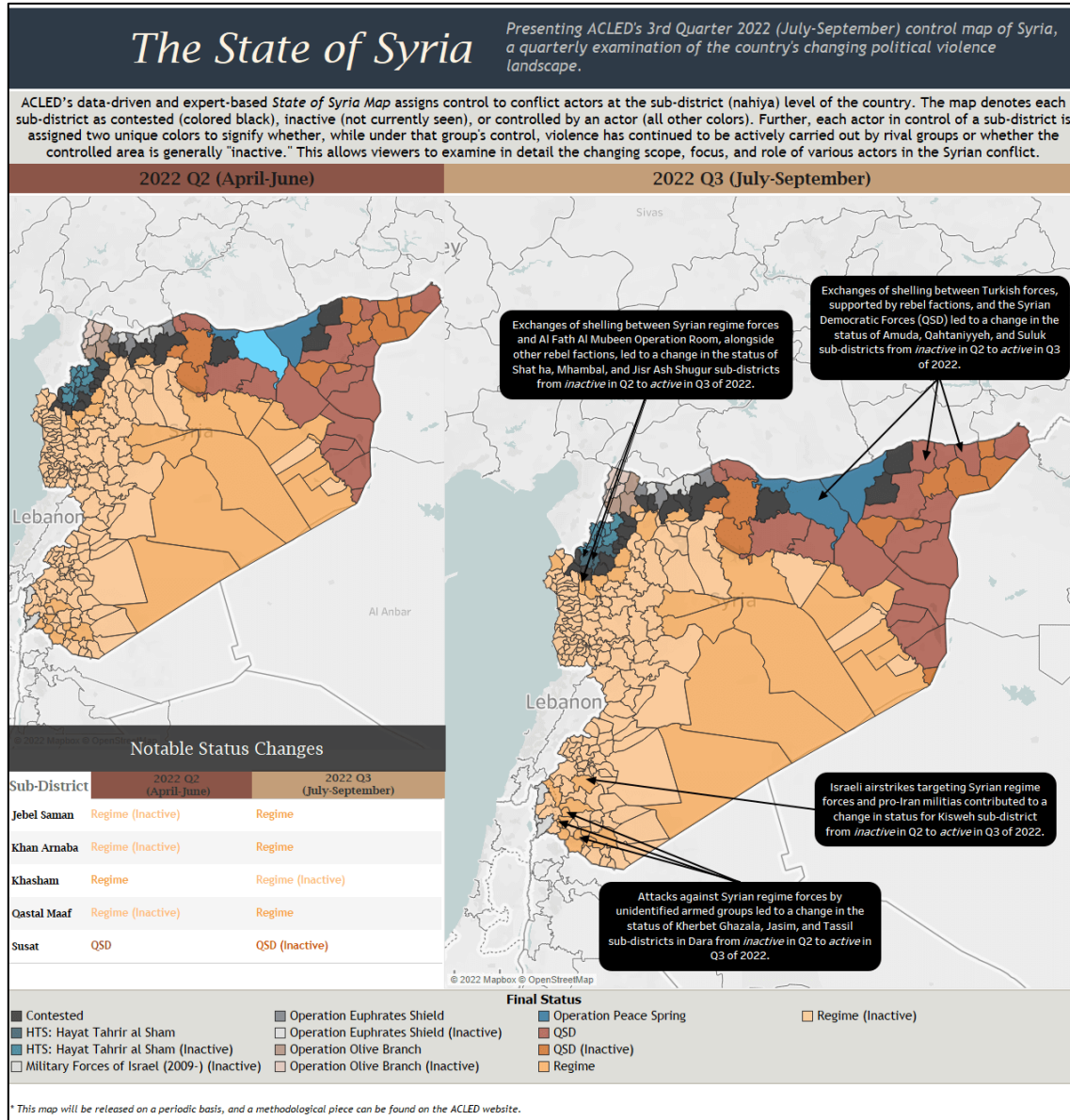
[104] AL-ABDULLAH, M., "The State of Syria: Q2 2022-Q3 2022," The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, December 1, 2022, https://acleddata.com/2022/12/01/the-state-of-syria-q2-2022-q3-2022/ (accessed February 5, 2023).

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